



# “The hand that played the drum shall also earn dollars.” The Paradox of Dalit Castelessness

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**The Paradox of Dalit Castelessness**

presented by Kanishka Elupula

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Typed name: Prof. Namita Vijay Dharia

Date: September 27, 2023

Title

*“The hand that played the drum shall also earn dollars.”*

The Paradox of Dalit Castelessness

Presented by Kanishka Elupula on September 27, 2023

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## Abstract

Kanishka Elupula

Dissertation Advisor: Ajantha Subramanian

*“The hand that played the drum shall also earn dollars.”*

### The Paradox of Dalit Castelessness

This dissertation investigates the complex interplay between caste, class, and market-centric discourses in contemporary India, with a particular focus on the experiences of Dalits in corporate workspaces and educational institutions. By examining the influence of market ideologies on the construction of modern subjectivity in this population, the study uncovers a unique form of "castelessness" among them.

This castelessness is a complex and paradoxical aspect of experience, where caste is both explicitly denied and implicitly enacted in subtle ways. However, this form of Dalit castelessness is not simply a strategy to escape stigma, but the consequence of a new form of self-making as a modern, middle class, global Dalit, which in turn is borne out of the values and ideas promoted by market centric discourses.

This form of castelessness does not amount to a substantive lack of caste. Rather, the research uncovers the pervasive influence of caste, even in spaces considered modern and progressive, revealing how upper-caste norms and values are often conflated with merit and modernity. Castelessness is itself a form of caste that is experienced differently by Dalits vis-à-vis upper castes. However, castelessness is also a real lived experience for some Dalits and it represents a significant shift in Dalit self-making. In addition, it may signal a new direction in Dalit organizing. The study emphasizes the need to recognize this emerging phenomenon without negating the broader structures of caste inequity that continue to pervade Indian society.

Drawing upon personal experiences, ethnographic insights, and theoretical reflections, this dissertation contributes to the understanding of the persistence of caste in contemporary India and the challenges and complexities faced by the Dalits in their pursuit of social mobility.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

### **The Question**

This project, at its core, seeks to answer one question. Why is it that some Dalits – formerly referred to as “untouchables” – who have experienced or continue to experience caste-based discrimination deny the importance of caste in their lives? I have observed this phenomenon mainly among Dalits who work in what are considered modern, global, and elite workspaces in the private sector. These workspaces tend to be global, either in the sense of transcending national boundaries as with multinational companies, or in the sense of adopting the culture associated with multinational companies that are typically based in the United States and Europe. In this second sense, global refers more to the culture of work and sociality at the company than the geographic spread of its business.

However, this not the question that I started out with. When I first began the research that was to become this dissertation, I set out to understand the social lives of Dalits who enter the modern and global workspaces in India. These Dalits are in a unique situation. On the one hand, their new occupations and professional successes distance them from their less successful social (caste) peers. On the other hand, they are not fully integrated with their professional peers, individuals who generally come from higher social strata, which usually means a higher caste. Initially, I wondered what their social lives are like. Do they make their identities known, or do they try to hide them? Do they get to maintain caste anonymity in these modern spaces, or are their identities revealed through mechanisms built into the social milieu? Is there a difference or distance between Dalits and others in these spaces, even when the caste identity of the former is

not known? If so, to what extent is this a result of Dalits distancing themselves to avoid stigma, or in an active effort to hide their caste? And to what extent is it an inability of the upper castes to get along with someone who does not embody upper caste mannerisms and subjectivity? In addition, I wanted to explore the differences between cases in which the identity of Dalits is known and cases where it is not known, with the following questions: Are they invited to socialize with their professional peers? Are they invited to the homes of their upper caste colleagues? Do they date or marry among their professional peers? As my research progressed, all of these questions turned out to be secondary to the core question I pose above about Dalit claims to castelessness. Finally, I also wanted to compare these claims and experience of castelessness between older generations of Dalits who came of age during a time of state-led development and newer generations who grew up post 1990s when India implemented economic reforms that dramatically increased the role and size of the private sector.

In India, there is a long-held belief among intellectuals, politicians, and activists that caste would simply fade away with economic development, and that societal differences would instead solidify along class lines (Jodhka 2016). This view is often referred to as Indian exceptionalism, which sees caste as unique to India and its cultural/Hindu traditions. From this perspective, one could reason that as modernity replaces tradition, caste would be replaced with more modern forms of difference (Jodhka 2016)

This understanding of caste has also been an implicit assumption that has guided India's economic and development policy since its independence. Caste was not considered a relevant factor in making decisions regarding the economy. (Jodhka 2016; Mosse 2020a; S. Deshpande

2013) Instead, it was relegated to the domain of culture while economic development was seen as both a product of modernity and a modernizing process.

Both pre- and post-independence, the left and right wing in India were in agreement that “The process of modernization would weaken caste and eventually replace it with ‘modern’ structures based on individual achievement. Social inequality, or stratification, would be structured around the ‘open’ category of class that modern societies of the West have”<sup>1</sup> (Jodhka 2016, 233).

Despite being challenged and debunked, this assumption has nevertheless “become a part of the common-sense view on social change among the Indian middle classes and elsewhere” (Jodhka 2016, 233). My contention is that this understanding extends even to a section of Dalits in the middle class, and that the adoption of this perspective has to do with the common social imaginary shared by middle classes of modernity and economic development.

Initially, by focusing on Dalits in present day India, who work in the technology sector for global firms – sometimes, well-known names like Google, Facebook/Meta, and Amazon, I hoped to understand how liberalization and globalization affects caste and class relations. At one level, this would test the long-held belief that caste would fade away with development and also test a newer but widespread and growing belief that liberalization and the market forces that it unleashes, will erase caste – because, the reasoning goes, markets only care about the efficient allocation of resources, and caste does not factor into that equation. At another level, this was to be an ethnography of the “Corporate Dalit” that would provide insight into how caste and class relations in the context of liberalization mediate their professional and social lives.

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<sup>1</sup> Ambedkar (1916) frames caste as a closed class and class as an open caste.

My preliminary research revealed that many Dalits in well-paid private sector jobs, especially in the technology sector, deny the relevance of caste in their lives. This is not to say that they deny the existence of caste per se, or its role in other people's lives – only that they either deny or downplay its importance in their own lives. They were not hiding their caste status – which would not have been hard to explain – or denying the existence of caste itself, as many upper caste people do (S. Deshpande 2013; Subramanian 2019) but simply denying its role in their own lives. There seemed to be no obvious explanation for this. In a socio-political context where the upper castes often accuse Dalits of using their caste to claim benefits from the state and of overusing the “caste card”, this behavior seemed all the more puzzling and called for an explanation.

If I took this “denial” of caste at face value, which is to say that if I assumed that caste did not really affect this set of Dalits, then the rest of the questions that I sought to explore and answer seemed moot. It became clear to me that this needed to be explained before one can better contextualize and explore the issues raised by the other questions I pose above.

There are several reasons why a Dalit might deny the place of caste in their life. It could be that one does not want to talk about something that marks them as inferior or stigmatized. Relatedly, this could also be an attempt at “passing” as non-Dalit or upper caste. In both cases, saying that caste does not matter is a way of avoiding the topic or subtly suggesting that one is upper caste, since upper castes are known to claim that caste does not matter (Pandian 2002; S. Deshpande 2013). My informants are acknowledging their caste status but denying its effect on their lives. Sometimes, this can be due to the belief that talking about caste and keeping caste-based

discourses alive might add to its strength or give it staying power. Some of my informants seemed to think so, and they said as much, but this is not true of all my informants. Many continue to talk about caste. Even in the case of those who adopt the strategy of not mentioning caste, I was still left with the question of what takes the place of these caste-based discourses.

Many of my informants said some variation of “caste did not have a big impact on my life”, even as they narrated life stories which very much revealed the importance of caste in their lives. This could be interpreted as a strategy of letting their life stories convey the salience of caste while also showing that they choose to not be affected by it. At the same time, I found that there seemed to be a genuine belief that caste did not matter much in their lives. I noticed that these Dalits both embrace market centric discourses that promote a language of castelessness, which is shared across castes, and also embody the values and ideology of these discourses. This castelessness is not the removal or annihilation of caste (Ambedkar [1936] 1979). It is a rhetoric of castelessness that is very much in line with the rhetoric of Indian exceptionalism – the early ideas of caste fading away as long as one does not speak of it and focuses instead on economic development. This embrace of market centric discourses and rhetoric of castelessness also seems to be an important characteristic that is constitutive of middle classes, including the Dalit middle class. However, there is also a lived experience of castelessness among this section of Dalits that goes beyond rhetoric or strategy to manage stigma.

At this point, one might ask what is meant by the term Dalit middle class or even by middle class more generally – both in India and globally. Anthropology has only recently begun to pay attention to middle class both as an analytical and/or lived category. Several scholars have

attempted to arrive at a definition using various criteria, and entire books have been written about what this means in the Indian context; a depth of discussion that indicates that there is no consensus on what it is. This dissertation looks at middle class both as a category that can be defined by economic means and aspirational content that includes but isn't limited to the economic sphere. Dalit middle class is an even newer concept that has, except for a few notable exceptions (see Ram 1988; Srinivas 2016; Pai 2013), barely received any attention at all. Its earliest use refers to Dalits who obtained government jobs and therefore gained some economic means (Ram 1988).

The government jobs that were made available to them via a policy of affirmative action helped them transition from their traditional caste-based occupations which would have kept them at the bottom of the economic ladder. A salaried job, especially with the government, has widely been seen as the primary marker of middle class status in India, even though in recent years the desire for private sector jobs has grown to the point where many people prefer them to government jobs. A small section of Dalits has benefited from the policy of reservations and acquired government jobs. This helps them claim a middle-class status, relative to their caste peers, but also putatively alongside their professional peers. This new class status is especially true for those Dalits who moved from menial or agricultural work in agrarian areas to urban centers with electricity, sewerage, drinking water supplies, bureaucratic, civil, and commercial institutions like a municipality, police station, banks etc.

In more recent studies that try to tackle the question of class-caste relationship, little is said about who or what a middle-class Dalit is. This study deals with a very specific section of Dalits who meet both the economic and aspirational criteria for middle-class, as described above. These Dalits see modernity – particularly in the form of economic development and higher standards of living – as fostering new modes of thinking and behavior that supplant more traditional values and relations, thereby eroding caste. Even though, that process of caste erosion can and currently is being impeded by caste itself. This notion of modernity, in turn, while having its origins in the pre-independence era, has been assimilated into and is reproduced by market-centric discourses that have become prevalent since the 1990s. The idea of the middle class that this dissertation is informed by and builds on is itself deeply intertwined with the ideas of modernity, development, and markets.

To be middle class in India requires the fulfillment of certain criteria: having sufficient disposable income\* to be able to consumer certain goods in certain ways, having a global outlook while also preserving their Indian cultural sensibilities; and being caste free or casteless. (\*Footnote: This class can and does accommodate a wide range of incomes because a smaller disposable income can be made up for with greater aspirational content, as long as a minimum threshold is met.) To not concern oneself with or be affected by one's caste, at least in explicit terms, has been an important signifier of modern Indian middle classness for a long time (Pandian 2002; Guha 2013); this ability has, at least partially, percolated to the Dalits. I propose that this is not just a result of economic means, but also the acquisition of new conceptual tools, repertoires, and vocabularies. Not only does middle classness imply castelessness, to be modern and global also implies castelessness. Because caste is seen as traditional, “transcending” it is a

prerequisite to attain modernity and globality. Finally, the above criteria and subjectivity are actively promoted by market centric discourses. Put differently, modernity, globality, and middle classness require “castelessness,” and market centric discourses promote “castelessness”, along with the other attributes and markers of middle classness. Therefore, middle classness, modernity, globality, castelessness are mutually constitutive and are reinforced by market-centric discourses.

Fashioning a modern, global, middle-class subjectivity in India demands a certain form of castelessness. While on the surface, this castelessness seems to be shared by upper castes and Dalits alike, there are some crucial differences that become clear upon deeper inspection. The lives of the middle classes continue to be mediated by the differences in caste sensibilities and class aspirations, even as a shared imaginary of development that is undergirded by market centric development discourses takes root. In this shared imaginary, upper castes can see their privileges as not arising from caste but from other secular means such as merit, work ethic, etc., (S. Deshpande 2013; Subramanian 2019) and Dalits can similarly buy into the idea that as long as they are willing to fashion themselves in accordance with markets and modernity, they too can be successful. Markets make caste go away, but one must first embrace castelessness to become a market being that is modern and middle class. Or so the implicit logic goes.

This dissertation explores this common social imaginary and how it makes Dalits and upper castes seem casteless in a similar fashion. This is not, however, to say that there are no differences in how and why different individuals arrive at this castelessness in the first place, and how they experience this status. The castelessness of upper castes has received some attention in

the academia (Pandian 2002; S. Deshpande 2013) including one recent work that takes a closer look at this (Subramanian 2019). However, Dalit castelessness has received little or no attention at all. My work is an attempt to shed light on the experience of Dalit castelessness.

This study finds that the growth of market centric discourses in India and the adoption of the values championed by these discourses, by the middle class, including Dalits in the middle class, holds significant explanatory potential for this phenomenon of “castelessness” among Dalits. This understanding then provides the context and background for all the other questions that I raised in the beginning.

However, this finding applies only to a specific segment of the Dalit population that is urban, well educated, working in well-paid jobs, and can be considered middle class both in economic and aspirational terms. Moreover, this is a segment of what some scholars have called the New Dalit Middle Class, that is more interested in securing economic empowerment rather than social status and political power (Pai 2013). The organizing and activism of this group is referred to as Dalit middle class activism. While earlier movements were mobilized on issues of political empowerment such as identity, dignity, and self-respect, the new Dalit middle class movement whose coming of age coincided with India’s embrace of globalization and liberalization, emphasizes economic empowerment. This class is better educated and led by people who hold senior ranks in bureaucracy, government owned companies and to some extent in academia, business and [now increasingly in the private sector]. This new class shares the anger of their rural brethren against oppression and domination but also feels strongly that it should receive a fair share in the fruits of post-independence political and economic development – particularly

following liberalization - which has resulted in higher growth rates and a strong private sector with high-paid jobs (Pai 2013, 119–20).

There is indeed a vocal and influential section of the Dalit middle class that is primarily focused on securing economic gains. Interacting with informants across these private technology companies, various government agencies, and NGOs, I found their interests and rhetoric to be remarkably aligned. This is in spite of the fact that some of them saw themselves as “capitalist-leaning” while others – fewer – saw themselves as “socialist-leaning”, and some said they were primarily interested in pursuing economic benefits for their community, while others saw themselves as being more focused on matters of social justice and social status. This dissertation pays significant attention to such activism as another avenue to understand this new Dalit Middle Class self-making and finds that it too can be explained with reference to market centric discourses.

## **Methodology**

I began my fieldwork in March of 2019, in Hyderabad, in the state of Telangana, India. Over the last two decades, Hyderabad has grown to be a major hub for technology services companies. Particularly the area of Gachibowli is densely populated with large buildings housing office space for these companies. The fieldwork was interrupted in April of 2020 due to the pandemic. After this, my meetings and interviews with informants mostly took place online. I interviewed people via zoom, whatsapp, and phone calls until the end of the year. After that, I continued to

meet my informants, participate in meetings, and social events mostly online, but also, occasionally, in person, until late August 2021.

In the initial days, most of my primary informants were people working in offices located in the Gachibowli area of the city. I would meet them in and around Gachibowli. Since most of these gated office complexes did not allow unofficial visitors onto their premises, I would often meet them at cafés or other public spaces nearby. Many an interview was conducted while standing outside the office gates, or at a bus stop or parking lot nearby. I would also commute to various places around the city to meet my interlocutors at locations near their homes or anywhere that was convenient to them.

The second major set of my informants included activists, members, and sympathizers of various non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or associations whose primary purpose was to “promote Dalit interests”. Most, if not all, these organizations could be considered instances of Dalit Middle Class activism (or New Dalit Middle Class activism, which are used interchangeably here). The rest of my informants comprised students affiliated with these NGOs or with the above-mentioned private corporations – through part time jobs or internships, government officials, entrepreneurs, etc. These people were spread throughout the city, and I made the effort to visit them wherever and whenever it was convenient to them. I attended several meetings of these NGOs and other less formal groups, that were open to the public and several that were not. At a few of these meetings, I was invited as a guest and at others I was allowed to observe.

Sometimes, this led to awkward situations where someone thought I had snuck in without permission and possibly harbored ill intent. At one such event, a participant aggressively tried to get me to leave the venue, while others around him were trying to tell him that I was invited by the head of their organization and was therefore meant to be there. It was a while before this enthusiastic participant realized that the people around him were yelling at him to stop and not at me to leave.

Regarding this second group of subjects, I ended up focusing a lot of my time on one NGO called Swaeroes Network, which is uniquely placed at the intersection of private, government and non-governmental sectors, and comprised of elements of Dalit middle class organizing, technology sector, and students with global aspirations. This organization, its functioning, and the aspirations it represents, serve as a case study of Dalit middle class activism, the politics and performance of middle classness among Dalits, and how castelessness emerges as a form of middle classness.

I interviewed around 50 people<sup>2</sup> With about 35 of them, I had long conversations that lasted anywhere from an hour to several hours, and in some cases, multiple such conversations. With the rest, I had shorter conversations that lasted less than an hour, or engaged in multiple, brief conversations. This second segment included meetings that were not planned in advance, and those that were scheduled as online meetings but were interrupted or cut short due to technical issues. Besides this, I had many brief conversations with people I met at meetings, was

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<sup>2</sup> There were several conversations that may or may not count as interviews. It is difficult to tell where fieldwork ended, and sociality began. Because of the very nature of the ethnographic work undertaken – there were formal interviews, informal interviews, casual conversations, etc., - I hesitate to put a hard number on this.

introduced to by my informants, or just happened to meet during the course of the fieldwork. I was allowed to record some of these interviews and conversations and did not receive permission for others. At times, I did not record an interview because I did not want to risk interrupting the flow of a spontaneous conversation by asking permission to record. Some of the informants gave me their consent to reveal their identity while others did not. In several cases, people initially said they were comfortable with revealing their identity, but later showed hesitation or doubt regarding their decision. In all such cases, I have withheld their identities.

About 25% of my informants were women and I interviewed most of them online. While at first, I was somewhat discouraged by this low percentage, I now believe that it is not as low a proportion as it may seem. While part of the explanation for this low number lies in the fact that I am man, trying to conduct formal and informal interviews with people who don't know me, it is not the whole story. My informants largely come from two main pools: Dalits working in the technology sector, and Dalits in NGOs and other forms of organizing. The proportion of women in both these pools is quite low. Most people who work in the technology sector are engineers. There are fewer women engineers than men. Moreover, there are fewer women engineers in the top tier colleges, and the number of Dalit women here is lower still (Krishna 2014). When it comes to NGOs and organizing, it seems quite likely that there are far more men in this space than women.

The fieldwork continued this way until the pandemic led to a shutdown by end of March 2020. For much of this time, I was affiliated with and lived on the campus of University of Hyderabad, which is about 10 minutes driving distance from Gachibowli. (During peak hours, it was not

unusual for it to take up to an hour or longer to travel that distance.) I conducted several of my meetings and interviews on the campus of the university, which is housed on 2000 acres of mostly forest land that stands in stark contrast to the highly polluted and congested city that is just outside the university's boundary wall.

During the lockdown, my fieldwork paused for a few months; I then began to interview people on the phone and via zoom for several months before tentatively moving to in-person meetings again, closer to summer of 2021. The pandemic had a sizeable impact on how I conducted my fieldwork. Something is definitely lost when an ethnographer is unable to meet informants in person, spend time in their homes, their usual hangout areas, office cafeterias, etc. But it was not all negative. The pandemic helped me gain a clearer understanding of the fact that my site is not entirely localized to the city or the state I was working in, and that my informants already had lives that were heavily mediated by technology and involved a significant amount of time spent online, especially since a majority of my informants are “techies”- people working in technology related jobs in what is referred to as “Information Technology” or “IT sector” in India. Many of them work at multinational corporations that have offices across the globe and they are regularly in touch with their colleagues in different parts of the world. Most of their work is done on computers and does not require their physical presence at the office. Furthermore, they see themselves as a part of a “global work culture,” and to some extent, share some common values and aspirations with their real or perceived counterparts in other – particularly developed – parts of the world (Murphy 2011).

Another upside to the lockdown is that I was able to speak with more people on zoom and whatsapp than would have been possible in person. This was especially true of women. Most of my one-to-one conversations with them happened online rather than in person. Before the lockdown, I was having some difficulty meeting informants, because they would frequently reschedule or cancel meetings. A lot of time and effort was spent navigating traffic and pollution to get to a meeting spot, only to realize that the informant wasn't able to make it. While this was frustrating for me, the informants usually had genuine reasons and unavoidable circumstances. Moreover, several people would not agree to meetings at all because of uncertainties with their schedules, traffic conditions, or both, and did not want to commit to an appointment that they could not keep. At other times, I would unexpectedly run into an informant, usually not from the corporate pool, who might end up sitting and chatting with me for one or two hours over several cups of chai.

Before the lockdown, a large part of my average informants' day would have been spent at work, before they had to navigate heavy traffic to get home. This meant that if they could not find time to speak to me during work hours, they would have to meet me after work and arrive home much later than they would like. Alternatively, we would have had to schedule the meeting late in the evening or during weekends when they would have to take time away from their families. This made it difficult for them to meet me in-person, particularly for women. Moreover, women were far less likely to agree to a meeting during work hours. They were also less likely to want to talk just outside or nearby their workplace, preferring to instead meet at relatively upscale cafes when possible<sup>3</sup>. This may say something about a stronger work ethic or differential

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<sup>3</sup> Upscale coffee shops have become an acceptable place for middle class women to be seen in public and even be accompanied by men – they are good examples of modern social spaces.

expectations from women in these corporate spaces or in society in general. I would also imagine that they were far less likely to want to be seen outside the office, having a long chat with a man (me) who might be identified as not working in any of these offices. (For these meetings and interviews I always dressed in what would be considered business casuals – collared tees and jeans/semi-formal trousers – but most others here were either dressed more formally or at least had their IDs clearly displayed on lanyards.) Women were also far less likely to invite me home for lunch or dinner as compared to my male informants, who did this quite often, and they were less likely to meet me at the university campus where I was staying.

During the earliest phase of the fieldwork, I had planned to divide my time more or less equally between two sites: Hyderabad, a large city, and Bellampalli, a small town. Bellampalli, is a town of around 55,000 people with 30% of them being Dalits. This proportion of Dalits is well over the national average of 16.5%. In the past, many people here had been employed in the railways or collieries, both of which are government owned. Since salaried employment was the primary marker of middle-class status in independent India, its local availability seems to have paved the way for these employees to see themselves and to be seen by others as middle class. At present however, the coal mines are running out of coal and the railways does not create many new jobs. Together, they now employ a very small percentage of the people in this town and the indirect influence they had on the town's economy has waned. The children of this generation with government jobs have either started local businesses or moved to the cities where they are pursuing higher education and are searching for, or working in, private sector jobs. I had planned to compare this older cohort of middle-class Dalits, who had government jobs, with younger cohorts in private sector jobs Hyderabad.

Initially, I had envisioned my dissertation giving equal attention to both these places. I spent some time in Bellampalli interviewing some people and making a lot of notes about local life. When I began my fieldwork in Hyderabad and I kept encountering the phenomenon that led to my core question, I decided to focus my remaining time in Hyderabad. But even as I made this decision, it became clear to me that I would have to define my field site in broader terms, going well beyond the geographies of Hyderabad or even the states of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh. Earlier Telangana was a region within the state of Andhra Pradesh. In the year 2014, Telangana was made into a separate state. The two states which were earlier one state continue to share Hyderabad as their joint capital.

However, Bellampalli also happens to be the town where my grandparents lived all their lives. My father too spent a substantial amount of time there and currently lives there. I have spent a lot of time in this place both as a child and as a Ph.D. student when I returned to India during the summers. I chose this place as one of my research sites, because of my familiarity with it. While I did not conduct sufficient field work there, this dissertation still significantly informed by my association with the place over the last two decades.

In the beginning of the fieldwork, I was using a method of snowball sampling to meet new informants who belonged to the Dalit community and worked in large MNCs in Hyderabad. However, my initial informants referred me not only to people who lived and worked in Hyderabad, but also to people living in other Indian cities like Bengaluru, Delhi, and Nagpur. Moreover, I was soon interviewing people who were based in these cities, at one time or another,

but were now living in other countries: particularly in the USA. Even after moving to other cities and other countries, they had maintained connections with the groups and organizations they had belonged to while they were in Hyderabad. Sometimes, they were still working for the same companies that they worked for while they were in Hyderabad, but in a different office in a different country.

All of these people across different cities and countries saw themselves as belonging to their chosen community, one that transcended geography. They kept in touch and organized using social media like Whatsapp groups, Facebook groups, and regular online meetings via Zoom. I decided to follow their lead and treat all my informants and their life worlds as one cultural group and their geographic spread across the globe as my site. Since my informants from this group are people who work for technology companies and people who used online modes of networking and organizing as a routine, even before the pandemic, they could be seen as one community that spanned vast geographic distances. This only became more apparent when the pandemic broke and people took to spending even more time online. The rest of my informants, too, were savvy enough to have some participation in these online fora, even before the pandemic.

The other thread of my fieldwork research entailed talking to people who belonged to various voluntary organizations that were established to further Dalits' interests. All of these organizations are good examples of Dalit middle class activism. Many of my informants from the technology companies were also involved in one such voluntary organization or another. For many Dalits who achieve some kind of professional or financial success, being involved with

voluntary organizations can serve as a way of maintaining connections with the community (of social peers) that they now feel cut off from (Naudet 2014). Several of my informants were affiliated with Swaeroes Network and were called the Swaeroes Techies Group. I also interviewed several techies who were originally from the neighboring state of Maharashtra and were involved in the formation of a new political movement whose identity and activities were still secret at the time of my fieldwork. Others attended meeting of an organization called All India Backward and Minority Communities Employees Federation (abbreviated as BAMCEF and was formed by late Kanshi Ram who was also the founder of the Dalit based political party called Bahujan Samaj Party) meetings. Some of the government employees I interviewed were regular attendees of the Telangana state SC/ST<sup>4</sup> officers meeting – which is not a formal NGO but is clearly catering to middle class Dalits.

As mentioned above, I eventually decided to focus most of my ethnographic efforts related to this segment of my fieldwork on Swaeroes Network. This organization was founded by a former police officer and has grown into a sizeable operation spread across the state of Telangana. Its members had already been organizing various events online before the pandemic struck and this trend was further fueled by the lockdowns and other restrictions that resulted from the pandemic. The organization has several sub-groups like the Swaeroes Techies Group – which comprised people working in the technology sector, Swaeroes Entrepreneurs Group, etc. and each of these divisions had their own Whatsapp groups and other social media channels that were very active.

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<sup>4</sup> Schedule Caste (SC) is the formal, legal category to refer to Dalits. “Dalit” is, however, the term preferred by most of them. Schedule Tribe (ST) is the official term to refer to the tribal populations in India. SC and ST are legal terms of the sets of people who have been identified by the state as historically disadvantaged and therefore qualifying for benefits of affirmative action.

An interesting feature of this organization is that its members are encouraged to call themselves Swaeroes, and they discourage the use of the word Dalit. This organization serves an excellent example and a case of study of Dalit middle class activism and of yet another way in which caste is made invisible by Dalits, even as they come together as Dalits by other names (people who have been disadvantaged by caste and are seeking to undo the injustices of caste). A full chapter of this dissertation discusses my finding regarding this group.

Gradually, my informant pool came to include employees of technology companies, government employees, entrepreneurs, students, and activists belonging to various NGOs and its sympathizers, who were coming together in these groups to discuss, plan, and organize themselves with the aim of improving their economic conditions. Through this, the geographic and professional boundaries between my various groups of informants seemed a lot more blurred than they did in the beginning, and my site was based as much in the city of Hyderabad as in the network of computers and servers that make up the internet.

### **A note on my positionality (and the reason for this study)**

The initial impulse for this project came from my own experiences as a Dalit who has spent a significant amount of time in elite educational institutions and modern corporate workspaces. I had the fortune of receiving a full scholarship to go to what was then considered the best school in my state in India: The Hyderabad Public School (HPS)<sup>5</sup>. I then went on to get a bachelor's degree in commerce from Shri Ram College of Commerce, Delhi University, and a master's

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<sup>5</sup> This is for all intents and purposes a rich private school, but it is required to admit a small number of SC/ST students whose school fee is paid by state government.

degree in Economics from Jawaharlal Nehru University – considered two of the top universities in India, and at the time of this writing, I am a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Anthropology at Harvard University.

After obtaining a master's degree in economics, I began to work as a Research Analyst at a company based in New Delhi. During this time, it dawned on me that I was living in a liminal space where I was cut off from my social peers, thanks to my own academic and professional success, but not quite integrated with my professional peers.

Most of my closest friends since childhood were people who belonged to the SC/ST communities<sup>6</sup> Many of these close friends were SC/STs who received scholarships to attend HPS and live in the boarding, as I did. The school had about 3000 students, and 300 of them – only boys – lived on campus as boarders and the rest were day scholars. However, almost everyone who lived in the boarding were SC/ST students from out of town and therefore, the word “boarders” itself became a term used in stigmatizing and demeaning tones to refer to students from Dalit and indigenous/tribal communities.

Many of my friends from college and my master's programs are also SC/STs. When I began working, I was among the few of my friends who had a job. Most of the rest were students

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<sup>6</sup> Academia makes a clear distinction between Dalits and tribals. For eg: Dalit studies and tribal studies are considered two distinct subfields and they rarely overlap. This is for good reason, as Dalits and tribals arrived at their current positions in society through very different historical circumstances and they are still very distinct groups in many respects. Moreover, they are also considered two distinct categories for many administrative and legal purposes. However, since they are both beneficiaries of reservations, they are often clubbed together as one category of “SC/STs” in schools and universities. They are also often treated as the “quota category people” by the “open/general category people” and this brings them together as a somewhat united SC/ST category.

enrolled in university and pursuing higher education or were preparing for competitive exams that were used as recruiting tools for government jobs<sup>7</sup>. Among this group of friends, I was one of the few people with a significant disposable income, and I found myself routinely paying for everything whenever we would “hang out”. Since I spent most of my day at work, had a different schedule, had more income, and dressed in formal attire as my job required, both my role in this social unit and my personal experience of interactions among my friends changed in important ways.

Even as I was undergoing this experience of being distanced from my friends, I did not feel integrated into my professional community either. I did hang out with my colleagues, and we socialized during and after office hours, but I felt like I was always walking on eggshells around them or getting into heated arguments. In the office, the hotels and convention centers where we held conferences and meetings, and the upscale restaurants and bars that we went to after work, most people spoke as though it was assumed that everyone present were an upper caste person, making these all seem like de facto upper caste spaces where I always felt like an anomaly. In these spaces, people would openly say disparaging things about reservations, “caste-politics” – which always meant anything representing the lower castes, and about SC/ST people themselves. Often, they would say things like “reservations are eating up the country”, that people who benefit from reservations had been “handed everything on a plate”, and that “the country is being held back by these undeserving people” and the politicians who cater to them so that they can remain in power.

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<sup>7</sup> Traditionally, government jobs have been very sought after in India. In recent times, their allure is fading as the private sector is seen as modern and glamorous. But government jobs are still extremely desirable for many. And this is particularly so for Dalits who stand to benefit from affirmative action in government jobs.

Within this socio-corporate world, the commonsensical view was that reservations were a bad thing and the only reason they existed is because of evil politicians who sought to stay in power by appeasing the SC/STs. (They often used the phrase “only because of vote-bank politics”). These beneficiaries were routinely derided as greedy, lazy, underserving, backward, and, with no sense of irony, casteiest (S. Deshpande 2013; Subramanian 2019). In fact, the opposition to reservations and the scorn and hatred towards SC/STs and OBCs, built on their belief in the unfairness of reservations and its negative effects on them – the deserving – and by extension the country as a whole, is a strong factor that unites the upper castes as one group (Upadhyaya 2008). In these conversations among my upper caste colleagues, a lot of vitriol was expressed against politicians. But when they named specific politicians, it was always a lower caste<sup>8</sup> politician that was the object of this derision.

In the traditional understanding of caste, the system is made up of four “varnas” - Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras - each of which contains many “jatis”. Either varna or jati could mean caste depending on the context. For the purposes of this discussion, we can look at varna as caste and jati as subcaste. Dalits are not included in this ritual hierarchy. But in practice, they are treated as being below this hierarchy and the most inferior. They are the most exploited and disadvantaged in the caste order and considered untouchables due to their low status. Tribals are the indigenous communities of India and because they were historically isolated from mainstream society, they were never considered a part of this ritual hierarchy. However, they face severe economic and other disadvantages in India today.

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<sup>8</sup> In this dissertation, I have used “lower caste” to always include OBCs and Dalits

OBCs stands for Other Backward Classes and it too is legal category comprising social groups other than SCs and STs that are identified by the state as also socially and educationally disadvantaged and they too are provided affirmative action. However, many, but not all, of the groups classified as OBCs also belong to the Shudra community in the traditional caste hierarchy.

In general usage the term upper caste refers to Brahmins, Kshatriyas, and Vaishyas who have traditionally held a higher ritual and economic status. Lower castes can be used to refer to everyone else. However sometimes lower castes can only refer to Shudras, depending on the context.

Often times, in media articles and academic studies that talk about Dalits, authors appear to create a dichotomy between Dalits and upper castes. This is sometimes mean that everyone is upper caste when compared to Dalits but it leaves the status of Shudras – lower castes – unclear. In this dissertation I have used “upper caste” to always include Brahmins, Kshatriyas, and Vaishyas but sometimes depending on the context, it could include Shudras who are relatively upper caste and I have used “lower caste” to always include OBCs and Dalits.

