SOCIAL EXCLUSION, MARGINALIZATION AND DEPRIVATION: THE OTHER SIDE OF WELL-BEING

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ABSTRACT

The current paper explores the dynamics of social exclusion and marginalization in violent and non-violent areas of Bihar. This paper is extracted from a small portion of data collected for ICSSR project "The Shared Spaces: Exploring the Boundaries, Barriers and Bridges in Contemporary India". Interviews of 65 participants belonging to violent and non-violent areas of Bihar were analyzed. 35 participants belonged to Aarah city and Bahiyara village, which are non-violent regions, and other 30 participants were residents of three villages i.e. Ekwari, Kurmuri and Sahar, which have faced severe violence in the past two decades. Participants were mostly Hindu males and belonged to general and reserved category groups. Interviews were subjected to thematic analysis and various themes were extracted which focused on the implications of social exclusion, marginalization and deprivation on the psychological well-being of the participants. Results indicated that social exclusion and marginalization might also act to the advantage of Reserved Category groups. Caste as a group brings in the sense of belongingness and provides a thrust for identity construction. The findings are discussed in the light of current theorization in the area. Intervening measures suggested by the participants to cope with the distress has also been discussed later.

KEYWORDS: Social Exclusion, Marginalization, Deprivation, Psychological Well being, Disadvantaged, General Category, Reserved Category, Caste Groups, Exploitation, Subjugation

INTRODUCTION

Human societies are heterogeneous in nature. Apart from the natural differences like age, sex and personal characteristics, human beings also differ on the grounds of socially approved criteria. In India, criteria for differentiating people is highly diverse i.e. languages, religions, castes, class, cultures, creeds, socio-economic status etc. Amidst such diverse benchmarks to judge the social standing, one's status, power, income, and class in which one is born serve as the basis of socially created inequalities. Social stratification is a particular form of social inequality. It means division of societies into different strata or layers. It is the hierarchical arrangement of members (and social groups) of a particular society in terms of superiority, inferiority and equality on some commonly accepted basis of valuation. Members of a particular layer share common identity and similar life styles.

It is highly essential to study social stratification as it helps us to acquire socio-psychological mindfulness i.e. being aware about the hardships and limited resources that other people live with. It helps us gain insights into the underlying systems of beliefs and attitudes that play an invisible, and yet powerful role in guiding people's actions which can be ultimately used to enhance opportunities and improve the quality of life of the people.

Caste as a predominant mode of stratification of society has been interrogated primarily from the perspective of social exclusion, an endemic feature of Indian society. Despite the growing acceptance and need for equality, citizenship and democratic forms of governance, we note the presence of social divisions in society. Even in regions where the change in social and economic domains of rural life has been quite "radical" and the older order of caste has nearly disintegrated, caste-based divisions and inequalities continue to matter and often overlap with the emergent disparities of the new economy, both rural and urban (Jodhka, 2014). The social impact of divisions in society together with levels of marginalization influence social patterns of existence. In the Indian context we note that the race for social and economic resources has led to a fierce competition amongst various strata of society. Its strain on social patterns, intergroup relations and behavior, and the individual's well-being cannot be overlooked. In fact, the burden of divisions and everyday struggles of inequalities and deprivations have led to stereotyping, discrimination, violence and hatred across India. Given this scenario of strained relations among social groups the toll on well-being, harmony, and peaceful living is enormous.

Admittedly, social exclusion has various socio-political implications but our focus in the current paper is

mainly on the way the participants perceive exclusion and marginalization. Social exclusion mainly refers to the inability of a society to keep all groups and individuals within reach of what is expected from a society to realize their full potential. Marginalization and deprivation of certain groups or classes occurs in most societies including developed countries, and, perhaps it is more pronounced in underdeveloped countries. Specifically in India, caste plays a debilitating role for that section of society, which is labelled as lower caste or 'untouchables' by mere virtue of birth. It indicates thousands of years of servitude, exploitation and oppression on the basis of collective impurity due to being born in a community of untouchables. From a more gruesome side, it also indicates having a history of eating carrion, carrying dead animals, living outside villages, being treated worse than lepers and not being able to enter schools, offices and temples (Jogdand, 2013).

