



Development Review

Caste and development: Contemporary perspectives on a structure of discrimination and advantage



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ABSTRACT

Inherited caste identity is an important determinant of life opportunity for a fifth of the world's population, but is not given the same significance in global development policy debates as gender, race, age, religion or other identity characteristics. This review asks why addressing caste-based inequality and discrimination does not feature in intergovernmental commitments such as the Sustainable Development Goals, and whether it should. Taking India as its focus, it finds that caste has been treated as an archaic system and source of historical disadvantage due compensation through affirmative action in ways that overlook its continuing importance as a structure of advantage and of discrimination in the modern economy, especially post-liberalization from the 1990s. A body of recent literature from anthropology, economics, history and political science is used to explore the modern life of caste in society, economy and development. Questions are asked about caste as social hierarchy, the role of caste in post-liberalization rural inequality, in urban labor markets and in the business economy, and the effect of policies of affirmative action in public-sector education and employment. Caste is found to be a complex institution, simultaneously weakened and revived by current economic and political forces; it is a contributor to persisting national socioeconomic and human capital disparities, and has major impacts on subjective wellbeing. Caste effects are not locational; they travel from the village to the city and into virtually all markets. Caste persists in the age of the market because of its advantages – its discriminations allow opportunity hoarding for others; and the threat of the advancement of subordinated groups provokes humiliating violence against them. The evidence points to the need for policy innovation to address market and non-market discrimination and to remove barriers, especially in the informal and private sector; and to ensure caste has its proper place in the global development policy debate.

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1. Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) emphasize equality of opportunity and reducing inequality of outcomes, the elimination of discrimination in law, policy and social practice, and socio-economic inclusion of *all* under the banner goal 'to leave nobody behind'. "All" here means, "irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or economic or other status" (SDG 10.2). There is no specific mention of caste.

Several international human rights organizations insist that worldwide over 260 million people suffer from discrimination based on caste (or 'work and descent', the UN terminology for such systems of inherited status), that caste is "a fundamental determinant [of] social exclusion and development"¹, and affects some 20–25 percent of the world's population – including (but not restricted to) the peoples of South Asian nations and their diasporas. They have lobbied for caste to be recognized in progress indicators and data disaggregation, and have published shadow reports on caste disparities hidden in national reporting on SDGs (ADRF, 2017).

While prohibited by international human rights law, caste/ "work and descent"-based discrimination is excluded from the agenda of intergovernmental negotiations such as on the SDGs. Should the global policy agenda pay attention to identities and relations of caste as drivers of poverty and inequality? What is the evidence that caste still matters as a determinant of opportunity today, and what might its mechanisms be? Why is caste so often off the agenda, and treated differently from age, ethnicity, or religion? The topic is dauntingly large, and the present review is limited to caste in India's economic processes and policy approaches.

The intersecting nature of identities (caste, class, gender, religion) that give poverty in India its distinctive social face means that ultimately caste cannot be independently examined (Shah et al., 2018). Nonetheless, this review covers work that empirically and analytically attempts to identify the "grammar" of caste (Deshpande, 2017) at work behind persisting socioeconomic and human capital disparities in India (and by extension elsewhere). Today, absolutely and proportionately, the country's capital wealth (land, buildings, finance etc.) is largely in the hands of the "upper" castes, and the "lowest" castes participate in the economy primarily as wage laborers.² Per-capita income or access to high-status occupations decrease as we pass down the hierarchy, as does the *return* on factors such as better education or capital assets, while the proportion of people in poverty increases, indicating what the Dalit political leader B.R. Ambedkar referred to as a system of "graded inequality" (see Thorat [2017] for analysis of data to 2014). Aggregating disparities in occupation, education and assets into a Caste Development Index, Deshpande (2017, 93) shows that the degree of caste inequality is unimproved (and sometimes worsened) by the greater wealth or faster growth of different Indian states. Statistically, in India the caste into which a person is born remains among the most important determinants of life opportunity.

Caste is a source of embarrassment and controversy in middle-class India. Is it relevant to talk about caste in modern times? Isn't

caste an "internal" matter of heritage and culture beyond the remit of global agendas? Certainly, we do not find caste treated alongside gender, race or age in the international analysis of poverty and inequality. I will start this review (Section 2) by asking how caste is conceived such that it evades global policy attention. This will involve looking at the history of caste in India's social policy. Section 3 turns to anthropological debates on caste hierarchy and change. Section 4 considers caste and rural economic change. Turning to the wider economy, Section 5 looks at caste and labor markets, and Section 6 at caste in the business economy. I will take stock (in Section 7) of evidence on caste as a modern structure of opportunity and of discrimination (Harriss-White, 2014), before turning to India's affirmative action policy (Section 8). The final section of the article considers what idea of caste might be helpful to grasp its role in contemporary economic life.

2. Caste in Indian social policy

2.1. (a) Caste as a residual issue of religion and culture

The claim that caste is marginal to development policy debate requires some justification since caste appears central in Indian policy and the politics of affirmative action. My point is that the manner in which caste has entered social policy largely overlooks caste as a continuing structural cause of inequality and poverty in present-day market-led development, and instead treats it as an archaic Indian cultural and ritual phenomenon erased by such development, or as a social disability subject to (in principle, temporary) "special measures" (see Waughray, 2010, 336–37).

The government of independent India was reluctant to use caste as an explainer of poverty and inequality, and there was no place for social classifications used in the colonial administration; hence the abandonment of caste categories in the post-Independence national censuses (Dirks, 2001; Jaffrelot, 2006).³ Both Gandhian utopianism and socialist universalism expected archaic caste to disappear with modernization. Nonetheless, the Indian Constitution, which enshrined a commitment to equality in its directive principles, also recognized historical disadvantage, giving – by a presidential order (in 1950) – special protection and benefits to a list (or schedule) of castes (first drawn up by the British in 1936) whose "extreme backwardness" arose "out of the traditional practice of untouchability," without there being a definition or test of such untouchability (Dirks, 2001; Galanter, 1984).⁴ Since now-outlawed untouchability was taken to be a Hindu practice, the category of Scheduled Castes (SCs, which censuses record as about 17 percent of the population) excludes Muslim and Christian converts who, evidence shows, experience equivalent untouchability (Ministry of Minority Affairs, 2009; Mosse, 2012).

³ Debate around caste enumeration was revived by the 2011 Socioeconomic and Caste Census (<http://www.secc.gov.in>) which was based on voluntary disclosure but left caste-demographic data unpublished (Deshpande & John, 2010).

⁴ On official criteria applied to Scheduled Castes, see <http://socialjustice.nic.in/UserView/index?mid=28545#sc1> (accessed 11 April 2017). In parallel, provisions were made for a list of Scheduled Tribes (STs), the Adivasi or "aboriginal" groups not discussed here. At one level, the SC/ST distinction could be regarded as arbitrary, given the sociological continuum between "caste" and "tribe" (Bailey, 1961; Shah et al., 2018), but at another it points to two distinct forms of identity and discrimination: one rooted in ranked relationships of servitude; the other, rooted in geographical separation and dispossession, especially in relation to forest-based livelihoods (see, e.g., Sundar & Madan, 2016).

¹ <http://asiadalitrightsforum.org/images/imageevent/1736746861NCDHR%20-%20SDG%20-%20Nov%202015.pdf> accessed 21 January 2018.

² There are no easy alternatives to the contentious and simplifying terms "upper" and "lower" caste used in cited articles, but it should be clear they refer not to an accepted rank, but a history of power, domination and unequal social recognition, encoded in vernacular as well as sociological languages.

Social policy on caste (and the guidelines of the ministry and commission responsible) focus on the disadvantages of particular groups, treating caste as a static or *residual* problem addressed through remedial provisions, protections, safeguards and complaint-handling, rather than as a dynamic *relational* problem that might be subject to the state's general duty to address inequality and discrimination in economy and society.⁵ While criminal law (the 1989 Prevention of Atrocities Act) prohibits specified acts against members of SCs, caste does not feature in any comprehensive legislation against discrimination and for the promotion of equality in India.⁶ The everyday inequalities of caste tend rather to be regarded as matters for social and (today especially) market-based transformations.

Historians looking at the role of missionaries and colonial policy explain how caste came to be officialized as a matter of religion or “the social realm” separate from political economy (Viswanath, 2014), and how caste was to be dealt with by reform from *within* rather than state intervention. Indeed, addressing caste discrimination as a matter of Hindu religious reform rather than infringed socio-political rights is what separated M.K. Gandhi from Dr B.R. Ambedkar in pre-Independence debates (Dirks, 2001; Roberts, 2016).