It is worth noting that during the time I worked in Delhi, nobody in the office asked me what caste I belonged to, and I did not volunteer this information. It really was taboo to directly ask someone their caste in a corporate setting in Delhi Beteille (1991) claims that today, in India, it is unacceptable to speak of caste in public. Such talk of purity and pollution continues but is now confined to the domestic or private domain. As my experience shows, Beteille is right, but only

to the extent that upper caste Indians rarely bring up their caste in public. Instead, status differences in urban areas are often expressed as differences of class: education, income, community, shared traditions, practices and religious observances. In this sense, people did not “care” about one’s caste, except when it came to SC/STs<sup>9</sup> and in some cases OBCs. Of course, caste still mattered, in an overt and explicit manner, when it came to things like marriage and business networks (Mosse 2020b; Munshi 2016), but it could not be openly addressed in a corporate space. In a de facto upper caste space that was implicitly anti-lower caste, caste qua caste did not matter except in conversations about reservations and merit (Pandian 2002; Subramanian 2019). The one thing that may have differentiated me to a keen observer was the fact that I was always left defending reservations and the need to undo caste-based injustice in conversations where everybody else took the other side or chose not to speak. Moreover, although I did not support any Dalit based or low caste political parties or their leaders, I found myself defending them, as I was making the case that the media and my colleagues always used lower caste politicians as stand-ins for bad politicians, whereas, in fact, they were no worse than the upper caste politicians.

People were often surprised by my “unusual” and “contrarian” stance and “radical views”. I do not know if this may have tipped some of them off regarding my caste status. It is possible that some people knew my caste status because this was common knowledge in my university.

Universities routinely made this information public through various means<sup>10</sup>. Some of my colleagues were also friends with my university classmates – generally, it would not have been

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<sup>9</sup> In my social and professional circles in Delhi, for the most part, people associated reservations with SC/STs. This is because reservations in education for OBCs is a relatively recent phenomenon here.

<sup>10</sup> Admission lists always mentioned category of admission for the “quota” students.

very difficult to find out my caste if someone wanted to. I do not know if anyone ever wanted to know so badly as to make the effort to find out. But most of my colleagues seemed to assume that I was from an elite, upper caste, and wealthy background. There are a couple of reasons for this: my proficiency with the English language, the fact that I attended very reputed schools, my competent performance at work, and finally, the fact that I was a native of a southern state working in a northern state of India. The fact that my colleagues did not know much about my state, or my surname (which can be a marker of one's caste), made it easy for them to impose an upper caste identity onto someone who they thought of as having had "good schooling" and displaying "polished mannerisms". It simply never occurred to them that someone could be well-educated, "polished", capable at their job and be a Dalit. Moreover, they could always put down my unusual views to the fact that I attended Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) which is widely considered a "left-wing university". There is in fact a not insignificant section of upper caste leftists who support reservations and social justice, and JNU was considered something of a training ground for such "lefties". Some people simply said that I was just one of those people who "always has to be a contrarian".

Here is an incident that will clarify why I think they took me for upper caste: An email was once circulated among my colleagues. One of the colleagues specifically came up to me and said "you should read this email!". It was the now famous "the ant and the grasshopper: Indian version" email which has been widely circulated for years now. This adaptation of the story from Aesop's fables portrays upper castes as the hardworking ants and lower castes as the lazy grasshoppers who do nothing all year. When winter comes, the grasshopper stages political protests and demands a share of what the ant has accumulated through its hard work. The grasshopper keeps

demanding from the ant until the ant has nothing left. The ant finally leaves the country, goes abroad, and sets up a billion-dollar company, while India still remains a developing country. The idea clearly is that upper castes are unfairly cheated out of the fruits of their labor and that reservations are what keep the country poor. Such (bastardized) versions of this story have a long history. They first began to appear on conservative websites in the US mocking the liberal sympathy for the poor. In the 1990s a version began to circulate in South Africa (Ballard 2004). This email<sup>11</sup> was shared with me because this colleague was certain that I was not one of the “quota-people”. To me, this was perhaps the clearest indication that I was not welcome in this space. My “good” or “working” relationship to all these people who considered me a friend, was reliant on their assumption that I was “one of theirs”. With this condition being the bedrock of these relationships, my interactions with them could only go so far and my place in this socio-corporate world was tenuous at best.

But my feeling of lack of integration goes beyond this. My entire life experience up to that point, through high school, college, graduate school, everything I knew about the corporate world, and mainstream media had made it clear that reservations were a social evil and something to be looked down upon. Any efforts to organize, represent, or benefit the lower castes, especially Dalits was derided as “caste-politics” – which always came with a negative connotation – that was “holding the country back”. Anyone who was a beneficiary of reservations was undeserving and guilty of having stolen an opportunity from a deserving candidate – who was always the upper caste “meritorious” candidate. This also implied that they – beneficiaries of reservations – were inferior, and their credentials were invalid or suspect.

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<sup>11</sup> The version emailed to me was adapted for India and ended with the line “It is because of these mother-fucking ants that the country remains poor”.

Thus far, I have tried to present a picture of how I was caught in between the two worlds I inhabited when I started working – my close, mostly SC/ST, friends, and my colleagues from work. But there is another dimension of my life experience that gave me a more intimate look at how upper castes constitute these educational and workspaces as de facto upper caste spaces. Besides my colleagues, I also had friends from upper castes that I got along with, and some that I was quite close to. But even with them, I had regular heated arguments about reservations and caste politics. In my younger years, during middle and high school, the upper caste friends were also day scholars. So, there was always a boarders-day scholars divide. All the disparaging and demeaning comments, and differential treatment by teachers, administrative staff, and students alike could be recast in terms of the boarder-day scholar or fee-paying student vs freeloader divide. For example, In 9<sup>th</sup> grade, a friend of mine once said the following to a group of boarders: “you boarders better study hard and do well, because your scholarship comes from the tax money that my father pays to the government. I don’t want my dad’s money going waste”. He says this with a laugh and clearly believes that he is saying something clever and obviously true. He did not think it was offensive in any way. Teachers would routinely say “you dirty boarders”, “you come here...wasting government money and our time”, “you don’t belong here [in the classroom]...you should be out there washing buffaloes”, “go back home and start farming”, “go back to the forest” – particularly when referencing tribal students, so on.

When I arrived in Delhi for college, I made a new set of friends. They too were mostly from SC/ST communities, but I also made a few close friends from upper castes<sup>12</sup>. I had upper caste roommates and housemates for several years during and after college. But it seemed like I never crossed the line into full friendship with them. There was always an unease about the issue of caste. Whenever it came up, we either got into arguments or we had to tiptoe around it. This is not to say that they discriminated against me or treated me personally as inferior, at least not to my face. However, they too would often say disparaging things about beneficiaries of reservations, caste politics, vote-bank politics etc., that I was to later encounter in the workspace. Even among these friends, I was left in a defensive position. It was almost as though they wanted me to “not be like the others” and accept their point of view, since it was “obviously the right one” and if only I weren’t so biased due to my caste status, I would see it. In the best-case scenario, I was seen as being unreasonable. From my perspective, as a beneficiary of affirmative action, it felt like I would have had to disown my history and life experiences, in order to accept their point of view and fit in, however uncomfortable the fit may be.

In a way, the conversations at the workplace that I described above, were simply a continuation of the conversations I had with my upper caste friends in college. The fact that my college friends knew my caste status while my colleagues did not, only reinforces my point that they all simply saw these colleges and workspaces as upper caste spaces and so my caste status does not change anything. They weren’t so much reacting to my “intrusion” into their space as they were

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<sup>12</sup> Upper caste here, should be understood as anybody other than SC/ST. Affirmative action for OBCs in education institutions weren’t implemented yet. Therefore, the student groups were usually divided into SC/STs or quota people on the one hand and general category – general because they were not admitted through affirmative action and almost always meant upper caste – on the other.

simply inhabiting their upper caste space. My caste status and my presence is an anomaly that they are not addressing. Much like the workspace, the college was also meant to be a de facto upper caste space<sup>13</sup> that was being encroached upon by the SC/STs. My college – Shri Ram College of Commerce, Delhi University, may have been more so than the average college because a very large part of the faculty and student body was made up of people from one caste group - Baniya – and the traditions and norms of this group were seen as traditions and norms of the college. This could be observed in many of the behaviors and routine utterances by the faculty and students alike. For eg: at the beginning of the year, when faculty members spoke to the students during classes or tutorials and other smaller gatherings, they would say over and over again that we were merit students and that merit students behave a certain way and deserve to be here, and that this was a place of merit<sup>14</sup>. Lest one thinks that all students were being included in this category of merit, in meetings of smaller groups, the faculty would often ask how much we scored in our qualifying exams and what category we were admitted under. Sometimes, they would simply ask if one was a “merit student or category student”. Moreover, in the on-campus housing, one floor was unofficially reserved for “merit students” and all the other students were accommodated on another floor. They ensured that merit students were never assigned “non-merit” roommates and vice versa.

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<sup>13</sup> Subramanian (2019) offers a detailed account of how a similar dynamic plays out in the elite technology institutes – IITs, in India)

<sup>14</sup> In that context, it is clear to all concerned that “merit” clearly refers to the set of students who are not covered by reservations. In fact, that is the best definition of merit one could derive from this context. The faculty weren’t trying to include everyone in the category of merit, rather they were trying to convey that the college rightfully belonged only to the unreserved category.

Here is another example that shows how students too saw the college as an upper caste space: During my second year in college, a student in my cohort – let's call him A - was being bullied by another - B. Several people, including me, decided to intervene, and put an end to this. When we came together as a group, along with the 2 students in question, several people made the argument that it was not fair to bully A because he was just like us, and he deserved better. More specifically, several students said some version of "he is a merit student too", or "he has come here on the basis of merit, just like the rest of us, so he deserves to be treated better". Student B apparently saw the wisdom in this and agreed never to bother him again. I was not left wondering, if they thought it was OK for a non-merit student to be treated poorly, because I already knew their answer. It was written into the values and norms of the college.

Here is a final and perhaps most telling, albeit quite rare, example that conveys how these spaces are constituted as implicitly upper caste. In my college there were students who claimed that they were not actually SC/ST but that they used their power and influence to gain admission to the college as SC/ST students, in order to get around the fact that they did not meet the cut-off for general category. These students, when they were actually believed, were well-received and not seen as "others". In fact, this is a phenomenon that can be observed in colleges all over India, where students can pay large sums of money to gain admission in what is referred to as "management quota" in spite of not making the cut-off, and this is not seen as an attack on merit.

Having these upper caste friends gave me an interesting and a more intimate vantage point to observe attitudes, behaviors, and conversations that I would otherwise not have been privy to and probably wasn't meant to be a part of. These experiences have provided me with insight into

how the upper castes see themselves as the true victims in society, taking refuge in the spaces that should rightfully belong to them entirely, and asserting their rights as casteless, modern, meritorious, individuals. Embracing one's own (upper) caste status was not wrong, because their caste was simply their community, and one can't be faulted for embracing community and its traditions and practices (see Mosse 2020b). Mistreating or disparaging lower castes was not wrong, because they – the lower castes – were undeserving and unjust beneficiaries of government largesse, and undercutting their interests and dignity is only a way of protecting and advocating for merit. The upper castes are simply coming together, in an unfair world that is rigged against them, to protect merit and help the country progress.

For instance, one day while I was in college, during a campaign for a student election, I was sitting with a group of friends and acquaintances. Everyone in the group, except me, was an upper caste student. A Dalit student who was also contesting in the election was walking past us and one of the people in my group began to mock him by shouting something demeaning. Ostensibly, he – the Dalit student walking past us – was being attacked because he was a political opponent and not because he was Dalit. At this point, another student in my group said to the first one: “be careful with these SC/STs, they can get you into trouble”. He then narrated an incident about how he was in a small scuffle with another student and had to go to the police station to resolve it. A friendly policeman there, warned him that he should be careful because he could be unfairly accused by SC/STs and face the risk being tried under “the draconian” SC/ST Atrocities Act<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> Referring to SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989.

In the above scenario, the upper caste students saw themselves as victims who are constantly at risk of being accused of caste-based discrimination or violence. They ignore the fact that they instigated this conflict and also completely overlook the fact that I was an SC, and I was sitting with them. These students knew that I was an SC, but they seemed to forget this in the moment. They are used to being in a de facto upper caste world and anyone who fits into that world is assumed to belong there and is therefore not one of the “non-meritorious” others. I seemed to fit into this world until the matter of caste came up, and this created a dissonance that they could not resolve.

I continued to be involved in similar situations even when I was with other Indians at Harvard University, in the US. Once again, they seemed to constitute this as a de facto upper caste space in their minds. In my very first year, when I told another Indian student at Harvard that I was working on caste in India, he immediately said that I should work on “reverse-discrimination” instead. He said the real issue is the plight of poor brahmins (and upper castes as a whole) in India. Another time, I was speaking to a student about finding academic jobs in India, and she remarks “because of these reservations, the deserving people cannot find jobs in India anymore”. I have also been a part of many conversations at Harvard where a foreigner asks “Does caste still exist?” and other Indians in the group almost always say some version of “not anymore”. Indians are clearly a minority at Harvard and they are not actually seeking to attack Dalits or lower castes directly. If they knew my caste status, I believe at least some of them would not say the things they said to me or said in my presence. But they are so used to experiencing educational

institutions, especially elite ones, as upper caste spaces, and used to speaking and acting a certain way in these spaces. What they are saying is just a commonsensical view to them.

The upper caste Indians did not need to recreate Harvard University as an upper caste space, rather they live in an upper caste imaginary where every space is a casteless upper caste space until and unless it is encroached upon by caste-marked subjects and their explicit caste-based discourses. When such encroachment does happen in any given space, as it did in the political arena in India, when lower caste began to organize along caste lines to demand rights, they decry it as a space of backwardness riddled with caste. In the above instance they have relegated politics to backwardness and embraced corporate and educational spaces as modern and caste free (Mosse 2020a). Of course, at Harvard, there are Indians who do not say anything offensive about Dalits or lower castes generally, but even many of their behavior towards me changes when they find out my caste status. It might become more formal or awkward, as if one is not sure how to interact with me anymore. Going beyond this, outside of India, because of their greater number, resources, and influence, upper casteness is presented and perceived as Indianness. Traditions, rituals, cultural practices, and behaviors of the upper castes come to stand in for Indianness, and Indianness itself becomes upper casteness.

### *The caste-class continuum*

There is another aspect of my personal experience with the caste-class continuum that informs this dissertation. Until I entered college, there were many times when, even as I was aware of the differential treatment that I was being subject to, I did not register it as having to do with caste. For instance, as a child, several times a year, I remember being called to a teacher's office where

I was required to sign some papers. The teacher insisted that I bring my own pen, and if I touched anything in his office, including the desk or the very papers that I was supposed to sign, he would beat me black and blue. I believed that this discrimination was based on class – brought on by the fact that the government gave me a full scholarship to attend a very prestigious private school. I did not attribute it to caste and the fact that I am a Dalit. This teacher was literally practicing untouchability, but it did not occur to me as such until many years later when I arrived at Harvard University to begin my Ph.D. program. I found out later, that many of my friends who had the same experience with the same teacher, also did not realize this until years later. Moreover, when I went home to the one room shared by my family of three, I never thought of my family or my neighbors as anything but middle class.

The importance of this vignette is to point to the fact that even as I was experiencing caste-based discrimination, I did not have the verbal or even the conceptual repertoire to identify it and express or even encode it in my memory as such. But my available repertoire was saturated with concepts, ideas, and vocabularies of more modern forms of difference. So, I processed my experiences with the tools available to me at that time.

I later found that this is a common enough phenomenon among Dalits of a certain age. Whether or not this is the case with earlier generations of Dalits (particularly those who grew up before the 1980s and 1990s) is beyond the scope of this study. Once again using my personal experience as an example, I can say that my father tried to raise me without the awareness of caste until it became unavoidable. For example, when I asked him why the letters SC appeared next to my name in the attendance register and other documents at my school, he simply said

“that’s because we are not rich, and therefore you receive a scholarship from the government to study at this school”. My father belonged to the section of Dalits who seemed to have believed that modernity would erode caste but not in the same way that upper castes believe it does. This section of Dalits believed that through education and good employment, their children would grow up to have enough resources and status as to not be circumscribed by their caste. They saw economic development as a bulwark against caste oppression. They felt that the government needed to ensure that Dalits can gain such education and jobs. They even felt that government should control and direct economic development in a manner that ensures more equitable outcomes. So, his generation did not – at least back then – seem to believe in the power of markets as the new one does. This generation actually associated government and public sector with better quality and fair pricing, and the private sector products and services as unreliable and low quality. The current generation of Dalits also sees economic resources as a protection against caste-based injustices. However, they also see the ritual basis of power fading away and being replaced by economics as the true basis of power in today’s world. Moreover, they look to the private sector as the current and future source of economic resources.

Even though my father tried to avoid usage and talk about caste, when I was younger, his life experiences were too deeply affected by caste for him to be open to castelessness – as the later generations do. He does not say that caste did not affect his life or play an important role in it. Even after I became aware of the caste dynamics that influenced the possibilities and opportunities in our lives, I never heard him say anything that would seem like Dalit castelessness. He does say that things used to be much worse and that we must keep up the good fight to protect what little gains we have made. Even to this day, he actively attends meetings

and rallies about Dalit upliftment. Has pictures of B.R. Ambedkar at home, and on many things he owns. He still sees the Dalit struggle as a fight for rights, equality, and dignity, as do many of his contemporaries. Whereas, with the current generations of Dalit activism, words like “success”, “progress” and “development” often replace words like “social justice”, “emancipation”, and “upliftment”.

My fieldwork in Bellampalli was supposed to collect data about how different generations of Dalits engage with caste and castelessness, so that I could compare it with data from younger cohorts of Dalits who grew up in an environment saturated with market centric discourses and live and work in cities, particularly in modern global workspaces. However, that turned out to be too much for this project and therefore this dissertation does not offer a more in-depth discussion about older generations of Dalits and how they compare with the younger ones. I have however, provided a few snapshots based on personal experience and preliminary research. They should only be taken as preliminary findings until more research is undertaken. The focus on my study is on the younger generations of Dalit working in well paid jobs in the corporate sector in urban areas. My fieldwork in Hyderabad does, however, suggest that the socio-economic milieu post-1990s provided these later generations with a different set of tools and conceptual repertoires that enable them to conceptualize, articulate, and conceive of solutions to this difference, in a new way, that is markedly a product of its own times and circumstances, and is heavily shaped by market centric discourses.

Finally, since my informants were aware that I am a Dalit, they seemed to assume a certain level of cultural competence on my part during our interactions. Therefore, some of what they were trying to convey was not explicit or verbal. A significant part of what was said or left unsaid was done with the understanding that I would know what to infer and how to interpret the information based on our shared background and experiences of being Dalit. A simple example is when they use the phrase “our people”. In most cases it is meant to be understood as Dalits. But sometimes, they will use our people and poor people interchangeably, and I am still supposed to understand that they mean Dalit when they say poor, but sometimes the poverty aspect is indeed being highlighted and being Dalit is only incidental. Sometimes, this use of the phrase “our people” suggests that the informant may not have gained my trust sufficiently to explicitly mention caste. At other times, caste is not mentioned because it is obvious, and to mention it explicitly would be to put too fine a point on it. Learning to talk about caste without explicitly mentioning it, is itself a middle-class attribute (that displays sophistication) that my Dalit informants have made a part of their repertoires. Sometimes, this is due to fear of being overheard by non-Dalits. At other times, it is simply because Dalits too have been socialized in environments where to speak of caste would be rude or unsophisticated. Politeness, in the language of market-centric discourses, demands erasure of caste, except when denouncing its explicit use for political purposes - a phenomenon that is always associated with lower castes.

Based on all the above experiences, beginning in elementary school leading up to my time in the corporate workspace, I began to wonder if other Dalits working relatively well-paid jobs in the private corporate sector, with similar life experiences leading up to that point, were going through similar experiences as mine and what implications this has for the formation of a new

Dalit middle class identity and for Dalit politics generally. Eventually, this became the topic of this Ph.D. dissertation.

Given how my experiences have taught me that anything associated with Dalits is automatically written off as non-meritorious, and that Indian academia, extending all the way to Indians at internationally acclaimed institutions such as Harvard University, is a de facto upper caste space, initially, I considered not revealing my caste status in this dissertation. I would rather this were seen as the work of an objective<sup>16</sup> researcher, anthropologist, and ethnographer who happens to be Dalit. However, one does not just happen to be Dalit. For most Dalits, being Dalit becomes a large part of their everyday existence. Even as a relatively privileged Dalit, I was constantly aware of my inferior ascribed status and the important role it played in my everyday life. I had many experiences which served to remind me that my relationship to many people I interacted with was that of a Dalit/reserved category/quota student vis a vis a “normal person/general category/merit student”. This was a result of both external and internalized assumptions. The above-mentioned vignettes and conversations serve as examples of some of those reminders.

This sort of hyper awareness and hyper visibility of Dalits is perhaps enhanced and magnified for Dalits who operate in elite spaces. In the end, it seemed that I would have to go out of my way and hold back some relevant information about my data and how I obtained it, to avoid mentioning my caste. As one reads through this dissertation it may seem that my story is partly a microcosm of the overall story that I am trying to convey here. Some of my vignettes prefigure

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<sup>16</sup> I suspect that this word may not sit well with some anthropologists. I use it for the lack of the better term to draw attention to the meticulousness and analytical rigor with which I have treated my data. At the very least, I have not knowingly manipulated data to arrive at the desired conclusions.

the experiences of my informants or have a similar theme. However, I did not set out with the intention to make this so. Moreover, I have taken great care to not generalize my story or try to find a simulacrum of my story in that of my informants. However, I have found that several of my informants have stories about college and workplace interactions that are similar to mine. While my informants' stories share some similarities with my experience and among themselves, their stories are specific to their circumstances. My informants come from many different social and cultural backgrounds, even if they are all Dalits. Some are from rural areas, some urban, some had uneducated parents, others were raised by educated government employees, some are very comfortable with and are fluent in English, others are not, some have adopted a lot of western mannerisms and values, others have not. Their stories reveal the many different aspects of and pathways into the commonality that I am exploring here.

There are now many works on the Dalit experience including autobiographical works, about the experience of caste by other names, but I have provided a few vignettes from my own experience to help the reader better understand my positionality. Consider these along with the usual disclaimers that should accompany any work that would qualify as "anthropology/ethnography at home".

I will end this section by noting that I have tried to be as objective in my analysis and the way I have collected my data, but I leave to the reader to arrive at their own conclusions as to how much objectivity is possible for someone in my position (and whether objectivity would lead to more legitimate scholarship). Even as I write these words, I can feel the upper caste gaze judging

this as “Dalit scholarship” – as in scholarship by a Dalit, rather than scholarship on Dalit studies. Thereby, hyper-marking Dalit (and other non-elite) intellectual production and in doing so simultaneously unmarking elite intellectual production. I realize that my caste is inextricably linked to my scholarship just as an upper caste person’s is to theirs, when they study caste. The fact that an upper caste person may not be as acutely aware of their caste and the role it plays in their scholarship perhaps makes it even more pertinent. This important role played by caste among upper caste without it being explicitly recognized as caste has been studied before, albeit rarely (see Pandian 2002; S. Deshpande 2013; Subramanian 2019; 2015). Building on these works, I look at the role of caste in the lives of Dalits when it is not explicitly brought up as caste and when it explicitly brought up as castelessness. This section is not just a statement about my positionality and of native ethnography, but it is exemplary of the more general phenomenon that is the subject matter of this study. I could have built a similar narrative by piecing together vignettes from various informants, but I made a stylistic choice to tell the story through one life history – mine. Similarly, I have tried to present my ethnographic findings through the stories of just a few individuals.

This dissertation is organized in the following way:

Chapter 2 takes a look at the liberalization of India’s economy and its impact on not just the structure and organization of resources in the economy but also on how people came to understand the economy and their role in it. While liberalization brought in new kinds of jobs and aspirations, it also brought in new ways of looking at the world and constructing the self in relation to the economy. It pays special attention to not only the economic regimes since independence but also

the economic discourses that shaped both Dalits and upper castes as market beings that are modern, middle class, global, and casteless.

Chapter 3 Looks at the existing literature on middle class generally, middle class in India, and the Dalit middle class. It also explains some terms and concepts required to understand what the idea of “castelessness” means among the Dalit middle class.

Chapter 4 present my ethnographic findings that show how castelessness comes to be both a performance and lived experience of middleclassness among my Dalit informants. It shows that castelessness is not just a strategy but a lived experience that my informants share with their upper caste colleagues, largely as a result for their shared social imaginary of development.

Chapter 5 focusses on the NGO Swaeroes Network, and its founder Praveen Kumar, as a case study of new Dalit middle class subjectivity and organizing.

Chapter 6 concludes with a brief summary of the overall findings. It comments on the current state of the field of castes studies and how it marks lower castes while simulataneously unmarking upper castes. It also comments why work such as this has not been undertaken before.

## Chapter 2: Economic Liberalization and Dalits

### **Introduction**

This chapter takes a look at the liberalization of India's economy and how it has not only had an impact on the structure and organization of resources in the economy but also on how people came to understand the economy and their role in it. While liberalization brought in new kinds of jobs and aspirations, it also brought in new ways of looking at the world and constructing the self in relation to the economy. The economic discourses promoted by the government and the media post-liberalization played an important role in shaping the middle-class subject as a market being. This chapter is a look at how the economic regimes and discourses that shaped both Dalits and upper castes as market beings that are modern, middle class, global and casteless.

For about 3 decades after gaining independence in 1947, India adopted a strategy of economic development that relied heavily on the public sector. The private sector was regulated, and foreign goods, technology and investment were restricted. This began to change in the 1980s as these regulations and restrictions were loosened, but only gradually and incrementally. In 1991, India was experiencing a severe balance of payments crisis. As is often noted in descriptions of this historic moment, both within the media and in academic circles, India only had enough forex reserves to pay for about two weeks' worth of imports (Reddy 2002; Reserve Bank of India 2005). In response, the government launched a series of policies that are commonly referred to as “(economic) liberalization” or “(economic) reforms.” These policies were described as leading to more liberalization (of regulations and controls), privatization (sale of public assets to private entrepreneurs and allowing private investments in various economic spheres), and globalization (allowing foreign technology and capital into the Indian market). Several of these policies were

also a part of the conditionalities imposed by the International Monetary Fund which along with the World Bank and Asian Development Bank, provided loans to help India get through the crisis. Before these reforms, the economy performed reasonably well for the first 15 years from 1950–1951 to 1964–1965, when the rate of growth of gross domestic product (GDP at factor cost) averaged 4.1% per year (Ahluwalia 2019). For the first three decades taken together, the economy averaged 3.5 % GDP growth. This was derisively called the “Hindu rate of growth” since this growth rate came at a time when other Asian economies were growing at much faster rates. In the 1980s, however, India’s growth rate rose to about 5.5% and to about 6% in 1990s, and it averaged 8% for 2003-2015, peaking at about 9% during 2005-2008 (Aiyar 2016). This increased growth was attributed to the loosening of controls and opening up of the economy. It lead to a lot of excitement among supporters of the policies of liberalization, in the academia, policy circles, and the media.

#### **Average Rate of Economic Growth (%) in India**

| <b>Time Period</b> | <b>Growth rate of GDP (%)</b> |
|--------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1950–80            | 3.5%                          |
| 1980–92            | 5.5%                          |
| 1992–2003          | 6.0%                          |
| 2003–15            | 8.0%                          |

(Aiyar 2016 Author’s calculations from tables of the Government of India’s Economic Survey, various years.)

## **Liberalization and Employment**

The post-liberalization period in India (from 1991 onwards) saw a massive growth in the private sector, especially in the services sector. Agriculture, traditionally considered the primary sector of the Indian economy, went from being the largest contributor of GDP to the smallest, and the services sector, traditionally considered the tertiary sector, became the largest contributor to GDP, while industry/manufacturing remained the economy's secondary sector. Despite the change in the size of contribution to the GDP, Agriculture continues to be the largest sector in terms of percentage of the workforce it employs.

In 1951, agriculture contributed 51% to GDP and accounted for about 72% of India's labor force, while the industrial sector (mining, manufacturing, construction, gas, electricity, and water supply) contributed 19% to GDP and employed about 11% of the workforce, and finally, the service sector contributed 30% to GDP and employed 17% of the workforce. By 2012, agriculture's share of employment fell to about 47% of the labor force, with industry at 25%, and services at almost 30%. The corresponding GDP shares were 14%, 27%, and 59% respectively (Dasgupta and Kar 2018). Which means agriculture, went from being the largest contributor of GDP (51%) to the smallest (14%) while remaining the largest source of employment, albeit falling from 72% to 47%. The services sector became the largest contributor to GDP increasing from 30% to 59% but its contribution to employment did not grow significantly enough to reduce the strain on agriculture, increasing only from 17% to 30%. Industry's contribution to GDP grew from 19% to 27% and its share of employment increased more than proportionally from 11% to 25%. What this means is that while services sector has become the largest contributor to GDP, it has not been able to generate enough jobs to reduce the dependence on agriculture. Its share in GDP is not proportional

to its share in employment, leaving a large part of the Indian workforce in the agricultural sector which is now contributing a much smaller share to overall production.

### **GDP and Employment shares of the 3 sectors (in 1951 and 2012)**

| <b>Sector</b>          | <b>GDP share %<br/>1951</b> | <b>GDP share %<br/>2012</b> | <b>Employment<br/>share % 1951</b> | <b>Employment<br/>share % 2012</b> |
|------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Agriculture            | 51                          | 14                          | 72                                 | 47                                 |
| Manufacturing/Industry | 19                          | 27                          | 11                                 | 25                                 |
| Services               | 30                          | 59                          | 17                                 | 30                                 |

(Dasgupta and Kar 2018)

However, in absolute numbers, there was a significant increase in jobs in the services sector, following liberalization. A large part of this came from the IT industry, including the related IT enabled services (ITeS) and Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) industries<sup>17</sup>. The IT industry has been the biggest employment generator in the services sector and has spawned the mushrooming of several ancillary industries such as transportation, real estate, catering, security, and housekeeping. Direct employment in this segment is estimated at 4.47 million in the financial year 2020-2021 with an addition of 138,000, of which, nearly 36 per cent were women employees. Indirect job creation via ancillary services is estimated to be over 12 million (Government of India 2022). As mentioned above, this increase in service sector's share of employment was not proportional to its increase in share of GDP. Nevertheless, it was a significant development, especially when contrasted with manufacturing, which increased its share of GDP by only 8

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<sup>17</sup> All of these together will be referred to as the IT industry in this dissertation.

percentage points while its share of employment more than doubled, increasing by 14 percentage points from 11 to 25 percent.

The growth of employment in the services sector, however, was generally of a higher quality. Many high-paying white-collar jobs were created in this sector. But most of this job growth in services came from the private sector while job growth in the public sector remained very low. Add to this the fact that growth rate of jobs, in services and the economy overall, was not keeping pace with the rate of growth of GDP. In fact, the rate of job growth actually declined following liberalization—i.e., the percentage of new jobs being created each year was, on average, lower than in earlier periods (Ghosh and Chandrasekhar 2015). This led to a situation where fewer new jobs were being created, and most jobs that were being created were in the private sector.

At the same time, the country also witnessed a growth in technical and engineering education, and higher education in general. This, in turn, provided the skilled labor force that made it possible for the services sector to see such an impressive expansion. Many people were moving out of rural areas—and away from the agrarian economy—to live in urban areas. They were also gaining higher educational qualifications than before, but this was not being matched by creation of new jobs to meet the demand.

The policies of privatization and reduction of the public sector in favor of the private meant that the number of good jobs that were available to Dalits (and Adivasis/Tirbals) under reservation<sup>18</sup> (affirmative action in India) policies did not keep pace with overall job growth. There are several

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<sup>18</sup> This will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

intellectuals and activists who have argued that reservation is being undermined by the privatization push (see Jaffrelot and Kalaiyarasan 2020) and have called for reservations to be extended to the private sector (Thorat 2004). This concern is compounded by the fact that the available reserved jobs are not always filled, as those in charge choose to keep the posts vacant instead of hiring Dalits and other reserved category candidates. Moreover, the government also initiated various programs to reduce public sector employment by offering voluntary retirements to employees and imposing bans on further hiring. During the period of 1970-1990, the public sector added about 8 million jobs. After 1991, job creation by the public sector more or less came to a halt, adding only 80,000 jobs in the entire decade up to 2001. In the following decade, employment in the public sector actually declined by 1.59 million (Jodhka and Prakash 2016). During the same decade, employment in the private organized sector, increased from 8.65 million to 11.45 million, making up for the decline in the public sector.

**Public and Private (organized sector) employment by decade (in millions)**

| <b>Year</b> | <b>Public Sector</b> | <b>Private sector</b> |
|-------------|----------------------|-----------------------|
| 1970-1      | 11.10                | 6.73                  |
| 1980-1      | 15.48                | 7.40                  |
| 1990-1      | 19.06                | 7.68                  |
| 2000-1      | 19.14                | 8.65                  |
| 2010-11     | 17.55                | 11.45                 |

(Collated from the Handbook of Statistics on the Indian Economy: 2012-13: 53, Reserve Bank of India cited in Jodhka and Prakash 2016)

Since Dalits, tribals, and other reserved categories depended on these public sector jobs more than others, they have reason to be more concerned about this trend. Without reservations in the private sector, Dalits are at a disadvantage when it comes to being hired for these jobs. Besides direct discrimination, there are two others indirect mechanisms that can keep Dalits from being hired for these private sector jobs. One is the continued preference of upper castes to hire from their own communities as shown by (Markovits 2001 cited in Jaffrelot and Veer 2008) in the case of merchants and traders, and Beteille (2001) in the case of bureaucrats and intelligentsia. Two, the soft skills that private employers seek are simply aspects of upper caste culture and mannerisms. These “soft skills” are the cultural capital enjoyed by upper castes and therefore difficult to acquire through formal education (Jodhka and Newman 2010; Mosse 2018).

