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A Note on Occupational Mobility Caste  
and Job-Reservation

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Introduction

This paper is set out in two parts. The first part attempts at developing a certain frame for studying occupational mobility starting with questions regarding social organisation. This, we believe, provides an explanation for the availability of men in different occupations, or in conventional economic jargon the supply side of the labour market. In part two a very preliminary attempt is made at applying this frame for studying a few developments in India with the coming of the British and after. We end the paper with a few observations on the recent controversy on job-reservations.

I

A Frame of Occupational Mobility

1.1 Social Organisation

1.1.1 Social Activities: Our starting point is society viewed from the angle of activities which is simply a collectivity of social activities. These activities may be many such as priesthood, administrative, military, crafts, agricultural and so on, each of which are called social activities owing to the simple fact that they are expressions of components of social tradition. Once social activities are posited thus one can immediately go on to the question of social organisation of activities. Social organisation, broadly conceived, is an 'arrangement' through which men are associated with these activities

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so that all these activities are carried out in the society. What this immediately points to is a collectivity of men corresponding to the collectivity of activities.

1.1.2 Specialisation: Now, let us touch upon a few essentials of organization. First of all something needs to be said about specialization. If a certain activity  $A_1$  (collectivity of activities  $A_1, A_2, A_3, \dots$ ) is carried out only by a certain group  $G_j$  then we say  $G_j$  is specialised in  $A_1$ . This in no way means that  $G_j$  carry out only  $A_1$  they may carry out other activities as well, but  $A_1$  is not carried out by any other group. This immediately takes us to the question of the working time (W.T) of men. How do they apportion their W.T. across activities? If any group devotes the whole of their W.T. to a particular activity then we call them full timers (F.T). With F.T. the question of subsistence can be posed unambiguously. F.Ts need to draw their subsistence by carrying out that particular activity to which they devote whole of their W.T. To put it differently the effective demand and the share of social produce devoted for carrying out that activity are such as to provide their subsistence.

1.1.3 The Subsistence Question: Any discussion of subsistence is not complete without a few words on subsistence crop production, i.e. agriculture. It is obvious that agriculture by its very nature is seasonal and even within such clear limits man's activities are spaced depending upon the growth process. Hence it is impossible to conceive of full timers in agriculture. This peculiarity of agriculture raises the possibilities of some interesting combinations. There can be certain groups of specialists or full time specialists who, because

of the very nature of the production processes and locational factors, need to be provided subsistence from 'outside'. Miners and metallurgists are such. As regarding some other activities, say, carpentary, smithy.... etc., these are very much part of the 'agricultural societies'. These specialists draw their subsistence in two ways. One way is by becoming full timers which means the effective demand condition is satisfied and their subsistence comes from 'outside' like the miners and metallurgists. Another way is to devote part of the working time to specialised activities and the rest to agriculture. This is an important aspect of social organisation which will be used later on as the 'movements' - specialists rooted in land becoming full timers and full time specialists drawing part of their subsistence from land - revolve around the pivot of effective demand, which in turn is a reflection of the state of the society.

## 1.2 'Orders' in Society

1.2.1 Labouring VS. Non-Labouring: So much regarding social organization. It has provided us with one way of viewing divisions in society. Now, let us touch upon another, viz. the division between labouring and non-labouring. Labour for us is man's activities in production. Thus labourers or labouring groups in any society refer to those who are engaged in activities falling within production. It is clear that labour is just part of the activity in society and that there are other activities as well in society.

1.2.2 Life and its Protection: Here one may mention whole lot of activities around life and its protection. Protection needs to be viewed from two angles. Protection from 'nature' as conceived by man which

refers to the so called religio - magical - medical fabric (obviously some of these activities fall in the boundary of production), and protection from other human groups which refers to the military administrative - judicial fabric.<sup>1</sup> The social activities falling within the religio - magical - medical fabric are priesthood and related activities and the social activities falling within the military - administrative - judicial fabric are what are called the activities of the state.