As a matter of religion and historical disadvantage, caste falls outside the purview of economic planning (Jodhka, 2016, 232), and is treated as an *internal* cultural matter excluded from international frameworks applied to other forms of discrimination such as gender or race. While the UN bodies subsume caste under “descent” (one of five “grounds” of racial discrimination), India rejects this, and the monitoring by UN treaty bodies that this would imply (Keane, 2007; Waughray & Keane, 2017).⁷

2.2. (b) Caste as politics

The enclosure of caste within religion/culture, history and the nation (Mosse, 2016) separates caste from development; and this “culturalization” of caste (Natrajan, 2011) implies an “economization” of poverty, that is a narrowing to the economic and material of the “interests” in development that concerned Hirschman (1997). More recently, caste has also become “enclosed” within a certain kind of politics, especially after policy on affirmative action – taking the form of fixed quotas or “reservations” in public sector employment and higher education, formerly limited to the Scheduled Castes – extended these benefits to a more heterogeneous set of Other Backward Classes (OBCs), a listing of 3,743 different *jatis* or castes, some 52 percent of the population. The government commission that recommended this change (the so-called Mandal Commission) brought with it the hitherto rejected idea that caste could itself be considered a criterion of socioeconomic backwardness (rather than just an effect of Hindu untouchability). But as an extensive literature shows, the practical effect was not to bring a new policy focus on caste in economic relations, but instead to draw caste firmly into the realm of *political* competition (Jaffrelot, 2006; Jayal, 2015). Violent upper-caste protest followed the extension of caste reservations beyond the “ex-untouchables”.⁸ The defensive response to this gave political substance to what was

initially an abstract administrative category – the “OBCs”. Indeed, Jaffrelot (2003) sees the political rise of the lower castes (in the northern states), including the formation and subsequent electoral success of caste-based parties as India’s “silent revolution”.

This alignment of political parties to caste categories of entitlement was a particular moment in the mutual adaptation of caste and politics: caste being how democratic politics takes shape in India; and electoral politics being how caste is re-energized (Sheth, 1999) with emergent higher-order clusters, new mythologies and leaders articulating perceived interests through caste identity (Gupta, 2005, 417; Jodhka & Manor, 2017b). The large literature on different aspects, phases and regional variants of caste politics falls beyond the scope of this review. The point here is that the politics and public debate on caste with its focus on “reservations” has become significantly detached from the wider role of caste in the economy and in social and economic development. This autonomy of caste-political transformation from development is demonstrated in Witsoe’s (2013) analysis of the government of Bihar (under of OBC Lalu Prasad Yadav, 1999–2005). Despite holding political power and threatening the upper-caste controlled apparatus of state-directed development, the lower castes were unable to turn this power into institutional change that could bring sustained or equalizing socio-economic gains for them.

Making a similar point the other way around, Jayal (2015) sees the politics of recognition around the extension of reservations as a “caste-abatement”, distracting from growing economic inequalities brought about by neoliberal reforms introduced at the same time (after 1991). In fact, as the Indian state restructures in favor of industrial capital, it also has had to respond to democratic pressure from a voting constituency of lower-caste poorer people by directing tax revenue from new wealth in industry to huge increases in state welfare programs, deploying a rhetoric of inclusive growth, and enacting various social and economic rights (to education, food and rural employment) – a class abatement alongside caste abatement (Gupta, 2012; Jayal, 2015; Varshney, 2017).

Studies of the upper-caste/middle-class politics of caste refusal – the insistence that the market economy and meritocracy have (or certainly should) remove caste as a modern concern (Deshpande, 2013; Subramanian, 2015) – suggest a muting of caste within the professional policymaking class itself. An anti-reservations discourse regards caste as unnecessarily perpetuated by affirmative action which penalizes merit and unfairly advantages lower castes and their self-serving, vote-bank manipulating, political entrepreneurs (Jodhka & Manor, 2017b, 1). So lower castes become the accused purveyors of caste and its politics while upper castes lay claim to cosmopolitan identities or middleclassness (Subramanian, 2015, p. 295). Others point out that the public denouncing of affirmative action, and insistence that caste no longer matters, is part of a politics of concealed caste advantage. Thus, the public denial of caste as actionable injustice goes along with its protection in private and its portrayal as a matter of culture. Thus Natrajan (2012) points to the view that what today remains of caste is benign or beneficial. Caste is community or cultural identity, part of the vitality of Indian democracy; caste provides networks of trust for business. Caste is anyway a private and domestic matter. The caste-based violence that reaches TV screens and newspapers represents an “abnormality” of normally benign caste.

In short, policy discourse on caste is based on the notion of caste as an archaic system and source of historical disadvantage due compensation through affirmative action. It has, in parallel, produced a caste-mobilizing politics prompted by reservations and anti-reservations, caste-party-political assertions and the elite silencing of caste in the name of merit. If caste is erased from modern development discourse, it is on the premise that caste discrimination is being eliminated through market-led development.

⁵ see <http://socialjustice.nic.in/UserView/index?mid=1510>. On the distinction between residual and relational approaches see Mosse (2010).

⁶ In March 2017, the Congress MP Sashi Tharoor put forward such an Anti-Discrimination and Equality Bill.

⁷ On controversial attempts to include caste within international or national law on discrimination or equality (e.g., UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination or the UK Equality Act), see Waughray and Keane (2017).

⁸ The OBCs were given a 27 percent share of central reservations. Unlike SCs and STs, this was not proportional to their population share (52 percent) because of a constitutional limit of total reservations to 50 percent (although state-level allocations sometimes exceed this maximum).

What disappears from view (and is the subject of sections below) is the significance of caste in the working of the modern economy itself, especially post-1991 liberalization.

The 1990s also witnessed an upsurge in anti-caste civil-society and political activism from Dalits, “Dalit” being a heterogeneous category of former “untouchables” with this self-ascribed political label meaning the “broken” or “downtrodden”. The history of Dalit assertions against caste inequality and exclusion is, of course, centuries-long, but with the Mandal debate giving a national visibility to the caste question, an upsurge in anti-Dalit violence fueling new social movements and Dalit political parties in the south and the rising success of the Dalit-focused Bahujan Samaj Party in the north, and with the birth centenary of Dr B.R. Ambedkar (in 1991) giving focus to him as a political icon, the momentum of Dalit politics increased in this decade. Moreover, caste was placed on the development and human rights agenda of interlinked local and international civil society campaigns, social movements, political parties and NGO networks focusing on caste abuse, inequality and economic exclusion, claiming a moral, political and legal equivalence between racism and caste discrimination, experienced by Dalits as “India’s hidden apartheid” (Bob, 2007; Nagaraj & Greenough, 2009; Thorat, 2004). The varied forms and effects of anti-caste development activism, and the transposition of a “rights-based” to a “Dalit human rights” approach to development would be the subject of a separate discussion (Anandhi & Kapadia, 2017; Gorringe, Jeffery, & Waghmore, 2016; Hardtmann, 2009; Lerche, 2008; see Rawat & Satyanarayana, 2016; Waghmore, 2013). Significant here is the fact that Dalit activism has set an agenda that is now beginning to focus on caste in the modern economy, and to reframe the caste and development debate beyond reservations. Before coming to this, I must address some basics on the scholarly approach to caste, especially within anthropology and its village studies, the privileged site of caste research.

3. Village ethnography: Caste hierarchy and status mobility

Most scholars concede that caste is a composite of disparate phenomena (some of great antiquity) brought together in different ways under specific historical conditions, and must be studied as such. Regarding early-modern times, from the late-seventeenth century, expanding trade and militarization, systems of state and revenue in peninsular India, made society more “caste-like” in ways amplified under British rule (Bayly, 2001). Few doubt that descriptions of a ranked and self-regulating “traditional caste system” by field anthropologists arriving in the 1950s carried a heavy imprint of colonial rule: the way its revenue and property systems dismantled earlier political orders and sedentarized populations into village communities; the effects of its census categories and systems of recruitment, reservations and (political) representation; the pre-eminence accorded to Brahman priesthood and the consolidation of the opposed category of “the untouchable” (Bayly, 2001; Charsley, 1996; Cohn, 1987; Dirks, 2001). The extent to which the British “invented” the caste system or the idea of it continues to be debated (Fuller, 2016), and revisionist history is now drawn into Hindu nationalist denunciation of the very idea of caste (Mosse, 2016).

The varied and contingent nature of caste has not prevented attempts at a unified conception. Some modelled caste in terms of three key effects: social separation, graded status and occupational specialization (Dumont, 1980). Others (Lindt, 2013) distinguish different dimensions of caste. A *hereditary* dimension comes from castes as endogamous kin groups (*jatis*), restrictions on marriage, diet (e.g., vegetarianism) or eating/living together being an aspect of separation. The control over women’s sexuality in social reproduction underlines the centrality of gender to how

caste works (Chakraborty, 2003). In its *economic* dimension caste is a division of occupations with ascribed status, perhaps within an agrarian village system. In its *political* dimension caste constitutes systems of dominance and rule at local and regional levels. Finally, caste has an *ideological* dimension associated for example with ideas of purity and impurity, ritual ranking or the moral-bodily constitution of human difference and interaction (Dumont, 1980; Marriott & Inden, 1977).

The most influential theorizations of caste have privileged the ideological. In his book *Homo Hierarchicus*, Dumont (1980) insisted, first, that the multiplicity of endogamous *jatis* (castes) acquired coherence at the ideological level, ordered through an opposition between “the pure” and “the impure”; and second, that the four-fold ranked social functions or “classes” of ancient India known as *varna* (Brahman: priesthood, Kshatriya: kingly rule, Vaisya: trade/production, and Sudra: service) provided a model. The superiority of Brahman purity over Kshatriya power established the ideological separation of status and power that, for Dumont, characterized caste as a unique social system. A fifth *avarna* (without *varna*) category comprised the socially excluded “untouchables”.