According to the Report of the Working Group on Empowering Scheduled Castes, appointed by the National Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, about 113,430 job opportunities were lost by the Scheduled Castes in the Central Government services during the period of 1992—97, constituting a decline of 10.07 percent of job opportunities. As per the Economic Survey 2003—04, 1.364 million jobs have been abolished during the period of 1995—2002. In fact, when the number of educated persons among these underprivileged sections is increasing, the number of public sector jobs available to them is dwindling (Mandal 2009; 2014).

The Dalit middle class (which will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter) is seen to have arisen because of reservations in public sector jobs and has largely relied on the public sector. It, therefore, did not see a corresponding growth in size as compared to the overall growth in middle class, during this time. However, another segment emerged within the Dalit middle class,

comprising Dalits employed within the private sector. While there wasn't and is not any reservation for jobs in the private sector, the reservations in higher education helped a significant number of Dalits to attain the education and qualifications needed to find jobs in the private sector. Some of these Dalits also entered into the IT industry, and they constitute one of the core demographics of fieldwork undertaken for this study. The crucial difference between these two groups of Dalit middle classes is that, while the earlier group was employed in public sector jobs based on reservations, the latter was selected purely based on their qualifications in open competition with the rest of Indian society. While members of the earlier Dalit middle class, which arose in the government sector, experienced discrimination and were considered unfit, underqualified, and only employed because of reservations, the latter group could not be accused of the same. Indeed, the latter group could claim to be on an equal footing, professionally, with their colleagues from upper castes. In theory, this gives them the freedom to be more open and vocal about their caste status. This project asks whether this is really the case. Does the new Dalit middle class from the private sector have a different experience than the Dalit middle class from the government sector? Are they treated more equally? Are they accepted into both the professional and social worlds of their colleagues as equals? Do their experiences encourage them to be more open about their caste, or are they still forced to hide it for fear of discrimination or other reasons? If they are open about it, why so? And if they are not open about it, why so?

### **Liberalization and Market-Centric Discourses**

In the 1990s two things happened along with liberalization, and at least partially as consequence of it. On the one hand, there was a huge growth of caste-based political organizing and caste-based political parties were seeing more electoral success. On the other hand, the idea that economic

growth is good for all and will make old and backward concerns like caste disappear received a major boost in the media. This section is focused on the latter development.

There was and still remains a tendency in the mainstream media in India to prioritize economic growth over its equitable distribution and over social justice concerns in general. This is based on the argument, discussed in the introduction, that growth is good for all, and that economic development will erode the influence of caste. This argument, however, has taken on new forms in the post-1990s era. Economic growth is now seen as a more realistic possibility because it is driven by the private sector, and economic growth is hailed as the solution to all ills by its new supporters (Katju 2009; Singh 2008; Munshi 2017). In effect, this argument diverts attention away from caste-based struggles for justice and equality towards the issue of economic development. Therefore, it can be seen as a strategy to counter and undermine caste-based mobilizations and movements for social justice and equitable distribution. The phrase “let us grow the pie before we talk about dividing it”<sup>19</sup>, or some variation of it, is often repeated in the media. As with the old view of Indian exceptionalism, development is supposed to make caste irrelevant; but now, the impetus for development comes from the private sector instead of the public sector. In its most benign form, this discourse frames the debate in terms of rich and poor rather than upper and lower castes. What remains unstated is that the benefits of growth mainly accrue to the already well-to-do—i.e., those who already have cultural, social, and economic capital—thereby benefitting the upper castes and further increasing the economic gap between upper and lower. Perhaps more importantly, as Deshpande (2013) points out, this focus on economic growth allows the upper castes to move focus away from their accumulated caste privileges.

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<sup>19</sup> While this is a common enough phrase that most English educated Indians are very familiar with, I was unable to find any links to the actual articles due to lack of access to the necessary archival sources.

### *India as an “Economic Superpower”*

The above logic is reinforced through constant repetition in the mainstream media in India – more specifically the English language media – where it usually takes on some variation of a narrative built on the following three points:

1) after independence, India followed a socialist model of development, with the government playing a large role in investing in and managing the economy. This was inefficient and led to a low rate of economic growth; referred to as the “Hindu rate of growth”.

2) Post 1990, the economy saw drastic changes with the implementation of economic reforms which encouraged private capital and unleashed market forces. This led to higher rates of growth and set India on a path to economic superpowerdom.

3) In order to further capitalize on the good work and benefit from a small window of opportunity available to India to become an economic superpower, an opportunity provided by the current global economic conditions and India’s current demographics, which makes plenty of cheap skilled and unskilled labor available to businesses to exploit, more reforms, i.e. complete privatization, liberalization, and deregulation are required. But this, they argue, is not happening, because there are uninformed or ill-intentioned elements who resist reforms, and wittingly or unwittingly hold the country back.

In this narrative, these uninformed elements are not clearly identified; they could be left wing political activists, environmentalists, farmers, indigenous people or whoever happens to oppose a particular reform measure or economic reforms in general. This sentiment is nicely captured in the advertising campaign called “India Poised” launched by the leading English language newspaper, Times of India, featuring the famous Indian actor, Amitabh Bachchan. A brief video advertisement

titled *India vs India* has the actor saying “there are two India’s in this country. One is straining at the leash, eager to spring forth and live up to [the promised potential] ....and the other India is the leash....One India leads, the other India follows”. In the Hindi version of the advertisement, he says that one India goes forward and the other goes backward (Times of India 2007). The ad does not go into the specifics of who is represented in each of these two Indias, but the overall narrative here is in line with how the TV and news media often talk disparagingly about the uneducated, backward people (who are usually lower caste) in contrast to the praise heaped on “modern” Indians (who often come from the upper castes).

Sometimes, these negative elements are portrayed as being caught up in old ideologies and parochial concerns, and that there are politicians who practice “vote-bank politics” and try to appease these elements instead of doing what is right for the country. Caste-based politics is always seen as one such undesirable form of vote-bank politics, as is any form of social welfare. Any policies or efforts to help to the poor, rural masses, minorities, or the agriculture sector, are dismissed as a “gravy train” where the resources never reach the intended targets. A quick Google search returns several news articles about “gravy train” measures by the India government (see Muruganandham 2023; Gupta 2022). Such efforts are decried by the media as “populist” – which always has a negative connotation – and the government is always accused of launching these measures “with an eye on upcoming elections”. The government of the day is usually guilty of doing just that. But also, there is always an election around the corner, in some state or at the federal level. As a result, any social welfare measure can be painted by the media as something that was done with an eye on upcoming elections or to shore up a specific vote-bank. In contrast, any subsidies, tax deductions, or debt write-offs and waivers granted to the corporate sector is

either ignored or hailed as a measure in the right direction – one that encourages entrepreneurship and the spirit of markets.

Another argument that is often used in the media is something along the lines of “in a country with so much poverty, poor infrastructure, and other issues, it is a shame that people are fighting for reservations instead of coming together and working for the benefit of the country as a whole”. Or “instead of addressing the issues of the poor/instead of seizing the opportunity to become a global economic superpower, the government is caught up in vote-bank politics of reservations”. It is never explained how reservations negatively affect the infrastructure or poverty levels, or even what the relationship between the two is.

Such themes make up the crux of market centric discourses and they have saturated the Indian media scape since the 1990s, and many people have grown up being shaped by them, both among the upper and lower castes, including Dalits. Currently, there are many Dalits working in the technology sector in India who have been constantly exposed to the above narrative since childhood. This project seeks to understand what effect this constant barrage of market-centric discourses has done to their understanding of caste and the struggle against it.

### *“India Shining”*

In the run up to the 2004 general election in India, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the party that was in power, launched a mega publicity campaign called “India Shining”. This campaign sought to educate the country on how the reforms had been immensely successful in transforming India from a poor, backward country to one that was prosperous and ready to become a global economic

superpower. It was meant to show that people were already benefiting from these policies and that others should join in. The party lost the election, however, and this campaign was widely blamed as a primary reason for the failure (Kaur 2016). This dissertation argues that Kaur (2016) is correct in pointing out that the disenchantment with the campaign was not with the project of reforms itself but the public's disappointment at not having been able to profit from the reforms which were shown to be so beneficial for some sections of society. The campaign popularized the idea of economic reforms and established it as the best path to prosperity. In fact, as Kaur points out, the opposition party did not even challenge the effectiveness of reforms<sup>20</sup> but simply launched a counter-campaign pointing out that the benefits from these reforms had only accrued to the already well-to-do and the "common man" got nothing out of it (Kaur 2016). The opposition's counter-campaign came to be called "Aam Admi Ko Kya Mila" which translates to "What did the common-man get?". The India Shining campaign was clearly aimed at the middle class Indian, and my research finds that the ideas and images presented in this campaign have indeed resonated with the middle-class Indians that make up my informants.

### **Dalits Post-Liberalization**

Pre-independence, the struggle for Dalit equality was confronted with two prevailing nationalist discourses (Partha Chatterjee 1999 cited in Prakash 2015). One was the Marxist discourse wherein caste was a feature of the superstructure and was bound to disappear under the impact of modernity. As pointed out above, this came to be the popular view referred to as Indian

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<sup>20</sup> The main opposition party at the time, the Indian National Congress, actually takes credit for initiating the economic reforms while it was in power in 1991. As such the two largest political parties in India – one which led the government and the other which led the opposition – were both in favor of economic reforms and took credit for implementing them.

exceptionalism, which appealed to people from a broad spectrum of political orientations (Jodhka 2015). The second discourse was the one embraced by Gandhi and Radhakrishnan, which held that caste in its original form is not oppressive, but that it merely performed the function of division of labor in a modern economy.

Both these approaches implied that the focus should be on the domain of economics, and nothing needed to be done about caste per se. Both of these notions were challenged early on by B.R. Ambedkar (1936), who contended that property as a source of power was predominant, at the moment in Europe, but this was not necessarily true for India at that time or even Europe in the past. He points out that there are other sources of power, particularly religion, which can be as great or a greater source of power than money. He says that the socialists are mistaken in thinking that equalization of property must precede everything, and he points out the proletariat revolution required to achieve the socialist vision of economic equality is unlikely to happen because workers are not likely to come together unless they know that they will not be discriminated on the basis of caste and creed after the revolution. Regarding the second view about caste being a form of division of labor, Ambedkar acknowledges that civilized society does indeed need division of labor, but that the caste system is not merely a division of labor but also a division of laborers. It is a hierarchy in which laborers are graded one above the other. Moreover, it is not based on natural aptitudes or one's choice or preference, but on social status assigned at birth (Ambedkar 1936)

However, the notion that caste would simply disappear with economic development came to be the prevalent view among politicians, intellectuals, and common public alike in India, and in many ways it continues to prevail even today. Post-liberalization, a modified version of this argument

(as described in the section above) becomes the dominant one. This argument can be captured in the saying: “A rising tide lifts all boats”. However, this time the tide comes from the private sector. The reforms are supposed to help better the economy and thereby, through some inexplicable means<sup>21</sup>, also the social condition of Dalits.

Even sympathizers of the Dalit cause, and activists fighting to end caste-based discrimination, buy into this argument. During my fieldwork, I heard a schoolteacher who was trying to defend his Dalit students for scoring lower in an exam. He explained to his students in the classroom that one cannot judge the accomplishments of all his students by the same scale. One student might have educated parents, a nice study desk at home, good food, and a comfortable bed, while another has no comforts and no electricity at home, he does his homework under streetlights and sleeps on the floor. Therefore, he said, the performances of these two students cannot be measured by the same scale. Even though this teacher was trying to encourage his Dalit students, like most educated, urban upper caste Indians, he was trying to avoid talk of caste, and ended up using economic situation as a proxy for caste.

Post-independence and particularly post-liberalization, there have been many voices that have called for harnessing and embracing the power of markets to help Dalits tap into the vast opportunities offered by the new economic regime (Prakash 2015). The prevailing notion was that the state protectionism of the Nehruvian model retained the caste basis of society and restricted social mobility. However, this call for support of free market policies has also usually been

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<sup>21</sup> It is not clarified if this is meant to happen through trickle-down economics. It is as though a clarification is not deemed necessary because the mechanism of erosion of caste is supposed to be self-evident.

accompanied by a call for state action to help Dalits enter into and take advantage of these markets (Prakash 2015). While the impact of these reforms on socio-economic conditions of Dalits is debatable, their effect on the discourses of Dalit socio-economic conditions and of class and caste in India is more apparent.

Post-1991, many claims have been made that the caste system has been weakened due to economic reforms, and that Dalits are therefore better off in the post reform era (Still 2014), implying that the people's economic position is no longer tied to their caste status as tightly as it once was. However, there are two counter-arguments to this: One, caste is a form of social capital that has been successfully converted to economic capital (Teltumbde 2011; A. Deshpande 2011) and the urban and upper caste bias of liberalization has further bolstered the position of upper castes (Still 2014) arguably weakening the relative socio-economic position of lower castes and thereby, more firmly entrenching the upper castes as upper class and lower castes as lower class. Secondly, there is no good evidence to back the claim that liberalization and market reforms are benefitting Dalits economically (Teltumbde 2011) or helping their social mobility. Jodhka (2015) shows that, even though rapid mechanization has made traditional social organization in agriculture completely redundant, there is no evidence to show that this “in any way enables dissolution of caste-based differences and identities in rural areas” (Jodhka 2016, 234). On the contrary, he shows that it has escalated economic inequalities across caste groups. While in theory markets should reward talent and ignore ascriptive identities, in practice, this does not happen (Prakash 2015; Thorat and Newman 2010). Some scholars have even suggested that this discrimination could occur due to “benign” reasons – employers may use caste as a proxy for unobserved socioeconomic characteristics and not due to prejudice (Munshi 2017).

Some argue that caste is becoming more like class in India. DL Sheth (1999) talks about a process of ‘secularisation of caste’ through ‘de-ritualisation’, ‘politicisation’ and ‘classisation’. Classisation is a process which releases people from ritualistic ties and links them to economy and politics instead, which has led to the formation of what he calls ‘new middle class’<sup>22</sup> which while overlapping with caste is independent of caste. Both upper caste and lower caste members in the new middle class share more similar economic interests and lifestyles with each other than with their own caste members who are not in the middle class. Karanth and Ramaswamy further bolster this with their finding that villagers seemed to suggest that they are more influenced by their relation to the market than caste (Karanth and Ramaswamy forthcoming cited in Manor 2010)<sup>23</sup>.

My study looks at Dalits working in the technology sector, who do share more in common with their upper caste professional colleagues than with others of their own caste, as far as economic interests and lifestyles are concerned. But I also ask what this means for their political interests and their attitudes regarding the path the struggle for equality and justice should take and whether they are in agreement with their upper caste colleagues on these matters too. With the above background on the evolution of economic policies and market-centric discourses, the next chapter looks at the evolution of the middle class in India, with a particular focus on the evolution of the New Dalit Middle Class and its New Dalit Middle Class activism.

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<sup>22</sup> The term “new middle class” has been used by many scholars to describe different things, but usually it is intended to show that this class is somehow different from a middle class that existed before and continues to exist alongside the new one. In most cases, what marks the difference between the old and new middle classes is the fact that the old middle class relied on and continues to rely on the government, and the new middle class relies on or is borne out of the growth of private sector and globalization in that respective country.

<sup>23</sup> I couldn’t actually find this forthcoming work and I cannot verify if it was ever published.





## Chapter 3: Middle Class and Dalits

### **Introduction**

This chapter will set the stage to understand the specific section of the Dalit Middle Class that this project is most interested in. It examines what the idea of “castelessness” means among this segment and what that has to do with the liberalization of India’s economy and an attendant proliferation of market centric discourses in the country. To understand this relationship, one would need some background on ideas and terms including: the middle class generally, Indian middle class, caste and how it relates to class, caste and “castelessness”, Indian economic history as it pertains to liberalization (covered in the previous chapter), Dalit Middle Class (and what is sometimes called the New Dalit Middle Class), and finally the nature and anatomy of the market centric discourses that we are interested in (also covered in the previous chapter). Since there are no established or accepted definitions for many of these terms or phrases, it is important to understand what is meant by each of the above categories as it pertains to this project.

### **Middle classes**

At the most basic level, middle class can be seen as segment of society that is in between the upper (elite) layers and lower (plebian) masses of a society. As such, this group would not be found in a pre-modern, feudal order. Therefore, middle class is commonly considered a phenomenon of the capitalist era. The phrase was first used in Great Britain by the end of eighteenth century to refer to those who have some education, some property, and some character to preserve (Wyvill as cited in Warhman 1995: 443, cited in Jaffrelot and Veer 2008). Middle-classness has now become a powerful aspiration for large sections of people around the world, as well as the primary subject of interest and the key constituency of politicians and corporations globally. This renewed interest

in class brought on by the growing importance of the middle class requires an explicit theorization of that middle. However, there is no clear definition or understanding of this middle class. This lack of clarity is a consequence of the fact that the middle class has been subjected to “a wide range of assumptions and meanings, depending upon the local specificities of what it means to be middle-class – apathy, industriousness, fiscal irresponsibility, thrift, political conservatism, progressivism, cultural inauthenticity, and national character, among them” (Heiman et al. 2012, 7).

Despite centuries of use and the obvious contemporary relevance of the category of the middle class, anthropologists have only recently begun to analyze this category. As Heiman et al.(2012) point out, anthropology as a discipline has not offered a collective contribution to theorizing about the implications of the changing nature and composition of the global middle classes, and what this means for the global economy and people’s everyday lives. They also observe that “middle class” began to emerge as an analytical category for considering the implications of globalization in the 1980s and 1990s. Heiman et al.’s volume marks a significant moment when anthropology turned to focus on interrogating “...our understanding of what constitutes a ‘middle class’...and how anthropology can contribute to theorizing middle-class culture and history within global capitalist relations” (Heiman et al. 2012, 5). This section presents an overview of the state of anthropological literature on the middle class and is heavily indebted to the above volume.

Joel Robbins (2013) suggests that, since the 1980s, the focus of anthropology has moved from studying the cultural “other” to studying the “suffering subject”. This shift in attention, while a broad generalization, could very well be due to the apparent exit of elites from their ethnicities and identities into metropolitan sameness (Mosse 2015). Also, to the extent that anthropology has

engaged with class-based analysis, it has largely taken the peasants or lower classes as its central protagonists (Heiman et al. 2012). While there has been some work on ethnographies of the elite and powerful, and to a lesser extent on the middle class, for the most part, the focus of the discipline has been on the “powerless” (Heiman et al. 2012). The middle class, moreover, has been viewed as tainted because its very existence implied exploitation of the lower classes and inauthenticity and mimicry of elites (Heiman et al. 2012).

Another reason for this lack of work on the middle class is because of the influence of the tradition of Marxist analysis on the discipline. Although Marxist analysis is perhaps most closely associated with literature on class, it has, like Marx himself, not offered a lot of insight on the middle class – focused as it was on the struggles between a ruling class and a working class. Scholars working in the Marxist tradition continued to ignore middle class, considering it an ideological illusion, even as its size and importance grew in industrialized countries, ultimately leading to what has been called the “embarrassment of the middle class” for Marxists (Wright 1989 cited in Heiman et al. 2012). Even in attempts to rectify this “embarrassment,” scholars continued to hang on to the notion that there were two primary classes, with middle class being a segment of a “new petty bourgeoisie” (Poulantzas 1978 cited in Heiman et al. 2012) or a “new working class” (Mallet 1975 cited in Heiman et al. 2012). In India, too, the more orthodox Marxists thought that the petty bourgeoisie would disappear due to polarization between capitalists and proletariat (Dutt 1940 cited in Jaffrelot and Veer 2008) or they considered it to be a part of the ruling bourgeoisie (Kosambi 1964 cited in Jaffrelot and Veer 2008).

Significantly, this demarcation was grounded in the fact that middle class, whether it was considered a part of the bourgeoisie or the working class, performed mental labor as opposed to manual labor. As Heiman et al. (2012) note, Gramsci (1971) and Ehrenreichs (1979) saw the middle class as a class with the potential to align with either the proletariat or bourgeoisie, and Wright (1989) saw it as a group of people simultaneously located in various and contradictory positions of class relations.

Closely related to the nebulous boundaries of the middle class is a long-standing disagreement about whether class itself is best understood as “a material phenomenon... or simply a kind of associational category of people aligned around common sociopolitical goals” (Heiman et al. 2012, 8). One point of view holds that the use of the word “class” implies socioeconomic difference, but it is also common enough to use class to refer to a social class as captured in the terms “status group” or “habitus.” This project shares the understanding of Heiman et al., of “class as a sociocultural phenomenon growing out of industrial relations of production” while also incorporating notions such as status, habitus, hegemony, conspicuous consumption, reproduction, discipline, and the production of space (Heiman et al. 2012, 9).

Recent research, as evidenced by the contributions to Heiman et al. (2012), takes a broader understanding of class that goes beyond the relations of production and addresses more entrenched structural differences like gender, race, ethnicity, religion etc., allowing one to understand how people make meaning of their everyday lives. This understanding of class that goes beyond material concerns could in fact provide a useful way to analyze the material implications of these non-material concerns. What is important to note is that middle class practices are often deeply

contradictory, and the starting point for a study of the middle class “is an understanding of people’s everyday lives, including how they act, what they believe, what they say, and what they do not say” (Heiman et al. 2012, 12). This project is built around this understanding but with a focus on what is said, not said, believed etc., as it pertains to ideas of development, progress, caste, class, and the path to equality and justice in India.

Since middle class is seen to have arisen with, and as a consequence of, capitalism, there has been a tendency among earlier scholars to see capitalism and capitalist class relations (and therefore the middle class) as having emerged in Europe and spread across the globe in a teleological pattern. Newer scholarship takes care to not fall back on Eurocentric ideologies (Heiman et al. 2012). This dissertation shares the above understanding but is also cognizant of the concerted effort by various global forces to impose a western notion of development on India, and to shape modern subjects to be amenable to such a project. This effort largely overlaps with what has been called “The Washington Consensus” – a term first coined by John Williamson in 1989 (Irwin and Ward 2021).

Williamson originally referred to a set of policies suggested by the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the US Treasury to countries in Latin America that were dealing with debt crisis and seeking loans. These policies include “...reforming tax policy, allowing the market to determine interest rates, maintaining a competitive exchange rate, liberalizing trade, permitting inward foreign investment, privatizing state enterprises, deregulating barriers to entry and exit, and securing property rights” (Irwin and Ward 2021). Similar policies were adopted in India after 1991. This period also witnessed large changes in the media, education, and workspaces in India, which contributed to the arising of a social imaginary and subjects that are suited the larger goals of this

project. Further, while this dissertation acknowledges “that both the conditions and possibilities are local, highly variable, and nonderivative” (Heiman et al. 2012, 13) because middle class culture (and class generally) are not a “model” or “structure,” “but a lived experience” and a “social process over time” (Thompson 1978:147 cited in Heiman et al. 2012), it places significant emphasis on the effect of the more recent capitalist penetration, in the form of a set of discourses (covered in chapter two), that largely overlap with the prescriptions of The Washington Consensus.

In recent times there has also been some focus on immaterial, (Hardt and Negri 2004 cited in Heiman et al. 2012) or unproductive labor as Marx called it, and the importance of consumption rather than production in defining a social class (Heiman et al. 2012). The New Dalit Middle Classes, and my informants more specifically, are engaged in mental labor and would fit into the category of immaterial or unproductive labor. Heiman et al. (2012) point out that consumption is perhaps the single most recurrent theme in works on middle class, and their volume too “portrays middle-class life as bound up in consumer practices whether in terms of debates over appropriate consumption, lives oriented around consumer desire, or consumerist projects of class distinction.” (Heiman et al. 2012, 24). Middle class relationship to consumption is not the particular focus of my project, but my findings are quite in line with this intricate connection between consumption and middle classness; but with the added nuance that it is both consumption and rejection of limitless consumption (Jaffrelot and Veer 2008) and also discourses about consumption, rather than consumption itself, that have become constitutive of middle-class identity (Upadhy 2008). My focus is on what can be learned about middle class subject formation through the ideas and discourses one expresses about the economy, jobs, development, progress, future of caste, and solutions to the nation’s problems. This work is more concerned with exploring the strategies,

mechanisms, and hopes of my informants in their pursuit of acquiring the means to facilitate this consumption, and not so much on the consumer practices themselves.

The emerging literature on the topic approaches middle class as an aspirational rather than an economic category, which is nonetheless intimately linked to the growth of capitalism. This scholarship posits a divide between an old middle class that is linked to state-led development and a new middle class that is the product of liberalization and private enterprise. This new middle class also emerged in the context of several nation states adopting economic policies of privatization, liberalization, and globalization on the one hand, and a corresponding privileging of the values of private property, entrepreneurship, and personal responsibility (Ong 2006) on the other. These two middle classes are seen to coexist but often uneasily.

Neoliberal policies have both organized the consent of what Harvey (2005) calls “traditional middle classes” for the neoliberal state and also created a host of new middle classes worldwide to play the role of consumers and independent entrepreneurs [at least in rhetoric if not practice]. While this dissertation does not interrogate what is meant by neoliberal, it must be noted that the policies promoted by the Washington Consensus are aligned with what Harvey calls neoliberal policies. These “new middle classes” are products of the post-1980 global neoliberal turn, which among other things, led to offshoring of jobs from western industrialized nations to developing countries like India and China (Heiman et al. 2012) and the implementation of the policies promoted by the Washington Consensus within these developing countries. Often, these policies were forced on the countries by IMF and other lenders’ by making the implementation of these policies a precondition for the grant of loans. My project explores what happens once these jobs

start moving to India; as the country implements economic reforms, loosening government controls, and encouraging the growth of private capital.

Heiman et al (2012) see a situation where the traditional middle class struggles to maintain their living standards at the same time that new middle classes are on the rise. Several contributors to their volume see a tension between traditional middle classes, who they see as ideologically associated with more collectivist, national modernization paradigms, and new neoliberal middle classes organized around ideologies of free trade and entrepreneurial success. My research, on the contrary, does not see this tension between an old and a new middle class playing a significant role. However, there is a significant difference in incomes between different age cohorts (Upadhyia 2008). The older cohorts pre-1980s had lower incomes and were more likely to be in government jobs. But even private sector incomes were low pre-1980s compared to the newer jobs available in IT, banking and finance, consulting, and other jobs that are sometimes referred to as the “new economy”. There was a phase after 1991 when private sector incomes went up quite rapidly while government ones lagged. Since then, government salaries, too, have increased significantly but the ceiling on government salaries is quite low when compared to the private sector. However, government employment comes with a lot of perks – some official – like social status, job security, low work pressure generally, and some unofficial – including income made from bribes, which can be more than the salary itself. It is, therefore, true to say that perhaps the most crucial difference between the “old middle class” and the “new middle class” is in terms of age and the significant difference in incomes between younger cohorts of middle class and older ones (like their parents) (see Upadhyia 2008). But this is only if we use the criteria where the old middle class is literally older, and the new middle class younger. While there seems to be a slightly larger difference in

allegiance to the government when comparing people with jobs in the traditional economy versus jobs in the new economy, it does not have a significant bearing on my study. The criteria of loyalty to the government sector versus private sector is not a useful way of determining the old versus new middle class in my research site.

Older cohorts of Dalits in my site were slightly more likely to talk about the government as the means to development and improvement of the group, and the younger cohorts more likely to see “markets” as the right vehicle to their desired future. However, they are aligned on the need to capture the benefits of economic growth, no matter the avenue through which they come. Government or private does not seem to matter as much. Older cohorts may see the government jobs as a safer and stabler path to economic security and mobility for their children, and younger cohorts are more likely to look forward to careers in the private sector. Moreover, Dalits as a whole may be more likely than non-Dalits to prefer government jobs, because they are uncertain about entering the private sector, which they may see as an upper caste space, and also because they hope they can use reservations to get better jobs in the government, than they would in the private sector which does not have reservations. But this is not an ideological loyalty to the government. Even the older cohorts do not seem to be ideologically wedded to government-led development. Rather, they all seem to believe that private sector is more capable of delivering growth. While they may be somewhat divided on the idea that government sector is more capable of equitable distribution, they would rather the government’s efforts at equity included policies that would help Dalits capture some of the private sector’s growth.

I met government employees and students preparing for competitive exams to qualify for government jobs, who believe development will come from private enterprise, entrepreneurs who are almost entirely dependent on the government for their businesses, and NGO activists who say no to government intervention even as they work under a bureaucrat, hold their meetings in government owned buildings, etc. In their understanding, the government itself can be an avenue to create this market driven future. This is not surprising when one considers how right-wing politicians around the world are in the government but advocate minimization of the government. There seems to be an implicit understanding among most of my informants that the age of government-led development may be over. Some may still prefer government jobs because of the stability and status potential they offer and not because they believe that government led growth is morally or logically better than a market driven one. Both avenues are means to personal gains. They are more concerned about the goals and are not caught up in the ideological means. For example: One of my informants was a man who regularly debated and argued with his friends in favor of markets and privatization and spoke favorably about industrialists as the true leaders of the nation. But he also spent seven years trying to land a government job and finally become a bureaucrat. He was having these arguments and debates during the seven years that he spent preparing for the exam to become a bureaucrat.

There does not seem to be a significant tension between the old (pre-1980s) and new middle classes in terms of the ideological stances on development. If ideological stance was the original dividing line, one could argue that the old middle class has become the new middle class. Older people who came of age during the pre-reform era when government controlled most of the industrial production, and current younger cohorts of government employees both seem to be onboard with

private sector led development. The political tensions are, organized along lines of caste but not along the lines of difference in economic ideology or discourses. On the contrary, there is considerable common ground when it comes to ideology both within old and new middle classes and also within Dalits and other castes.

Whatever the dividing lines between the old and new middle classes, nation states now have an important stake in promoting middle classes and their interests. By including more people in the category of middle class, they shift attention away from the tensions between working and capitalist classes and shift desires away from liberatory politics towards middle class goods and lifestyles (Heiman et al. 2012). In India, the formation of the middle class is further complicated by the interaction of state and market with caste structures and sensibilities, and this will be explored further ahead in the chapter. In India, too, there is a concerted effort by successive governments, several large political parties, and the media, to move the focus away from caste divisions and frame the country as a homogenous middle-class constituency. This tendency is exemplified in the introduction of a new category called the neo-middle class in the 2014 election manifesto of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) which went on to win the election and has been in power since then (Capelos and Basu 2022).

### **Indian Middle Class**

Much has been said in the mainstream media as well as academia about the middle class in India and its importance and influence in the country's polity and economy. Particularly, about the important role it has played – all the way since the time of India's freedom struggle – and continues

to play today in bringing about social and political change (see Kapur, Sircar, and Vaishnav 2017; Jaffrelot and Veer 2008; Baviskar and Ray 2011). Further, scholars acknowledge that this category is vast, varied, and divided and, therefore, should not be seen as a monolith. However, despite these acknowledgements, this category is rarely defined. In fact, most scholarship on this topic does not seem to consider the fact that the category needs to be defined for there to be a clear understanding of what is actually being discussed. Rather, the scholarship seems to operate on an assumption that everyone knows what the middle class is. However, this is not the case. Since there is no definition offered by most scholars, it is possible that different scholars are talking about different groups when they use the term middle-class, and readers are operating from their own preconceptions of what this middle class is.

Some scholarly attention has been focused on the idea that the Indian middle class is not a monolith and that it includes different groups of people, each of which may not see itself as being in the same class category as other groups (see Kapur, Sircar, and Vaishnav 2017). And that there are different groups competing to claim the mantle of middle class (see Liechty 2003). Liechty shows this to be the case in Nepal and I suggest that a similar case can be made regarding India.

Some scholars have argued that historically the middle class in India is a product of British efforts to create a class of Indian bureaucrats (and eventually lawyers, accountants etc.) to help them rule India (Mishra 1961 cited in Jaffrelot and Veer 2008; Jaffrelot and Veer 2008). However, there was also another class of people, namely medium and small-scale entrepreneurs, that could be considered the original middle class in India. Both colonial times and post-independence provided

ample scope for middle class entrepreneurs to flourish and grow, and contemporary India is a country of small and medium entrepreneurs (Jaffrelot and Veer 2008).

More recently, scholars have made a few attempts to define and describe the middle class in more specific detail and have proposed several different criteria to do so (Kapur, Sircar, and Vaishnav 2017). Moreover, there continues to be debate among scholars about these various conceptualizations of the middle class (Kapur 2010). The most obvious basis for defining a middle class is perhaps in terms of income and wealth. Middle class is commonly understood to be somewhere between the rich and poor. Depending on the exact income or wealth criteria selected, it could lead to widely varied estimates of its size in India. Despite popular accounts and academic work that talks of the “great Indian middle class” that putatively holds the key to India’s future, scholarly estimates of the size and composition of that middle class vary widely from about 28 million to about 250 million (Kapur, Sircar, and Vaishnav 2017). This estimate is not very useful in understanding many aspects of the Indian middle class. Moreover, the economic criterion does not fully explain or describe the middle-class subjectivity, which is more important to the questions raised in this dissertation.