There is an implicit presence of caste in everyday interactions in our society (Ghurye, 1969). The communicative plunge of 'being questioned about one's surname' is deeply associated with the history of one's denounced caste. It devalues one's identity and labels their historical journey as derogatory. There have been innumerable micro-efforts by upper caste people to maintain social distance with lower castes by asserting their stigmatized group identity in subtle ways. For a long period, the term 'Dalit' represented a group identity of deprivation, humiliation and being underprivileged on account of one's birth in an untouchable caste. It strongly interfered with the needs of the Dalits (and individuals born in lower castes in general) to lead an existence of self-respect and pride. However, as a course of social creativity, the term 'Dalit' has now evolved to a 'collective politicized identity', which captures the essence of aspirations, hopes, and the struggles for transformations.

Against this stressful backdrop of deprivation and subjugation, it is essential to closely observe the issues and concerns, which the people go through in everyday life. Living in a constant conflictual state with intense dissonance, threat of violence and rivalry with the other caste groups, have severe consequences on one's psychological well-being (Fontaine & Yamada, 2012) and physical health (Nayar, 2007). With this as the foundation the present study attempts to bring out the paradigmatic experiences of inequality, deprivation, and struggles of identity assertion of lower as well as upper caste participants living in violent and non-violent spaces of Bihar. The upper/forward caste participants were identified as the 'General Category' (GC) and the lower/backward caste participants were identified as 'Reserved Category' (GC). These two terms are provided by the state. The latter term 'RC' includes Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST) and Other Backward Classes (OBC). For this purpose the study attempted to identify patterns of interpersonal and intergroup relationships in violent and non-violent spaces of Bihar. Violent spaces were identified as regions where violence was generally based on social stratification/reservation, and a law and order problem persisted on this basis. The idea was to understand the experienced reality of the participants facing social exclusion, marginalization and deprivation in two regions of a particular state, in this case, Bihar.

METHOD

Contextualizing the Study

Bihar is the second largest populous state in India and the second poorest state of India after Odhisha. Poverty is at 41.40% much above the national level of 27.50%. Incidence of poverty may have declined but the number of poor people has risen from 38 million to 43 million in 2010-11 (Singh et al, 2011). Poverty is more prevalent in the weaker sections of society yet even a substantial number of the GC families are also poverty stricken. It has been inferred that literacy and education levels are important determiners of rural poverty in Bihar. Migration rates are high.

A vicious cycle of caste strife and distrust has been characteristic of Bihar (Kumar, 2008). Caste has never been static or fixed. It is a malleable concept, which has been used as and when required, in different forms and re-inventions that articulate dissent and a complex camouflaging of politics of prejudice. The power of caste has varied across historical time, different regions and different policies. Bihar has poverty, corruption, existence of criminal gangs, vigilante justice, lynching, caste based violence, communal violence between Hindus and Muslims, decades long insurgency by Maoist groups, which put together make Bihar, and particularly rural Bihar, a challenging place to live.

For the current paper, we have taken into consideration interviews of 65 participants. 35 are from *Aara* city and *Bahiyara* village which are relatively non-violent areas of Bihar whereas 30 participants are residents of three villages of Bihar i.e. *Ekwari, Kurmuri*, and *Sahar*, which have faced severe violence in the past two decades. Most of the participants are Hindu males. They belong to general as well as reserved categories indicating the social hierarchy of caste system.

Procedure

The participants were subjected to a structured open-ended interview, which aimed at understanding the interplay of caste in violent and nonviolent regions of Bihar. After administering the interviews, the data was subjected to thematic analysis and various codes and themes were extracted. Participants belonging to "upper castes" are categorized as "General Category" and those belonging to "lower castes" are categorized as "Reserved Category".

Table 1

Themes emerging from the interviews of participants from Violent and Non Violent spaces of Bihar