This understanding of caste as a Hindu social system for the management of ritual purity or pollution separate from power or wealth failed to provide a usable framework for empirical research (see criticisms from Dirks, 1989; Raheja, 1988; Berreman, 1971). Discourses of caste purity or honor were found to be cultural resources serving (not separate from) political and economic power, including the inferiorization of enslaved agrarian labor as polluted untouchables. Elaborate caste orders among non-Hindus, including Christians (Mosse, 2012), demonstrated religious ideas to be inessential; and *varna*, while at times providing a model for imitation in status claims, had little pan-Indian descriptive validity (Srinivas, 1995). Ethnographers nonetheless (in 1950s–80s) sought caste as a village-integrating system of occupational specialization, with potters and priests, carpenters, barbers and agricultural laborers rendering service to dominant landowner patrons. Whether characterized in terms of managing (im)purity, mutuality, caste dominance, unequal graded rights, agrarian exploitation, a truncated remnant of a precolonial state system or an anthropological invention, this so-called *jajmani* system was in decline from the moment it was first described (Bremner, 1974; Fuller, 1989; Mayer, 1993; Raheja, 1988).

Service castes found their entitlements as village potters, cobblers or dhobis undermined by markets for plastic pots, rubber shoes, laundries, or themselves sought autonomy from caste ascription in market relations, sometimes building new caste-clustered niches: barber musicians-run public sound services, dhobi-run laundrettes, potter caste hardware stores (Harriss-White, 2003, p. 177; Wadley, 1994). Elsewhere, commons management systems for water, fish or forests embedded in now-rejected caste hierarchies became less viable (Mosse, 2003).

Least likely to lament a lost moral economy (Gold, 2009) were those compelled through agrarian servitude into demeaning, dirty and ritually impure work, including that associated with the death of humans and animals (funerary work, flaying and leatherwork), removers of the material and symbolic residues of daily life, treated as polluted in a permanent way, and integrated into village life in order to be excluded: through residential segregation, from ownership of land/house-sites, from common water sources, public spaces such as teashops or temples, classrooms or markets, and from or any mark of social honor whether riding bicycles or having stylish haircuts – in a word “untouchability.” Where possible, Dalits have tried to escape ignominious caste-referencing transactions and embraced market-mediated autonomy, contract and cash payment (Mines, 2005; Mosse, 2012).

Across the country, research today reports a levelling of the markers of social recognition – food, dress, grooming, styles of

worship, and a “declining ability of others to impose social inequalities” as Kapur, Prasad, Pritchett, and Babu (2010) conclude in a large-scale study in villages across two Uttar Pradesh sub-districts paying attention to changes emphasized by Dalits who had seen improvement in their incomes and asset holdings since 1990 (2010, p. 48). Partly owing to caste humiliation being subject to criminal law, village schemes of caste distinction are today overlain by rank-repudiating public moral narratives of civility and equality, although Dalits suspect an “inner” mind of caste judgement and disgust grasped only from within experience (Guru & Sarukkai, 2012; Guru, 2009; Jadhav, Mosse, & Dostaler, 2016; Waghmore, 2017).

While some (Kapur et al., 2010) emphasize such changes as market-economy driven, others document the organized ritual-political struggles at different scales through which caste power has been challenged and citizen rights and self-respect asserted (Mines, 2005; Lynch, 1969; Rao, 2009 among many). Economic independence, numerical strength or political mobilization are often preconditions for caste change (Bêteille, 1965). But elite-led caste status mobility (sometimes through emulation of upper-caste practices, or “sanskritization” (Srinivas, 1995, 15–41)) can also produce widening class, caste and gender divides. Status mobility and political competition has engendered “replication” of ranked differences among Dalit *jatis* (that Moffatt [1979] misconstrued as connoting consensus with caste-hierarchical values).⁹ When Dalit men displace ignominious obligations *within* their families onto wives, daughters and elderly mothers, who carry the continuing burden of caste humiliation (Mosse, 2012: 182) alongside the anxiety of sexual violence (Irudayam, Mangubhai, & Lee, 2014), or when on acquiring middle-class sensibility they impose new restrictions on Dalit women, caste again interlocks with gender inequality (Still, 2017).

Some anthropologists account for changed caste in terms of a shift from hierarchy to identity, and the re-coding of caste rank as cultural or “community” difference, adapting what Dumont (1980) first characterized as the “substantialization” of castes into competing kin-ethnic interest groups (Fuller, 1996; Gupta, 2004). It is in these terms that caste is seen to be reproduced through democratic politics, and the articulation of interests through caste-based political strategies and voting, producing new categories through “horizontal stretch” (Srinivas, 1995, p. 105) across individual *jatis*.

The modern horizontalization of caste has not, however, removed the vertical divide between *avarna* Dalits and others, but made it more evident. In 80 percent of 565 villages across 11 Indian states recently surveyed, Dalits faced segregation and exclusion in public spaces and markets (Shah, Mander, Thorat, Deshpande, & Baviskar, 2006); and 27 percent of the 42,000 households in a nationally representative survey (in 2011–12) admitted practicing untouchability in private spaces (e.g., barring Dalits from entry to areas of the house, or using separate utensils) (Thorat & Joshi, 2015). Significantly, such practices are strong among lower-ranked non-Dalit castes, where education appears to fuel rather than ameliorate status competition (ibid).

4. Rural development: Caste and economic inequality

Longitudinal research from the 1950s shows unequal access to new opportunities, whether in irrigated agriculture, off-farm or urban employment, as embedded in caste (Epstein, Suryananrayana, & Thimmegowda, 1998; Lanjouw & Stern, 1998).

⁹ Dalit political mobilization has often been *jati*-specific. Widening differences among Dalit castes prompts not just distinct political parties but demands for ‘sub-category’ reservations from the state.

During the period of agriculture-led growth (the 1960s–80s Green Revolution) cultivating castes gained from technology-driven increases in productivity often at the expense of laboring Dalits (Bremner, 1974; Harriss, 1982). But in recent decades, land and agriculture have weakened as a basis of caste power; and across India, upper-caste village elites are found withdrawing from the village economy and politics, their dominance replaced by fragmented centers of power or diffuse brokerage networks mediating access to scarce but necessary credit, state schemes, markets or jobs (Gupta, 1998; Jeffrey, 2002; Witsoe, 2013). Alongside, a relative decline in agriculture, the post-1991 liberalization period saw an explosion of diverse non-farm employment in rural areas. Recent reports of the seven-decade Palanpur study in Uttar Pradesh reflect a national trend in showing overall reduction in rural poverty and rising incomes from better paid work, but also growing inequality as the poorest access uncertain casual work in railways, cloth mills, bakeries, liquor bottling, brick-kilns and the like (Himanshu, Lanjouw, Murgai, & Stern, 2013).

Does caste contribute to this inequality? The picture is inconsistent. While Himanshu et al. (2013) find most inequality in Palanpur between households, thus *within* rather than between castes,¹⁰ Lanjouw and Rao (2011) argue that standard inequality decomposition analysis underestimates persisting Dalit caste-based disadvantages. They contrast Palanpur with Sugao, a village in Maharashtra, where income inequalities from access to outside employment (through circular labor migration) have *not* been along caste lines. Carswell and De Neve’s (2014a) ethnography of economically diversifying villages around the major textile cluster of Tiruppur (Tamil Nadu) finds opposite effects even in close-by villages: in one, new demand-driven labor markets reduce caste exclusion; in the other, power-loom industrialization *within* the village entrenches caste power, inequality and untouchability.

Iversen, Kalwij, Verschoor, and Dubey (2014) used nationally representative data, from 1993–4 and 2004–5, to assess the effect of caste identity on inequality in the post-reform rural economy. They discovered that Dalits have higher incomes in own-dominated villages (“enclave effects”), for reasons illustrated by Anderson’s (2011) account (from a 120-village survey across north India) of the way caste distorts groundwater markets such that low-caste farmers have crop yields 45 percent higher when in villages where water sellers are of the same caste. Inequality-driving caste discrimination in the supply of other inputs (e.g., seed, credit, including by cooperatives) and the sale of produce is reported by Dalits in a 2013 survey across 80 villages in 4 states (Thorat, 2017). Explaining the impact of labor and other rural markets on caste, and caste on markets means taking account of many things: variation in histories of land control or reform, urban proximity, caste demography, and caste-political mobilization (Lanjouw & Rao, 2011), but there is little to support a simple conclusion that capitalism disrupts the agrarian order to “subvert and destroy the caste system from the inside” (Prasad, 2008).

There are also non-market caste effects in development. Positively, Dalits have gained from a massive increase in state spending on public goods which has equalized access to school education, healthcare, housing, piped water and electricity (Banerjee & Somanathan, 2007; Munshi, 2016, 48). To this can be added public expenditure linked to enacted rights such as to work through what is perhaps the world’s largest work-fare scheme under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act. The NREGA self-targets poorer Dalits offering what is dignified as “government work” paid at the national minimum wage (Carswell & De Neve, 2014b). It

¹⁰ Recently Stern (2017) reports higher inequality associated with lower inter-generational mobility, suggesting that class differences in the village become self-perpetuating as the better-off are able to take advantage of opportunity-generating networks, the cost of which excludes the poor.

increases local wage rates and workers' bargaining power, which can also fuel class/caste tension (Imbert & Papp, 2015).