Scholars have fortunately used other criteria to delineate and define the Indian middle class. Some have argued that middle class in India is best understood as a cognitive identity, a feeling of belonging, as it spans all income groups and educational strata (Kapur, Sircar, and Vaishnav 2017). Another way to look at the Indian middle class is as Yogendra Yadav suggests: to think of it not as a sociological category but as a proper noun; a term that the ruling class in India prefers to call

itself (Yadav cited in Baviskar and Ray 2011). Satish Deshpande (2003, 139) says that the power of middle class comes from its claim of representing the entire nation, thus translating “domination into the language of legitimation”. Yet others have focused on middle class as a class that expresses itself through consumption and establishing its identity as distinct from lower classes (Sheth 1999; also see Upadhyaya 2008). All these approaches are valid and have their advantages, but self-identification (classically a matter of “status; ‘status’ is usually seen as a collectively attributed rank and identity’) could prove more useful to understand a class in more inclusive terms. Kapur et al. (2017) find this to be a particularly useful metric if one comes at the issue from the standpoint of political economy and is interested in class consciousness. What does seem to emerge through a survey of the literature and my own fieldwork is that many different groups of people with different income levels, geographies - rural/urban, castes, and professions claim to belong to the middle class, even as others from those very groups claim to not belong to the middle class. But a large part of those who claim to be middle class share a common social imaginary that includes a positive outlook on their futures and the development trajectory of the country (Thakurta 2017).

This project is particularly interested in this form of self-identification among Dalits, and in the question of what middle class self-making means for Dalitness. Since caste plays a huge role in social stratification in India, one must also understand the relationship between caste and class before further analysis can be undertaken. As things stand, the Indian middle class remains a contested, ill-defined category in terms of its economic basis, identity, and size. But self-identification, especially when acknowledged by others, can be a useful criterion for middle classness because it signifies middle-class self-making and a particular kind of social imaginary.

## **Caste and Class**

Caste is a polysemic term. In its most common usage, it denotes one of two things: Varna or Jati. Jatis are usually smaller groups with occupational specialization and endogamy whereas Varna is a broader category made up of many Jatis. It is difficult to arrive at a strict definition of caste and what it implies for those who belong to a caste, in either sense of the word. As with many social categories, there are exceptions to every rule, norm, and expectation regarding caste. Dalits are a group of castes who are ritually considered the most polluting (and therefore untouchable) and outside the caste system; they have been identified by the state as the most economically and socially backward and oppressed.

In the academia, traditionally, caste has been used as a key to understand India and it continues to be used as an important lens in studying Indian society and polity. It is widely acknowledged that there are regional variations in caste systems and therefore a specific caste or caste group may mean little at the national level, but they have clearer meanings at the state and local levels. However, Dalits, who make up about 16% of India's population, are a category with the most national coherence as they are in similar circumstances almost everywhere (Manor 2010).

Dalits were shaped into this coherent category as a result of the efforts of both the colonial and independent state (Charsley 1996). Colonial authorities used the term depressed classes instead of the then prevailing terms like 'Panchama' and 'Achoot'<sup>24</sup>, which were considered demeaning.

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<sup>24</sup> Panchama means "the fifth" and refers to the fact that Dalits were considered to be outside the traditional four-fold Varna system, which includes Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras. Achoot translates to "untouchable" and conveys the idea that they are too polluted to touch.

Later they were categorized as Schedule Castes as a legal recognition of their historical oppression. Eventually, the term Dalit emerged as the most popular choice of self-identification among them. Dalits should therefore not simply be seen as a category created by the ancient ritual system but one that was shaped by more recent historical circumstances and by modern law (S. Bayly 1999; Still 2014; Charsley 1996). Albeit a category made coherent by a similar set of experiences and access to opportunities. The term Dalit is now most widely used to represent the former untouchable castes belonging to the governmental classification of Scheduled Castes. But recently, a few people have begun objecting to the use of the word Dalit. They see it as a term that is not empowering, preferring instead to avoid all mention of their caste status or use newer terms with empowering meanings. The NGO Swaroes Network is a good example of this second strategy and will be covered in some detail in chapter five. In India today, Dalits are often the objects of derision of upper castes and the mainstream media for being “undeserving” beneficiaries of affirmative action. They also continue to be the targets of some of the most brutal forms of caste violence. These circumstances, along with the need to organize and advocate for themselves has only made Dalits a more coherent category over the several decades since India attained its independence.

The categories of caste and class can’t easily be disentangled in the context of India. It was pointed out by Ambedkar that caste in India can be considered a closed class, and class, an open caste. In Ambedkar’s formulation Hindu society was like other societies at the outset and was composed of classes. It was therefore a class system, where individuals could change their class if they were so qualified. But over time this “open-door character of the class system” gave way to “self-enclosed units called castes” (Ambedkar 1916).

As Ram (2008) puts it, the term Dalit has connotations of both caste and class. When it is used by a single Scheduled Caste, it could be understood as caste and when it is used by several scheduled castes to refer to themselves as one group, it becomes class, although it does not possess other attributes of class. While it is not easy to tease out the nuances of this varied usage among Dalits, what I have observed during my fieldwork is that often, informants will speak about Dalits as though the only thing that unites them is their lower position on the economic ladder. They often say “we Dalits” and then go on to talk exclusively about economic issues and pursuits. But each time, I had a sense that the social status implied by their caste was always present in the background.

In more recent times, scholars have also tried to find the bases of caste in religion, economy, polity, and colonialism. There are merits to each approach, but caste is best understood when considering multiple bases. The early views on caste can be divided into “book view” which draws from religious texts and rituals, and “field view” which tries to understand caste as it exists in society rather than take the ritualistic view as given (Béteille 1991; Christopher John Fuller 1996). *Homo Hierarchicus* (Dumont 1980 [1966]) is considered the seminal work that exemplifies what has come to be known as the book view. Dumont identified the religious principle of purity and pollution as the force that held the caste hierarchy together (Banerjee-Dube 2008). Even many of the works critical of Dumont challenged his interpretation of the text rather than question the validity of the texts in explaining social reality, and thereby continued in the tradition of the book view (Christopher John Fuller 1996). Later accounts have shifted the blame from ancient traditions and rituals to colonialism, claiming that the caste system as we know it today is a result of the colonial rule (Dirks 1992; 2001). The argument is that caste as we know it today is a modern

phenomenon which has resulted from the British rule. The most important intervention by the colonial state was its effort to enumerate caste via the census. "...The very effort to enumerate caste led to important changes, with the institution becoming progressively more and more "substantialised" and fixed than it had been previously" (S. Deshpande 2013, 35). However, "both the idea of timeless India and newer revisionism which almost claims that colonialism alone made India into a caste society are erroneous" (C. A. Bayly 1988). As Deshpande (2013) points out regarding the latter: the census commissioner J.H. Hutton notes in the Census Report of 1931 that it is "difficult to see why the record of a fact that actually exists should tend to stabilize that existence", and that "It is just as easy to argue and with at least as much truth, that it is impossible to get rid of any institution by ignoring its existence like the proverbial ostrich ..." (Census of India, 1931, Ch XII, p 430 cited in S. Deshpande 2013, 35).

Another strand of criticism of the book view is that even if Dumont was right about the importance of rituals and the centrality of purity and pollution in determining the practice and experience of caste, that argument pertains to a historical period that is now changing (Christopher John Fuller 1996). Dumont has responded by referring to this change as "substantialization" (Christopher John Fuller 1996), wherein caste differences have solidified along the lines of political and economic competition between castes rather than along the notion of purity and pollution.

Consistent with the idea of substantialization, 'way of life' and cultural differences are cited as reasons for caste divisions like endogamy, instead of purity-based hierarchy (Mayer 1960; Béteille 1965). Fuller (1996) argues that caste is in a state of flux and what it means in India today

is being reshaped by the confused discourses about it. Beteille goes so far as to say that it is unacceptable to speak of caste in public, in India anymore. Such talk of purity and pollution continues but is now confined to the domestic or private domain (Béteille 1991). But it is quite apparent that caste is mentioned in public quite often in India, especially in political discourses. Caste is the primary vehicle of political mobilization. Beteille says that 'the urban middle class' in India is ambivalent in its orientation towards caste. They know it exists but claim that it does not, and they are unclear and troubled by what it means for them (Béteille 1996). Beteille is right to the extent that upper caste Indians rarely bring up their caste in public and that status differences in urban areas are often expressed, by upper castes, as differences of class: education, income, upbringing, etc. But lower castes on the other hand, including Dalits, use caste more than ever to make political and economic claims. At the same time, there is evidence that lower castes including Dalits use caste more than ever to make political claims (Varshney 2000; Michelutti 2008; Jaffrelot and Kumar 2009; Rajni Kothari 1994). However, it is also true that even lower castes, including Dalits, now tend to refrain from talking about caste in modern workspaces and in certain elite educational spaces. Not mentioning caste in public, originally signified urban upper casteness, which was also largely synonymous with middle classness. Now lower castes and Dalits also adopt this behavior but only in certain spaces where they share aspects of their subjectivity, particularly a common social imaginary of development, with the upper castes.

To summarize the relationship between caste and class: There remains a strong correlation between one's caste and one's standard of living (Jaffrelot and Kumar 2009). Or as (Rajini Kothari 1970) points out, old caste hierarchies were rooted in materiality and still have tangible substance. They did not just exist at the level of ideas, beliefs, and imaginings. However, one of the foundational

beliefs of the project of nation building in independent India was that with sufficient economic development and education, castes would fade away and disappear altogether; to be replaced by class as the primary mode of stratification (Banerjee-Dube 2008; Béteille 1996; Jodhka 2016). This dissertation is informed by literature that explores the various bases of caste, but it pays particular attention to the relationship between caste and class in exploring the nature and significance of a Dalit middle class.

### **Caste and Modernity (Formation of the casteless Upper caste)**

Since the early decades of the 1900s it became clear to political and social reformers, intellectuals, and others who aspired for modernity that caste was in opposition to modernity, if not the very antithesis of it. Leading them to feel that “something had to be done about caste – it could not continue ‘as is’” (S. Deshpande 2013, 33). However, this change in how caste was spoken of in the public came more from “the normative pressures of modernity than communitarian intentions..” and therefore the commonality was more in the language in which social and political programmes were expressed than in the actual divergent projects contained in these programmes (S. Deshpande 2013, 33).

Among a section of these people, there developed a tacit understanding that caste can be overcome by simply ignoring it and focusing instead on economic development. The assumption was that with technological progress and economic development, as people’s material needs are met, they would be less concerned about things like ritual status. There were several well-meaning people who decided not to talk about their caste and raise their children without knowledge of their caste;

in a genuine effort to get rid of caste (see Guha 2013). However, these above efforts only led to a certain form of “castelessness” that let upper castes render themselves caste free when it suited their purposes, while maintaining all their caste privileges. Such efforts extended to some of my Dalit informants, whose parents tried to raise them without the knowledge of caste, until it became unavoidable, much earlier than they hoped. Deshpande (2013) says that upper castes are able to leave their caste behind because all of their caste privileges have been naturalized as things other than caste like merit, education, and upbringing, while Subramanian (2015; 2019) suggests that this withdrawal from the use of caste by upper castes in favor of merit, must be understood in relation to the growing caste-based assertion of lower castes.

Deshpande (2013) focuses on the Indian constitution and legal matters, and how they shaped both the discourse and strategy vis a vis the issue of caste, and points out that the emergence of this form of castelessness has its roots in India’s brush with modernity. However, this form of castelessness which manifests as an absence of the mention of caste, except to deny its importance or even its existence on the one hand or to accuse lower castes of still hanging on to it on the other, could have arisen independently of the provisions of the constitution. However, the constitution, through the provisions of reservations, unwittingly gave legal credence to the casteless status of upper castes and rendered them the apparent owners of the nation. As Deshpande explains: “Although this was not immediately obvious, the grant of reservations reduced the Depressed Classes to the status of supplicants for whom a special concession was being made by the majority that “owned” the nation. This effectively positioned the upper caste minority (which appeared as the unmarked majority) as the de facto owner of the nation, with the power to grant favours to this or that subgroup.” (S. Deshpande 2013, 35). It also “offered to the upper castes, an agency based

on the universal-normative position of "castelessness". This was, however, a presumptive castelessness - that is, it did not require the upper castes to "give up" their caste in reality; it simply assured them that they would be presumed to be casteless as long as they did not invoke their caste explicitly. In effect, the new constitution forbade the state to name or act against caste-based privileges or advantages as long as they wore the garb of secular modernity. Constitutionally and legally, caste was henceforth to be recognized only as a source of disadvantage or vulnerability, not as a source of privilege or advantage." (S. Deshpande 2013, 37).

Upper castes can now benefit from the advantages of caste by leveraging traditional caste capital, converting caste capital into class capital, acquiring higher educational credentials, and not mentioning caste as the enabling factor for such advantages. Moreover, this story of how upper castes convert their caste capital into modern capital does not appear to be a story of caste. It appears as something else. They can pursue their interests in the name of other things like nation-building, development, and positive change, the idea of a great tradition modernizing itself, or the goal of pursuing merit. "...the welfare of the upper castes need no longer be pursued in visible fashion through the mediation of public politics. It can now be made congruent with impersonal collective goals like nation-building, development, or later in the story, by equally anonymous forces like the market or globalisation" (S. Deshpande 2013, 37). This last point about market forces and globalization is of particular interest to this study. Later in the work, we will take a closer look at how this narrative has, in certain cases, co-opted even Dalits into embracing it as their own. However, Dalits are not entirely driven by the same motivations as upper castes. While the upper castes benefit from using markets as a way to cover up their caste advantages, Dalits'

embrace of the same discourses helps portray themselves as equally modern and not constrained by their caste disadvantage.

Just as upper caste castelessness in the field of education must be understood in relation to the lower caste embrace of caste, particularly in the political arena (Subramanian 2019), the embrace of castelessness in elite corporate spaces by Dalits, is partially a reaction to the upper caste accusations of overuse of caste and must be seen relationally. Upper castes may embrace castelessness because of lower castes' increasing use of caste for political mobilization and lower castes embrace castelessness partly because of upper castes accusing them of overusing caste. In such a scenario, Dalits can take shelter in the secular, caste free, modern discourses that promises to treat them as equals; whether or not such promises are met in the final analysis.

### **Caste and Castelessness today**

On the matter of the casteless upper caste, M.S.S. Pandian (2002) notes that there are “two competing sets of languages dealing with the issue of caste. One talks of caste by other means; and the other talks of caste on its ‘own terms’”. He traces the origins of these two modes of talking about caste to the colonial times, when upper caste culture was presented as Indian culture, and nationalism relied on a separation of cultural and spiritual domains on the one hand and secular material domains on the other. This “delegitimised the language of caste in the domain of politics” as caste was considered a part of culture/religion, not modern liberal democracy, and therefore a sovereign space for Indians. Caste here is framed as the other of the modern, and modern is upper

caste in its orientation. It is only by contesting this cultural and material binary that lower castes could contest the hierarchy and ideological exclusion inherent in this scheme of national culture (Pandian 2002, 1735).

As noted above, Deshpande (2013) explains this apparent castelessness of the upper caste as a result of conversion of caste capital into modern economic capital, whereby caste privilege gains legitimacy by posing as “merit”, (educational qualifications and soft skills) which seems like a modern and secular claim. Which leads to the question raised by Subramanian (2015) as to why this should be so. Why do upper castes talk less about caste and appear casteless at a time when caste seems to be growing in importance among lower castes? Subramanian (2019) takes an in-depth look at meritocracy in relation to caste and identifies meritocracy as not simply an ideology of transformation of capital as Deshpande (2013) argues, but as a response to subaltern assertion, and in itself an expression of caste privilege. Therefore, the post-colonial present appears as one where non-elites have caste while elites have class. Most work in the field of caste studies has thus far focused on non-elites and their use of caste, leaving a dearth of corresponding work on upper castes and their use of a variety of discursive registers that take the place of caste. Subramanian (2019) addresses this gap, but that still leaves the phenomenon of castelessness among Dalits unaddressed. This dissertation builds on the above two works, but instead of upper castes, it focusses on castelessness among Dalits.

As mentioned above, ironically, the redress mechanism for historical discrimination against Dalits: reservations – is another factor that contributes to the seeming castelessness of upper castes. The reserved category gets marked by caste whereas the general category is marked by lack of caste

and thereby upper casteness is encoded as merit that does not have to rely on affirmative action and special provisions. This allows upper castes to present reservations as the cause for persistence of caste, while presenting themselves as casteless and as champions of equality and modernity. Good example of this is an organization called Youth for Equality, a political organization which arose with the sole purpose of opposing reservations in the name of protecting equality, and “Indians for Equality”, a similar movement started by IIT alumni in Silicon Valley (Subramanian 2015; Banerjee-Dube 2008; A. Deshpande 2015).

Finally, Dalits themselves may be complicit in perpetuating Brahminical ideology and various aspects of caste. This can happen because of what M.N. Srinivas (1952) calls Sanskritization – a process wherein lower castes imitate or emulate the customs, rituals, and practices of upper castes, as a way of gaining social mobility – or simply because of a willingness to be accepted by upper castes (Narayan 2009). There are benefits to perpetuating a conservative system (Racine and Racine 1997 cited in Still 2014). For example, after attaining social mobility, Dalits may institute the same kind of patronage relationships with other Dalits as upper castes do (Mullard 2014), even as a strand of Dalit politics promotes and celebrates ‘Dalit culture’ which it poses as a counter to the dominant Brahminical or caste culture (Hardtmann 2009). Ilaiah (1998) refers to this as counter movement as Dalitization.

To sum up, the question of disappearing caste and persisting difference finds an answer in Kothari (1970) who argues that a relative decline in the importance of notions of pollution or the role of Jajmani system does not amount to a destruction of the caste system, but only a shift in the way caste awareness is mobilized and organized. Another counter to the vanishing caste argument

comes from Guha (2013), who says that the caste system has a systemic redundancy, so that when one or more sources that power it are removed the network can still survive. Today, Castelessness in India is therefore formal and largely rhetorical but not substantive. People, initially only upper castes, have adopted a language of castelessness, mainly as a consequence of their need to see themselves as modern. This trend received a major boost post liberalization of the Indian economy since the early 1990s, when castelessness became even more intertwined with ideas of development, progress, globalization etc. This has led to the hyper visibility of caste among lower castes and its invisibility among upper castes. The lower castes, particularly Dalits, are marked as caste subjects whereas upper castes can present as caste free. However, as mentioned above, there is a section of Dalits that also seeks to present itself as casteless in a way similar to the upper castes. This is due to their construction of the self as modern. The upper castes and lower castes share common ground here. They share the social imaginary of modernity, technological progress, potential of markets and private enterprise, and the promise of better economic futures as a result of all this. This study finds modern self-making to be the primary basis for the explicit denial of caste. While the implicit enactment of caste and the resulting persistence of social divisions and distance can be explained by the above formulations found in the above literature.

This dissertation argues that in the post-1990s, during the proliferation of market-centric discourses, lower castes and Dalits too embraced market-mediated modernity, in a way similar to the upper castes. This has led to a similar adoption of the language of castelessness, along with some mannerisms, values, and aspirations, but also a subjectivity of modernity among Dalits. However, neither of these developments – rhetoric or manifestations of castelessness, or even the

shaping of modern selves, among upper castes or among lower castes – implies, or even requires, the annihilation or abolition of caste.

Further, claims of castelessness, or of caste taking a back seat to class in modern India, only capture a superficial development. This castelessness of upper castes is made possible by their very caste privilege and serves to preserve their privilege by giving it a secular non-ascriptive cover. Therefore, castelessness here does not mean an actual lack of caste. While earlier works have looked at this form of castelessness among upper castes, not much attention has been paid to the phenomenon when it comes to lower castes and Dalits.

In general, the literature to date has not adequately explored the relation between middleclassness and caste as it pertains to Dalits, particularly in the post-reforms era. Dalits' conceptions, aspirations, and experiences of middle classness, in the era of liberalization and market discourses, particularly in modern corporate workspaces, is a very underexplored area and one which this dissertation seeks to explore. Later chapters will describe and explain the circumstances under which Dalits claim, perform, and embody this form of castelessness.

### **Dalit middle class**

Like many of the terms discussed earlier, Dalit Middle Class is also a vague category with no accepted definition. In its earliest use, it has been most commonly associated with Dalits in reserved government jobs (Ram 1988; G. Srinivas 2016). As mentioned in the introduction, India

has a form of affirmative action policy in education and government employment for disadvantaged groups like Dalits (officially labeled as Scheduled Castes) and Adivasis (Scheduled Tribes), and certain other groups. The policy is commonly referred to as “reservations” or “quotas”. Reservations or quotas are provided to these two groups in proportion to their share of the population, in public education, employment, and in legislative representation (Jayal 2015). However, these reservations do not extend to the private sector.

By the 1980s, a small section of Dalits had benefited from the policy of reservations and acquired government jobs (Ram 1998). This helped them claim a middle-class status, relative to their caste peers, but also putatively alongside their professional peers. However, this class of Dalits was not fully assimilated into the general middle class. In the sense that they were not yet treated as equal, the stigma associated with their identity and segregation in social life remained. This forced the Dalit middle class to become a close-knit community, a community at once cut off from its social peers by its own economic success while also not assimilated with its economic and professional peers due to its caste status (Ram 1998). This dissertation finds that the situation described by Ram persists today. Srinivas’s research argues that because of enduring discrimination or the fear of it, Dalit identity among the well-employed, becomes an in-group identity, where Dalit identity is used within the group, while the professional or middle-class identity is presented to non-Dalits (G. Srinivas 2016).

Since 1980s, however, more Dalits have benefited from reservations in education and received higher education in various fields, particularly in engineering and technology fields, which saw a huge boom in India in recent decades. Moreover, they also found gainful and, at times, well-paid

employment in the private sector. Whereas the above findings of Ram were based on Dalits in the government sector, this study extends the analysis to the private sector, and to the present day, to ask whether such fear of being treated as inferior, despite having the same qualifications, professional status, income etc., continues. Further, it seeks to understand the differences over these two time periods and in these different settings. This project seeks to understand if this segregation and equal but unequal status continues and what forms it takes in the private sector in the present day.

My research finds that this trend of in-group/out-group identity among Dalits – hiding one's caste for fear of and actual experience of discrimination – continues in the private sector. This is true even among people who are actively engaged in Dalit organizing through NGOs and claim to not be ashamed of or bothered by their ascribed identity. But there is also an accompanying trend, as pointed out before, of Dalits appearing to deny that caste had any impact on their lives or that they had been discriminated against on the grounds of caste. Moreover, the earlier view of the government as the means of “emancipation” of Dalits, through public sector employment, and policies for re-distribution, has changed significantly. My research finds that among Dalits in elite educational and workspaces, the reason for keeping the Dalit identity in-group, or even denying the identity and presenting a professional and middle-class identity outside the group, also has something to do with the adoption of modern market driven values and discourses and is not simply a strategy to avoid stigma.

This is not to say that there is no fear of discrimination, but rather that these Dalits see the world through a lens of modernity through which caste must be understood to belong to the past. If they are to enjoy the fruits of modernity, they must “leave caste in the past” instead of using that identity to make claims about past and present unfairness and to seek restitution for it. The problem, however, is that many, if not all, of these Dalits have lived lives that have been significantly shaped by their caste experiences. Their present circumstances, too, continue to be significantly influenced by caste. Yet, they have to find a way to leave caste behind. So, they do, in a manner of speaking. When many of my informants tell me their stories, they say that caste hasn’t affected them. But they narrate life stories that show the various ways in which caste shaped and influenced their lives, and all the things they had to do to reduce or negate this influence. They say or imply that because of their education, and present-day urban lives, which are built around modern corporate workspaces, they lead lives that are beyond caste. This is partly for the benefit of the listener who is supposed to infer that their lives have been affected by their caste, but that they choose to see it differently. But it is also partly because they have adopted or internalized the values that this denial of caste represents. In spite of the contradictions, castelessness is a lived reality for them.

Some Dalits choose to drop their caste identity altogether because they claim it can be used by upper castes to discriminate and degrade them. They believe the very process of using this identity to make political claims and seek remedial measures, makes them vulnerable to discrimination. They do, however, understand that adoption of the Dalit identity is not what caused the discrimination in the first place. They also acknowledge that there are several Dalits who are not able to leave the Dalit identity behind and make claims based on education, professional standing, or class. What they do adopt in place of the caste-based identity and the repertoires borne out of

identity politics, is the values and discourses of markets. In some sense, this class does separate itself from the remaining Dalits and is focused most on the issues that affect the urban Dalit middle class. This is in line with what some scholars see as the New Dalit middle class activism (see Pai 2013).

This section of urban, middle-class Dalits is more focused on education, particularly higher education and getting into top schools both in India and abroad, training students to succeed in competitive examinations that get them accepted into elite institutions that promise better careers and employment, job search, interview skills and other trainings, entrepreneurship, and extracurricular and wellness activities like arts, sports, fitness etc. In other words, there is significant focus on shaping the self as a resume and viewing life as a career. To answer the question about whether free market discourses have had a significant impact on the self-identity of Dalits, my research finds that they indeed have. As pointed out in the introduction, middle classness is one way to claim freedom from caste, and castelessness is the entry ticket to middle classness. Middle classness, modernity, globality, market subjectivity, are all interconnected. They serve as both context and referent to each other, forming a mutually constitutive relationship that is circular in nature.

### *Middle Class as White Collar*

In addition to well-paid employment, I propose that, for Dalits, there is another vector along which middle class identity was consolidated. A Dalit may claim to be middle class because they are 1) not “labor class”\* i.e. people who perform manual labor. Some of my informants use the English word “labor” and the phrase “labor class” to refer to people employed in manual labor. They talk

about “labor class area/neighbourhood/colony” or “labor class people”, and in these contexts, they are trying to make it clear that they are middle class as opposed to being labor class. Among Dalits, and perhaps most of Indian society, middle class status has a lot to do with the fact that they do not engage in manual labor. Middle class is made up of knowledge workers and people with “sitting jobs”. Broadly speaking, they are white collar workers, but this transition from manual labor to knowledge work is far more significant when seen in the context of traditional caste-based occupations which were difficult to break away from.

When a Dalit wears pants, shirt, belt, and shoes, sits at a desk, and works with pen and paper (or a computer) and is addressed as “Sir” or “Madam”, it marks a transition that is far more significant than simply moving up the economic ladder\*. However, since the Dalit’s caste does not change – the person is not reassigned a new caste to match the change in occupation or economic status – it would seem as though the change was largely one of economic class. However, this also marks a dramatic escape from some of the person’s traditionally assigned caste roles. This escape made a huge difference to earlier generations of Dalits who were able to make a legitimate claim to a middle-class status. But today, many Dalits, especially from urban areas, grow up not expecting to perform manual labor for a living. Many are already raised to see themselves as middle class (instead of Dalit) or future middle class, with education being the gateway to this middleness. Middle class becomes their preferred identity and Dalit becomes an identity that is imposed on them from the outside, or a residue of pastness that needs to be washed away with modernity. Some Dalits completely avoid or even actively hide their caste identity, while others use it strategically when needed (primarily in the political field). It is much more implausible for Dalits

living in rural areas and for Dalits who are still performing traditional caste-based occupations to hide their caste.

Along with this switch to “sitting jobs” comes the ability to pass for upper caste in some cases. Moving to large cities, especially if the city is far away from one’s place of origin, gives one more anonymity. This is much more so for Dalits employed in the private sector technology jobs in large cities, and almost impossible for Dalits in government jobs. In a society where a lot of people still use caste and occupation interchangeably, particularly in rural areas, this change is indeed quite significant. White collar employment, castelessness, modern and global subjectivity, self-identification, aspiration for all of these, can all go into the making of middle classness.

For example, I knew a person who was employed in a coal mine as an overseer, and he always called my father “sir”. Even though, as my father explained to me, it was quite likely that the coal mine worker made more money than my father. This is because my father dressed in a shirt, pants, belt, and formal shoes, and wore eyeglasses and worked at a desk, while the coal-mine worker spent most of his shift standing, dressed in a uniform and work boots. This image of middle classness and Dalit emancipation is perhaps inspired by B.R. Ambedkar who is often portrayed in western attire, wearing a suit. A lot of Hindi and Telugu phrases demonstrate the psychological shift marked by clothing and sitting at a desk. For example: the Hindi phrase “Suit boot pehenke aaya hey” was used by my informants as a way of saying one has arrived into modernity, or sarcastically when one hasn’t actually arrived but is trying to seem more important than one is. People often ask “Where does he sit?” as a way of asking where someone’s office or desk is. “The

Collector sits here” means that the Collector’s office is here. I also heard sentences like, “this is a good job, one simply has to sit and earn”.

## **Dalit Movements**

The Dalit movement has taken many forms: organizing against caste discrimination, forming political parties, writing protest literature, grassroots assertions, and middle-class activism. Therefore, it is more accurate to say that there are many Dalit movements that arose independently in different regions at different times (Pai 2013; Webster 1995). However, Pai points out that there is a form of Dalit assertion that is a distinctly post-independence phenomenon, which is a result of the process of democratization in India, which she defines as creation of more space for inclusion of various marginalized sections into the polity and society. Pai further points out that while many distinct strands have emerged within this movement, there are three main forms: grassroots assertion, political parties, and middle-class activism. Strong grassroots movements fighting against discrimination, challenging the power of the landowning castes, and Dalit NGOs comprise the first strand. Political parties have seen some success in capturing power and implementing some policies that have been beneficial to some Dalits. The success of Dalit political parties has enabled them to fight the more extreme forms of discrimination, improve access of state institutions, but has not led to material improvement in the lives of most Dalits (Jeffrey and Lerche 2000; Lerche 2008a). Finally, an educated section of Dalits has introduced a distinct third strand that has been called Dalit middle class activism (Pai 2013).

Pai further argues that the Dalit movement has taken a new turn with the emergence of a new Dalit middle class. This class is focused on economic empowerment rather than social status and political power. Its members are interested in capturing the benefits of recent economic expansion in India; they demand the extension of reservations to the private sector and call for policies that help them benefit from the growing economy. While earlier movements were mobilized on issues of political empowerment such as identity, dignity, and self-respect, the new Dalit middle class movement whose coming of age coincided with India's embrace of globalization and liberalization, lays emphasis on economic empowerment. This class is better educated and led by people who hold senior ranks in bureaucracy, government owned companies and to some extent in academia and business. This new class shares the anger of their rural brethren against oppression and domination but also feels strongly that it should receive a fair share in the fruits of post-independence political and economic development – particularly following liberalization - which has resulted in higher growth rates and a strong private sector with high-paid jobs (Pai 2013, 119–20). Most of my informants fit into this second form of activism. This shift in emphasis does not mean that social status and political empowerment do not matter anymore. Rather they are made subservient to economic empowerment, which becomes the primary object of their organizational efforts. It is as though there was an implied sense that economic gains would automatically lead to dignity and respect. As though the activists subscribed to the idea that economic development would erode caste and other such traditional differences. Ironically, the more supportive an informant is to the ideas of capitalism and free markets, the more likely they are to see economic concerns as the “base” and everything else as the “superstructure” - although they did not use those words.

In the latter part of the 1990s, Dalit movement opened another front. This is more advocacy oriented and is driven by Dalit activists and international NGOs and it uses transnational networks to generate international pressure on the Indian government. Lerche (2008a) refers to this form of organizing as the new Dalit movement and it falls within the framework of middle-class activism as mentioned before. This advocacy comes at a price. In order for it to resonate with international NGOs, Dalit transnational advocacy had to adopt a language and strategy that was familiar and acceptable 'internationally', i.e. compatible with existing mainstream discourses of equality and justice within the framework of market led development. These existing international discourses may dominate and overrule the interests of the local activists and this strand of the movement has clearly borrowed and adopted such discourses popular in the US (Lerche 2008a). For example: the movement tried to get the United Nations to recognize caste as a form of race (Visvanathan 2001). This is an avenue through which Dalit discourses could fuse with global discourses of free markets and liberalization. This effort relies not simply on educated Dalits, but on global, modern Dalit activists (and non-Dalit allies) who have the facility with the language, conventions, and discourses that appeal to an international (primarily western) audience. Such activism and its agenda are significantly shaped by or built on the foundations of market-centric discourses.

The Dalit middle-class activism, however, is not an entirely new phenomenon that represents a complete break from Dalit activism before 1990s. It played a significant role in the movement before liberalization. The Dalit middle class that resulted from reservations in government jobs has played a crucial role in the Dalit movement. In fact, the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), the largest and perhaps the most electorally successful political party arising from the Dalit movement, was

made possible by the efforts of the Dalit middle class (Gopal Guru 1993). In fact, “the party came into existence as a reaction to the process of social, political, and economic exclusion of Dalits from the benefits of development, and not the agenda of breaking the caste system” (Charsley and Karanth 2002, xii). Now the new Dalit middle class, which extends beyond people with government jobs, is seen to be playing a greater role and taking the movement in a new direction. But this segment of Dalit activism did not appear overnight. It builds on the earlier middle-class activism, but it is now more grounded in the private sector and undergirded by market-centric ideologies.

However, it is difficult to delineate this new kind of politico-economic aspiration of the new Dalit middle class. While this new strand of political mobilization makes its presence felt in both national and international arenas (Divakar and Ajai 2004; Lerche 2008b) it is not clear how widely these goals are shared among Dalits. This movement offers little to the Dalit masses whose core issue is institutionalized social oppression based on existing anti-Dalit power relations. Moreover, only a small share of Dalits can benefit from private sector reservations (if they come to be implemented) and enhanced business opportunities. Reservations in the private sector would be limited to the formal/organized part of the private sector, as it is extremely difficult to implement them in the unorganized sector. This only increases the overall number of jobs reserved for Dalits, across the public and private organized sectors, by 10.5% (Lerche 2008b). But this in itself does not mean that a large section of Dalits cannot be mobilized to this cause. A Dalit middle class subjectivity that is aspirational and subscribes to the promises of the market could certainly be a dimension of this movement (Teltumbde 2011; Pai 2013; G. Guru 2012). My research points out that indeed a significant section of Dalits has been mobilized for the above cause. It has not just

been mobilized from the educated and urban Dalits but also from Dalits aspiring to middleclassness.