1.2.3 Non-Labouring Activities and Subsistence: In as much as the activities of the State and priesthood are social activities and men are engaged in carrying out these activities their subsistence needs to be taken care of. That means a part of the social produce needs to reach these non-labouring groups. As already mentioned labour is man's activity in production and social produce is the 'end' of production. Thus if a part of the social produce has to reach the non-labouring groups then, there must exist very definite 'mechanisms' in each society which facilitate the movement of part of the social produce from the labouring to the non-labouring groups. One important 'mechanism' is that of 'right' over land. As land or territory is the 'base' around which the activities of state revolve, this 'right' and its many 'gradations' depend on the nature of the state and the level of differentiation of the institutions of state. With this it is seen that the criterion of 'right' over land is one which divides the society into definite 'orders'.<sup>2</sup> Thus, so far, we have touched upon two angles from which the divisions in society may be viewed. Just for the sake of completion we may mention that there are other angles from which society

may be viewed and social divisions thought of. We mention here one other important angle, viz. that of social relations. It is such an angle which takes one to definite social classes in society. For our purpose we need not go into this area. We confine ourselves to the above two angles and related aspects.

### 1.3 Social Groups

1.3.1 Entry Condition: In the above we began with social organization, then by viewing society from different angles ended up by viewing society as collectivity of occupational groups and collectivity of 'orders'. But nothing was mentioned about these groups as such. These groups in as much as they are groups of men their stability is governed by definite rules regarding entry into the groups and exit from them. Since exit is either moving out of the collectivity itself or entry into some other group in the collectivity for our purpose we need only go into the rules of entry. As to the rules of entry the two end points of this spectrum are 'free' entry and entry by birth. In the former any one outside the group may enter whereas in the latter it is fully governed by birth, that is to say that the children are born into the group of which their parents are members. To take a few examples, in the Hindu caste system entry into occupations, and in the 'orders' of Greek and Roman society entry into citizenship and the consequent right over land was governed by birth. Whereas in a modern society entry into any occupation is free subject only to the requirement that he has undergone the necessary training.

1.3.2 Entry by Birth and Unit of Reproduction: It needs to be noted at this point that entry by birth in itself does not reproduce exclusive social groups. There needs to exist very definite rules of reproduction of life, viz. rules of marriage, inheritance and so on to 'back up' the rule of entry by birth. With the two together one can conceive of exclusive social groups confined to certain occupations or enjoying certain rights. In terms of the notions introduced so far the totality of such exclusive groups consists in their being occupational groups or social 'orders' in the first place and in their being units of reproduction in the second. The Hindu castes and the Roman patricians and plebians are good examples of the above. Any breaking of the rules in one of the planes reduces the specificity of the groups. For example, a breaking of the rule of entry by birth does away with the occupational characteristic of the caste and reduces it merely to a unit of reproduction; or a breaking of the rule of marriage as with the plebian victory of 445 B.C. does away with the unit of reproduction characteristic of the 'order'. Leaving the questions of entry by birth and unit of reproduction for the present, the entry-rule as such provides us with a basis for raising questions regarding occupational mobility. Before going into it let us attempt a few clarifications.

1.3.3 'Freedom' and Mobility: An important point that needs to be noted here is that if a system is fully determinate, say for example entry into occupations by birth and marriage within the group, then the question of occupational mobility does not arise. Thus, 'freedom' at least at some level of the society is necessary for any talk of mobility. It is quite possible that mobility is restricted to certain

sections of society. For example take the Brahmins of the Hindu society. Though they were specialised in priestly activities they were allowed to enter agriculture and military pursuits in times when they could not subsist on their specialised activities.<sup>3</sup>