The delivery of public services is also a source of discrimination. A 12-village rural health care study across Gujarat and Rajasthan found Dalit children experiencing untouchability (e.g., aversion to touch during diagnosis) in the idiom of cleanliness from upper-caste junior health workers; more so among government than private or "traditional" practitioners (Acharya, 2010). A survey of the national food security Midday Meals Scheme in 531 villages also found caste segregation and avoidance, a mitigating measure being to put the scheme in the hands of Dalit women's groups (Thorat & Lee, 2010). Similar conclusions arise in relation to the Public Distribution System shown to discriminate against Dalits in shop locations, quality and price of goods and treatment of customers (ibid).

In sum, the picture of caste in Indian rural society today is ambiguous. New freedoms and formerly-denied social honor acquired by Dalits exists alongside forms of (often covert) discrimination which also drive economic inequality. In fact, intense competition for work in the post-reform economy that has shrunk public sector employment while "not generating jobs in the private sector at anything like the rate needed to allow people to leave the land" (Jeffrey, Jeffery, & Jeffery, 2008, 36) gives caste a new salience. In Uttar Pradesh, Jeffrey et al. (2008) found upper castes able to respond to under/unemployment by mobilizing capital and caste connections externally and to invest in village-based businesses in ways unavailable to Dalits. While Dalit women and men may experience village life as less marked by exclusion and denied honor, caste is ever-more important to opportunities beyond: access to higher education, jobs or business. Here caste is an composite effect, bound up and disguised in the mobilization of capital, networks into institutions of government or business, or dowry payments – which may be oriented towards status/occupational mobility through caste/class hypergamous marriage that precisely aligns gender and caste hierarchies (O'Hanlon, 2017, 439).

Caste here is mobilized competitively, not as status or ethicized identity in the struggle for regional political power, but as a resource or strategic network for access to the regional economy. It is this that lies behind the public advertisement of caste belonging, the marriage halls or student prizes of regionally-connected caste associations that I have witnessed in Tamil villages (Mosse, 2012, pp. 252–261). Caste reworked as private connections and capital, is not so easily perceived as such, even by those affected. With the transition from honor to opportunity, caste increases its invisibility.

Where caste becomes hyper-visible is in highly-coordinated and sometimes lethal violence, often directed at Dalits whose success, self-respect infringements of caste and kinship conventions, romantic choices or access to public office (e.g., through success in local council reserved-seat elections) so threatens the relational standing of adjacent caste groups.¹¹ Indeed, using a decade's district-level crime data (2001–2010) Sharma (2015) shows that increases in violent hate crimes correlate with the narrowing gap between the standard of living of Dalits and dominant castes; and violence commonly targets for destruction, often by arson, the material signs of Dalit progress (housing, shops, consumer durables or vehicles). But it also takes forms that maximize trauma and humiliation, including sexual violence, public stripping, forced consumption of excrement, and uploading humiliating attacks on social media (Shah et al., 2018, 240). Such caste violence has in turn prompted the formation of human-rights focused Dalit movements

backed by NGO networks attempting (with limited success) to use anti-discrimination for protection (Carswell & De Neve, 2015).

The Human Rights Watch report *Broken People* (Human Rights Watch, 1999) documented the anti-Dalit violence in the 1990s. In the next period, there followed a 40 percent increase in reported cases between 2009 and 2014 (Ghosh, 2016), although conviction rates remained low at 28 percent (for criminal atrocities against SCs and STs, ibid). Criminal standards of proof (of anti-Dalit intent) are an obstacle, as is caste prejudice within the judiciary (Ramaiah, 2007; Deshpande, 2017, xxxiii).

5. Caste in the urban labour market

For many Dalits, the town represents escape from rural toil and risk of humiliation to 'mere poverty' (Roberts, 2016, p. 55). In the industrial workforce, rural migrants experience mobility, mixed-caste working/living spaces and friendship groups. Individual experiences of casteless mobility are a reality, but at the scale of national data sets, as Deshpande (2017) concludes, the diversification brought by post-reform development has not broken the association, across states, of upper castes with higher-status professions and Dalits with manual and casual labor. National survey data expose glass walls against Dalit occupational mobility out of caste-typed roles or low-end service trades (such as masonry or carpentry) into more profitable ones or self-employment (Das, 2013). Under conditions of overall increased mobility between generations (especially in urban areas) studies find intergenerational persistence (especially occupational) greatest among Dalits (and Adivasis, the 'Scheduled Tribes'), and their occupational ascents are more fragile (subject to downward mobility, especially in rural areas) (Iversen, Krishna, & Sen, 2016; Deshpande, 2017, xiv–xv).

The intersections of caste and gender mean that Dalit women, with caste-comparative higher (although declining) participation rates in the labor force, are particularly restricted in job mobility. Despite often being represented as having relative gender freedom (compared to upper-caste women) Dalit women face highly exploitative work conditions. In a national survey, a third recorded experience of physical mistreatment (Deshpande, 2017, 138–39). While greater prosperity decreases violence against women (or its reporting), it also brings status-enhancing restrictions on their mobility and decision-making (Deshpande, 2017, 137–38; Still, 2017).

Recent ethnographic research explores the harder-to-detect ways that caste identity shapes modern opportunity at every level. Those leaving stagnating agriculture in search of urban jobs are sorted into work graded by skill, insecurity, danger, toxicity or status in caste-related ways. So, for example, Dalit workers in the Tiruppur garment industry are more likely to find themselves in the low-skill dirty dyeing units, and non-Dalits in the skilled tailoring sections (Carswell, De Neve, & Heyer, 2017). A new wave of rural industrialization creates skilled/managerial jobs for upper-caste outsiders, but despite legally contested claims for such permanent posts – sometimes taken to the international level where multinational companies are involved– those who lost land to new complexes at best gain casual work as security guards, loaders or janitors (Bommier, 2016; Donegan, 2018).

Drawing together case studies from across India, Shah et al. (2018) show how neoliberal industrializing India is shaped by inequalities inherited from village caste orders (see also Still, 2015b). It becomes clear that those who controlled the village land hold privileged positions in the regional economy, that caste is the character of clientelism in India (Jeffrey, 2002), and that caste networks in cooperatives, sand-mining cartels, on college campuses, in the housing market, and in IT companies are central to how

¹¹ Significantly, an experimental game study in rural north India found stronger in-group favoritism and willingness to impose sanctions on third-party rule-breakers among high-status *jatis* than among Dalits (Hoff, Kshetramade, & Fehr, 2011).

business, bureaucracy and education work (Fuller & Narasimhan, 2014; Jodhka & Manor, 2017a; Shah et al., 2018; Witsoe, 2017). Caste-based urban rental markets (Thorat, Banerjee, Mishra, & Rizvi, 2015) shape residential segregation in Indian cities (Singh and Vithayathil, 2012) with all that this implies for interactions and networks, while reproducing as city slums the spatially-marked village “Dalit colony” (Roberts, 2016).

Looking specifically at labor markets, three caste effects can be mentioned: (1) occupational ranking, (2) network effects (or opportunity hoarding), and (3) categorical exclusion. These can be taken in turn.

First, regarding occupational ranking and the differential valuation of work and workers, the caste-typing of jobs is strong in certain businesses such as (south Indian) restaurants with Brahman cooks and suppliers (Iversen & Raghavendra, 2006) or sanitary work with Dalit labor. Despite the self-representation of elite sectors such as information technology as being matched to upper-caste (Brahmin) knowledge and skills (Fuller & Narasimhan, 2014; Upadhyaya, 2007), identity-bound work is most characteristic of stigmatized occupations, none more so than the filthy, dehumanizing and unprotected work of dealing with human excreta, known as “manual scavenging”, campaigned against and prohibited by law,¹² but still assigned to the lowest Dalit castes, including by contractors to the Indian Railways (Singh, 2014). Despite transition from manual scavenging to sewer work, as Tam (2013) argues in the case of Ahmedabad, modern sanitation and sewer programs have accommodated caste divisions and discrimination, while placing workers in danger, as attested by the regular and early deaths of Indian sewer workers. Harriss-White’s (2017) recent analysis of the informal waste economy of a Tamil town shows how, more widely, the social cost of disposal of noxious waste is placed on undervalued humans, socially shunned through discrimination of their group identity as well as the characteristics acquired from their occupation (p. 110). As B.R. Ambedkar wrote, “the caste system is not merely a division of labor. *It is also a division of laborers*” (2002, 263).

Second, workers are caste-sorted through referral-based labor recruitment, via risk-bearing gang-leaders and foremen who, under shifting market conditions, use caste-kin networks to offer employers flexibly-hired loyal workers. The resulting caste-segmented (and caste-typed) labor markets are known from single-caste dominated workforces in the colonial mills, docks, railways, factories, mines, or indentured labor on plantations (and their contemporary equivalents), sometimes traceable to specific ancestral locations, or even to the role of an individual recruiter-foreman (de Haan, 1994; Iversen, Sen, Verschoor, & Dubey, 2009; Munshi, 2016a, pp. 23–26). Such hiring today produces a highly mobile “super-exploited” seasonal labor force recruited to distant construction sites, brick-kilns, factories and plantations, including Adivasis undercutting Dalit workers recruited in earlier generations, now laid off or casualized by structural changes in mills or plantations (Shah et al., 2018).