### **Dalit Movement in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana**

The Dalit Movement in Andhra Pradesh dates back to 1906 with the founding of Jagan Mitra Mandali in Hyderabad, which arranged cultural activities to expound the idea that Dalits were the original inhabitants of India while upper castes migrated in from Central Asia (Rao 2015). The 1920s and 1930s witnessed an effort to raise 'Dalit consciousness' by educating them about caste-based oppression and organizing them, and thereby helping consolidate a Dalit identity (Rao 2015). Several journals were published in the 1930s for this purpose and they frequently critiqued Brahmanical Hinduism and its traditions (Rao 2015). This was also the decade when Gandhi began his (dubious) efforts to uplift Dalits, who he referred to as Harijans, and Indian National Congress party leaders in the state got involved in the effort. However, the efforts by Gandhi and Congress were aimed at keeping Dalits within the Hindu fold and not aimed at actually dismantling caste (Rao 2015). By 1940s autonomous Dalit movements were in decline and by the time of independence more than 90% of the Dalits in the region were affiliated with Congress (Rao 2015).

Also in the 1930s, communist organizations in the state began to successfully organize agricultural and labour movements. Some Dalits were attracted to and joined these movements. However, the communists did not gain a lot of followers among Dalits, as the communists were unwilling to accept any kind of Dalit autonomy, their leadership in the region was drawn from upper castes and they failed to provide a cultural alternative to Brahmanical Hinduism. In the 1940s, there were six

different Dalit organizations in the state (undivided Andhra Pradesh). The biggest of these were Schedule Castes Federation and the Hyderabad State Depressed Class Association. This phase of the Dalit movement in the state faded in the 1940s and almost disappeared by the 1950s (Rao 2015; Berg 2014).

The Dalit movement was reborn in 1985 due to the landmark event known as the Karamchedu Massacre, wherein a Dalit village in Andhra Pradesh was violently attacked by a mob of higher caste people leading to the death of six Dalits. This led to the formation of an organization called Dalit Mahasabha, which led an independent Dalit movement (Gudavarthy 2005; Ratnam 1997) and fostered a “Dalit subjectivity as a distinctive political movement and a new discursive approach”, which resolved to maintain autonomy from other political formations and relied exclusively on Dalit intellectuals and leaders. The movement identified itself as Dalit, and Ambedkar became its uniting symbol. This revival was dominated by the Dalit sub-castes of Mala and Madiga who were better educated and more politically assertive than other Dalits (Berg 2014, 397). Together, they comprised about 80% of the Dalit population in the state (Satyanarayana 2014).

Dalit Mahasabha and the Dalit movement post 1985 also mark a clear separation from left wing radicalism (Gudavarthy 2005; Berg 2014). Because of a successful left wing armed struggle by a group known as Naxalites, Andhra Pradesh is seen as a place with more organizing around issues of class than caste (Ilaiah 2004). But due to the Karamchedu event, a new Dalit consciousness was forged, and it enabled Dalits to break away from an all-encompassing class discourse and challenge the myth that caste was a thing of the past. In fact, this event demonstrated how dominant castes

violently resist the social development and modern lifestyle of Dalits. This was further exemplified by other high-profile instances of violence against Dalits like Chundur in 1991, Vempenta in 1998. At the time, focussed as they were economic issues, both the mainstream and left-wing commentators struggled to explain why Dalits were targeted in this way (Satyanarayana 2014). The explanations offered, revolved around the larger changes in the economy and class polarization, but the social division on the basis of caste was ignored (Satyanarayana 2014). This led to debates within the radical left about dealing with caste rather than focusing solely on class and several people left the left-wing movement to join anti-caste movements that went beyond the Dalit Movement (Berg 2014).

This issue of higher castes resisting social and economic mobility of Dalits has a renewed relevance in the context of a growing Dalit middle class identity in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh today. Even today, the cases of extreme violence perpetuated against Dalits, particularly in rural areas, is often a result of the changing socio-economic conditions. Dalit mobility whether through white collar jobs or entrepreneurship is seen as a revolt against tradition (Jodhka 2004; 2016). Just as the hyper focus on merit by upper castes in urban areas must be seen in relation (and as a reaction) to Dalit and lower caste efforts to use caste a tool for mobilization (Subramanian 2015; 2019) to gain political and economic power, the extreme violence in rural areas is also a reaction to Dalits' real or perceived freedom from traditional relations of economic dependency on upper castes. Even scholars like Beteille (2000) who argue that the institutional hold of caste has weakened, acknowledge that at the same time, violence towards Dalits is on the rise (Jodhka 2016). These two simultaneous and corresponding responses by upper castes of shifting the focus to merit and perpetrating violence, in urban and rural areas respectively, results in keeping Dalits as caste-

marked subjects. The rural violence always marks Dalits as victims but never the specific upper caste group that perpetrated the violence. Even the Karamchedu massacre was orchestrated and perpetrated by people belonging to a specific higher caste, but only Dalits are marked by this caste violence<sup>25</sup>.

The 1980s and 1990s once again saw the birth and proliferation of many Dalit journals. The Bahujan Samaj Party also had a notable presence in Andhra Pradesh during this time. In 1998 two other organizations associated with the Dalit movement were formed: Kula Nirmulana Porata Samithi (KNPS) and United Front of Dalits and Minorities formed by radical left-wing groups. In 1994 a new movement called Madiga Reservation Porata Samithi (MRPS) was launched with the objective of securing a reasonable share of Schedule Caste reservations for the Madiga sub-caste. The organization led by Krishna and Krupakar, who changed their names to Krishna Madiga and Krupakar Madiga respectively, noted that a disproportionate number of reservation beneficiaries were from the Mala sub-caste and Madigas were losing out. This issue divided the two major Dalit sub-castes in Andhra Pradesh and decisively fractured the Dalit Movement in the state. As things stand today, this issue has not yet been resolved (Rao 2015) and the Dalit struggle in the present-day states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana is often shadowed by the Mala-Madiga conflict.

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<sup>25</sup> see Berg 2014 for a more detailed account of the incident and its aftermath.



## Chapter 4: Castelessness as Middleclassness

The story that I am trying to tell here is quite simple. Upper castes tend to discursively erase caste. One of the reasons for this is that they see themselves as modern subjects, with modernity implying a lack of caste due to the relegation of caste to the domain of “tradition” (Pandian 2002; Mosse 2020a). In certain socio-economic locations, lower castes and Dalits, too, tend to downplay or hide the role of caste in their lives. This leads to a situation where it would seem as though Dalits are denying caste just as many upper castes do. When this seeming denial is taken at face value, it causes one to wonder if the whole caste question can be laid to rest.

There are any number of reasons why Dalits downplay or hide the role of caste in their lives: to escape from stigma – managing information or the interaction (Goffman 1963), in order to “pass” as non-Dalit, out of fear of legitimizing caste by acknowledging it, fear of being accused of “playing the caste card,” or out of guilt for being more fortunate than other Dalits (i.e. guilt of having escaped the brunt of caste-based discrimination). All of these will become apparent through some of the life histories presented throughout this dissertation. However, as mentioned in the introduction chapter, there is one more important factor that shapes this behavior among Dalits.

Several generations of Dalits have been influenced and shaped by the same market centric discourses as the upper castes. Within these discourses, Dalits, too, have had to adopt the language of caste free modernity while also partially internalizing and constituting themselves as casteless subjects i.e., embracing a post-caste subjectivity. This is especially the case among Dalits who work for large global multinational corporations (MNCs) in modern office complexes

like Gachibowli and are adapting to their new roles as technological moderns<sup>26</sup> These Dalits cross a certain physical threshold to go from the everyday hustle and bustle of Hyderabad to the distinctly modern, global space of the office complexes in Gachibowli. In doing so, they also must cross a liminal space in their own minds, one that separates a life shaped by caste from a realm of castelessness.

The need to operate in these two parallel geographic and their corresponding mental realms, can lead to certain tensions within the modern corporate Dalit subjectivity. There is a constant underlying tension between the castelessness within the corporate zone, and a life of caste on the outside. While these Dalits genuinely do believe in castelessness of the modern spaces, and their own castelessness due to their access to these modern spaces and more importantly their own subjectivity of modernity, they simultaneously organize for the betterment of Dalits and acknowledge the reality of caste in other contexts. Although these subjectivities are aligned to the milieu of each domain, the domains themselves may be in conflict. This chapter explores these tensions through the life stories of Dalits who made the transition into the realm of casteless modernity, even if it is only through travelling back and forth – both in the physical and figurative senses, between the two worlds.

Dalits working in the modern global tech sector have been shaped by decades of economic discourses about free markets. This is evident in the contours of their daily habits, in which use of email, news, social media, and other apps like ride sharing, maps, dating etc., is ubiquitous.

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<sup>26</sup> I use technological moderns as a slight extension of term “technical moderns” used by Subramanian (2019), who specifically refers to those who pursued education and careers in technical fields. Technologies like the internet and cellphones are now accessible to people who have no technical knowledge. This form of modernity is facilitated by the access to these technologies and the imagination that it facilitates.

This influence is also exerted through the implicit worldview represented by spaces like malls, bars, and cafes, and possessions like cars and clothes that are an essential part of “modern life”, and in their mannerisms, vocabularies, and conceptual repertoires, as will be demonstrated. The professional goals and economic dreams they articulate are very much embedded in this milieu of casteless modernity. Moreover, they, physically and figuratively cross into a realm which is built around this technological modernity and is implicitly constituted as a caste free space.

In the process of becoming a technological modern, one is likely to imbibe aspects of this modernity that may, on the surface, seem secular and free of any caste-specific valence. For example, one might embrace the idea that technology does not care about one’s caste and is therefore a leveling force that brings the power of the internet to everyone, from Wall Street bankers to the rural poor in India, irrespective of any social ascriptions. Thus, an embrace of the argument for technology can become a gateway to the acceptance of casteless modernity. As an informant of Upadhyaya (2008, 66) notes, “The IT industry has brought in the notion that all value is about money. It’s the American attitude. IT is the gateway for American attitudes”. What is seen here as American attitude is the same as what I see as the key values promoted by market centric discourses, and they play a central role in fashioning a casteless self among the section of Dalits that this chapter looks at.

## **The Global-Modern Office Complex**

The first time I saw one of the large, modern office complexes in Gachibowli, Hyderabad was by happenstance. I had just arrived back in India and was staying at a hotel, in an area that I remembered as the outskirts of the city. Now, this area seemed to be an important hub that was undergoing a real estate and construction boom. I was severely jet lagged and thought I should take a walk to clear my head, and maybe even explore the area. From the large glass wall of my hotel room on the 12<sup>th</sup> floor, I could see a golf course and a large apartment complex named Golf View apartments. In front of the hotel was a very busy road with fast moving traffic. Across the road, I could see a narrow lane with small shops on either side. Seeing no other option, I decided to walk along this narrow lane.

It turned out to be one of those long winding lanes with a path made of hardened mud that had the occasional puddle of water on its uneven surface. Motorbikes whizzed past me as I tried to walk without getting my shoes too dirty. The occasional car passed by, taking up almost the entire breadth of the path and forcing me to step onto the entrance of a shop. I had to keep reminding myself that this was all completely normal in Indian cities. Even though I had spent most of my life in India, I had been living in the US for the last 5 years and found that perhaps I needed some re-acclimatization to the quintessential narrow lanes that seem to pop up among sections of large cities that undergo rapid urbanization with a sudden and massive growth in real estate and construction. These familiar narrow lanes commonly found in Indian cities somehow seem a little out of place in these modern enclaves. Yet, given India's development trajectory, these modern zones have no choice but to co-exist with the lanes, and people have to adapt to the

roles they are required to play in each of these spaces, including adopting the bodily techniques and mental frameworks required operate therein.

I kept following the path walking past homes, eating places, mechanics' shops, tailors, and people selling vegetables, trinkets, etc., and finally reached some sort of an opening. There was open area with lots of motorbikes parked here and there, and about 100 meters away, was a huge, futuristic looking, brightly lit building, with its shiny concrete, glass, and chrome exterior. Standing in stark contrast to the tiny, dimly lit shops and the narrow path that I just walked through, the edifice looked somewhat like an alien spaceship that just landed in the middle of a shanty town. I immediately recognized the structure as "the Amazon Building".

I had seen large buildings in India before, and I knew that this area of the city had large hubs (or rather islands) of office complexes with huge buildings. But I was not expecting to run into one of them at the end of this narrow Lane. It was not just the Amazon building either. There were several other large buildings that provided office space for well-known technology companies. The imposing structures were all lit up like Christmas trees, making all the tiny houses and shops that I had just walked past seem shrouded in darkness, poverty, and pastness. This shiny glass and metal colony of modern multinational corporate workspaces represents, in some ways, the dreamworld of the professional middle-class Indian.

I had been standing there looking around in amazement for less than a minute when someone walked up to me and asked me if I had a credit card. This turned out to be a salesperson for a bank who wanted to get me to apply for a new credit card. He perhaps took me for one of the

newer employees at one of these companies, and with any luck, one who might not have a credit card yet. This salesperson stands here hoping to catch people as they transition between these two zones. He is primarily looking for people who recently gained access to the corporate enclaves; supplying them with a tool – a credit card – that is both functional and symbolic of their transition, while he himself seems destined to stay in this middle zone.

I later came to see this area as a liminal space between the large glitzy office complexes that represent the global, the modern, the technological, and the path forward, on one side, and the narrow lanes and tiny shops that represent the local, backward, and the mundane that needs to be left behind, on the other side. This liminal space is replicated in many other locations and each one has its own set of people who serve as intermediaries that never transition to the other side. Taxi drivers, who drop people off at airports but never get on a flight, never even enter the airport<sup>27</sup> are a good example of this.

### **HITEC City and Gachibowli**

In year 1995, the then Chief Minister of the state announced plans to turn an area of Hyderabad into a hub for technology companies. In 1998 the first phase of “HITEC city” which stood for Hyderabad Information Technology Engineering Consultancy City, was inaugurated. In the year 2000, the US President at the time, Bill Clinton, was invited to this site and received with much fanfare, as a way of gaining global publicity for this new project. This area officially came to be called Hitec City, and today, it has a significant corporate presence. However, its adjacent area, Gachibowli, has truly become what Hitec City was meant to be: a major IT and business hub,

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<sup>27</sup> Only passengers with valid flight tickets are allowed to enter into the airports in India.

housing several multinational companies, software development centers, corporate offices, and educational institutions like the Indian School of Business.

The number of people who work in IT and IT enabled services (ITES) in entire state of Telangana was reported at more than 9 million in 2022-2023 and is expected to reach 10 million in 3-4 years (Government of Telangana 2023). More impressively, the state alone accounted for 44% of the new IT jobs added in the entire country. The report also confidently claims that Hyderabad would emerge as the city with the largest share of the IT industry in India, in 5-10 years.

The capital city of Hyderabad alone accounts for a vast majority of the above-mentioned numbers pertaining to the state, hosting most of the industry. While the above report does not mention the number of IT jobs in Hyderabad, it does say that the state government now aims to move beyond Hyderabad and attract new IT jobs to other cities of the state. It has set itself an “ambitious” target of creating of 25,000 new jobs in other cities. On the other hand, just one building in Gachibowli called Waverock has 2.5 million square feet of workspace, and is estimated to have 25,000 – 30, 000 employees working within its premises. Gachibowli not only hosts tens of thousands of IT jobs, it also hosts some of the more elite segments of this industry.

There are several large complexes here that house office space for large international companies like Amazon, Google, Microsoft, Uber, IBM, GE, etc. Working for one of these companies is in and of itself a status symbol. While this may not be the ultimate dream of everyone who works

here, it does mark them as having “made it” – at some level – and it clearly separates them from the rest of society through subtle and not-so-subtle mechanisms.

Corporate hubs are portrayed in market-centric discourses as spaces that are global in nature, and as representing a sharp break from the Indian traditions and past that are seen as backward. Some of the organizations housed here may even call themselves egalitarian or “flat spaces,” spaces where only skill matters and where, in contrast to other traditional settings, nothing else should play a role. (The trope of “the world is flat thanks to capitalism” is a well-worn one, within the corporate and media scape thanks to mainstream works like Thomas L Friedman’s (2005) book *The World is Flat*). Yet the physical nature of these complexes suggests quite the opposite. These are not spaces that anyone can simply walk into – they are literally walled off, gated, and protected by security guards. There is also an intangible kind of separation between these two realms. While these complexes are physically in Hyderabad, they are markedly a different realm within the city. When one crosses into this realm, one dresses differently, speaks differently, usually in a different language – English, and as such, the way one conducts oneself undergoes an immense change. On the other side, people can speak in Hindi, Telugu, or other Indian languages, hang out at chai stands and paan shops, speak loudly and use rough, abusive language, and have mannerisms that are more casual and local rather than corporate, formal, and western.

In the corporate zone, one works for global corporations using technologies that make geography irrelevant, or so the thinking goes. As employees, they work with people in different parts of the globe and in different time zones, and these jobs often require them to embody a global

subjectivity – one that transcends local traditions, including caste. Some of them even receive training in inter-cultural communication skills and this requires a certain amount of personal restructuring (Upadhyaya 2008, 81). Even in cases where a company or an employee does not deal with people in other countries or time zones, this kind of a global subjectivity is still the expected norm. It is worth noting, however, that geography does not become irrelevant. In fact, it is the constant performance of this global, modern, corporate, and middle-class subjectivity that creates an illusion of the irrelevance of geography when one is in the corporate space. Even the distinction between this space and wider society must continually be performed and policed.

There are people in the corporate zone who would never be seen at the chai stands or paan shops on the other side, and there are people on the other side who would never have occasion to go into the corporate zone. There are also many people who work in the corporate zone but do not fully belong there. The janitorial staff or even the security guards could be included in this. They are physically in the corporate zone but they do not share in its social imaginary or the intellectual project. There are, however, many who straddle these two worlds and cross from one side to the other, both in the physical and figurative senses, on a daily basis. A few of the people who work here live in upscale modern housing that is similarly insulated from the rest of the world. But most tech-workers move between the world of modern work to more traditional living conditions, on the outside, daily.

Intuitively, these workers know that they must embody different habits and values on either side of this divide to have access to both worlds. Very often, at the end of a workday or during lunch break, one can witness people leave the corporate zone and enter the local zone. A casual

observer would notice the change in their behaviour and get the sense that they have just stopped playing one role and are settling back into another, more familiar role. What is less readily apparent is that the corporate spaces are likely to be filled with upper castes, and in a sense, they are de facto upper caste spaces. This, as much as anything else, helps the imaginary of castelessness take hold here. But while upper castes are generally better able to perform this subjectivity, Dalits too have begun to enter these spaces. They too have acquired the tools to perform these roles through their exposure to the discourses and performances of this type of modernity.

## **Ravi**

Several weeks later, I find myself back in the same area between these two zones. But this time, I had my back towards the Amazon building, and I was looking towards the motorbikes and the narrow lane that I walked through earlier. I meet Ravi outside his office, which is in the Waverock building, right next to the Amazon building. He greets me with a warm smile and a hug. This is the first time we meet, and we had only spoken briefly on the phone once before. He suggests that we sit in the bus stop and talk. I am a bit surprised that he seems very comfortable sitting and talking about caste, (which he knows is a significant focus of my research) in such a public space. A few others sat not more than an arm's length from us and could easily hear us. As I explain the basics of my research and tell him about what I could do to protect his privacy, he does not seem concerned at all.

“I am working in a good job and I’m earning good money” he says “I can tell you how much if you like,” he adds.

I tell him to share whatever information he is comfortable sharing.

“14 lakhs” (1.4 million rupees) he says.

I say “So, this is a good amount for somebody in your position, with your experience?” He nods.

He is 36 years old, and he finds that his salary affords him a comfortable life. Both his parents were manual laborers, and he grew up without many of the comforts that he now has easy access to. He helps other people by teaching them to code. Mostly “people like us” he says.

“As in?” I ask.

“People who do not have any guidance, and therefore need someone like me.” He replies.

“I also taught some people who live in the US too. Because a friend of mine associated with Telangana Rashtriya Samiti [referring to the political party that is in power in the state of Telangana] in the US, asked me to teach, and I was happy to oblige”. I notice that he has not mentioned caste or Dalits so far.

After 15 minutes of chatting about how he helps society, I bring up the topic of caste in the workplace. He says it has not really been an issue for him. I pressed further, and shared my personal experiences of how caste sometimes came up without ever being made explicit. In response, he says “It is mostly people from Andhra who are always trying to figure out what caste one belongs to, Telangana people do not seem too concerned. [Referring to people from the two neighboring states that used to be one state called Andhra Pradesh. A part of the state split away to form a new state called Telangana, while the remaining part still retains the earlier name

of Andhra Pradesh] I think the Andhra people will give you special treatment if you belong to their caste, but it does not really matter if you don't."

Me: "Do you think people at your workplace generally know your caste?"

Ravi: "No! because my name does not give away my caste." He replies.

Me: What do you think would happen if everyone suddenly found out your caste?

Ravi: "If you are good, they cannot stop you. If you are good with the work you do, it does not matter how many upper caste people there are [in the workplace], and what they feel about Dalits, they will need you." This is offered more as a generalization than as a prediction of what would happen in his specific case. It seems like more of an ideal that he subscribes to than something that he knows from his experience.

I switch gears and ask him about his life as a student in college, and later as a lecturer at another college.

"In college, yes. People were more concerned about caste, and they don't treat you when they find out what caste you are from. Even when I was teaching at a college, some of my colleagues there tried to derail my career. But the principal of the college fully supported me. He was very happy with my performance and the students were happy too. So, there was nothing that the other faculty members could do."

When the conversation veered back to his present job and life in the corporate world, he says: "I am good at what I do. If there are 10 people – 2 dalits and 8 upper castes, in a workplace, but you are good at your work then they will keep you there." Even though the office is dominated by

upper caste people, “even if all 8 upper caste people are casteist as hell!” He says wrapping up that topic. There is an implicit assumption here that the “they” who will keep “you” here is not the 8 upper castes but somebody or something above them which does not care for your caste. It is as though the statement comes from faith in some upper management or a system, which is beyond caste and greater than the people who comprise it.

At this point, one might raise the following questions: What would Ravi say if I asked him whether this is true even in public sector jobs? If you are good at your job, would your caste not matter in a public sector job? But I do not ask him these questions because his stand on these matters was already clear to me. Moreover, there is another aspect that complicates a comparison between the public and private sectors. The problem is that public sector jobs are covered by the reservations policy and, therefore, Dalits in public sector jobs can be seen as attaining those jobs despite being incompetence, whereas there are no reservations in private sector jobs. This is the primary reason why the private sector is celebrated as a caste free space. It is the absence of reservations and the consequent lack of lower castes and Dalits that makes the private sector seem caste free. It is caste free not because upper castes cannot use their caste networks to monopolize these jobs, but because lower castes cannot use reservations to get them. The discrimination that Dalits face in the government jobs, has little to do with the government and everything to do with the fact that they are marked as Dalits, whereas, in the private sector it is possible for them to remain unmarked.

On the positive side, Dalits who work in the private sector should be able to claim to be meritorious like the upper castes. Except for the fact that they are then faced with the argument

that they would not be working in these jobs if they had not gone to a good college, and that would not have happened if they didn't have reservations. This makes it easier for a Dalit to be quiet about their caste, than to claim to be Dalits who have earned merit. Thereby, even in these spaces, the claim to merit remains a preserve of the upper castes. The claim to merit is not simply a marker of upper casteness but merit itself becomes a synonymous with upper casteness (see Subramanian 2019).

Another counterfactual worth exploring here is how Ravi would respond to the following question: If there are any Dalits who have been fired from the company or mistreated – for example, not given raises or had their promotions delayed or held back after their caste status became known, would you say that it is because they were not good at their jobs? Or would you say that a Dalit would have to be better at his job than non-Dalits in order to be able to overcome any caste bias?

Ravi's responses in general suggested to me a strong faith in the private sector and how it rewards merit (skills, efficiency, education) above all else; or at least a strong desire to put his faith in the private sector. The fact that he earns an income that he is comfortable with and that he has a job where he believes his skills are valued irrespective of his caste can go a long way in generating such faith. Ravi is also clearly making an effort to raise himself above the fray, above the everyday quotidian, mundane struggles of caste, so that he can speak from a position of authority, as a dispassionate observer. It is as though he were trying to convey the message that caste struggle is real, but he has managed to escape it and now he wants to help others who may not be so lucky. What is clear is that there is some sense of freedom that comes from having a

private sector job, and that he views talent, skill, and education as providing a moat against caste-based discrimination. He is conveying that he has such a large moat that he is unlikely to face discrimination and not that there isn't any discrimination per se. For him, there is some level of freedom from such discrimination in this corporate space.

He says that discrimination was more apparent and obvious in the college (which was a (more traditional work environment) where he taught, but much less so in this modern global corporate workspace where he now works. One way to put this into perspective is to consider the fact that traditionally, Dalits have been deprived of opportunities and avenues to increase their skills, and consequently, their market worth. Therefore, even without mentioning caste, one could dismiss Dalits as being unskilled, uneducated, or inferior in several ways other than on the basis of their caste. This is something that Ravi may have witnessed with Dalits of earlier generations, perhaps his parents who were manual laborers, or even Dalits of his own generation who do not have the qualifications that he possesses. A Dalit who is well educated and can out compete their upper caste colleagues, could have a sense that they cannot be treated in the same way as earlier generations of Dalits, or less qualified ones from the current generation. His situation now is different than before he had these qualifications, and different from someone who does not have similar qualifications. This difference is because he is here in the corporate zone – which is a physical manifestation par excellence of the world imagined by the market-centric discourses.

## **Hari**

Hari, too, claims to not have experienced much by way of discrimination. However, his story is replete with a multitude of measures that he and his parents took to avoid situations and the conditions which could lead to experiences of caste-based discrimination. “Since we moved from Andhra to Telangana<sup>28</sup>, people could not place my caste, moreover my parents told me to say that I belonged to Kapu caste [a numerically large caste group that is considered a relatively well-off caste in some areas of the state and a backward caste in others, but in all places it is a caste group that commands a much higher status than being Dalit] and I could get away with it on most occasions.” But when people did know his caste, for example, his teachers who could look it up in the school records, his parents would say that they were just claiming to be Dalit so they could get scholarships from the government. This is not very uncommon. There were a few Dalit students in my college who said the same thing. Some people would rather claim that they were lying about being Dalit and cheating the system to benefit from affirmative action, than to tell the truth about being Dalit.

Similar to many other informants, Hari mentions several times that his academic performance was the reason he did not suffer caste-based discrimination while growing up. “Because I was a topper, caste never really mattered”. On another occasion he says “Academically, I was bright, and therefore, fine as far as discrimination is concerned”. Perhaps he felt like he had to perform well academically to not face caste-based discrimination. But he also says that his good

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<sup>28</sup> Back then, these were different regions of the same state but due to the different historical circumstances that shaped these two regions, they were distinctive enough to be seen as being separated by more than geography. There is a striking difference in accent and some local customs and traditions, but most importantly, many people in each area rarely had any strong social or economic connections to the other.

performance was attributed to the fact that he was from a different state - “only a guy from Andhra could do so well in academics...they used to say.” All his successes, differences, and eccentricities could be passed off as stemming from the fact that he was originally from Andhra and not Telangana. His academic performance helped divert attention away from his caste and towards his status of belonging to a different state. It is worth noting that this association of Andhra with high performance is arbitrary. It is simply a way of getting around the matter of caste and how Hari defies his caste role by performing well in an area that he isn’t supposed to.

“My parents always considered themselves to be middleclass,” he says. His parents, perhaps in an effort to stay within the bounds of middle classness and castelessness, made sure that he did not interact with many people outside the house: “I never did much physical stuff like going out and playing with other kids. I lived in a general middle-class area and probably there were no other Dalits there.” (I note how this middle classness separates them from other Dalits and thereby overlaps with this mode of castelessness.) He does not remember interacting with other Dalits at school either. He says he could identify some of his school mates as tribals: “they were very poor and came from small hamlets...the other Dalits may have been poor too, but I do not distinctly recall anyone”. His middle-class status shielded him by separating him from other Dalits and enabling his relative castelessness. Middleclassness is one way for Dalits to escape caste but in order to be seen as middle class one must first demonstrate an ability to not be marked by caste. Since middleclassness is de-facto upper casteness, Hari needed to reinforce his middle-class identity with other identities such as being a good student and belonging to Andhra.

However, this castelessness was not the actual absence of caste. Hari's experiences with caste are quite real. Thus far in Hari's stories, his caste appears in the background, and often as the backdrop or context for the stories. But at times, it also appears explicitly and in the foreground. As he narrates, there was a time in his 11<sup>th</sup> grade when he was trying to find a house to rent and just could not find landlords who were willing to rent to him when they found out he was Dalit. "My parents explained to me that this is the reason we do not tell the truth" (about their caste). He is quick to add that none of these incidents ever had a big impact on him. "I have always brushed them off in some way. Nothing felt really bad. It never influenced me." This is the key point here. Caste, for Hari and several other informants, typically appears in the background in ways that they dismiss as inconsequential. But even in instances where caste is obvious and explicit, individuals like Hari will insist that they are not "affected" by it. This makes it clear that this castelessness is more about self-making than anything structural.

Hari recounts an anecdote about being invited to the house of a friend who belonged to the Vaishya community, an upper caste typically associated with merchants, for a meal. He was asked to enter from the gate at the back of the house and to sit and eat in the back yard. While this was their way of not letting him enter the house, he takes comfort in the fact that his friend also sat with him in the backyard. "I did not see this as insulting or discriminatory against me. I thought that it was a system they had to follow and so they did, but at least they were good to me. They were under no obligation to offer me lunch." Instead of seeing upper castes merely as agents or enforcers of the caste system, Hari chooses to see his friend's family as trying to be nice to him while staying within the confines of a system that they too are bound by. It could be that he feels shame and does not want to acknowledge it; it could be that he genuinely saw things

the way he describes them. For many, covert discrimination may be preferable to overt, as it allows them to reinterpret or ignore it. Either way, his experience of castelessness is not the absence of caste and not the same as that of an upper caste.

He continues to be friends with this person. He notes, “I went back to their house almost 20 years later and this time they served me at their dining table...and I continue to visit their house even now”. This could suggest a loosening of the hold of tradition or a redrawing of the dividing lines, but it is worth noting that when Hari went back their house after 20 years, he was visiting home on a vacation from his job as a Professor of Business at a university in Australia.

When he was able to hide or rise above the restrictions that his caste status normally implied, he seems to remember it fondly. When he had negative experiences, he “brushed it off”. In a way, he did manage to transcend his caste and pass for upper caste. However, this castelessness had to be constantly negotiated and performed and cannot be taken for granted.

In high school, Hari had a group of friends from middle and upper castes, though he did not know the caste of some of the people. “It was all very friendly, maybe because we all went to a government school.” He recalls that “some of them actually got in touch with me recently, and they remembered me fondly. We spoke about how wonderful it was that we got the opportunity to form these friendships”. He also offers other reasons for his casteless experiences, but his position seems clear – he was not affected by caste – whatever the reasons may be and however valid they may seem to the listener. For example: he says that growing up, he lived mostly in left-dominated areas of the state, and so discrimination was a bit less. It is not clear if left-

dominated areas of the state are significantly different from the others in terms of caste-based attitudes and practices. What is noteworthy is that his life story is full of reasons as to why caste did not affect him as much; deflections and explanations that actually reveal how significant a role caste played in his life. So why does he say that caste did not affect him?

It seems that Hari and his family have taken great care to make sure that their caste does not become an issue. They tried to keep it a secret, when possible, and lied about their caste status when not. When their caste status became known, they lied by claiming that were lying about it. Ss when they said they were claiming to be Dalits just to get some benefits from the government. They lived in an area that did not mark them as Dalits, and they did not have much interaction with other Dalits. They either actively encouraged or tacitly welcomed the idea that all their differences could be attributed to the fact that they were from a different part of the state.

The family made a conscious choice to pass as non-Dalits whenever possible. Their strategies of distancing themselves from their caste peers, not mentioning their caste and/or actively hiding it and lying about it whenever possible are obvious strategies to overcome stigma. These strategies are not uncommon. But these strategies are not available to everyone. Hari's family's middle-class (economic) status, their move from Andhra to Telangana where their caste antecedents were not well understood by the local community, and Hari's good academic performance came together to make this possible. Sometimes, he managed to pass as non-Dalit or not be marked in any way by his caste and therefore, in that sense, became "casteless", like his upper caste friends. Other times, his caste was acknowledged but he was still able to "transcend" it in some way. For example: once he heard his 7<sup>th</sup> grade teacher talking on the phone and mentioning to someone in

utter surprise that he (the teacher) was sitting with a student (Hari) who topped 7<sup>th</sup> grade in the school and perhaps the entire district and was a Harijan<sup>29</sup> (Dalit). This teacher was not trying to disparage him. If anything, they were impressed and amazed by the fact that a Dalit could be the topper of their school and maybe even the entire district.

Middle-class Dalits, whether determined by economic criteria or self-identification, are the ones most likely to portray themselves as casteless. This becomes much more feasible when one is a “good student” or has economic means and is willing to not bring up caste. In other words, it is the fashioning of a modern self that makes it possible to experience this castelessness. In a traditional society, a Dalit is unlikely to be middle class in terms of economic or social status. It is possible in the “modern world” as in the case of my informants. This form of middle classness is therefore entangled with modernity. Middle classness means not having to face the horrors of poor Dalits, but also acknowledging the merits of and performing a specific form of modernity in order to keep enjoying the form of castelessness that it provides.

It is evident that Hari was constantly affected by caste throughout his life. But he keeps referring to the fact that he was middle class and therefore was not affected. As mentioned in the introduction, middle-classness is, among other things, an ability to not be affected by caste. Similar to Praveen Kumar (discussed in the next chapter), Hari has reservations (no pun intended) about calling himself Dalit even as his scholarly work is now around caste. “I am really pushing the conversation and research on caste in corporate spaces. Now that I am

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<sup>29</sup> Harijan which means ‘children of god’ was the term chosen by Gandhi to refer to the untouchables, however, most Dalit activism and now the community more generally rejects this term as patronizing and prefers the term Dalit instead.

working on caste, many people assume that I am Dalit [another example of how Dalits are constantly marked as caste subjects. Or viewed another way, bringing up caste in these modern spaces, could mark one as Dalit or lower caste]. In most cases, I do not accept or deny it when people assume that I am Dalit. Now I do not even say that I am a Dalit. Sometimes, I use the phrase: I happen to be a Dalit. I do not want to acknowledge an irrational system and identity. Why give somebody else that power over you?" he concludes.