	VIOLENT SPACES		NON VIOLENT SPACES	
	General Category	**Reserved Category**	**General Category**	**Reserved Category**
1. MARGINALIZATION, DEPRIVATION & INEQUALITY				
A. Blame of Deprivation	Feel excluded in various spheres. Condemn govt. and caste ascription.		Felt deprived and blamed govt. for seizing their interests	Felt no exclusion at all
B. Distribution of Opportunities	GC & RC believed that opportunities are in favor of each other.	Poor standards of education and blamed GC for encouraging alcoholism.	Unequal opportunities in education and employment; talent based v/s caste based opportunities	Advocate elimination of caste system
C. Social Categorization	Categorization essential to identify the 'needy', should be done is a way where benefits reaches the deprived ones.		Categorization leads to disparity and conflict	Formation of '*maanav jati*' ('human caste')
2. THREAT TO PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING				
A.Fear and Doubts	Felt extremely threatened during violent attacks, fear recurrence of violence, and experience lot of unease. RC- can't trust police and govt.		Mutual trust and harmony among each other	Doubts during voting; GC envy progress; limited help by fellow RC members
B.Learned Helplessness	Disheartened and insecure; benefits to RC; politically driven violence	Treated with utter disrespect; felt; misguided & misunderstood	Struggle even harder to earn merit and compete with RC	Reservation has been helpful but other hurdles in the way to success
C.Mistrust on Government	Reservation uplifts RC at the cost of GC's education and employment, Reservation as a trump card for vote banks	Govt. favors GC as they are financially stronger and politically valuable.	GC & RC believe that political parties are a major cause of caste conflict. They are perceived as the biggest threat to nation's unity.	
3. STRUGGLE FOR ASSERTION OF IDENTITY				
A.Personal Identity and Threat	GC & RC believe that personal identity is built by character and hard work. GC- Illiteracy and poverty manifolds threat, RC - no threat during harmonious times but 'caste' is a danger		Unity, honesty,work and morals as basis of Identity. Political and religious groups threaten it.	Reservation enhanced identity, women building identities in multiple domains.
B.Caste Identity and Caste Group Affiliation	GC & RC recognize the socio-economic interdependence, psychological need to maintain peace and harmony GC views caste membership as unimportant whereas RC considers it integral for identity		GC & RC believe that being Indian and human should be the basis of identity, caste identity is perceived as a threat. GC- Caste is a developmental menace RC- Intra group jealousy	
4. PUBLIC OPINION: INTERVENTIONS TOWARDS A PROGRESSIVE SOCIETY				
A.Individual Level	Stop harbingering doubts and mistrust, encourage peaceful conversations and positive thinking		Awareness about significance of education, emphasis on career guidance with the motto – '*each one teach ten*'	
B.Societal Level	End discrimination and categorization, elect unbiased leaders, promote literacy, de-addiction and cleanliness		Eliminate caste system, promote inter caste marriages, organize inter caste events, need to work at grass root levels	
C.Government Initiatives	No initiatives by the government can reduce the damages already incurred.		Support NGOs, promote trust, work for literacy and de-addiction, refrain from provocative speeches and policies	

RESULTS

The interviews were subjected to thematic analysis and following themes have been derived.

*GC-General Category, RC-Reserved Category

DISCUSSION

The current paper aimed at exploring the dynamics of social exclusion and marginalization in the violent and non-violent spaces of Bihar. The emerging patterns suggest a despondent state of affairs where despite social and political efforts by various government/ non-government bodies, both the upper and lower caste people feel socially excluded and marginalized. The turnaround of circumstances in the past few decades have been such in Bihar that no caste group is free from perceived physical and psychological threat. Especially for the violence prone regions, the impact by the brutal bloodshed has been so intense on the psyche of the residents that their belief systems and thought processes seem to be permanently dented. They are pursuing with their lives but under a constant threat of recurrence of similar episodes of violence. Since the violent attacks were directed towards each other, there seems to be very little trust among the people. To make the situation worse, the people understood the disreputable role played by the governments and police during violent attacks that make them more reluctant to trust the authorities for any sort of assistance in future.

PERCEIVED DISTRIBUTION OF RESOURCES

Coming down to everyday life, the social distribution of opportunities and resources have always been a bone of contention between upper and lower caste groups (Human Rights Watch, 2007; Narula, 1998). There is a tendency to perceive the higher share of resources tilted towards the other group. Apart from a few general category participants from violent regions and reserved category participants from non-violent regions, who believed that equal opportunities are provided and that success is a result of hard work and intrinsic motivation, most participants believe that opportunities are in favor of the other caste group.

The results pointed that participants from general category feel socially excluded and deprived as the policies formulated by government are relatively skewed towards the reserved categories. Considering reservation as a major menace, they feel unprivileged and deprived in education and employment sectors. Dearth of opportunities for them as well as tough competition on the grounds of caste heavily impacts their socio-economic status. They perceived it as a loss-loss situation, which is difficult to survive. Reserved category participants from violent regions consider their caste ascription as a *psychosocial curse*. It not only rejects them as '*inferiors*' but also scars their identity with discriminatory acts against them. They expressed severe disappointment with the poor quality of education system. Further, they accused the general category group for their notorious efforts to encourage alcoholism among reserved categories.