Third, opportunities opened to an in-group by caste networks also exclude others as a category, regardless of the characteristics of individuals, as Tilly (1998) argues. Such “categorical exclusion” was found in research on the construction sites of western India which distinguished Saurashtrian bricklayers from Dalit/Bhili casual laborers, ensuring that even after 25 years’ work on construction sites, in stone quarries, lime kilns and brick fields, a Dalit (or Adivasi) laborer has no chance to get skilled or better-paid work (despite a shortage of skilled labor) (Mosse, 2010, p. 1126). By influencing skill acquisition, cultural capital and network formation, categorical distinctions and occupational differentiation

become self-reproducing (Corbridge, Harriss, & Jeffrey, 2013, pp. 252–253; Munshi, 2016a, p. 27; Tilly, 1998).

Nonetheless, education and skill development are valued as the route to individual mobility (out of caste-occupational traps), especially among Dalits whose increased school enrolment is reflected in a national narrowing of the caste gap in primary and secondary education in the post-reform era (Hnatkovska, Lahiri, & Paul, 2012, cited in Munshi, 2016, 35). But while education is deeply woven into Dalit narratives of positive identity, progress and civility (e.g., Ciotti, 2006), qualitative studies across the country point to the shackles of caste-labelling, low expectations and classroom segregation that defeat Dalit ambition (e.g., Nambissan, 2010, p. 277). Indeed, using a national data set of 51,550 households, Desai, Adams, and Dubey (2010) find that while poor educational outcomes among OBCs and Scheduled Tribes have to do with low enrolment or parents’ education or income, in the case of Dalits, caste *identity* independently affects the impact of schooling.

Beyond school, problems for Dalits deepen. Not only did the Dalit/upper-caste gap in access to higher education widen in the post-reform period (to 2004/5) – a time when “the premium to education is rising in the formal sector” – but also, the return on education for Dalits (in terms of increased wages) declined (between 1983 and 2000) (Deshpande, 2017, pp. 75–82, 186; see also Deshpande & Zacharias, 2013). These are, in the apt title of Jeffrey et al.’s (2008) ethnography of the disjuncture between higher education and employment, *Degrees without Freedom*. Noting that for Dalits, each additional year of education yields a smaller increase in wages than for upper castes, Das concludes bleakly that for urban Dalits, post-primary education “confers almost a disadvantage” bettering the chances of neither salaried work (beyond the small number and now enclaved low-end jobs in the reserved formal sector) nor self-employment, while increasing their likelihood of opting out of the labor force” (Das, 2008, 1).

There is persisting caste-based disparity in earnings (upwards of 15 percent) for equivalent levels of education, greater in the private than the public sector, and compounded for Dalit women by gender disparities. The question of why equivalently qualified Dalits earn less, points to *discrimination* – in recruitment and role allocation (hence occupational segregation) more than wages (Deshpande, 2017, 152; Madheswaran & Attewell, 2007; also discussed in Munshi, 2016a).

Employment discrimination occurs at two levels. First, the job market implicitly demands of applicants traits, skills, linguistic and cultural competences which the education system does not explicitly give, and that come from families transmitting a dominant class-caste culture bundled as individual “merit” (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 494; Munshi, 2016a, p. 27). The “merit” that recruitment managers of 25 large Delhi-based firms said they used in candidate selection when interviewed by Jodhka and Newman (2007, p. 4127) was emphatically “formed within the crucible of the family”.

Second, discrimination operates directly on identities. Applicants are sorted explicitly by caste (and religion), which is what studies sending fake CVs signaling the caste or religious identity of identically qualified candidates find. Discrimination is found especially in private firms, in certain sectors (more so in call-center than software industry jobs), and when recruiters are male and Hindu (Banerjee, Bertrand, Datta, & Mullainathan, 2009; Das, 2013; Siddique, 2011; Thorat & Attewell, 2007; Upadhyaya, 2007). Such caste-based discrimination is also demonstrated in experimental studies on charitable giving (unwillingness to support identifiable victims with Dalit names) or exam marking (lower marks for papers randomly assigned Dalit names) (Deshpande & Spears, 2016; Hanna & Linden, 2012). Drawing on theories of racial prejudice, Thorat (2017) suggests that this discrimination mostly operates on caste identities through socially framed norms,

¹² See Safai Karmachari Andolan (‘manual scavengers’ movement’) – <http://safaikarmachariandolan.org>.

perceptions, interests and decisions rather than individual psychological prejudices.

Finally, identity-based discrimination has been modelled to show that it is not only compatible with functioning free markets, but produced endogenously by them, specifically as a means to overcome coordination problems (Basu, 2017). Because jobs involve interaction, a given person-type (caste) is preferred over another because it is believed that other people will prefer the same type, so improving that person-type's productivity. Given the interactional nature of most work, discrimination changes the productivity of those discriminated against, reproducing productivity differences. The notion that caste identity can thus arbitrarily become a 'focal point' of productivity and coordination in a rational market, and that discrimination itself may even enhance economic growth, underscores the need for affirmative action policy (ibid).

These caste effects are reproduced through differentiated expectations of graduates, so that upper-caste/class candidates experience privileged cultural capital and prejudicial norms and networks as *casteless merit*; whereas, Dalit men and women with limited finance and weaker networks, experience being persistently identified with their caste background and in consequence have an understandable preference for the scarce public sector jobs (Deshpande & Newman, 2007; Deshpande, 2013; Jodhka & Newman, 2007).

6. Caste in the business economy

Perhaps Dalits can skirt discrimination in the primary labor market by turning to self-employment in business. Surely the massive post-reform two-thirds increase in private business since 1990 with half the workforce self-employed by 2005, provides the conditions for the erasure of caste (Harriss-White, Vidyarthi, & Dixit, 2014, 40, 51). The prominence of caste in business and homophily in employment suggests otherwise (Deshpande, 2017, p. xxi). Again, in business, we find the three caste effects of (1) network effects, (2) the ranking of markets, and (3) caste exclusion and barriers.

Starting with networks, their importance is well known from the way castes dominant in trade in the early 19th century moved into manufacturing,¹³ followed by agricultural castes especially with the post-1991 reforms (Chari, 2004; Damodaran, 2008; Munshi, 2016a, pp. 14–15; Rudner, 1994). Caste networks for business regulation are especially important where risks are high, formal institutions weak and "selective trust" at a premium (Harriss, 2003, pp. 766–67), whether the low-end and high-turnover opportunistic Gujarat garment industry, or the high-end diamond industry in Mumbai and Antwerp studied by Munshi (2011).¹⁴ Strong caste networks also develop in shunned markets, such as leather, sanitary ware, cleaning services, and the earlier-mentioned waste economy dominated by Dalits (Jodhka, 2010).¹⁵ This is illustrated by Gill's study of the Delhi waste business, which also shows how caste divisions (here among Dalits) differentiate those dealing in segregated dry inorganic waste, often plastic (*kabada*), and the most stigmatized Dalit castes picking and dealing in unsegregated organic/inorganic waste (*kooda-kachhra*) (Gill, 2012).

Markets are indeed ranked, and the more inferiorized the market, the more caste-linked to occupational pasts. Dalit business

access to markets is correspondingly differentiated. At a macro-level, sectors such as mining/quarrying, construction and transport are found to be relatively open to Dalits, while entry into health and education, food, hospitality, finance and the service sectors (where it is Dalits rather than the markets that are stigmatized) is much harder (Harriss-White et al., 2014, 67; Thorat & Newman, 2010). A micro-level study of south Indian entrepreneurship showed a third of the 405-household sample engaged in caste-linked business activity (e.g., crafts, dhobi services, musicians) (Guérin, D'Espallier, & Venkatasubramanian, 2015). Caste influenced the market for high-symbolic-value products like oil, milk or rice, and Dalits were excluded from food or clothing markets (beyond own-caste customers), being restricted to inferior physically demanding businesses. Even transport services were segmented: non-Dalits transported people/long distances; Dalits transported goods/short distances.

Networks and ranked markets exclude. Restricted access to capital or collateral (e.g., property undervalued because of its caste location), to business networks, premises, infrastructure, raw materials supply chains and markets controlled by other castes, all mean that Dalits (the first generation to do so) have entered the business economy at the bottom, running petty shops, as dealers or agents. These are mostly survival-oriented rather than entrepreneurial businesses, owner-operated or reliant on family labor, without formal credit, and mostly rural and male (Guérin et al., 2015; Harriss-White et al., 2014; Jodhka, 2010); (Deshpande and Sharma, 2016; Deshpande, 2017, xvii–xxii). The small Dalit share of enterprise ownership, initially *decreased* post-reforms before rising by 2005 (Harriss-White et al., 2014, pp. 51–52; Iyer, Khanna, & Varshney, 2013, p. 56; Thorat, Kundu, & Sadana, 2010, p. 312). And while there is diversification away from stigmatized activities, especially in rural areas (but few benefits from microfinance schemes¹⁶), prejudice still enclaves Dalit businesses in towns and cities (Deshpande, 2017, xviii). This questions the presumed liberating effect of urban anonymity (Gupta, 2004, xx) (but see below), and the market-era hope of fighting caste with 'Dalit capitalism' envisioned by the Dalit Indian Chamber of Commerce (DICC) set up in 2005 by high-profile but very unrepresentative Dalit millionaires.