## **Anand**

For most people in the Gachibowli corporate world, it would have been obvious to suggest a meeting at a café like Coffee Day, Barista, or the more expensive Starbucks. Cafés have become the default venues for such meetings among the urban, tech savvy, globalized middle class, as they form a safe, neutral territory in terms of how one is perceived and judged by their levels of consumption. Yet I invited Anand to meet me inside the lush 2000-acre campus of the University of Hyderabad and we both agreed it would be preferable to meet here.

The choice of location shows that Anand did not find the need to demonstrate his middle classness to me through performative consumption. This also shows some level of assumed intimacy or familiarity on both our parts, and the understanding that this was to be an informal and friendly meeting - a mode of sociality that does not rely on the intervention of modern market-mediated social spaces.

So, I found myself interviewing him near the Savitri Bai Phule auditorium on a weekday at 5pm. He left work a little early to beat traffic. I start by asking him to tell me a little about his family background and childhood. He says that he hails from a small village located about 100 km from Hyderabad where both his mother and father were agricultural laborers. He went to a government school until 2nd grade and then went to a convent school.

Anand seems to believe even more strongly that caste is not important and that it plays almost no role in his life. Various vignettes that he recounts from his life do seem to reinforce these assertions. He recalls that he had no awareness of caste between grades 5-10. He was well liked by his teachers because of his good grades, and he was usually ranked first in his class. He was always in a friendly competition with another student who belonged to the Reddy caste (a dominant caste in the state that has a far higher ritual status than Dalits).

As we continue to chat, he says “I do not remember experiencing or witnessing any caste discrimination even in junior college [11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades], come to think of it, even college [undergraduate] was fine. I even had upper caste roommates including a brahmin and I never felt discriminated against.”

I ask him whether his friends knew what caste he belonged to when he was in high school or college?

He says “obviously, they did”.

I ask him how he knew this.

“They would know, because....” He trails off.

He seemed to suggest that it would be obvious that they would know his caste, but seemed unable to recall or explain why. But it became clear as the conversation proceeded to the topic of his religion.

Unlike many others I interviewed, Anand's stories, at least the way he told them, actually seemed to reinforce his castelessness, i.e. caste did not seem to be playing a role either in the background or foreground.

At one point in our conversation, he is at great pains to explain that "if you are good as a person and behave properly, then others will not be concerned with your caste. I don't know what goes on in their minds and how they think about my caste status, but it seems to me that if you are well behaved, caste does not matter. If you have been a good student and you perform well at your job, your caste should not really matter. At least that is what I feel based on my life experience."

Being a good person and being well-behaved are considered essential attributes of middle classness. However, in discussions about middle classness, one rarely defines how to be a good person or be well-behaved. Rather, being middle class seems to automatically make one a good person who is well-behaved. In addition, among the Indian middle class, one often hears the phrase "he/she comes from a good family". When someone does something that is considered wrong, people (even strangers) may say things like "you look like you come from a good family, why would you act like that?". This notion of coming from a good family always seems to imply middleclassness. However, one must be middle-class before they can make a claim to

being from a good family. Thereafter, a continued a performance of middleclassness is tantamount to being a good person who is well-behaved and comes from a good family.

He goes on to explain that if one goes into every interaction with the feeling that one will be discriminated against or that one will not be accepted, that might influence the outcome of the interaction, becoming something of a self-fulfilling prophecy. This is reminiscent of the idea that a positive mindset results in positive outcomes and a negative mindset, rather than structural reasons, is responsible for negative outcomes. This is a common trope from the self-development discourses which are a sub-genre of the market-centric discourses. It prescribes that individuals should therefore take responsibility for the outcomes they obtain and work on changing their mindset to get better outcomes rather than complain about how the world is at fault. These area ideas that has been popularized by books like *“The Secret”* and *“Think and Grow Rich”*, to the more recent trend of social media gurus who teach their followers how to manifest everything. The latest of these is a phenomenon called “Lucky Girl Syndrome” on TikTok that is essentially a rebranded version of manifesting methods from earlier decades. Taking personal responsibility for everything, particularly one’s economic situation in life is also a very popular theme promoted by “life coaches”, “motivational speakers” and other “gurus”.

While I had to agree with his point that having an expectation that one will not be accepted can make it difficult to be or feel accepted, I wanted to point out, however, that it puts all responsibility on the individual and does not acknowledge any systemic discrimination. I wanted to ask questions along the following lines: But there are people who are discriminated, right? Do you recognize such a thing as unfair caste-based discrimination? Moreover, is it ok to be

discriminated against, based on your caste, if you happen to be a weak student or one who does not excel at their job? Instead, I take the conversation back to his childhood.

“Let’s talk about your childhood some more,” I say. “When you were growing up did people in your village know about your caste?”

Anand: “Of course they knew.”

Me: “How?”

Anand: “Because, I went to church, and it was clear that most people who went to church [in my village] were Dalits. Because they were not allowed to go to temples\*. (Footnote: Dalits were traditionally not allowed to enter Temples as their presence was considered polluting, leading some of them to convert to Christianity.) A hungry person will obviously go wherever they can get food. [This is a hunger for devotion or a spiritual practice.] Therefore, I think most Dalits go to church. Especially those who are educated and want to lead respectable lives.”

Me: “Have you had the experience of going to a temple and being stopped from entering?”

Anand: “Actually I never tried because it was clear to me that we would not be allowed. It was common understanding.”

Me: “Do you know of any Dalits who went to temples?”

Anand: “No, they generally did not go. They [upper castes] did not have to physically stop anyone. To my knowledge, nobody [no Dalits] went.”

Me: “Does your last name give away your caste?”

Anand: “Probably not.”

Me: Is it possible that people in your high school and college, knew that you were Christian and, therefore, they may not have considered you a Dalit.”

“Yes”, he says, and he also admits that perhaps he had a slightly different life experience compared to other Dalits due to his status as a “good student”.

It is important to put the above story in perspective. While Anand may have come from a village where all Dalits converted to Christianity, not all Dalits are Christian. In fact, a majority of them are not. So, it is quite possible that Anand is trying to convey that his life experience has been very different because he has converted to Christianity. It is extremely unlikely that he would not know that most Dalits are not Christian. It is also unlikely that members of his church/congregation would not have had some conversations about how unfortunate it is that all Dalits do not convert to Christianity or that Christianity is the solution for Dalits. It would seem as though Anand is taking a different stand than most of my other informants by claiming religion as the basis for castelessness. However, even in this conception, Anand draws on tropes made popular by market centric discourses to make his case.

Mindset being more important than structural factors is one such trope. The trope of the good (meritorious) student succeeding against all odds is another that is based in free market rhetoric, one that seems to have been internalized even by Dalits. Dalits need merit to overcome caste, but it is difficult for them to accumulate merit because of how merit is inextricably linked to upper casteness. As explained elsewhere, upper casteness is presented as merit (Subramanian 2019).

The idea that education will help transcend caste barriers is instilled into many Dalit children at a young age and reinforced throughout their childhood and youth. B.R. Ambedkar, whose erudition is credited with having changed the course of Indian history, and Dalits lives in particular, is often invoked to make this point. In Jules Naudet's ethnographic study finds, every one of their Dalit informants emphasized how the importance of education was instilled into them since they were old enough to attend school (Naudet 2014). This dovetails nicely into the narrative that markets only care about skills (merit) and therefore the way out for Dalits is to gain education (merit). Some Dalits do buy into the merit vs reservations dichotomy. One hears phrases such as: "we too can be meritorious", and "we should not depend on reservations forever". They also seek to become worthy of respect by being a "good person" who is invariably a good student and a good employee. An upper caste person does not have to do any of this to not be discriminated against, or to experience their version of castelessness. In essence, Anand is talking to Dalits about how to overcome caste. Even as he places lot of emphasis on religion, he continues to use the language of market centric discourses and stories that are saturated with tropes of self-development.

To present Christianity as a path to escaping caste-based discrimination is not unusual among Dalit Christians. Although conversion to Christianity may not be very effective in helping Dalits escape discrimination. On the contrary, they may lose the benefits of reservations and also face discrimination from the non-Dalit Christian community (Louis 2007). Among my informants, however, it did not matter as much if someone was Christian or not. While the very few Christians I spoke to, offered Christianity as an explanation for why they were not affected by

caste, they too relied on ideas of global, middle class, market centric modernity to make their case and tell their stories.

Some of the above conversation might make Anand sound like a “caste denier.” However, this conversation has to be weighed against the fact that he is an active member of a voluntary organization called Swaeroes Network, a group that is organizing to help Dalits and other lower caste, and poor people and will be discussed in the following chapter.

I aksed him about how and why he joined the Swaeroes Network.

“In 2012, I heard about the formation of an alumni network for people who attended social welfare schools. We were invited to the meetings, and we were asked to go back to our schools and talk to the students about how we made it. We told the students that we were from the same background as them and told them how we went about achieving what we did.”

“But what motivates you to do this?” I asked

“When I heard that this is what they are doing to our people, I thought that we need to do something.” He says, referring to what he heard about how the upper castes were discriminating Dalits.

“I thought I needed to help them...If other caste people are helping their own, why should we not do it?”

He does not say that he was personally discriminated. But he recognizes that there was discrimination – that’s why he could not go to a temple – and that currently, there are people who are being discriminated against. He is motivated enough to join this organization, participate in their programs and talk to me about it. In this way Anand, much like my other informants,

raises himself above the fray and speaks from a place of not being affected by caste. While Christianity may have helped in fashioning a modern self, his modernity is still deeply rooted in market values.

### **Casteless Dalit Events**

Moving from the stories of my informants, I would like to recount the experience I had at two public gatherings, which capture the performance of this castelessness at a group level:

In 2018, a Dalit friend of mine told me that an organization called Global Empower Network (GEN) was conducting a seminar to help “our” students (a common way for Dalits to refer to other Dalits) apply to universities abroad, and that I should talk at the seminar and share my experience of applying to a PhD program in the US. I agreed, and he put me in touch with the organizers. After speaking to the organizers and looking through the promotional material, I began to wonder whether I had misunderstood the purpose of the event. There was nothing in my conversation with the organizers or in promotional materials to suggest that this event had anything to do with Dalit students.

The event took place on the campus of MIT. On the day of the event, after listening to several presentations, I still did not see any indication that the event had anything to do with Dalits per se. I was quite confident that this event was mainly for Dalits because I was already familiar with Dalit spaces and contexts where caste is never made explicit. I was not sure, though, if I would be breaking some unsaid rule if I made it explicit. Nothing in the handouts, the backdrop, or presentations gave me any clue whatsoever. Therefore, when it was my turn to speak, I stayed away from using the words Dalit or caste. All of this is not uncommon. As mentioned in the

introduction, this is a necessary skill for Dalits to navigate these elite modern spaces. Here, even as we come together to help Dalits, we are not mentioning the word Dalit. This may seem like a strategy to fit in. And it is. But it is more than just that. It is a performance of our modernity and middle-classness.

At the end of the Q&A session following my talk, the friend I mentioned earlier asked me a direct question about why I had so much difficulty getting letters of recommendation for my graduate applications. In response, I mentioned the role played by my caste status. Once I did this, many others also mentioned how their caste shaped their educational experiences. It was as though we were talking about it the whole time; implicitly at first and then explicitly. In a sense, first we constructed the seminar as a modern, global space, and then it became a more intimate space. We were perfectly in tune with each of these domains for the duration that we inhabited them. We seamlessly switched from performing our middle classness to performing our Dalitness. The organizers, participants, and the audiences tuning in from India were mostly Dalit, and this was a de facto Dalit event organized by Dalits, promoted by Dalits, through Dalit networks. They all came together because of how caste affects Dalits. Yet, caste could very well have gone unmentioned during the event.

The panelists were there to present as successful applicants who happen to be Dalit, and not as Dalit applicants. The event was supposed to send the message that “we are as good as anyone else” without actually having to say it. Moreover, Dalits who spend time in elite or well-respected educational institutions and corporate workspaces end up receiving a training (unintentionally) in speaking about their lives without ever mentioning caste.

Dalits in in these spaces can, at times, believe they can be like anyone else because of their access to global institutions; in this case educational ones. This is a group of mostly Dalits, in Boston, organizing an event primarily for an audience of Dalits in India; assuming that all the audience needs, is information and guidance. This event did not address or speak to the structural issues that Dalits face in accessing primary or secondary education. Issues like money, internet availability etc., were outside its purview. Clearly, this is by and large an event for the new Dalit middle-class (NDMC), even if it is sending the message that anyone can make it. It is not difficult to see that only a very tiny segments of Dalits could possibly benefit from this knowledge. Until we explicitly spoke about caste, we were simply performing our modernity, globality, and middleclassness, which is the default setting in these spaces.

I had a similar experience at another event where I was asked to speak before a crowd of 2500 attendees. The event was titled “From Margins to Harvard”, and the key speakers were 6 Dalits who were in some way affiliated with Harvard University. The event took place in the city of Nagpur, which is the capital of the state of Maharashtra, which borders the state of Telangana, where I was conducting my fieldwork at that time. The flyer for the event described the aim of the event as “To create awareness, inspire, motivate, and guide Ambedkarite students as well as students from other marginalized communities to pursue higher education in Ivy League universities like Harvard and beyond”. In their talks, every one of the speakers mentioned the words like poor, marginalized, underprivileged, or disadvantaged, but the words caste or Dalit were not used until more than halfway into the program. It only came up because one of the four speakers – Praveen Kumar, who will be discussed in greater detail in another chapter – had a

point to make about the use of the word Dalit. Ironically, it was a point about why he does not like to use that word. This is in spite of the fact that the flyer mentions the term Ambedkarite which can stand in for Dalit. Although non-Dalits can be followers or admirers of Ambedkar, it is quite rare for non-Dalits to call themselves Ambedkarites.

In this case, the Dalit leaders and organizers seemed to be trying to “rise” above caste, generally preferring to avoid language of caste as a means of rising above it. The key thing to understand here is that when Dalits organize events, they are not trying to separate themselves from the rest of society. This is an important difference between Dalit organizing and upper caste organizing. Implicit in an upper caste event is that they are excluding others from such events<sup>30</sup>, but Dalit events are exclusionary only because Dalits have been excluded from rest of society. Dalit events implicitly point out that they have been excluded and they must come together to address this exclusion and inequality. It is not that they want to separate themselves but that they have already been separated. While some Dalit organizations do exclude<sup>31</sup> upper castes from leadership positions, they do seek allies from among all sections of society. They seek and promote, unity and intermingling of various strata of society. Any exclusionary practices are due to a lack of choice or to protect meagre resources. I heard some organizers of various Dalit events say that they limit certain events to Dalits and allies only, because they do not have the resources to accommodate more people. That is why the above two events that I describe did not promote themselves as Dalit only events and they did not restrict or prevent anyone from

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<sup>30</sup> see Mosse 2020b for a discussion on how caste/jati networking continues to play an important role in associational life. It is seen as something to be protected as an inner domain to which entry is guarded. This is particularly among the India diaspora, in UK and elsewhere, where such caste networking is vital to family status, marriage, community leadership, temple organization, voluntary organizations, and business and other networks.

<sup>31</sup> As they did in the movement that resulted from the Karamchedu Massacre (Berg 2014).

attending them. Even though these events are primarily targeted at Dalits, they seemed to be trying to de-caste the events and organize under the umbrella of universal human dignity. But unlike elite universalism, which often conceals underlying power structures, Dalit organizing of this sort embodies a form of subaltern universalism that seeks to articulate a vision of human dignity rooted in the experience of marginalization (see Roberts 2016). This commitment to inclusivity and solidarity transcends caste boundaries, even as it acknowledges and seeks to redress the specific injustices faced by Dalits. Not mentioning caste at these Dalit events is similar to upper castes not mentioning it at their events – because there is no need to. But in both cases, it is also a modern behavior that has been entrained in upper and lower castes alike through market centric discourses, influencing how caste is navigated and understood in contemporary society.

After the session at the second event, several students came up to me to talk to me. They asked me questions about problems faced by “Buddhist students” and opportunities available to “Buddhist students,” but did not mention the word Dalit. Yet again demonstrating that adopting this manner of communication is not just a way of avoiding stigma, but also a way of demonstrating that they can speak the modern language of castelessness. It signals their readiness to go global by adapting to a new modern world through the modern identities and mannerisms. The aspiration to study at an elite American/western school often goes hand in hand with the adoption of this form of middle-class modernity.

## Conclusion

Being a Dalit in non-Dalit or upper caste spaces like elite educational institutions and corporate spaces requires one to develop a special skill. This is to be able to avoid talking about caste, and when caste does come up, to be able to discuss it without giving away one's own caste status. Once a Dalit's caste status is known, the merit of their argument in a conversation on caste may not be consequential anymore. It can be perceived as simply a gripe, or a grievance being expressed by someone implicitly claiming to be the aggrieved party.

There is also a long-held desire among many Dalits to not acknowledge the caste system. To begin with, Dalit is not a status that comes with respect. Even though the term was self-selected, chosen by Dalit leaders over other terms like untouchable, achoot, Harijan, etc., it still denotes the same low status that is imposed on them by an unfair system. It is almost as though calling oneself Dalit is an acknowledgement or even a validation of the caste system. This is one of the reasons why Hari and Praveen Kumar (discussed in the next chapter) and some others that are a part of the New Dalit Middle Class are opposed to using the term. Many others, try to find a balance between not being reduced to their caste by giving away their Dalit identity but also making sure that they are not hiding their identity because of shame.

Castelessness is itself an aspiration that makes and (un)marks the new Dalit middle class. The new Dalit middle class can be identified as much by its desire to gain economic benefits as by its desire to be casteless – much like the unmarked, casteless, upper castes. In a milieu where caste is seen as backward and at odds with a casteless form of modernity (Pandian 2002; S. Deshpande

2013) the desire to be the unmarked category is not difficult to understand, especially when the alternative is to be marked as Dalit. This chapter seeks to make the case that this manifestation of Dalit aspirations to unmarked status is itself a defining characteristic of the new Dalit middle class. Castelessness can also be seen as a form of Sanskritization i.e. Dalits imitating the behavior of upper castes to gain acceptance and increase their status (M. N. Srinivas 1952). For that matter, the aspiration to middleclassness, modernness, globalness among Dalits, can all be seen as forms of Sanskritization. But this would imply a conscious strategy on the part of Dalits, and in several cases it is. But it is not simply an imitation of the upper castes. In the corporate office zone, it is not just a strategy, but subjectivity. Dalits may seem to be imitating upper castes when in fact both Dalits and upper castes are embracing a similar form of modernity. It is just that upper caste claims to this modernity are naturalized while Dalits' claims often seem like poor imitations.

Several times during my fieldwork, when I sat down for long interviews with my informants, I was struck by two things. One is that several of them had a life story that they would launch into, without much prompting or questioning from me. Several times, I just had to ask one question, and the informant would narrate a story that may span their childhood to the present day, with lots of anecdotes, observations, and their own analyses. Many of them seemed to have a relatively well thought out story of who they are and how they came to be where they are. This almost felt like a resume that captures their "life career".

I also observed that several of them told a story that seemed to imply that caste-based discrimination is real, but they were the lucky ones who escaped the worst of it. In most cases,

their stories do reveal caste-based discrimination. The informants, however, choose to remember it as though it were no big deal or as though it did not seem to them as discrimination at that time. Many times, I was left with the distinct impression that they wanted to downplay their caste experiences so as to not present themselves as victims. It appears they were careful to not come across as “playing the caste card” and to show that they realize that they have had it better than most. Which seem like a behavior that is informed or entrained by the internalization of allegations from the mainstream media (and the discourses it promotes) of over-playing the “caste card” and playing the victim – which are portrayed as “backward” behaviors not becoming of the global modern. By distancing themselves from their caste, these Dalits can speak to caste as dispassionate observers. This is an empowering feeling and almost a prerequisite to fashioning a modern caste free subjectivity. A subjectivity in which one speaks not as a victim but as an observer, a social scientist, an intellectual, or somebody above the fray, so to speak.

In India today, to be middle class is to be some level of modern. To be casteless is modern. To be middle class is to be casteless. But upper castes can have it both ways, enjoying the unspoken benefits of both elite markers. They can have caste in the form of kinship and business networks when it suits them (Munshi 2016; Mosse 2020b; 2018) and when it does not, they can have castelessness – i.e. caste in the form of culture, tradition, community, and merit. When Dalits speak the language of castelessness and are seen as “casteless,” they enter the mainstream and middleclass. If nothing else, the language of castelessness itself works as a barrier that deflects attention away from their own caste status. This barrier has to be constantly reconstructed and

negotiated, as does their middleclass status. Their stories implicitly convey that caste discrimination can take very ugly forms and that the discrimination they have faced is mild by comparison. But upon deeper inspection, it appears that this is not just strategy. Dalits, too, have internalized the idea of a casteless modern in ways similar to the upper castes. They try to leave their caste behind when they step into modern corporate workspaces and other institutions. Their allegiance to and faith in the processes of markets is deep-rooted.

When Hari, Ravi, Anand, and others downplay or deny the role of caste in their lives, they are not denying caste per se. They understand that it affects the lives of some others significantly and they are willing to do what they can to help those people. They are not doing this to simply help themselves or their community either. They see the continued existence of caste as an injustice, and they want to correct it. This attitude towards caste is a modern, secular, universalist one that rises above caste. They are trying to help downtrodden, disadvantaged, oppressed people, and many of the intended beneficiaries of their current efforts happen to be Dalits, but they have every intention of going beyond that and working for the whole country. In some ways, they are doing what many Dalit leaders in the past have done – fight to end all discrimination and injustice. But they are doing so while speaking a more secular, caste-free modern language. The difference is that they also view the world through a specific lens of modernity.

In the modern lexicon and in modern global corporate geographies like the Gachibowli office complex, it is ok to be seen as serving society. It is *not* ok to be seen as playing the caste card or playing the victim. It is not in keeping with the moral economy that valorizes personal responsibility and promotes the rhetoric of equal opportunities provided by markets. To be seen

as ungrateful or impolite to markets is to pass up on these opportunities. However, my informants are not simply doing this for the sake of appearances.

In my informants' behaviour, there is at some level, an implication that the same force that created a smartphone or gave them access to the internet brought this zone of glass and steel buildings here. There is something momentous in being associated with this process. The number of times people pull out their phones and show it to me, or the point to the building, or to themselves to show me their clothes, or point to the steering wheel of the car we are in, while saying things like, "I have a good life", "I am thankful for where I am", "I understand how lucky I am", points to this. There seems to an implied understanding that the force which made all this possible does not like the whole talk of caste, discrimination, and anything to do with tradition and past. But Dalits do not simply have a compulsion to act or speak this way. It is also internalized.

Even among Dalits, it is important show that caste does not play such a big role in one's life, as some sort of a claim to modernity. This could also be because of how Dalits in educational institutes are made to feel - like they are always playing the victim and extracting incommensurate benefits. There is so much antagonism towards reservations and Dalits, and so much talk about caste not being an issue or it being a thing of the past, that some Dalits do wonder if they are just playing the victim and relying on a crutch instead of just taking charge and creating their own destiny as the new doctrines of success suggest. A lot of the modern discourses about success emphasize the need to leave behind victimhood and take full responsibility for one's life. While in the academia and certain intellectual circles, identity

politics and looking at various vectors of discrimination is still popular, most other people are more exposed to the discourses of “hustling”, “hard work”, “taking charge”, and “creating one’s own destiny”.

For Dalits, castelessness becomes the bridge through the aforementioned liminal space between the narrow lanes and the modern office complex. What would have been limited to a strategy of playing castelessness to gain access becomes a subjectivity of castelessness thanks to a middle-class imaginary that is shaped by a constant exposure to market centric discourses.



## Chapter 5: Swaeroes Network: A Caste Study in Dalit Middle Class Activism

### Introduction

Recent scholarship on Dalit personhood and politics in India talks volubly about the emergence of a “new Dalit middle class” and how it represents a new strand in the Dalit political movement (Pai 2013). Yet, the composition, size, relative importance of this class, along with the factors that have led to its emergence have not been adequately substantiated (Kochhar 2015; Baviskar and Ray 2011). As explained in chapter three, in India, the category of middle class itself is not well defined or understood and estimates of its size vary widely all the way from 28 million to 250 million (Kapur, Sircar, and Vaishnav 2017). However, the new Dalit middle class has been described as a section of the Dalit population whose organizing efforts are focused on securing a share of the economic gains that India has seen over the last few decades rather than on the traditional planks of equality and social justice. Additionally, as explained before in chapter three, these organizing efforts and the activism it represents have been called Dalit middle class activism (Pai 2013).

Another interesting development that scholars have pointed to regarding modern urban India is that caste is rarely brought up here in explicit terms (Béteille 1991). While this is partially true, it is largely because caste is now encoded as merit, community, and business and kinship networks. At the level of individuals, one rarely talks about caste in explicit terms, but at the group level, this trend allows upper caste Indians to present themselves as modern and casteless. By the same token, lower castes are left using caste as a basis for political mobilization and making claims vis a vis the state (S. Deshpande 2013; Subramanian 2019). Dalits, who are the targets of most caste-

based violence and discrimination, are forced to use caste to ask for protection, restitution, or remedial measures, and have therefore become the category that is most marked by caste. What is remarkable, however, as shown in the preceding chapter, is that even Dalits in urban areas, especially in putatively modern spaces like elite corporate workspaces, have taken to presenting themselves as casteless and some are even organizing themselves around this casteless rhetoric even as they come together as Dalits (or Dalits by another name)– which is explicitly about caste. These organizing efforts, however, fit quite well into the phenomenon that has been described as the new Dalit middle class.

Chapter three attempts to shed some light on the nature and composition of this emergent social category by exploring and contextualizing the categories of middle class, Indian middle class, Dalit middle class, and the caste and class continuum. Whereas, the ethnographic evidence presented in the introduction chapter, chapter four, and in the present chapter try to capture where this category falls on the spectrum of economic, social, aspirational or imaginary categories in contemporary India. This chapter is an ethnography of Swaeroes Network (and its founder Praveen Kumar), which was set up to further the interests of Dalits, particularly in the areas of education and employment. It is a good example of Dalit middle-class activism but also one that presents itself as casteless, even though it is almost entirely made up of Dalits (and a few tribals and lower castes) who came together because of their disadvantaged caste position in society. It is focused on ultimately securing economic benefits for the people it seeks to represent and advocate for. This chapter seeks to advance the argument that the emergence of this new type of organizing, while multi-causal, is strongly rooted in the growth of the private sector and market centric discourses that have taken root in the Indian social imaginary since the 1990's.

## Meeting Praveen Kumar

At 6:50 AM on a Saturday morning, I was sitting in an Uber that was driving down the mostly empty roads of Hyderabad towards the Lifestyle Building for my 7 AM appointment with Praveen Kumar. I woke up at 5 am to make sure that I would be in time for the appointment. But the pre-arranged taxi failed to show up, and it was very difficult to find an Uber near where I was living. I knew that if I were even a minute late, he would probably leave without me. I tried to call and let him know that I had been waiting for almost an hour to find an Uber and that I might be a few minutes late, but he had not answered the phone.

To my great relief, I arrived at the appointed place with 2 minutes to spare. I stood on the sidewalk in front of the lifestyle building, collected my breath, adjusted my hair and adopted the casual posture of someone who had been waiting for several minutes. At exactly 7 AM a Toyota Innova (a large SUV) pulled up right in front of me. Praveen Kumar lowered his window and asked me to get in from the other side. I got in and sat behind the driver as instructed and put on the seat belt, while Praveen Kumar,<sup>32</sup> helpfully, took my backpack and put it behind my seat. As soon as I heard the click of my seat belt the vehicle started to move. And we began our journey from Hyderabad – the capital of the state of Telangana – to a town called Jagitial, which is about 4 to 5 hours away by road. I glanced at my iPhone SE and noted that the clock still showed 7AM.

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<sup>32</sup> I have referred to him by his full name throughout because Praveen seems a bit too casual and loses something of the aura that he has built up. Kumar is common Punjabi surname and an upper caste one at that. It too misses something. Also, Mr. Kumar does not seem right. When people talk about him, they always say “Praveen Kumar” or “Praveen Kumar IPS”, while his followers call him “Praveen Sir” and refer to him as “Supreme” at Swaeroes meetings.

I had been meaning to interview Praveen Kumar for a while. He was, at the time, a police officer of the elite Indian Police Service (IPS) cadre, and his rank was that of an Inspector General of Police of the state of Telangana. He had built up quite a reputation as a capable, honest, and hardworking civil servant who was a stickler for punctuality. However, he has gained more popularity and importance for being the founder of Swaeroes Network. This organization, which started off as an alumni network for people who studied at the Social Welfare schools run by the state government, has gone on to become a large organization spread across the state and is a prime example of the new Dalit middle class and its organizing efforts. Its membership, while open to all, now largely includes alumni from social welfare and tribal welfare schools, Dalits, tribals, and a few other lower castes. They come from all walks of life, including businessmen, IT professionals, and teachers.

I had emailed him recently, to request an appointment for an interview. To which, he replied: “why don't you join me on one of my tours so we can travel together, and we'll have enough time to speak”. So, a few days later, when he asked me to travel to the town of Jagitial with him, I immediately agreed, since this would give me up to eight hours to ask him everything I wanted and give me an insight into what his tours entailed and what made him so popular.

Inside the car, I took in my surroundings and noticed that next to the driver in front of me was a gunman carrying an automatic weapon. Praveen Kumar is sitting next to me, and in the seat behind us, was another gunman carrying another of the same weapon. I turned to Praveen Kumar and began our interview by telling him a little bit about how anthropologists conduct their research and what I was studying. I told him about the measures I could take to protect his

privacy if he so wished. He responded with “go ahead and ask me anything under the sun”. Showing that he wasn’t concerned about privacy and had nothing to hide.

I began by asking how it all started for him. Among his following there are many stories about what made Praveen Kumar go down this path of serving Dalits, lower castes, and the poor in general. But there is one story that I heard Praveen Kumar himself mention in one of his speeches. He said that his mother had once asked him a question about whether she should be proud that her son was a high-ranking police officer or ashamed that the lives of people in her neighborhood continue to be the same (miserable) as before, even though her son (who was a product of that neighborhood) had gone on to achieve immense personal success. This incident is what he and his followers say provided the spark for his journey. Another popular narrative is one that highlights the importance of his time spent at Harvard University, where his plans began to take a concrete shape while he was pursuing a mid-career program at the Harvard Kennedy School.

“I had some ideas first, Harvard gave me the confidence and a sounding board to talk about my ideas and test the validity of some concepts, but I don’t think it did that much. Over there, it is good to meet people from all over the world, top professors and professionals...[to] see how normal they all are. I already had some of my own ideas, and then when my mother told me about how nothing has really changed for people around us and when she asked me that question, it gave the whole idea some more force or gravitas” he says.

Over the last few years, Praveen Kumar has emerged as a Dalit icon with something of a celebrity status. He founded and built Swaeroes Network. Many members of this organization

now refer to themselves as Swaeroes and among other things, the organization places a huge emphasis on punctuality. One of the most important things about being a Swaero is to always be on time. “Arrive 10 minutes early, but never late,” I heard Praveen Kumar say, while giving a speech to the Swaeroes Network cadres at their “annual bootcamp”. This organization seeks to create a new identity among its followers and the emphasis on punctuality is an important tenet of this identity. It is something of an inside joke that Indians are tardy and never on time. People jokingly say that “Indian Standard Time” (or “Desi Standard Time”, as I have heard it used in the US) means an hour after the appointed time or simply, significantly later than planned. In such a milieu, being punctual would allow Swaeroes to stand apart and even allow them to claim some level of superiority. Especially, since public transport is unreliable, and commuting is a big hassle given the traffic jams and constant construction work on the roads. The middle-class which sees itself as exchanging time rather than “labor” for money, is distinguished from the poor and lower classes by its hyper-awareness of time. They value time (at least in rhetoric and as a display of their modernity) and they seek to demonstrate this value through its efficient use and punctuality or the rhetoric of it. Demonstrating some ability to manage one’s time efficiently, is both an aspiration of and a pre-condition to middle-classness.

Besides punctuality, Praveen Kumar envisions Swaeroes as productive, intelligent, dependable, worldly, and not as underclass indigents who need to be rehabilitated or depend on government largesse or charity of any kind. This last attribute is a major point of departure from most other Dalit movements and organizing efforts. Most political leaders make promises to use government resources to help Dalits. Many NGOs too rely on channeling government resources and other charitable giving to Dalits who need it. Moreover, the word Dalit itself means broken

or oppressed, and Dalit movements have been built around the idea that Dalits are oppressed people who need to organize and demand that the injustice done to them is recognized and corrected (Ram 1998; Pai 2013; Shah 1990; Omvedt 1994). Dalit organizing has implicitly centered on the importance of uniting and gaining political power and using the might of the state to better their lives.

Through the Swaeroes Network, Praveen Kumar seeks to bring about a transformation in Dalits' mindsets, Dalit politics, and the perception of Dalitness itself, both among Dalits themselves and society at large. This new identity that he seeks to bring about through the move from Dalit to Swaero is encapsulated in the "Swaeroes' Ten Commandments" and personified by Praveen Kumar himself. The values enshrined here align closely with neoliberal governmentality which pursues efficiency through less governance and privileges improving human capital, self-making, and enterprise over reliance on state and democratic redistribution (Foucault 2008). However, Praveen Kumar presents his ideas and strategies as commonsensical, practical, and personal rather than intellectual or theoretical.