1.3.4 'Hierarchy': A second clarification is regarding hierarchy. It is necessary here to note that a collectivity of activities and associations with groups of men does not in itself point to any hierarchy or ordering. The question of ordering necessarily arises the moment a definite ethical position is taken. A case in point is the brahminical view of the activities of society. They compared it to the functions of the bodily organs and gave pride of place to the head. Once this is granted it is clear that the ordering can be different depending upon the plane from which one views the collectivity. Further, the hierarchy accepted at one stage of the evolution of society need not be the same at another stage. These, then will be governed by religious movements, political turmoils and so on. For example, in periods of invasions the group from which soldiers are recruited may move up in the scale as compared to the others, or say the craftsmen who have special skills in armoury may move quite high in the hierarchy or to take a different case whole groups may move over to the side of the enemy to raise their own status in the hierarchy. Same may also be the reason for the movement of groups from one religion to another. Take the case of Harijans adopting christianity or Muslim faith. These are questions regarding the ordering of activities and institutions and it is only with reference to such orderings that we may talk about upward or downward mobility.



## 1.4 Occupational Mobility

1.4.1 Occupational Mobility: Now let us move on to the question of occupational mobility. By occupational mobility all one means is the movement of men from one occupation to another. There are two aspects to this movement: one may be called the inter-generational and the other intra-generational.. By intra-generational mobility we mean men moving from one occupation to another during their working life and by inter-generational we mean the movement of offsprings as compared to the occupations of their parents. It is clear that the availability of men in any occupation at anytime is governed by such movements. This explains the 'supply side of the labour market.'

1.4.2 'States' of Society and Mobility: It is possible to conceive of two 'phases' of occupational mobility depending upon the states of society. In a stationary or declining society the lack of effective demand, or differently the <sup>decline in</sup> levels of different activities force people to move down whereas in a growing society the occupational mobility is clearly 'visible'. In this phase people move out of occupations and either eliminate these occupations completely or force the necessity of bringing in changes in the content of these activities. One other way societies face this problem is by encouraging people to migrate from other societies which have large number of men willing to perform such activities. Note the contrast between movements in the two states of society. In one people are forced to move out of occupations owing to lack of effective demand whereas in another people move out and bring about changes in existing activities.

Having touched upon the different states of society and the 'visible' mobility, let us attempt a brief sketch of the channels of mobility.

1.4.3 Channels of Mobility: The content of skill and knowledge in the different activities are different. Entry into all these activities, (except for the unskilled and lowly skilled) is subject to the requirement of long periods of training and education. Thus schools, academies and training centres become the channels through which one enters these activities. As such rules of entry and the actual conditions of entry into these bodies is a crucial factor in all questions regarding occupational mobility. Though theoretically everyone may be free to enter these bodies the actual conditions may be such that only those who are already in the top in the occupational scale or property scale and consequently who gain a larger share of the social produce can enter these bodies. In such a case the mobility gets confined to the 'top', i.e. 'top' according to one scale move to the 'top' in another with almost no movement from below.

## 1.5 Conclusion

In sum, beginning with social activities and social organisation we passed on to occupational groups in society. Similarly beginning with the distinction between labouring and non-labouring groups we moved on to definite 'orders' in society. Then taking up the question of entry we moved on to occupational mobility on the way touching upon 'freedom' and hierarchy. In the context of occupational mobility the channels of mobility were gone into. In discussing the entry into these channels it was shown that whatever may be the rules of entry actual conditions may restrict mobility to the 'top' of men from 'below'.

## The Indian Case

### 2.1 The Caste Hierarchy

2.1.1 Caste System: What has been developed so far is a certain frame. Now let us take the concrete case of India and attempt at sketching a few developments. Our starting point for this purpose is the Hindu Caste systems. Castes, as already mentioned, are specialised groups on the one hand and units of reproduction on the other. Now, it is possible to raise three sets of questions relating to the caste system:

(i) its origins

(ii) its perpetuation with all modifications

and (iii) its 'breaking up' during the British rule.