Prakash's (2015) study of 90 cases opens a window on Dalit entrepreneurs' experience of the liberalized economy. He reveals the costs of exclusion from networks that circulate information, give preferential rates, allow stock transfers, or facilitate the informal transactions with officials needed for business. Dalits feel closed-in by humiliating prejudice. One in Uttar Pradesh tells Jodhka (2010, 46), "while most other local businesses or enterprises are known by the service they provide or the goods they sell, our shops are known by our caste names". Half in Jodhka's study tried to hide their caste identity, especially where rivals leverage consumer discrimination against them, impugning the quality of Dalit food, health-related, education or other personalized services (Prakash, 2015, p. 72). Pervasive discrimination suggests to Harriss-White et al. (2014) an attitude that Dalits are expected to be laborers; their entry into business is socially transgressive. Setting up a business, even selling fruit or fish, is not just an enterprise, it is a social assertion. Barriers to self-employment lead many educated Dalits to withdraw into unemployment (Das, 2008).¹⁷

¹³ Even in 1964, "23 out of 37 of the largest north Indian-owned industrial houses listed in the Monopolies Inquiry Commission Report" were Marwari or Gujarati Bania (Munshi, 2016a, pp. 14–15).

¹⁴ Using this latter case, Munshi (2011) suggests that, over time, self-reproducing business networks substitute for caste connections.

¹⁵ With "cosmopolitanization", some businesses here are slipping into the hands of big-operations managed by non-Dalits, leaving Dalits mostly as workers, supervisors or contract suppliers (Prakash, 2015, 70; Harriss-White et al., 2014, 67).

¹⁶ Research reveals caste prejudice and restricted networks behind failures of entrepreneurial activity in Dalit women's savings and credit groups, whether NGO-, bank- or state-promoted (Kalpana, 2017; Guérin, D'Espallier, & Venkatasubramanian, 2015). Credit relations are bound-in with unequal power and status in ways that entrench rather than weaken caste.

¹⁷ Some rely on improvisational economic activity as brokers/mediators (Young et al., 2017), or join the "not-working poor", surviving through what Ferguson (2016) refers to as processes of *distribution* (rather than productive jobs), that is claiming a share of other people's resource or income streams.

The caste effect is uneven – less in procurement (unless on credit), more in recovering outstanding bills – but the overall disadvantages are hardly compensated for by reliance on NGO or state initiatives (see below), and DICCI represents the elite end of Dalit business where discrimination is weakest. Indeed, it is the smallest entrepreneurs (urban and rural) who find it hardest to escape caste identity effects. Using nationally representative data for 2004–5, [Deshpande & Sharma \(2016\)](#) find the caste-gap in earnings from self-employment greatest at the lower end of the distribution, where discrimination produces a “sticky floor” effect, ([Deshpande, 2017](#), xxiv).

Spatial analysis shows discrimination varies across the country. [Harriss-White et al. \(2014\)](#) map three regional variants: a “northern” belt with low general business activity and low Dalit participation; a “central” belt with high activity and high Dalit participation; and a “southern” belt with high business activity but low Dalit participation. State policy, such as on poverty reduction, is a poor explainer of this variation (also found at district level); but so (at state-level) are education levels, growth rates, unemployment, Dalit political success or anti-caste movements. Access to essential business resources (credit, skills, sites, supplies) is a factor ([Vidyarthee, 2016](#), p. 247), but strong discrimination against Dalit business in the southern entrepreneurial region, credited with pro-poor growth, is hard to explain ([Harriss-White et al., 2014](#), 59). In fact, [Vidyarthee \(2016\)](#) finds urbanization the most significant factor associated with incorporation of Dalits as owners of businesses, notwithstanding the above-noted restrictions on diversification of urban Dalit enterprises.

7. Caste in the post-liberalization economy

Caste in the post-liberalization economy does not denote a single process or effect. As [Harriss-White](#) puts it,

“[c]aste has a perplexing capacity to dissolve, as ascriptive characteristics give way to acquired ones (such as skills, compliance and trust, experience and creative competence), and as capital becomes mobile. But at the same time it persists and transforms itself as a regulative structure of the economy – sometimes in the same site’ ([Harriss-White & Vidyarthee, 2010](#), 318).”

As such, caste works *both* as a structure of disadvantage or discrimination, and as a structure of advantage or accumulation working alongside gender, religion and the dis/advantages of education, occupation and connections “closed” through endogamy ([Harriss-White, 2003](#): 239).¹⁸ As in [Tilly’s \(1998\)](#) theory of “durable inequality”, caste involves processes of both “categorical exclusion” and “opportunity hoarding”. Moreover, the effects of caste are such as to operate quite differently (sometimes inversely) on upper and lower castes. Noting the force of caste differentiation *among* disadvantaged groups themselves, [Shah et al. \(2018\)](#) point to forms of “class casteism” (borrowing from Etienne Balibar’s “class racism”) that stigmatize and segment identities, rendering cross-class cultural/political alliances fragile. Simultaneously, caste inequality depends upon, and is stabilized by, gender inequality or “graded patriarchies” ([Chakraborty, 2003](#)). First, this means that the lower-caste women experience labor unfreedom and market discrimination that is structured around patriarchy (work mediated by male relatives, gendered social norms, or sexualized harassment, e.g., [Kapadia 1999](#)). Second, Dalit women suffer control and violence as the effects of the failed masculinity of humiliated Dalit men ([Anandhi & Kapadia, 2017](#)).

¹⁸ As captured in Ambedkar’s early formulation of caste as “enclosed class” ([2002](#), p. 253)

We should be clear, modern caste persists in the age of the market because of its *advantages* – its discriminations are opportunities for others, although rarely examined as such. Indeed, constitutionally and legally caste is only a source of disadvantage, never a source of privilege ([Deshpande, 2013](#); [Subramanian, 2015](#)). Caste is a *resource*, perhaps best conceived as a network, in part of actual or potential kin; a network of enormous durability and spatial reach ([Munshi, 2016b, 2016a](#)) offering protection (social insurance), access (to jobs, business, the state), mediation (of disputes) and control (over resources), beyond state regulation ([Hoff, 2016](#)). The value of caste-belonging is attested by the low and stable rate of out-marriage at just five percent in rural India (and the collectively imposed, sometimes murderous, upper-caste sanctions against elopements across the “untouchability line” [[Chowdhry, 2009](#)]). Among educated middle-class Indians, still 70 percent marry (broadly) within caste ([Banerjee, Duflo, Ghatak, & Lafortune, 2013](#); [Munshi, 2014, 2016a](#)).

The mutual insurance in crisis provided within *jati* networks at village-level is well understood, and their role in links to education, labor markets and for business has been noted ([Munshi, 2014](#), p. 49,53; [2016a](#), p. 4; [Munshi & Rosenzweig, 2009](#)). Caste networks similarly segment community-based organizations, the NGO sector ([Picherit, 2017](#)), the bureaucracy and of course political parties. At the same time, networks have their own effects. For example, [Munshi and Rosenzweig \(2009\)](#) argue that the cost of exiting village caste networks explains India’s low rural-to-urban migration despite high wage differentials; the richer the network, the stronger the disincentives to migrate, marry or invest outside. Since better-placed individuals can detach into individual mobility, in principle, networks are strongest when there are few outside options or, as with brokered labor recruitment, avenues of mobility are provided by the network itself ([Munshi, 2014](#)).

Changed circumstances can alter, even reverse, the positive effect of a network. [Munshi and Rosenzweig \(2006\)](#) explain how caste networks that facilitated the mobility of one generation of Dalit men from villages into formal sector blue collar jobs in Mumbai, limited the opportunity of the next, as boys were channeled into network-linked vernacular-language schools, excluding them from new white-collar jobs in the post-liberalization economy, accessed in fact by young women through high-return English-medium education. The idea that networks produce “dynamic inefficiencies” ([Munshi & Rosenzweig, 2006](#), 1230) and Dalits may actually be disadvantaged by their networks finds support in [Deshpande’s \(2018\)](#) finding from a retrospective study in Delhi that while upper-caste secondary school graduates who used networks in job searches did better than those who did not, Dalits using caste networks did worse than those who did not.

In principle, caste networks that fail to meet interests will attenuate, but in practice the political construction of interests including oppositional identity struggles hold networks together when they no longer improve economic welfare ([Munshi, 2016: 33](#)). Or as [Jeffrey et al. \(2008\)](#) show, activist network-building by educated Dalits (in rural Uttar Pradesh) may be a response to blocked access to jobs or business. More generally, Dalit activist or NGO organization is a response to their weaker caste networks into business or bureaucracy (see [Waghmore, 2013](#); [Picherit, 2017](#); [Jaoul, 2016](#)). But Dalit public action cannot easily challenge power in informal processes, and Dalit networks that are strong politically “are often weak in terms of garnering access to assets and markets”, capital and jobs ([Das, 2008](#), p. 6).

Indeed, the great scope and influence of caste lies in the fact that, as [Harriss-White \(2003\)](#) points out, the part of the Indian economy upon which the vast majority of people depend as laborers or self-employed is *informal*, regulated not by legal-institutional structures of the state, but through social structures of gender, religion and caste, which extend their influence to the

operation of formal institutions and the market, controlling the supply and price of goods, rents and labor in ways that “remain hardly touched by liberalization” (2003, p. 241).