These 10 commandments are as follows:

- I am not inferior to anyone.
- I shall be the leader wherever I am.
- I shall do what I love and be different.
- I shall always think Big and Aim high.
- I shall be honest, hardworking, and punctual.
- I shall never blame others for my failures.

- I shall neither beg nor cheat.
- I shall repay what I borrow.
- I shall never fear the unknown.
- I shall never give up.

Back in the car, we had only gone about 50 km when we stopped at the side of the road where a group of about 50-100 hundred people were waiting to receive Praveen Kumar. He got out, shook hands, smiled, and waved at people, while I got out from the other side and tried to remain inconspicuous but observant. He walked with the crowd to the statue of B.R. Ambedkar, which he garlanded and then walked back to cut the ribbon and inaugurate a small, one-room store that sold dairy products. It is not usual for a high-profile public persona as Praveen Kumar to inaugurate such a small business. But this small business set up by a Dalit was perhaps intended to serve as an example for other Dalits to embrace entrepreneurship at whatever level and scale of capital available to them. Within 10 minutes, Praveen Kumar's role at the event was over, and we were driving away.

We drove another 20 km or so and stopped at a house, where there was a bigger crowd waiting. Perhaps, more than a 100 people. There was more smiling, waving and shaking of hands from Praveen Kumar. Then he was escorted to a tent where several chairs were laid out and he was asked to speak briefly. We were back in the car in about 25 minutes, and he explained to me that the event was a memorial for the mother of an ex-MLA (Member of Legislative Assembly of the state). The ex-MLA, who is now a Swaero, conducted the ceremony by serving buttermilk

instead of the traditional alcohol. Not partaking of intoxicants, I learnt, was another important quality of a Swaero, along with waking up before sunrise. Practices like these – not partaking of alcohol and waking up early – could seem like practices that were traditionally valued and preached in India, particularly among upper caste males. For example, waking up early to pray or practice yoga would not sound new to most Indians. However, this drive from Swaeroes Network is grounded in the logic of modern self-development discourses that prize the development of the self as a form of capital. Moreover, Swaeroes Network advocates this in equal measure for both its male and female members. There were several more stops along our journey that day, and with each stop I began to realize how big the organization has grown and how popular Praveen Kumar really was.

### **Swaeroes Network and Praveen Kumar**

Swaeroes Network was founded by Praveen Kumar in 2012 as an alumni network, and it has quickly grown to become one of the most recognizable organizations in the state of Telangana. While the formal membership of the organization was, at that time of the fieldwork, only a few thousand strong, the number of sympathizers, well-wishers, and people whose lives are touched by its activities seemed to be in the hundreds of thousands. In August 2023, the word Swaero was included in the Oxford Compact Oxford English-English-Telugu Dictionary.

As mentioned earlier, the organization was founded as an alumni network for graduates of Social Welfare schools. Social Welfare schools are government-run schools primarily meant for Dalits

and the Social Welfare Department is a governmental body that specifically deals with the welfare of Dalits. (The name of the department is a bit of a misnomer.) The term Swaeroes originally stood for “Social Welfare Aeros” and as per the websites and other literature of the organization, Aeros stands for the sky. Based on my conversations with several office bearers and members of the organization, “Aeros” implies something along the lines of “soaring high” or “sky is the limit”. Social Welfare Aeros was shortened to Swaeroes and people in the organization began to refer to themselves as Swaeroes. Many go so far as to replace their last names with the word Swaero. The Oxford dictionary offers the following definition: “Swaero: SW+Aero (Social Welfare + Sky is the limit) literally means the sky is the limit to the social welfare students, also used as a type of aspirational identity by students and alumni of social welfare schools as an additional name to their given names to fight the stigma against their traditional caste identities”. However, as members of the organization explained to me, the meaning of Swaero was adjusted to mean State welfare aeros<sup>33</sup> (instead of social welfare which specifically refers to Dalits) in order to accommodate the fact that tribal welfare schools were also included under the administrative authority of Praveen Kumar and thereby into his movement. Over time, the organization has expanded to several other walks of life and has established several sister organizations including formal, informal, and semi-formal groups under its umbrella: for example, Fit India Foundation – which seeks to promote awareness of health

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<sup>33</sup> It may seem logical to put the explanation of the meaning of Swaeroes and the reason for the formation of the organization, at the beginning, where I first introduce the name. However, I do not want to lead with names, definitions, official literature, and the goals and aims stated therein. Swaeroes Network is, at the moment, has been built around and is still heavily reliant on the personal charisma of Praveen Kumar. Moreover, the organization does not have more than 3-4 pages worth of official written literature on its website. This, too, seems hastily written or in need of editing. The rest is links to video coverage from their various events and talks given by Praveen Kumar and a few others from the organization. Therefore, I have tried to foreground ethnographic evidence, preferring to go back to official statements as needed to put the ethnographic data into perspective.

and wellness, – and Swaeroes Techies Group and Swaeroes Entrepreneurs Group, Swaeroes International, Swaeroes Circle for Students among others.

This identity of Swaeroes is very central to the vision and mission of this organization. As one of their websites describes it, before setting up this organization, Kumar and others realized that graduates of these state-run schools (which at that time was only social welfare schools) were “psychologically divided into castes and sub-castes and working against each other. This was enough to give birth to an idea of bringing them together under a new identity and with a new ideology” (Swaeroes Network n.d.). The website portrays the idea that the adoption of this identity (along with its accompanying ideology) is instrumental and at the core of the successes of this organization. As the website mentions: “...we believe your identity will not only decide your destiny, but it will also help others to rediscover and refine their own true identities and thereby change their destinies.” (Swaeroes Network n.d.). This identity is heavily promoted by the organization which in its online presence seems to carefully avoid any talk of caste. Sticking only to talking about “the poor” or “alumni” from their schools.

The story of Praveen Kumar himself seems full of contradictions, on the surface. As noted above, he is an officer of The Indian Police Service (IPS) cadre, the most elite branch of the police service in India, and in 2014 he held a prestigious and high-ranking position of Deputy Inspector General (D.I.G) of Police. Instead of continuing with his duties as a police officer, enjoying the high status and plum postings that came with it, he made an unusual request to the state government, to be appointed as Secretary of the division that runs Social Welfare schools in the state. This was received with a lot of surprise at the time, as it was unusual to appoint a police

officer to this post. Moreover, it was not a very sought-after position, even among people of a lower rank than the one he held at that time. Many of the teachers and parents of the students from these schools were up in arms (figuratively speaking), protesting that a police officer – one whose most notable career achievements until that point occurred while he was fighting left-wing militia known as Naxalites<sup>34</sup> – might turn the schools into battlefields.

However, the appointment was approved. At the time that he took over, these schools were seen as underperforming, having poor infrastructure, and delivering an inferior level of education. Under his leadership the schools turned around and started to perform quite well. This improvement was seen as a key achievement of the state government, and Praveen Kumar began to receive wide acclaim<sup>35</sup>. At the same time, the NGO, Swaeroes Network was growing, and Praveen Kumar encouraged the students at these schools and their parents to identify as Swaeroes. Even though these were government run schools, and Swaeroes Network was a non-governmental organization, since Praveen Kumar was head of both these bodies, at least from the outside the boundaries between these two organizations began to blur. While there were no accusations of impropriety, it became difficult to tell where Praveen Kumar's government duties ended, and his NGO activities began.

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<sup>34</sup> The name Naxal derives from a peasant revolt against landlords that began in Naxalbari in the state of West Bengal. Since then, the organization has gone through many transformations and names. Various fragments of what are considered the Naxal movement arose under different names: for example: People's War Group in Andhra Pradesh, and as several factions combined and merged, the name and composition of this movement also changed.

<sup>35</sup> This article in the news media is one such example: <https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/harvard-university-students-study-success-story-telangana-social-welfare-schools-109985>

Given the impressive turnaround of these schools, it was not long before the government also placed the administration of Tribal Welfare schools in the hands of Praveen Kumar. These, too, are government-run schools, except they are meant mainly for tribal students instead of Dalits. Tribal Welfare Department is to tribals what Social Welfare Department is to Dalits. Soon, the tribal students from these schools, too, began to call themselves Swaeores, and the meaning of the word Swaeores was adjusted to reflect this growing membership. Rather than “Social Welfare Aeros”, Swaeores came to stand for “State Welfare Aeros”. It is worth noting here that neither Praveen Kumar nor Swaeores Network have tried to limit the membership of the organization to Dalits and Tribals. Although it was founded by a Dalit, its early membership and current sympathizers are overwhelmingly Dalit, and even the name Swaeore originally stood for Social Welfare Aeros (which implied Dalits who are served by the Social Welfare department), the organization seeks to appeal to people from all walks of life. This willingness to open its membership to everyone, does not in itself, differentiate it from earlier Dalit organizations and movements.

As discussed in the preceding chapter, Dalit organization and political parties are not meant to corner power or resources for themselves, rather they are there to try and get their fair share for Dalits or any share at all. Generally, Dalit organizations do not restrict membership to Dalits or exclude others. In the same way as an organization working for gender equality, or civil rights in the US, does not seek to exclude people by gender or race respectively. Swaeores Network’s website explains in their “FAQ” section, in response to a question about whether one can be a Swaeore if they do not belong to the SC/ST community: “You can. Swaeorism is an (sic) universal ideology built to erase the unscientific and man-made differences among people of all

ethnicities and castes and religions in all continents so that everyone can realize his/her potential and make some incremental change in life.” It implies that caste is unscientific and a man-made difference that needs to be erased.

However, Swaeroes Network is not an intellectual project but a movement that believes in action, and in fine tuning and adjusting their strategy and direction as they go along. As Praveen Kumar said a meeting with key functionaries and volunteers: “we are a fluid organization, we learn, and adapt as we go along”. Therefore, I have placed a lot of emphasis on what could be learnt from my interactions with the leadership and general membership of this organization over what can be gleaned from the very limited literature put out by the organization<sup>36</sup>.

Under Praveen Kumar’s administration, the academic performance of the students in both sets of schools rose significantly. He introduced several new programs including academic and extra-curricular activities. These included remedial classes for math and English, with a special focus on speaking English, summer camps, training in music, sports, additional coaching for competitive entrance exams for medical and engineering colleges, and coaching, training, and mentoring for job interviews. While the vast majority of these programs are funded by the state government, some of them are organized through the funds raised by Swaeroes Network and through the time and expertise volunteered by its members. Since the students call themselves or are referred to as Swaeroes and the members and volunteers of the NGO are Swaeroes too, and since Praveen Kumar works for the betterment of Swaeroes using government resources where

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<sup>36</sup> At the time of the fieldwork, the only written literature they could point me to amounted to a few paragraphs in total. Since then, it has expanded to a few pages, largely due to an “FAQ” section on their main website.

possible and non-governmental resources when not, the lines between the government and non-government parts of this effort blurred even further. As of 2021, many students from these schools have been admitted into top universities in the country, a few have gone abroad for further study or internships, and many have acquired well-paying jobs in the India's booming information technology sector.

Throughout this time, however, Praveen Kumar had been more focused on changing the mindset of the students at these schools and the members of the organization than anything else. Perhaps more important than the improvement in academics is the fact that he has managed to change the identity of the students from Dalit, Tribal, or low caste to what he believes is the more empowering identity of Swaero. In the process, he has tried to move the basis for this collective identity, at least partially, from caste and tribe to a social class – one that is not defined by traditional societal roles and expectations. My contention is that this effort to change the basis for their identity is in line with the modern middle-class subjectivity as discussed earlier in the dissertation. Being a Swaero is another manifestation of the modern self that becomes a claim to some form and level of castelessness. Kumar has built a sense of community and rendered Swaeroes as purpose-driven people with a strong sense of values and ethics who can eventually succeed in life. He planned and executed a few projects that further lent credence to the idea that Swaeroes must be associated with success and pride. Perhaps the most popular of these was a project to train 20 girls and 20 boys in mountaineering, and one of them – a 13-year-old tribal girl named Poorna – went on to become the youngest girl in history to climb Mt. Everest.

## Dalit Vs Swaero

What clearly emerges when looking at the history and stories about Praveen Kumar, his followers, and the organization, is that there are two key ideas or values that are at the core of the philosophy of Swaeroes Network. First, as we have seen, Praveen Kumar does not like the use of the term Dalit and chooses instead to be called a Swaero. Dalit, he claims, is not an empowering term – it originally referred to people who were oppressed or “broken”. To some extent he seems to believe in dropping the question of caste entirely, which by design or default leads to building a community, pursuing aspirations, and making claims in terms of class (i.e. a social class). Since the term Swaeroes extends to people who are not Dalits, it goes beyond caste lines or at least does not make caste overt or explicit. Secondly, he is averse to Swaeroes being beneficiaries of government largesse; instead, he says that they need to encourage entrepreneurship and look to the private sector for betterment of their lives. These two can further be boiled down to being self-reliant – taking responsibility for one’s outcomes in life – which along with the 10 commandments above, are a variant of the values enshrined in market centric discourses.

Praveen Kumar is very vocal about his opposition to the word Dalit. The first time I heard him mention this was when he and I were invited to speak at a seminar, in the neighboring state of Maharashtra, to encourage (Dalit) students to pursue higher education<sup>37</sup>. In an auditorium of about 2000 people, speaking right after I did, Kumar told the audience that the first thing he did after he was appointed to run the Social Welfare schools was to hang a huge photo of BR Ambedkar (the most popular Dalit rights activist and the chief architect of India’s constitution) in

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<sup>37</sup> This is the same event mentioned in the previous chapter.

his office. He went on “The second decision we took in our schools, we have about 200,000 children...is to discourage usage of Dalit. We don’t use a word called Dalit in our schools. What do you mean by Dalit? Are we broken? Is Kanishka broken? How can you call these people broken? [pointing to the panel on stage] We said no! Our children...they will not enter into this world with those symbols, negative symbols, they will enter into this world with positive symbols. We gave an official order that nobody shall be called as Dalit” he said very emphatically.

Back in the car, I brought up this speech and asked him why he chose to create the new identity of Swaero, especially when the Dalit identity is one of the most coherent categories in India (see Charsley 1996; Rajini Kothari 1970). Millions of people belonging to various former untouchable castes have come together as Dalits in spite of belonging to various regions of India, speaking different languages, practicing various professions, and dealing with different local forms of oppression. They have managed to come together as one community (as one identity) that has suffered the brunt of the evils of the caste system and have organized politically to advocate for their cause at various levels. The common view among intellectuals, activists, and common Dalits is that what is needed is more Dalit unity across regions and political parties.

“The trouble with using the word Swaero is that you are introducing a new category”, I said.

“There might be a lot of people who are hesitant to adopt it, including several intellectuals and activists who worry that it may cause yet another rift rather than unite more people”. I was also subtly hinting at the rift between the two major sub-groups of Dalits in the state – Mala and Madigas – and he was well-aware of what I was pointing to.

He responds with, “Ok, let’s say we unite all Dalits under the term Dalit, what then? Will that be enough? The problem I have with these intellectuals is that they have no plan beyond uniting everyone. I have a plan. I want a million coders (software professionals) from our community, our own billionaires, successful people in every field. That is how we fight discrimination, injustice, and escape this vicious cycle. My plan can be challenged and improved upon...but at least, I have a plan”.

It is clear from the above that his idea of moving away from identifying with the unempowering term Dalit is inextricably linked to reframing the debate in terms of class (market-centric modernist planks of economic empowerment, access to education, and employment opportunities) rather than caste (and its traditional planks of dignity, social justice, political representation). This harkens back to the view of Indian exceptionalism mentioned in the introduction, which holds that caste will disappear in the face of economic development (Jodhka 2016). The two major trends we see in the Swaroos movement – moving from Dalit to Swaero and moving from government to markets – are inextricably linked. It also seems that he is not so much moving towards or embracing class as he is trying to move away from caste. This effort to move away from caste is a response to his embodiment of the ideals of middleclassness. The move creates a space that is once again filled in with the conceptual tools provided by market centric discourses. The empowering ideas, notions, and values he champions, are aligned with the core ideals championed by the rhetoric of free markets.

This move in identity and strategy also gets around the issue of divisions within the Dalit population. His identity of Swaero has the potential to unite Dalits across sub-castes in the state,

even if it has the potential to create a rift within the current cohesiveness of the category of Dalit more generally. It also has the benefit of being able to appeal to and accommodate people other than Dalits into the movement.

### **Markets Vs Government**

As Praveen Kumar's declarations above underscore, he has strategically sought to give up the identity of Dalit in favor of organizing as Swaeroes who are focused on improving themselves and helping each other improve their economic situation. The focus is on Swaeroes as individuals seeking to improve themselves and their market worth rather than right-seeking collectivities. In the process, knowingly or unknowingly, he seeks to render Dalits, along with some tribals and other lower castes who join the movement, as casteless (or free of traditional ascriptive identities) and competent. Moreover, he moves the organizing efforts and claim-making of Dalits from a basis in caste to class. His focus is on self-making and economic gains, which puts him and Swaeroes Network firmly in the category of the new Dalit middle class (Pai 2013). This strategy of downplaying caste is intimately linked to Praveen Kumar's acceptance of market centric discourses, the private sector, and market-based solutions. The betterment of these individuals is supposed to lead to the benefit of all Dalits and society as a whole. Much like the rhetoric of Laissez faire going back all the way to Adam Smith's famous 1776 book *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (Smith 1799).

Intellectually, Praveen Kumar seems to be a product of the market centric discourses that have become mainstream since 1990s, and the rhetoric of self-development and self-help, and personal responsibility that go along with it. His ideas seem to be based more on an attraction

towards free market rhetoric than any real aversion to demands on the government. His desire to not be dependent on the government is perhaps not so much about the government itself but simply follows from his desire to embrace the rhetoric of markets and the private sector.

“Capitalism is inevitable, it has to happen and will happen, slowly, everywhere. Communism has failed in Russia and capitalism is the only way forward,” he says confirming his stance on this matter.

Contemplating this notion, I aimed to get a clearer sense of how deeply he engages with these ideas intellectually, and how invested he is in them emotionally. So, I ask: “A lot of times when people use the word capitalism, it is not clear what they mean. Many people talk as though we have only two options: one is capitalism where all production is in the hands of the private sector and the other is Russian style communism where the state owns all means of production. But we could have some combination of the two and be anywhere along the spectrum. Many times, people say that capitalism is better because they don’t want Russian style communism. When you say that capitalism is the way forward, do you accept the entire package of complete privatization, liberalization, deregulation, and absolutely no intervention from the government?”

He sidesteps the question and responds with, “However many questions you ask me, I will keep coming back to the same thing. We need to have our own entrepreneurs, our billionaires. In fact, we started a program in our schools called ‘Kaun Banega Karorepati?’ [the name of a popular TV show in India, which roughly translates to ‘who will become a millionaire?’ and is based on a similar American TV show]. You may have heard the saying *dappulu kottina chethulathone dollarlu kuda samphadhinchali* [the hands that played the hand drum (dappu) should also earn

dollars]”. Playing the hand drum is closely associated with a particular large sub-caste of Dalits in the state. The implication is that Dalits who were left with no options but to stick to their caste determined occupations, should use private enterprise and modern mind-set to succeed, not just in India but globally by gaining social and geographic mobility. A Telugu student, who becomes an engineer and goes to the US, is a popular motif of success in the two states of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh. Earning in dollars is a shorthand for the success on a global scale.

Kumar says entrepreneurship can be the solution in all kinds of situations, and he tells me a story of how he helped people who have been working as sweepers and cleaners in all the municipalities of the state to organize themselves into registered businesses and become contractors rather than employees. He made this possible by writing to the Collectors (top bureaucrats) of each district to urge them to recognize these businesses and offer them cleaning contracts rather than hire them on an ad hoc basis. What remains unsaid is that this would not have been possible if not for Kumar’s role and influence in the government, and the role of the collectors who are also officers of the government. Perhaps Praveen Kumar’s interest in encouraging entrepreneurship is most visible and best exemplified in the existence of something called the Swaeroes Entrepreneurs Group. This is a group of entrepreneurs who are closely involved with Swaeores Network. However, this is mostly made up of entrepreneurs who rely on government contracts. To be sure, these people are private sector entrepreneurs even if they rely on the government and even when the contracts are the result of policies that seek to promote supplier diversity. Because there is a clear difference between an entrepreneur who relies on government contracts vs a government employee who has a regular salary and the benefit of job security that comes with government jobs in India. But the fact remains that they

are reliant on the government and are generally not very successful in serving private sector clients, even as the organization takes a stand that seems to vehemently oppose reliance on the government.

This seemingly contradictory strategy of relying on the government to get away from the government is well within the prescriptions of popular market-based discourses. This is also in line with an ongoing debate among intellectuals about Dalits' relationship with the economy and particularly the notion of "free-markets". One section of intellectuals has called for Dalits to embrace the private sector and free market mechanisms as forces of emancipatory power, but many of them have also sought government intervention to help Dalits take advantage of those private sector opportunities (Omvedt 2001; Panini 1996; Ramaiah 2004). This discursive trend points to the mainstreaming of the private sector, in which the government becomes an avenue to get to the norm of the private sector. Praveen Kumar, knowingly or unknowingly, is adopting this very same strategy. This is not to say that he limits himself to this strategy or approach. Maybe he thinks that this is all that can be done at this stage in their movement. But one wonders if the limits to his efforts so far, and to this strategy, which has been advocated by others before, are apparent to him. The association of public sector with caste and private sector with castelessness is largely a discursive erasure of caste. The move from public to private does not remove structural issues such as the control and domination of the national resources by the upper castes or the persistence of caste as community and business networks, and all social aspects.

Swaeroes Network's continued reliance on the government may seem different from the upper caste's embrace of markets, which insists that involvement of the government is always bad and implies corruption. However, when one goes beyond the rhetoric, the upper caste position is not different either, both are still using the government to achieve their goals. This is where I depart from Deshpande's (2003) argument that upper castes are "kicking away the ladder" after getting all they could from the state. His otherwise insightful work argues that upper castes are kicking away the ladder of government support after having moved on to the private sector and consolidated their positions there (S. Deshpande 2003). I suggest that this move by the upper castes is largely a rhetorical one that could lead one to overlook the fact that they (upper castes) continue to dominate the state and all its resources including public sector employment, government contracts, and political representation. This rhetorical move lets them appear to have no choice but to retreat to the elite, private spaces, which are seen as the only remaining abodes of merit, while continuing to enjoy all the benefits and privileges from the government (see Subramanian 2019).

The members of Swaeroes Network, too, do not see this reliance on the government as a contradiction. This is representative of a larger trend of the current middle-class position on this issue. They call on the government to provide the goods and the conditions necessary to achieve their aspirations for success in the private sector and blame the government for any failures or shortcomings of the private sector. All of this is very much in line with the core ideas promoted by market centric discourses. As mentioned in chapter three, the middle class in India today is not really divided into supporters of government-led growth and supporters of private-led growth. Rather, they are all seek individual success wherever it comes from. While praising the

efficiency of the private sector many would be happy to accept the security of government jobs and contracts. The difference, however, is that people are willing to let go of their hold over (or aspirations for) government positions and pursue options in the private sector. Even the older generations who held powerful positions in the government, now recognize the power of the private sector to help one accumulate wealth and prestige in society and are more open to their children pursuing careers in the private sector, particularly if it means going abroad and earning in “dollars”. All of this is, once again, true of Dalits and non-Dalits and is yet another manifestation of the common social imaginary mentioned earlier.

Praveen Kumar’s insistence of doing away with the dependence on the government is quite vocal and central to his overall vision and in line with the prevalent discourses, but it is not simply an effort to pay lip service to dominant discourses. His stance on this issue became very clear to me when I spoke to him about an organization called Dalit Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (DICCI). This is a pan-Indian organization that was formed in year 2005 to serve as an association of Dalit businesspersons, much the same way as organizations like Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) and Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) serve all businesses. DICCI’s aim, its website explains, is to “Fight Caste with Capital” and its motto is “Be Job Givers – Not Job Seekers”. I had interviewed the President of the state division of DICCI and we spoke about a relatively new law that requires every branch of every bank in India to set aside 1 crore rupees (10 million rupees) to be given as loans to businesses owned by Dalits, tribals, or women. However, he explained to me that most of these loans go unutilized as there are not many Dalits or tribals who run businesses and have the knowledge and training required to meet the criteria for loan eligibility. DICCI, he said, has been trying to address this

issue among Dalit entrepreneurs by mentoring them in successfully applying for these loans and setting up their businesses.

When I asked Praveen Kumar if he has encouraged anyone from the Swaroos Network to get these loans. He seemed put off by the whole idea and simply said “no”. I persisted, adding, “a lot of capital can be raised for Dalit entrepreneurs by tapping into this source.” He responded: “when people get these easy, unsecured loans, they will not be motivated enough to succeed in their business. You cannot be a successful entrepreneur if you risk nothing. I don’t want to encourage more of this stuff where we are simply seeking government handouts, so, no! I am not interested in that” he says with finality. This opinion of his suggests that his faith in the values promoted by free market goes beyond rhetoric and is ingrained beyond the superficial level.

At this point in the discussion about Kumar’s commitment to private sector as a means to emancipation, it is worth re-emphasizing that he was at that time, an employee of the government of India, serving as the secretary of a department in the state government. The schools that he runs, both the Social Welfare schools and the Tribal Welfare schools, are divisions of the government and are run on government funds. Praveen Kumar has himself benefitted from government run Social Welfare provisions and affirmative action policies that are designed to help Dalits overcome their social and economic backwardness. His importance and his ability to get things done, originally stemmed from the fact that he is a high-ranking official of the government. He has used his position as a high-ranking officer of the government to improve the delivery of government services to Dalits and Tribals. While Swaroos Network is a non-governmental organization, its importance and reputation also stem from Praveen

Kumar's success in his government job. Moreover, the organization itself was initially, comprised of alumni from government-run schools. Several of the students who idolize Praveen Kumar, dream of following in his footsteps by becoming government officials like him. Even the aforementioned Swaeroes Entrepreneurs Group is made up of people who get most or all of their business from government contracts which are specially earmarked for Dalit entrepreneurs.

It is clear that Kumar believes that economic empowerment is the way forward and his attachment to market centric discourses about economic upliftment, entrepreneurship, self-responsibility, and risk-reward relationship goes beyond the superficial. While speaking at the annual bootcamp for Swaeroes cadres, where he was addressing the key functionaries of the organization and talking about strategies to grow its membership and following, he asked the audience: "Can you promise to provide education for someone's children? Can you pay for their airfares to travel abroad for their education? If you can do that, people will follow you!" He explained that when the organization can promise a better economic future to its followers, it would automatically grow. But at another point during the same speech, he downplays the importance of money and economic resources: "Others are not organizing better, simply because they have more money. It is not simply about money. It is more important to have persuasive skills, like Jesus<sup>38</sup>". This too may seem like a contradiction at first, however, it is easily resolved. This focus on improving one's economic situation (and "human capital"), instead of dwelling on matters of identity, equity, and social justice, is a major theme in market centric discourses and Kumar seems to be aligned with them. The seemingly contradictory idea that money and

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<sup>38</sup> This could be to reinforce his stance that Swaeroes Network is open to people of all religions, and perhaps to make Dalit Christians feel welcomed. The "FAQ" section of their website does say that they welcome people of all faiths and traditions.

economic resources are not important in building an organization or a better economic life for oneself is also an important theme of these discourses. The idea is that one can start with nothing and achieve everything because markets reward hard work, talent, and the ability to take calculated risks, or so the argument goes. “You need to build yourself into a brand, before you can convince others to join you,” he says. “Are you living the life of a Swaero? Do you wake up in the morning and exercise? Are you always on time for all meetings? When you do all this, then people will become curious and ask you why you do what you do and how you do what you do. Then, you can tell them about becoming a Swaeroe.”

### **Back in the Car...**

About 3 hours into the journey, we reach the outskirts of the town of Karimnagar, I notice that there are 2 police vehicles waiting on the side of the road. Praveen Kumar informs me that we will get a police escort from here on. One vehicle starts to drive in front of us and the other one joins at the back and now we are a three-car convoy.

Karimnagar is part of what is called the Naxal Belt – a stretch of towns, villages, and forests, spread across several states along the eastern boundary of India covering about 150 of India’s 600 districts. This belt has a large presence of active Naxalites/Naxal groups – an armed left-wing militia which has been at something of a low intensity civil war with the State of India for several decades now.

Several years ago, Praveen Kumar was posted in Karimnagar as the Superintendent of Police and earlier he also served in nearby towns in other capacities. He was very successful in quashing or controlling the Naxal movement in this region. He is credited with having used many innovative techniques of public relations and negotiation tactics to achieve this success. It is perhaps a testament to his success that he is a “marked man” – i.e., known to be on a hit-list of the Naxalites. It was a time when there were many shoot outs, raids, and encounters resulting in many deaths on the side of the Naxals as well as the police.

This part of Praveen Kumar’s history is well known and has resulted in many tales about how it has affected him. I remember a conversation I had with a filmmaker from University of Hyderabad who narrated one of the more popular tales, which goes something like this: After fighting Naxals for many years, Praveen Kumar began to see that these Naxals are poor people, mostly Dalits, tribals, and lower castes who were just fighting for their rights. These people were like him, and they were the very people that he always intended to serve. He realized that now the state was using him to fight others like him. So, he wanted to leave his violent past behind and find a way to serve these people better; instead of just following the orders of a state that was not interested in the welfare of the less fortunate. This led him to pick education and schools for the socially backward as a suitable alternative to fighting Naxals in the forests.

I ask Praveen Kumar about the veracity of this apocryphal story and whether he felt guilty thinking that when he fought Naxals, he was really fighting the very same poor and less fortunate people that he hoped to serve. He said, “The Naxals have to be fought, because they have taken

the wrong path. We cannot solve any problems by forming armed militias and attacking the state.”

“So, it is not the guilt of fighting Naxals that drove you to seek a position that is so far away from the usual police duties with little to no chance of violence?” I ask.

“No. That is good story, but that is not what happened,” he says.

Perhaps the most interesting stop on our journey was when we stopped at a girls’ college (11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades). All the girls in the college came into the quadrangle and sat down on the ground to hear Praveen Kumar speak. The girls were all excited and happy to see him, and so were some of the teachers. I look around and notice that the buildings looked old and rundown, the infrastructure in general did not look very good, but the overall atmosphere in the college was one of excitement and hope. When somebody brought up a list of complaints about the college, Praveen Kumar, who is ultimately in charge of everything to do with these schools and colleges, listened to them very patiently before responding. He started by saying that he understands that there are several problems here and that the students deserve better, but there were budgetary constraints, and he was doing the best he could. He went on to narrate a conversation he had with the Chief Minister of the state (equivalent to a state governor in the US, but perhaps more powerful) to explain his predicament. “The Chief Minister asked me one question. Do you want more buildings or more colleges? I told him without hesitation that I want more colleges.” Essentially, the chief minister was asking Praveen Kumar to choose between more buildings and better infrastructure in existing colleges or establishing more new colleges in new locations.

He then narrated the story of a bright young girl who studied at one of his schools. The last time he saw her, she wasn't in college because her parents did not want to send her far away to school. Instead, they married her off to someone who was barely educated, and she was now a house maker and six months pregnant. So, it was an easy decision for him to choose more colleges in more places rather than improving infrastructure at the existing ones. "It is really important to have more residential colleges in order to make sure that the futures of these young women are protected" he said.

This concern for equity does not seem to fit into the values promoted by market-centric discourses. There is another important tenet of Swaeroes Network which shows that Praveen Kumar or the organization is not wedded to neoliberal doctrine. The organization emphasizes the need for Swaeroes to pay back to society. Their website says: "We strongly believe that Every Citizen must pay back to Society and it is the only way to overcome challenges in the country, thus build a better, stronger and happy nation."

In fact, the alumni organization started with the idea of pay back. The alumni who benefitted from government schools and went on to have successful careers were to spend their time or money to help the current students do the same. This speaks to my point about him not being driven by doctrine but by his commonsensical notions of what is right. But these commonsensical notions happen to be heavily influenced by the prevalent mainstream discourses. Being the hegemonic discourse, market centrism is the default framework through which most people look at most societal issues (Foucault 2008). In line with these discourses, he does seem to believe that everybody can succeed given a chance, however small. But he also has

a more immediate concern of making sure that these girls don't drop out of the education system completely due to a lack of opportunity. His analysis of the issues faced by those he wishes to serve comes from his experience. His personal life and his everyday interactions give him a very grounded view on the problems. His solutions, while innovative, are heavily influenced by the current intellectual milieu of market centrism.

There were several other stops along our journey that day. We halted at a place where a statue of BR Ambedkar was unveiled and a "reading room" was inaugurated. Several people stood in the rain to witness the inauguration before they all went under a tent to listen to Praveen Kumar speak briefly from the dais. We were then taken to someone's house nearby where lunch was served for everyone in the lawn. Kumar and I ate a hurried lunch with everyone else before moving on to the next event.

At another stop there was a felicitation ceremony for teachers from the Social Welfare and Tribal Welfare schools in the district. In Karimnagar, he was received with a brief ceremony and guard of honor organized by the police force of the city. This was at a government guest house where he met with the Collector (Indian Administrative Officer) and the Superintendent of Police of the district. Both of them seemed to have great respect for Kumar. I was also invited to join the three of them in this meeting, as if to reinforce his stance that there was nothing secretive about what he was doing. It was 10 pm by the time we got back to Hyderabad. He dropped me off at the Lifestyle building where we began our journey, and I took a taxi back to the university campus on the other end of the city.