However, reserved category participants belonging to non-violent regions do not feel excluded. In fact, they consider reservation as a major milestone in their journey towards success. Interestingly, wherein on one hand the reserved category participants in non-violent regions seem to be flourishing in a non-threatening and empowering environment, the general category participants (who seemed to be in harmony with all other caste groups) furtively sustain lot of negativity towards reserved categories. They hold government responsible for inducing erroneous mindsets in people belonging to reserved categories by providing them with opportunities (reservations and quotas) without having to compete for merit. Secondly, the participants belonging to reserved categories pointed towards the development of intragroup wariness. People from reserved categories who have climbed up the social ladder refuse support to their counterparts who are still trying to step the same ladder resulting in jealousy and conflict among the members of reserved categories.

ADVANTAGE OF BEING DISADVANTAGED

Though, both general and reserved categories suffered tremendous violence and felt socially excluded and deprived, they believed in polishing their present and exalting their future. In spite of sensing lot of threat from various sources ranging from 'caste groups', 'religious groups' to 'higher authorities', they still believe that their personal identity is a result of their morals, hard work and honesty. They recognize the need for interdependence and mutual coexistence. Inter caste collaboration, sharing and helping others results in positive enhancement of their identities. All this can be summed up as the '*advantage of being disadvantaged*'. Disempowerment and deprivation primes the building of durable traits like resilience and perseverance, which help the people improve their quality of life. They are determined to bring change in their social circumstances and achieve success in their own ways. There is a major augmentation in their standpoint to evaluate situations. They don't behold people of other castes as perpetrators any longer; instead they sympathize with them as co-victims of mindless violence.

Eventually, their locus of control also shifts from external sources to internal. They focus on building personal identity rather than fostering caste identity. Most of the participants felt that caste membership was not essential as it promotes caste based discrimination and discord. Instead people branded themselves as 'Indians' and 'Humans'. Participants from violent regions believed that poverty and illiteracy have the potential to manifold the experienced threat. Only participants belonging to reserved categories from violent regions felt that caste group affiliation is essential for their identity development. It serves as a secure base for the participants who experience significant levels of doubts, fears

and threat from the other caste groups and authorities. It provides them with a sense of belongingness and high self-esteem (Tajfel, 1981, 1982).

PUBLIC OPINION

Contemporarily, the Indian political system has failed to gain respect and trust from the public. Participants, during the interviews, blatantly disrobed the political intentions of the leaders and efficiently understood the hidden motives behind the political dogmas. According to the upper caste participants, whether it is the creation of *Mahadalits* in Dalits, promoting caste based reservations, inadequacy of education system, or favoring lower caste groups for vote bank, all can be summed up as the political and financial benefit of the government. Politician like Lalu Prasad Yadav and Nitish Kumar have emerged as dominant voices for lower castes. Although changes in lower caste identities were noted before independence (Jaffrelot, 2000) categorization by state authorities, and due recognition of OBCs post-independence started the game of numbers; higher numbers translated into a larger number of votes and could act as pressure groups (Blair, 1980). The current scene indicates a strong assertion of backward classes that now play a dominant role in social and political fronts. Overall, most participants agreed that though it is the government's responsibility to spread equality, they have only ended up playing inappropriate politics and spreading negativity to satisfy their personal motives.

It was reassuring to note that participants were aware about the socio-political milieu in which they live. As discussed above, irrespective of caste most of them condemned government initiatives on ample of grounds. Participants proactively suggested intervention measures to take a step forward towards building a progressive society. In violent regions, suggestions ranged from replacing doubts and mistrust with peaceful conversations and positive thinking to ending all sorts of discrimination and exploitation. Participants from both category groups felt that reservation should be based on one's financial conditions and not bestowed upon by birth. They asserted that reservation given to rich Dalits is inappropriate, rather than help should be provided to those Dalits who are exploited.

In non-violent regions, participants accentuated the need for education, organization of events, community meetings and inter caste marriages to strengthen brotherhood. Most participants advocated the formation of a 'human caste' that should be solely constructed on the principles of humanity, cohesiveness and harmony. Many of them also emphasized the basic principle of life as "*sarve bhavantu sukhina*". The suggestions provided by the participants are very viable and, if implemented well, have the potential to change the persona of modern India.

CONCLUSION

Through this study it was found that though the consequences of years of violence are deep rooted in the minds of the people, they still recognize the need for socio-economic interdependence and harmonious coexistence. Social exclusion and marginalization, in spite of being a threat to one's social identity and well-being, has still served a functional purpose for a lot of participants belonging to lower caste groups. It leads to a positive group identity formation. It was also noted that people were readily taking measures to bridge the gaps and eliminate the boundaries.

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