8. Affirmative action

The predominant importance of informal processes is why affirmative action (confined to the formal sector) is not the central story here, even though (as noted) the issue of public sector “reservations”¹⁹ has come to dominate national discourse and political action on caste, being a focus for anxieties about survival or success in the post-reform economic order. This produces activism both against reservations, and to extend them; the latter claim (legally unsuccessful) being for OBC (Other Backward Classes) status from regionally dominant farming castes (Jats, Patels, and Marathas) who feel threatened, for example by the corporatization of agriculture, water scarcity and being outcompeted for jobs (see [Deshpande & Ramachandran, 2017](#)). Of course, the prominence given to the issue of reservations is telling for its diversion of attention from the role of caste in the informal structures of the economy.

Arguments, that reservations are no longer necessary because caste is no longer important to inequality of opportunity, or that they are ineffective on grounds such as poor outcomes, “creamy-layer” benefits or inefficiency, are not supported empirically. Reservations have positive effects in providing access to higher education for SC (and ST) students who would not otherwise pursue this (e.g., [Weisskopf, 2004](#)), and whose graduation rates are not adversely affected by entering with lower qualifications ([Bagde, Epple, & Taylor, 2016](#)). Reservations categories do have stigmatizing effects, which while painful do not, [Deshpande \(2016\)](#) shows, undermine these gains, affect performance or block uptake.²⁰ Importantly, the reservations system allocates resources (college places and government jobs) that are scarce in relation to increasing growth-fueled demand ([Munshi, 2016a](#), 45). A state-wide study of engineering colleges shows that reservations do redistribute opportunity in class/caste (but not necessarily gender) terms, hence the upper-caste resentment ([Bertrand, Hanna, & Mullainathan, 2010](#); [Munshi, 2016a](#)). [Thorat, Naik, and Tagade \(2016\)](#) moreover show that a majority of SC public sector employees are drawn from the less educated and land-poor families (not a “creamy layer”),²¹ and [Parry \(1999a\)](#) shows ethnographically the reach of direct and indirect benefits from reserved jobs through community networks. But since most Dalits are employed in the private sector or in (non-reserved) temporary government jobs, the proportion covered by reservations is tiny (three percent).

The idea that reservations displace competitive merit so as to undermine the efficiency of public institutions is challenged in [Deshpande and Weisskopf's \(2014\)](#) analysis of 22 years' data (1980–2002) on the Indian Railways, which finds an increased proportion of reserved SC/ST employees positively associated with productivity and growth (2014: 15). The claim that reservations perpetuate otherwise-disappearing caste cannot be tested against a no-reservations counterfactual ([Munshi, 2016a](#), 48), but on the evidence is most unlikely. In any case, studies of reservations-recruiting public-sector industry show reduced caste divisions (e.g., [Parry, 1999b, 137, 1999a](#)), contrasting private sector factories where *jati* solidarities are a “conspicuous feature of shopfloor organization” and used in recruitment through private contractors.

Parallel electoral reservations in the lower house of parliament (the Lok Sabha), in state legislative assemblies and (from 1993) in local government (village and town panchayats) have generated less controversy, occurring alongside a general shift towards caste-based politics in India. This shift, research suggests, has tended to lower the quality/competence of candidates from the majority caste, negatively impacting the delivery of public goods, while encouraging individualized public transfers to members of the politicians' own caste ([Munshi, 2016a](#), pp. 43–46). At the local panchayat level, despite intimidation, violence or upper-caste-controlled “puppet” SC leaders, evidence across India shows Dalit panchayat presidents increasing poverty-reducing transfers to individual households, albeit mostly members of their own *jati* (rather than all Dalits) ([Munshi 2016a](#) provides a detailed review).

The rising political voice of Dalits in the 1990s, and campaigns on caste-based economic disparities under the post-liberalization conditions of a contracting state, began to push affirmative action beyond employment, education and politics to the business economy.²² There were for some time preferential loans, housing and other schemes for Dalits, although immensely fragmented, variable across states, and hard for researchers let alone ordinary Dalits to pin down ([Berg, 2014](#)). The Scheduled Castes Sub-Plan (SCSP), which allocates a proportionate share of the development budget to Dalits, was largely notional until it became the focus of Dalit campaigning and high-profile criticism for failures of allocation.²³ From 2012, for the first time affirmative action was extended to include market support, credit/capital support and skill development ([Vidyarthi, 2016](#), pp. 173–175). Responding to demands from an emerging Dalit entrepreneurial class (lobbying through DICCI) and building on the Madhya Pradesh state's experiment in “supplier diversity” in line with the pro-Dalit 2002 “Bhopal Declaration,”²⁴ the government's Public Procurement Order (2012) required four percent of all goods and services for central government/public sector undertakings to be purchased from Dalit small business suppliers, alongside credit support and skill-development schemes (*ibid*; [Deshpande, 2017](#), xxiii; [Thorat, 2011](#); [Vidyarthi, 2016](#)).

[Vidyarthi \(2016\)](#) is skeptical about this shift from state-backed group-based affirmative action, to a corporate “diversity paradigm” for individual enterprise ownership (see also [Lerche, 2008](#)). The approach, driven by bureaucrats and a Dalit business elite, finds little Dalit grassroots support from the poorer self-employed majority (cf. [Sarkar & Sarkar, 2016](#)), and because evading the difficult matter of private-sector job reservations meets little upper-caste resistance (*ibid*). Based on his examination of policy “escape hatches”, procedural evasion, non-compliance, allocation failures, mis-targeting and obstructing complexity, [Vidyarthi](#) judges the new Dalit economic policy agenda as combining “discursive encouragement” with “practical neglect” (2016, p. 228). Policy measures benefit only a tiny Dalit elite and fall short of targets (little more than one tenth of the four percent procurement target up to 2014).

The overall impact of affirmative action is much debated. Positively, [Hnatkovska et al. \(2012\)](#) find from 1993 to 2005, a national narrowing of the gap between SC/STs and other caste groups in education, occupation choices, consumption and wages, such that the median wage advantage of non-Dalits over Dalits

¹⁹ Extending reservations to the private sector, where caste-based discrimination is most evident, has been rejected politically ([Thorat, Aryama, & Negi, 2005](#)).

²⁰ Bureaucratic impediments (not stigma) are the obstacles to taking up reserved places, at least among SCs ([Deshpande 2016](#), 19).

²¹ [Thorat, Naik, and Tagade \(2016, 63–64\)](#) point out that the purpose of affirmative action is to address discrimination that is *categorical*, operating at the level of the group and so different from anti-poverty programmes which could reasonably exclude better-off Dalit households.

²² Especially, the National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR) <http://www.ncdhr.org.in>.

²³ e.g., the notorious diversion of 7.4 billion rupees from SCSP to the Commonwealth Games by the Delhi government in 2010. Between 2011/12 and 2015/16 only half of the allocated outlay (8.5 against 16.2 percent) was made to Dalits, the majority of central government departments making little or no allocations for Dalits ([Vidyarthi, 2016](#), pp. 202–203).

²⁴ Adopted by The Bhopal Conference: Charting A New Course For Dalits For The 21st Century, Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh, India, 12–13 January 2002 <http://www.digvijayasingh.in/Bhopal%20Declaration.PDF> (accessed 23 Dec 2017).

(and Adivasis) was well below that of white males in relation to black males in the United States; while the rate of inter-generational mobility had equalized. They conclude that improvement in school education is the most important factor, even though a gap remains between Dalits and upper castes in length (amounting to two years) and quality of schooling (Deshpande & Ramachandran, 2016; Munshi, 2016a, pp. 35–36). Attributing the narrowed gap to affirmative action is difficult since this only targets higher education. Indeed, Deshpande and Ramachandran (2016), by including OBCs alongside SC/ST and “Others” (upper castes by proxy), and so providing a more differentiated cross-caste comparison (and tracking absolute as well as relative gaps), find widening disparities over a decade (2000–2012) in certain areas such as higher education and access to the most prestigious white-collar jobs as upper-castes “pulled away” during the period of high economic growth.²⁵ The “glass ceiling” effect of discrimination means that the caste wage gap is greatest at the top of the income distribution (Deshpande, 2017, xv; Thorat, 2017). Nonetheless, Deshpande and Ramachandran say that without reservations disparities would have been greater, a conclusion supported by the case of Muslims who without reservations have experienced a widening of wage and education gaps (Hnatkovska & Lahiri, 2012). Modelling caste gaps across sectors – widening in agriculture, stable in manufacturing and narrowing in services – Hnatkovska et al. (2012) suggest that under the particular conditions of economic growth, the existence of institutions reducing the cost of investment in education and skills in relation to others (ie. SC/ST reservations) accounts for the pattern of caste convergence.