What is perhaps most fascinating about Praveen Kumar is the unique relationship he has with the government he serves. He has built up his reputation by using his position with the government and its resources. He has always been careful to thank the government and the Chief Minister for allowing him to do his work. The government gets some credit for the work he is doing, and therefore benefits from his achievements and popularity. However, one had to imagine and many suspected, that the government or rather the political party in power, was also worried that if his reputation and his NGO kept growing, he could emerge as a power center to be contended with, even if only among Dalits. He could use this success and recognition to launch his own political career and emerge as a rival to the current political dispensation. Once we were back in the car, driving to our final destination for the day, I asked him about this issue: “It seems to me that the government is in a sort of a bind. If they let you continue, your influence and your message, which may not be in line with their’s, will keep growing, but if they remove you from this post, in an effort to curtail your growing popularity, they risk a public backlash for removing an officer who has been doing such excellent work.” He responds simply: “I agree, the government may have some concerns about this”.

I continue “One solution to this tricky problem is that the government could promote you to a higher position in the police force and ask you to go back to your police duties. That way it looks like you are being rewarded for good work but at the same time your growing influence among the grassroots can be controlled,” I suggest.

“Actually, I am due for promotion next year,” he says “and if I were the Chief Minister, that is what I would do. Promote me and say that we need more police right now, so you please take up police duties again”.

Me: “What happens in that case? Do you have a plan to make sure that your work continues?”

Praveen Kumar: “Yes, the Swaeroes work will continue, we have a leadership structure in place. Already, I am not officially a part of the leadership. Other people have taken over, and we have an excellent leadership”.

I suggest that this promotion may also be beneficial for the organization, particularly, since he had many years left before he reached the compulsory retirement age, it seemed almost certain that he would receive yet another promotion and become the Director General of Police (top policeman in the state who is in-charge of the entire police force).

Praveen Kumar: “No that is not the thing...what is important is that I have a lot of life left, I will be able to do a lot more,” he says, once again downplaying the importance of the government and his job.

However, he assures me one more time that he does not have any ulterior motives. “I am serving the people because I want to serve the people. I am happy as long as the state government keeps me alive [referring to the fact that he needs government security to keep him safe from any assassination attempts by the Naxals]. I get my salary of 2 lacs [200,000] rupees every month and I can live quite comfortably. I don’t need to do this.”

A few months after we had the above conversation, Praveen Kumar was promoted to the position of Additional Director General of Police, which is the second highest position that a police officer can hold in a state. He was also allowed by the government to continue with his role in education. For a few months, his work with the government-run schools and colleges, and the Swaeroes Network continued as before. In August 2021 he took voluntary retirement from

government service and launched his political career by joining the largest Dalit based political party in India – Bahujan Samaj Party.

### **What's he really up to?**

Praveen Kumar has to play many roles - govt. employee, NGO activist, motivational and charismatic leader, idol and champion. A “champion” of the Madiga section of Dalits, but one who was doing his best to present himself as a champion more generally, at least for all Dalits. He does not see himself a scholar of market mechanisms or economic development. He claims to adopt whatever strategy or tool he thinks is the best suited to achieve his goals. Adapting and refining as one goes along. He comes across very clearly as influenced by the market centric discourses. Even the presentation as being non-ideological and flexible, seems influenced by market-centric and self-development discourses.

He seems to inspire suspicion and doubt among general public as much he inspires awe and commands respect among his followers. People have pointed out that his organization seems like a cult, and I have tried to capture some of the attributes that make it seem so. He seems aware of this perception but perhaps sees it as the right strategy at the present moment. He said on one occasion that they must learn from the organizing genius of the Hindu right-wing organization Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and copy what can benefit them in building their own organization. During my fieldwork, when people found out that I was studying Swaroos Network and was in touch with Praveen Kumar, they often asked me questions like “What do you think is going on with him?”, “What is he really up to?”. Even my colleagues who read

initial drafts of this chapter, seemed suspicious of his intentions. Many people said that he probably has political ambitions and therefore is not honest.

He seems to have a persona and mannerisms that inspire suspicion among some people. His position of being the government while building an NGO further fueled this. Generally, people in India seem to be distrustful of bureaucrats and view the possibility of political ambitions as something to be suspicious about. However, I did not see any reason to doubt his commitment to his work. It was clear that he worked tirelessly for the goals he was pursuing. During our conversation, he hinted to be that he is not doing this because of political reasons but simply because he wants to serve the public. The fact that he did join politics, however, does not take away from the fact that he intends to serve the community and has done a lot of work towards that end, and continues to do so.

## **Conclusion**

I chose to focus on Swaeroes Network because it serves as an excellent case study for Dalit middle class activism. I focused on Praveen Kumar almost exclusively in this chapter, but I have interviewed several people in the organization and they are all in some level of alignment with him. They are quite focused on economic gains and building human capital as a path to economic empowerment. They are very much a product of market centric discourses. This can be seen very clearly in several of their maxims, tenets, and practices, but particularly in their rhetoric. It is visible in their emphasis on punctuality, private enterprise, human capital – investing in oneself and making oneself more marketable, building the self as a brand, a moral code that is in line with self-making as a market(able) subject – not drinking alcohol, exercising,

waking up early, not lying, returning what you borrow, always being a leader etc. It is also evident in their aspirations for going beyond India, travelling, working, succeeding abroad, and becoming a global citizen.

Some of the events that I witnessed that day were about business, some were about self-improvement, some were also symbolic – garlanding statues, serving buttermilk instead of alcohol. But they all showed a pervasive influence of the modern middle-class subjectivity that the organization is built around. While Swaeroes Network is a de facto Dalit organization, and to smaller extent tribal organization, their reasons for not using the word Dalit is driven by the real lived experience that some people have been able to experience and want to help other do too. It is in line with how I use castelessness in this dissertation – in the sense of framing issues in terms other than caste and/or simply avoiding talk of caste, as a result of self-making as a global modern and way to perform middleclass. The import of this development to the field of caste studies arises from the fact that they are doing something interesting because they do not erase caste per se but achieve a similar effect by giving it another name. They are not hiding their caste status, but they are not engaging in debates and discussions about caste either. Instead, they make it all about economic disparities, unequal opportunities, etc., and speak the secular language of market-centric modernity.

## Chapter 6: Key findings & Conclusion

Traditionally, the field of Caste Studies has prominently focused on studying the lower castes. Moreover, within lower castes there has been a particular emphasis on studying Dalits. During the Mandal Agitations<sup>39</sup> there was heightened attention to OBCs, which includes several lower castes but excludes Dalits. Although there have been some notable exceptions to this focus on the lower end of the caste hierarchy (C.J. Fuller and Narasimhan 2014), including some works that this dissertation builds on (see Subramanian 2015; 2019; S. Deshpande 2013), most work done on caste is about lower castes and now increasingly about Dalits. Within anthropology, this trend perhaps only reflects the larger trend within the discipline of focusing on the subaltern, inferior, or lower classes and making them the subject (or rather the object) of our study. Irrespective of the researcher's intentions, academics' very focus on the lower castes is yet another way in which lower castes, and Dalits in particular, are marked by caste while upper castes get to remain unmarked and, in that sense, casteless.

The issue of how lower castes become marked by caste within academic discourse, and upper castes become unmarked by the same token (by the very work undertaken by academics who study caste) hasn't received sufficient attention. While there are many valid reasons for such focus on the lower castes, an obvious yet often neglected one is that Indian academia itself is

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<sup>39</sup> The Mandal Agitations in India can be categorized into two major waves. The first wave occurred in 1990, following the Indian government's decision to implement the Mandal Commission's recommendation for a 27% reservation for Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in government jobs and educational institutions. This led to widespread protests, particularly among upper-caste youth, who were opposed to affirmative action, resulting in violence and several deaths. The second wave of agitations emerged in 2006, when the government extended the OBC reservations to higher educational institutions, including prestigious institutions like Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) and Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs).

upper caste by composition and orientation. As such, Indian scholars have tended to study the lower caste “other” rather than the upper caste self, which is taken to be the naturalized normative that does not require studying.

To put this another way, the academia only mirrors a larger societal phenomenon where the lower castes are marked as caste subjects. As I have argued in this dissertation, Dalits, in particular, are the most legible as caste-marked subjects, while upper castes become the default unmarked norm. This phenomenon has received some attention in academic literature. Pandian (2002) and Deshpande (2013) point out how this castelessness plays out in the political and social fields, while Subramanian (2015; 2019) extends this discussion to academic institutions providing an in-depth account of upper caste castelessness. In each of these areas, this form of castelessness is a response to lower caste demands for equality, social justice, and redressal of caste-based discrimination, on the one hand, and a continuation of caste privileges in the guise of merit, tradition, and culture on the other.

This dissertation builds on the above studies on the unmarking and castelessness of upper castes, by looking at a seemingly similar form of castelessness, and strategies of unmarking, among a segment of Dalits. However, as I have shown, these two forms of castelessness are not driven by the same understanding or lived experience of caste. Among upper castes, castelessness is a way of denying the very existence of caste (and hence a form of violence); both the negative effects on lower castes, and also the benefits and privileges it bestows upon them (S. Deshpande 2013). Among Dalits, by contrast, castelessness is a statement about overcoming caste. For them, it is

not so much a denial as a willful disregard, ignorance, or a blasé attitude towards something that, at least within their imagination, no longer holds any sway over their lives.

As I have argued, it is important to note that in both cases, castelessness is really, in fact, about caste. In the first, it is about naturalizing the privileges of caste, and in the second it is about celebrating the success of overcoming the barriers and limitations imposed by caste. In both cases, caste identity is very much present in their senses of self and everyday practices, though in different ways. Another commonality in both cases is that this castelessness is facilitated by the ideas and discourses of modernity, markets, and globalization. These ideas are actively generated and disseminated in the discourses promoted by the media post-1990s and can be encapsulated in the term “market-centric discourses”. The internalization of these discourses plays a significant role in both the Dalit and upper caste self-making as modern-middle-class-beings with a shared social imaginary that holds the promise of and valorizes economic development as the primarily goal of society.

For a long time, Dalit activists have believed that obtaining political power and leveraging the state's resources and authority is the most effective, if not the only, method to improve the Dalit condition. Dalit movements have typically seen the Indian constitution, and legal and political processes, as the path to emancipation. This tendency may have resulted from the fact that every Dalit movement in the past has taken inspiration from the life and work of Ambedkar and has sought to show respect and pay homage to his role as the chief architect of India's constitution and the country's first Minister for Law and Justice. After several decades of pursuing electoral politics as the path to emancipation following Ambedkar's call to “Educate, Organize, and

Agitate”, there seems to be a new dominant trend within a section of Dalit organizing. Middle class Dalits and Dalit middle class activism represented by organizations like Swaeroes Network, seem to be rallying around the idea that the opportunities provided by private enterprise, self-making, and global markets, may be a more direct and desirable path to Dalit emancipation. They see Dalit entrepreneurs, software professionals, athletes, and millionaires as the new emblems of Dalits’ success – with words like “success”, “progress” and “development” replacing words like “emancipation” and “upliftment”. Even those who are not actively advocating for market-based solutions or private enterprise, tend to make statements such as: “private sector is the way forward” or “we cannot depend on the government, which is always controlled by upper castes”, and various other forms of the well-worn argument of “there is no alternative”.

Intellectuals continue to debate whether liberalization (along with privatization and globalization) actually benefits or hinders Dalit social and economic mobility (see Still 2014). However, this dissertation finds that a segment of the Dalit middle-class does seem to be persuaded by the potential of market mechanisms to create conditions for their socio-economic mobility. Or at the very least, they seem persuaded that it is the best option or avenue available to them to overcome the shackles of caste.

Many convincing works show that markets do not counter or remove caste, but that caste is reproduced in new ways in the private sector (Thorat and Newman 2010). The private sector is co-opted into existing caste relations, and social networks organized around caste can substitute for market institutions (Munshi 2016). Some scholars suggest that market mechanisms might

therefore eventually replace caste networks, in the same way that ethnic networks, which used to be important in several developed countries, have lost their salience as these countries attained greater economic development (Munshi 2016). Others point out that Dalits continue to be discriminated against by the very economic and market processes through which they seek liberation (Mosse 2020a; 2018).

There is little evidence of the hoped reduction in salience of caste networks. These networks, in fact, serve as a huge barrier for Dalits when trying to establish themselves in business. They find it difficult to raise capital because kinship and caste networks matter even when raising capital through banks (Jodhka 2015). These networks continue to play an important role in corporate hiring too (Jodhka and Newman 2010). For the vast majority of Dalits, even when the cultural and ideological hold of caste is gone, economic mobility seems to be largely horizontal – from traditional caste occupations to the lower end of the informal economy (Jodhka 2016, 237).

However, this continued role of caste in the modern private economy does not by itself mean that markets are bad for Dalits; especially for middle class Dalits who work in elite companies in urban areas. The persisting role of caste in modern corporate spaces only shows that market mechanisms may not be the great equalizing force that they are made out to be in both the economic and social domains, but more so in the social domain.

On the plus side, the culture of the emerging global private sector may, and the spaces it creates both within and outside the office, at least offer Dalits an escape or temporary reprieve from caste. In such spaces, for example, it is not common to inquire about one's caste or personal background. This creates an impersonal form of corporate sociality both within and outside of

the office. While this form of corporate sociality does not get intimate enough to extend into the domain of private life, it offers some measure of relief from caste stigma. Many of my Dalit informants claim that their caste status does not affect them in social situations outside office, but as I have shown, very few of my informants seemed to be interacting with their colleagues to any significant degree, outside of work. They claim that they are not interested in going out to get drinks or food with their colleagues, after work. I heard several responses along the following lines: “I could go, no one is stopping me....but I don’t want to” or “they do invite me, but I am not interested”. All in all, I couldn’t find much evidence of socialization between my Dalit informants and their upper caste colleagues, outside of the work environment. But the discourses that permeate these modern spaces, help Dalits “transcend” caste, at least subjectively, by facilitating a modern middleclass global subjectivity.

Even though the outcomes of on Dalit economic and social mobility thus appear limited, scholars have noted ways in which even the appearance of Dalit social and economic mobility has provoked retaliation from members of upper castes. As scholars have explained, the castelessness of upper castes has to be understood relationally (Subramanian 2015; 2019) as a response to the lower caste and Dalits’ use of caste to make political claims and demand compensation. Similarly, others have also pointed out that the extreme violence perpetrated against Dalits in rural areas, in more recent times, is a reaction by the upper castes to new the social and economic mobility of Dalits (Jodhka 2004). Even a simple act like starting a small business by a Dalit can be seen as a revolutionary move, leading to retaliation from upper castes.

I have proposed that there is a similar relationality at play when it comes to Dalits refraining from caste discourses in modern spaces. This must be understood in the light of upper caste accusations against Dalits and lower castes of overusing the “caste card” to gain undeserved benefits from the state (i.e. the verbal “level-playing field” ideology). It is also true that Dalits are at risk of experiencing double stigma in these spaces – one from their caste identity and the other as being recipients of state provisions (A. Deshpande 2015). So, it is in their best interest to avoid all talk of caste. In a de facto upper caste space such as the modern corporate office, not talking about caste helps them blend in.

As I have shown, the acceptance of corporate culture and intentional avoidance of discussing caste do not tell the complete story about why Dalits deny the impact of caste in their lives. Firstly, my Dalit informants are not simply refraining from talking about caste. Instead, they are actively saying that caste did not and does not affect them. Hence, there is both a passive and an active component to this castelessness among Dalits. Secondly, whether in the passive sense – choosing not to talk about it – or the active sense – denying its impact, this absence or erasure of caste and caste-based discourses, and practices of organizing, must be replaced with or a function of something else. I find that they are usually replaced with the values and logics of market centric discourses and self-making as middle-class market beings. The influence of this new form of self-making extends to organizing and social life beyond the workspace.

What is important here is not the mere presence or absence of caste or whether one avoids it or has been affected by it socio-historically, but rather the ability to not be affected by it consciously. This form of castelessness among my Dalit informants is witnessed in their ability

to remain unaffected by the pervasive effects of caste. This ability is an important attribute, if not the very cornerstone, of modern, global, middle-class subjectivity. This dissertation argues that it is the permeation of market centric discourses into every aspect of life in certain socio-economic locations of urban India today, that holds the most explanatory potential for the emergence of this form of castelessness among Dalits.

### **Why hasn't it been done before?**

Why have other scholars not studied the phenomenon of castelessness among Dalits before? I suggest that the answer to this question is three-fold. One explanation follows from the aforementioned orientation of the discipline of anthropology, and social science more generally, to study the subaltern. In studying the subaltern – Dalits in this case – scholars have positioned themselves in one of two roles: the work done by one side has served to shift the focus away from or to underplay the violence, injustice, or discrimination faced by this group, or to point the blame away from the perpetrators (upper castes) towards other factors like colonialism (see Dirks 2001), or lack of liberalization and market mechanisms (see Munshi 2019). The other side is focused on showing the historical and contemporary social marginalization and oppression faced by these communities, understanding the dynamics of caste-based discrimination, exclusion in social economic and political fields and how caste intersects with other forms of disadvantage and discrimination such as gender and class (see Rege 2006; Sheth 1999; Ram 1998; Ilaiah 2004) or the challenges faced by lower castes and their advocacy for their rights (Visvanathan 2001).

The first group is likely to make arguments about the diminishing importance of caste (Béteille 1991) for the country as a whole. When taking such an approach they may miss the importance of castelessness among Dalits, because they see caste as fading and disappearing for everyone. And if they do take notice of it, they are still likely to miss that such “castelessness” is often a form of caste. The second group is more concerned about arguing the continuing importance of caste and is likely to ignore any trend that even appears counter to the arguments that they seek to advance, as an anomaly or exception. This section of the scholarship does not want to be seen denying caste or its negative effects on its victims and is therefore blinded to any phenomenon – like Dalits denying the effect of caste – that may appear to do so.

The second reason for this lack of work, particularly in the discipline of anthropology, could be due to a trend within the discipline. When formulating research questions, scholars might lean more towards conducting literature reviews and identifying gaps in existing literature than on generating their questions from the ground up, by spending time in the field and observing phenomenon that need explanation or further investigation. This trend can be explained more by how the academic institutions and their funding criteria are set up rather than by a tendency on the part of the researcher to eschew fieldwork in early stages of research.

The final reason for the lack of work on or even the recognition of the phenomenon of Dalit castelessness, is the elite nature of the academia generally. Even when there are lower caste and Dalit researchers, the upper caste and elite bias in the academia tends to produce research that is more in line with the world view of the elite sections of society. Spivak (1988) shows how colonialism and the western academia erase or underrepresent the voices of their subaltern other.

In spite of the critical acclaim received by such scholarship, the dynamic pointed out by Spivak with regards to western academics vis a vis their subaltern other, is alive and well in the context of the Indian (and now increasingly western) academia vis a vis the Dalit subject. The composition of the academia hasn't changed sufficiently to generate questions that break out of the existing molds. From this privileged perspective, quite often, the elite or normative subjects are portrayed as occupying complex identities while Dalits are reduced to a single identity – Dalit. Moreover, even when a scholar comes up with original questions derived from the field, it would be difficult for them to observe such nuances due to the current political realities that make such intimate work across politico-economic gulfs increasingly difficult.

### **Caste Persists**

It is worth re-emphasizing that this dissertation does not deny the existence of caste and its negative effects, nor does it accept wholesale, the statements by the informants about the lack of caste in their lives. Rather, it seeks to analyze and contextualize this new form of Dalit castelessness. Reading between the lines of what my informants have said, one could surmise that they don't actually believe that caste has not affected them. Rather, they seem to believe that they have not let caste affect them; and there is a clear difference between these two positions. While they say that caste has not affected them, the only logical conclusion that I can draw from the stories they shared which undermine their own claims is that they believe they have not let it affect them. This is how the contradiction between the ideology and the actuality of the market-centric modernity is resolved. What they mean by "not affected" can be deduced as follows: Caste is an oppressive force that ensures that Dalits remain at the bottom of society, stigmatized

and ostracized, kept from developing their human capital, and attaining socio-economic mobility. The fact that my informants have managed to escape this fate means that caste has not “affected” them. Caste is being portrayed by them as though it were a disease. Even though one may have had to take several precautions to avoid being infected by it – spent time, money, or emotional resources to do so – the fact that they are not crippled by the disease, so to speak, is seen as a win. In other words, it is seen as: not being affected by it.

On the other hand, many upper castes also say that caste does not matter and that it has not affected them or the lower castes. But it is clear from further observation that they do not really accept this at a gut level. For example, this comes across clearly when one looks at fact that people rarely marry across caste lines - 95% of all marriages<sup>40</sup> in India happen within the caste (Desai, Vanneman, and Applied Economic Research 2018). Among my informants and throughout my network of friends and acquaintances, I have found very few instances of dating across caste lines. It is rarer still for these relationships to turn into marriages. Among my informants, I found only one instance of a Dalit woman who married a non-Dalit lower caste (OBC) man, and no instances of Dalit men marrying higher caste women.

Some scholars have argued that there is more interest in inter-caste marriages than is captured in the data on marriage outcomes (see Ahuja and Ostermann 2015). What they suggest is that people are more open to inter-caste marriages, even if they do not end up marrying across caste

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<sup>40</sup> There are very estimates of inter-caste marriages, but I source I cited above is perhaps the largest and most comprehensive survey on the matter. For eg: Others estimate for out-marriage are five percent in rural India (Chowdhry, 2009 cited in Mosse 2018) and among educated middle-class Indians, still 70 percent marry (broadly) within caste (Banerjee, Duflo, Ghatak, & Lafortune, 2013; Munshi, 2014, 2016a).

lines, and that this is a sign that the hold of caste in the sphere of private life is fading. They further argue that such interest, rather than marriage outcomes, is a better indicator of social distance between caste groups, because there can be several confounding variables like education, income, profession, family background, personality, appearance, etc., working alongside an individual's caste that could get in the way of an inter-caste marriage. Therefore, marriage outcomes are likely to overestimate the social distance between castes (Ahuja and Ostermann 2016).

It is possible to make the case that caste anonymity provided by urban life increases social interactions between people of different castes as equals (Ahuja and Ostermann 2016). But my research finds that such equality is achieved either by avoiding or denying caste, and it lasts only as long as caste does not come up. Such interactions, therefore, do not cross a certain threshold of intimacy, as can be gauged from marriage outcomes. The fact that there are several confounding variables that interfere with inter-caste marriages, is more evidence that caste simply makes its appearance by other names. Moreover, when inter-caste marriages do happen, there is often severe opposition from friends and family members, sometimes even leading to honor killings (D'Lima, Solotaroff, and Pande 2020). Going beyond marriages, I did not find much evidence of close social interactions between my Dalit informants and their upper caste colleagues. This experience aligns to a great extent with my personal experiences as described in the introduction.

However, the above argument about openness to inter-caste marriage serves to make an important point that is directionally aligned with my findings. Ahuja and Ostermann (2016) find

that a significant portion of participants and their families in their study are willing to consider inter-caste marriage if it is consistent with upward mobility, allowing them to improve their caste or socioeconomic status. I find that upper castes preserve their caste capital in every way they can, but they do seem, in principle, willing to trade it for economic capital. But unless this verbal willingness translates into action, as demonstrated by inter-caste marriage, it may not amount to much more than lip service. I find that upper castes do not consciously recognize their upper casteness as a form of capital that comes with privileges. However, they do recognize economic capital as the primary and perhaps only form of capital and are willing to obtain it. But when it comes to inter-caste marriage, upper caste privilege gets in the way by manifesting as a lack of education, income, profession, family background, personality, or appearance on the part of the lower caste or Dalit.

### **What explains the continuing prevalence of caste?**

To be clear, caste and caste-based discrimination is alive and well. More importantly, this is so because upper castes are deeply committed to caste, a commitment that they now express in the language and through the performance of community, tradition, and merit. Pre-independence, several thinkers and leaders from the modernizing middle-classes that was made up almost entirely of upper castes sought to divide the life world of Indians into two spheres. This scheme put the domains of home, private, spiritual, and tradition on the one hand, and its corresponding categories of outside, public, material, and modern on the other (see Pandian 2002).

In this formulation, caste was seen as an internal, private matter that was not open to public scrutiny. It was supposed to be a matter of culture and tradition, and not a matter of politics. This

suited the interest of the modernizing middle-class Indians whose political efforts and aspirations were aimed at gaining freedom from British rule, while not wanting to deal with the injustice of caste practices and other traditions. Moreover, in this formulation the traditions and culture of the upper caste were naturalized as national culture, thereby excluding or sub-ordinating the lower castes and delegitimizing the mention of caste in the public and political sphere. Further, there emerged two sets of languages to speak about caste. One was the modern upper caste version that speaks about caste in other terms and the other version left to lower castes, which spoke of caste on its own terms (Pandian 2002).

In line with the work of other scholars, this dissertation argues that in the post 1990s era, there is a new twist on this formulation of the rightful place of caste. In the eyes of the modern middle class Indian, caste has gone from being unacceptable in politics to being mostly a matter of politics but unacceptable in the domain of economics. The economic realm has emerged as the new container for modernity (Mosse 2020a). In other words, caste was first enclosed within religion, and politics was a modern public domain that ostensibly did not concern itself with Hindu religious tradition, which was on the face of it, a non-political matter. Later, caste became enclosed within politics as an effect of the contemporary claims to modernity of the market economy, denying it any role in the economy (Mosse 2020a). Further, politics, which has now been defiled by caste, becomes a domain of backwardness, while the economy becomes the new standard of modernity that has no space for the backwardness of caste and politics. In the world view promoted by market-centric discourses, caste in politics, and politics itself, do not belong in the realm of modernity. Progress and development are apolitical and secular pursuits, whereas

politics, only hinders development<sup>41</sup>. In the era of post 1990s modernity, this dichotomy of caste tradition and market modernity persists in the idea that modern market economy will ensure that caste fades away, yet “economic knowledge (and derivatively development discourse) makes caste phenomena disappear through discursive exclusion” (Mosse 2020a, 1228).

Although, in the colonial context, the private sphere of tradition could be imagined by the upper caste as not open to politics and scrutiny, in current times, even this private sphere is being penetrated by public discourses (Upadhyaya 2008, 69). These public discourses, I have argued, are dominated by market centric values and ideas. Marriage is perhaps the final frontier of this private domain. As a site of social reproduction par excellence, it is perhaps the best signifier of structural change in Indian society. Ambedkar (Ambedkar 1936) said that marriage is the only solution to the division that caste creates. Therefore, a useful way to gauge change in social attitudes towards caste is to look at the prevalence or lack of inter-caste marriages. On this matter, the data shows that the hold of caste continues to be extremely stable. The penetration of market discourses into the private sphere has brought about changes in how people speak about caste, but these discourses do not promote actual equality or the necessity to give up or even be willing to examine one’s privileges. The issue that usually gets lost in discussions about caste in India today, is that caste is not something that simply happens to the lower castes, it is imposed, enforced, or practiced by someone (upper castes) for their own benefit and to the detriment of lower castes and Dalits<sup>42</sup>.

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<sup>41</sup> Note that “politics” here is in the eyes of the beholder. There is a crucial difference between Politics and politics.

<sup>42</sup> Satyanarayana 2014 comes close to making this claim without actually making it.

When scholars do mention castelessness with respect to Dalits, they are often referring to something that is more akin to Ambedkar's "annihilation of caste" (Ambedkar 1936; see Mosse 2020b). The Dalit castelessness that I have discussed in this work has more in common with the castelessness of the upper caste than with the annihilation of caste. By this, I mean that it comes more from the belief that development is antagonistic with caste and that more development will lead to more opportunities to break free from the shackles of tradition. It does not come from the understanding that in a developed modern setting, upper castes are willing to put aside their claims to superiority and accept Dalits as equals in both public and personal spheres. In fact, it is not clear if many of these middle-class Dalits even seek to annihilate caste and bring about a transformation in the "social conscience" as envisaged by Ambedkar (2002, 122). Ambedkar argued in his essay titled *Ranade, Gandhi and Jinnah* that social reform must precede political reform, and that political rights are not protected by law but by the social and moral conscience of society. Political rights can be protected if the society recognizes and chooses to enact them but having laws is not enough when "a whole body of people are determined to defy it" (Ambedkar 2002, 122).

In the above formulation of Ambedkar, the ultimate goal in the struggle against caste would be to have a society where people believe in and are committed to equality. This means a change in the hearts and minds of the upper castes, and Dalit movements have not been very successful at achieving this goal. Since bringing about that change is more in the hands of the upper caste, earlier Dalits movements have instead focused on obtaining political power, and the newer Dalit middle class organizing efforts are moving towards making economic resources and opportunities a higher priority. Overall, bringing about a transformation in the "social

conscience” does not seem to be something that the middle-class Dalit activism places a lot of faith in. Rather, my informants seem to be onboard with the view that caste will simply fade away as it is replaced by concerns of modernity. They see their situation and their lifeworld through the lens of market centrism.

Being the hegemonic discourse, market centrism is the default framework through which most people look at most societal issues (Foucault 2008). It takes more effort to see caste through any other lens. In most cases, it is not that people have considered earlier approaches to the struggle for Dalit equality and found them lacking. Rather, they simply look at their current situation through the lens of market centric modernity and understand the problem largely as an issue of differential economic endowments and access to opportunities. The solutions end up being economic too – mostly about better access to opportunities to education and employment. Even when my informants offer their opinion on the Dalit movements of the past, or on the approaches taken by their elders in dealing with caste, they evaluate these in economic terms, in light of market centric values. They do however, understand that these differences were created by caste which “has no truth” to it (Mosse 2020b, 28; also see Roberts 2016) and will not last in its ritual sense.

My informants see the ritual basis for caste hierarchy as one that is not going to survive much longer. They are also keenly aware that caste capital is being converted into and now pervades as economic capital. One way this becomes clear is through the observation that, given a choice, most Dalits would rather be rich than upper caste. This is not simply because expressing a desire to be upper caste would be seen as a betrayal to the Dalit cause – an acceptance of their

inferiority – but because they see economic capital as superior to a higher ritual status. They see that the basis for the power of upper castes has moved from ritual superiority to economic superiority.

Dalits today would rather have good education and jobs than the status of being upper caste.

They see education and economic resources as the true and more valuable form of capital. They recognize how the upper castes gain economic advantages as a result of their upper casteness, but they see the economic advantages gained as a more stable form of power than upper casteness itself. Even if they do not see the possibility of caste networks fading away and giving way to a more egalitarian society, they hope to create a world where there is equal access to economic opportunities and use those opportunities as a bulwark against caste injustice.

To be sure, there are freedoms that come with a market mediated modernity – primary being the possibility of anonymity. But these freedoms are largely a result of the political gains achieved by earlier generations through political movements, in the form of various forms of affirmative action and legal protections against discrimination and violence. However, market discourses have so effectively permeated today's middle-class aspirations and ways of being in the world generally, that market mechanisms manage to present themselves, and convincingly for many, as the only path to economic betterment. For my informants, anonymity and economic freedoms are experienced in global, modern, spaces and are experienced as arising from market mechanisms.

Rural Dalits, who do not get to inhabit these modern spaces like large shopping malls or multinational corporate offices, may not see caste as being eroded by markets. For example,

Mosse (2020a) finds that his Dalit informants in Alapuram village in Tamil Nadu do not see caste order as being undermined by markets, but instead, they give credit to the political struggles against untouchability in 1960s and 1970s. My urban middle class Dalit informants, on the other hand seem to see markets as undoing the hold of caste, creating more economic freedoms, and making India global – like the rest of the world, which does not have caste and is therefore more equal.

It is important to reiterate that not all my informants are focused on denying caste. Some people did talk about discriminatory experiences and how their Dalit status has negatively affected their opportunities in life. This is a well-known and expected response from the Dalit community. But as mentioned in the introduction, what is note-worthy are the responses that claim a lack of discrimination. Responses that claim discriminatory experiences are to be expected. But even in these responses about discrimination, there is a lot of focus on the economic aspects or implications of such discrimination. Many use the words poor, lower caste, and Dalit interchangeably, and their complaints are mostly about how their economic opportunities have been affected by caste. It is quite likely that they are foregrounding economic aspects because they are more measurable and therefore easier to convey. It is also a result of their lived experience of inferior access to economic opportunities. But I have sought to draw attention to how market centric discourses encourage the framing and understanding of every issue as an economic one. The exposure to these ideas, the saturation of their imagination with economic issues, and the self-making as modern middle class market beings, all contribute to lead my informants to frame caste differences as differences in economic opportunities and outcomes.

When Dalits perform middle classness, it is often performed as castelessness, without it having to be a conscious strategy.

The intention of this study is not to deny the existence of caste or the prevalence of caste-based discrimination but rather to point out that the language and world view of modernity and market-centric discourses has led to a form of castelessness that while not amounting to a substantive lack of caste is indeed a real lived experience for a segment of Dalits. This form of modernity is consolidated along several overlapping and converging axes: corporate modernity, middle class modernity, global modernity, technological modernity, and they all have formal castelessness in common (i.e. asocial individualism). What is witnessed here is not simply a language of castelessness but an internalized subjectivity of castelessness. Moreover, this is something that the study observes largely among what we call the new Dalit middle class. There are other strands of Dalit organizing that are explicitly about caste and built around discourses of how caste has affected them in many different forms. This study merely focusses on a more recent development of castelessness as a pillar of organizing and self-making, that happens to be an exception to the earlier norm and perhaps a harbinger of future Dalit organizing.

In the past, people like Ambedkar and Periyar who fought for equality were not seen as modern because they invoked caste. Back then and even today, the modern way to deal with caste is to not mention it at all. My Dalit informants straddle a middle ground between the social reformers, who since pre-independence have sought to bring about change in social attitudes first, and political reformers, who sought to focus on gaining political rights to the neglect of social attitudes. My informants accept and talk about caste and its impact on others, but they deny its

importance in their own lives. In this way, they continue to sympathize with the large majority of Dalits who are still caught up in caste structures, while seeing themselves as modern for having the means to evade the pernicious effect of these same structures. This puts them above the fray, as modern Dalits who are themselves not the passive victims of caste anymore. While they may not be working towards changing the conscience of society, they have made the transition to modernity through their education, employment, and change in their mindsets. Now they seek to help their fellow Dalits make the same transition. Even though the wider structures of inequity remain embedded in other domains – like real socio-economic privilege.

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