9. The modernity of caste: Rank, network, identity

The idea of an integrated “caste system” and the alternative of competing “ethnic”, political or cultural identities fail to capture the range of interactional domains (including class and gender relations) and adaptive dimensions through which caste is reproduced today. We have noted the caste-related value-ranking of occupations, spaces, markets and people that culturally pre-organizes modern capitalism even while being displaced by its market processes. This does not manifest any one religious or cultural system, so framing caste in exceptionalist Indian/Hindu terms is mistaken. Caste processes can be understood in terms of generalized social phenomena, such as ascriptive hierarchy, identity discrimination, categorical exclusion, opportunity hoarding or elite capture (Desai & Dubey, 2011, pp. 47–48; Jodhka, 2016; Tilly, 1998), allowing comparison with race, ethnicity and other identity-based inequality (as Dalit activists insist in pressing for inclusion of caste in UN conventions against racism (Nagaraj & Greenough, 2009). Indeed, anthropologists have fruitfully revisited the comparison of caste(ism) and race(ism) marginalized by the culturalist framing of caste (Fuller, 2011; Pandey, 2013; Roberts, 2017; Still, 2015a).

Caste is also viewed comparably as a kind of network process, mostly in economist (Munshi, 2016b) but also ethnographic studies (Witsoe, 2017), although rarely featuring in formal “network analyses” that link micro-interactions to structural outcomes at meso- and macro-level.²⁶ Advantageously, network analysis would avoid “caste” as an over-determined cultural or political concept, or presume an independently definable caste logic, which is no longer productive. Caste-influenced interactions are found to take genuinely new and unexpected forms, perhaps interacting with

other network processes around forms of consumption, taste or style which independently socially include or exclude. Caste thus has effects that fall well beyond the fields where it exists within actors’ frames of reference,²⁷ such as when produced endogenously by market relations, as Basu (2017) cited above explains, or in other ways lodged within interactional systems. It is this flexibility of caste, not continuity of a particular cultural form or social institution, in which lies its resilience (Emirbayer & Goodwin, 1994).

But a strictly anti-categorical structural network approach in which nodes are only a function of interactions ignores the importance of circulating cultural and political discourses of caste (Emirbayer & Goodwin, 1994, pp. 1430–1431).²⁸ Explaining caste as a network-effect also strips the dynamics of power from the “flows” in the network. Power is manifest as the capacity to connect, as demonstrated in regional networks of dominant castes. Historical and contemporary mobilizations to assert or protect status (caste honor or purity) advertise the gains to be had from identification with an esteemed group, strengthening the network (Hoff, Kshetramade, & Fehr, 2011, pp. 472–473), or distance from past inferiorization. But caste power is equally asserted over others (especially Dalits) through curbing *their* capacity to connect, to act collectively, or used to “pulverize and atomize” others (through threat of violence) and inhibit the formation of positive identity (ibid).

Alongside caste relations, caste *identity* has been reconceptualized beyond the taken-for-granted, substantial and *sui generis*. On the one hand, caste is an imposed societal categorization constituting subjectivities and self-worth, evidenced, for example, in Dalit’s lower expectations in the job market (Deshpande & Newman, 2007) or the ‘depressed entitlement’ revealed (in a national sample) in their perception of lower levels of earning as remunerative (Goel & Deshpande, 2016). We know from Hoff and Pandey’s (2006) experimental studies that caste discrimination produces “stereotype threat” effects; that is, the expectation of negative judgements about worth/ability, and fear of conforming to the stereotype, with impact on self-confidence and hence performance. Caste categorizations are thus made durable through their impact on agency as well as the structural effects of exclusion, segregation and blocked mobility. But the fact that Goel and Deshpande (2016) find “depressed entitlement” effects mitigated by election of a pro-Dalit political party (in Uttar Pradesh) or dignified government workfare schemes shows that perceptions are not fixed and that, as Appadurai (2004) argues, positive experiences can change the horizon of expectation and aspiration.

On the other hand, caste, like any identity is performative, and produced interactively (Latour, 2005). Identity is relational and exists in the crossing between networks; identity is a site of struggle for control and to secure a footing, to stabilize uncertainty through relationality (as White, 2008 argues). Identity effects are context-dependent. The performance of Dalit boys assembled from different north Indian villages by Hoff and Pandey (2006, 2014) in maze-solving tasks fell below others (deteriorating by 23 percent) *only* when their caste identity was publicly announced. The power of situational clues on performance, learning new skills or responses to competition, brings the behavioral science view of caste identity and its effects as “frame-dependent”.

In this view, the varied culturally-shaped mental models (narratives, identities, categories, expectations, judgements, world-views) through which people process information and make

²⁵ Opposing inequality trends clearly co-exist, but the more nuanced picture from Deshpande and Ramachandran (2016) methodology shows that the number of criteria demonstrating divergence exceeds convergence.

²⁶ But see Mohr and White’s (2008) analysis of institutional stability in Indian caste and American academic science.

²⁷ Of course, caste also remains explicitly a basis of prejudice (see recent survey Coffey, et al. 2018)

²⁸ Integration into networks is also the means to participate in identity discourse, accounting for how on university campuses students may only become aware of the salience of their caste as valued (or degraded) identity by virtue of the networks they are enrolled into (or excluded from).

choices may or may not foreground caste (Hoff & Stiglitz, 2016). What differentiates members of privileged castes from “lower” castes, is scope for the experience of the *irrelevance* of caste (albeit usually detectable) among the former, who can “encash” accumulated caste privilege as a casteless claim to private or public resources as unmarked citizens, while the “indelibly engraved” caste identity of Dalits overwrites all other identities being hyper-visible in their claims (Deshpande, 2013, p. 32; Subramanian, 2015).

The making-salient of caste and all its social judgments, is a modern form of power over Dalits. Done subtly, in a great variety of settings and amidst the expectation of equal treatment (for example in universities), this can be experienced by Dalits as devastating, hurtful, even traumatic. Such “dignity humiliation” – the rejected claim to equality (Lindner, 2010) – is a source of distress, turning the universities to which they gain access into places of defeat for ambitious Dalit students or faculty (Deshpande & Zacharias, 2013; Guru, 2009; Jadhav et al., 2016). The bearing that this has on the tragic deaths by suicide of talented students in elite institutions needs careful inquiry, but it has without question disrupted the public narrative of casteless modernity.

The idea of caste as an imprisonment of the mind has given salience to the idiom of religious conversion in anti-caste struggles, not as individual acts but – as Ambedkar insisted to be true of conversion to navayana Buddhism – as a transformation of the “social conscience” to embrace an idea of humanity beyond the social order (2002, pp. 122, 525). Recent study of its cognitive and affective aspects, points to caste as inner experience, its associated dynamic of pride, fear or anxiety being an effect of prejudice and threatened violence (Jadhav et al., 2016). Describing the incorporation of social hierarchy as “durably inscribed” embodied feelings, taste and dispositions, others use Bourdieu’s idea of “habitus” to capture the “caste mind/feeling” tacitly shaping everyday sensibility and tactics that make caste salient or not, through gesture, phrase or phone ring-tone that through invocations of historical identity that presage prestige or humiliation, connection or repulsion (Corbridge et al., 2013, pp. 255–256).²⁹

10. Conclusion

Ranging widely over literatures addressing caste and development, recent research gives reasons to pay the same kind of attention to caste in global policy as has been given to gender or race as opportunity-shaping identities. What has been discovered of the effects of caste for India is relevant to other South Asia countries and their diasporas. That caste is bound with other identity effects (gender, class) does not preclude policy attention to its distinctive characteristics: forms of occupational ranking, exclusion and enclosure, network effects, graded inequality and stigmatization. As fewer Indians remain poor, more of those who remain in poverty are Dalits and Adivasis, especially women among them (Harriss-White et al., 2014, 7). But poverty-generating processes are not entirely the same among these marginalized groups. As has been shown, Dalits suffer restrictions to occupational mobility occurring within the same markets. They have the least land, get the worse jobs, have poorest education. Gang, Sen, and Yun (2008) show that the relative poverty of Dalits arises from these “characteristics”, whereas Adivasis are poorer because of lower *returns* on given characteristics such as agricultural land with limited access to technology. Theirs is a locational rather than an occupational disadvantage.

The effects of caste are not “locational”; they travel from the village to the city and into virtually all markets where “cultural and social relations play out” (Das, 2008, 3), and have impact on the gains from developments such as education.³⁰ The relational inequalities of caste require no particular ideological justification and are reproduced rather than erased by globally-integrating neoliberal urban or industrial development. They ensure that every opportunity for Dalit advancement, whether starting businesses or gaining access to the educational gateways to middleclassdom, is a source of prejudice against them. Prejudice is materialized through a caste-networked economy, seen in the ‘glass-ceiling’ effect in salaried employment and the ‘sticky-floor’ effect in self-employment, and rendered durable intergenerationally through the closures of caste endogamy.

The evidence presented here points to the need for policy innovation to address market and non-market discrimination, to remove barriers and provide support (to Dalits) in the informal and private sector, and otherwise adapt interventions to the realities of caste. It also demonstrates need for informed discussion of caste inequality, and to challenge the exclusion of the issue from its proper place in global policy debate on sustainable development.

11. Conflict of interest

The author declares there is no conflict of interest.

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²⁹ Murali Shanmugavelan’s PhD research at SOAS tracks in fine detail the varied communicative practices of “caste mind” (*cati puti*) in everyday village Tami Nadu.

³⁰ One study using 1990s national data showed that a one percent increase in literacy resulted in a 10 percent rise in ownership of enterprises among Adivasis, but a mere 0.001 percent increase among Dalits (see Harriss-White & Vidyarthi, 2010, 328).

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