For our purpose we do not have to go into the origins of caste-system. We propose to touch upon (ii) and quickly pass on to (iii).

2.1.2 Specialists and Subsistence: To begin with, the caste-system had a ritual hierarchy with Brahmins at the top specialised in priestly activities. Though they began as full timers, in the course of history because of subsistence questions they were compelled to enter other activities. This was not only true of Brahmins but also other castes. What comes into operation here is the above mentioned effective demand and the related subsistence question. Observe O'Malley:

Even the laws of Manu, though inculcating that each of the orders should follow its own calling, allowed considerable latitude in case of necessity. If a Brahman could not subsist by teaching the Vedas, he might earn a livelihood as a soldier. Should he fail to get a subsistence by that, he might take up the occupation of a Vaisya, i.e. commerce or agriculture, or the keeping of cattle; and a kshtriya, if driven by distress to give up his calling, i.e. the pursuit of arms, might do the same; but neither a Brahmin nor a kshtriya might till the soil himself... (p.123)

Note that all along the hierarchy is maintained by barring any upward mobility.

## 2.2 Against Hierarchy

2.2.1 Religious Plane: It is in the context of the above mentioned restriction on upward mobility that certain religious movements and certain political alignments attain their significance. The history of Hinduism is replete with such movements, mostly at the behest of one caste or a group, challenging the hierarchy. To mention just one take the case of the shaiva movement in Karnataka. But such movements always ended up by throwing up a marginal group without in anyway changing the hierarchy. Similar was the impact of alien religions like Islam and Christianity. These provided shelter for certain groups mostly from the lower rungs of the Hindu system so that their status was raised in relation to the Hindu hierarchy. What Bernard Barber (Social Mobility in Hindu India) and Burton Stein (Social Mobility and Medieval South Indian Hindu Sects) talk about essentially refers to such attempts.<sup>4</sup>

2.2.2 Political Plane: So much regarding the religious fabric. Now let us come to the political plane. Certain political developments did provide opportunities for certain groups to raise themselves in the hierarchy. Cases of certain landowning groups claiming themselves to be at the top owing to their 'proximity' to the king or certain craftsmen owing to their special skills in armoury are clear cases of political patronage. It is owing to these two forces that whole lot of modifications were introduced in different regions. However the basic aspects of the caste-system did not undergo any change.

### 2.3 The Coming of the British

2.3.1 Reduction of caste to a Unit of Reproduction: The first substantive changes were brought about in the caste-organisation with the coming of the British. With the annexation of India an administrative-military system was sought to be raised by the British which was alien to the Hindu system. Though the initial recruitments to the army and police were highly selective and caste-based in due course it became necessary to broaden the 'area'.<sup>5</sup> With this entry by birth was increasingly done away with thereby removing one of the pillars of the caste system; viz. the association between caste and occupation. Caste, then became merely a unit of reproduction.

2.3.2 Entry through Western-School system: Alongside the administrative-military fabric developed the commercial and industrial system. This brought about a whole lot of 'new' industrial and commercial activities. Men needed to be recruited for carrying out



these activities. Here again entry by birth of the caste system did not have much meaning. With the emergence of these new occupations and skills the question of education and training arose. The western-school system was introduced and people were needed to undergo this process before entering the different occupations, especially at the higher levels. Thus entry into the occupations was governed by entry into the schools wherein one of the effective rules of entry into the occupations became the rules of entry into the schools. Now the entry into the schools was devoid of any caste considerations. With this it is possible to talk about 'free' entry into the occupations and the consequent occupational mobility.

2.3.3 Mobility from 'top' to 'top': Though by and large the rules of entry are free from any caste considerations, the actual conditions may be such that only the well-to-do can enter the schools and academies. This necessarily takes one to the question of ownership of land for in a predominantly agricultural society land is one of the most important productive assets. In the Hindu caste system there were gradation of rights over land and certain castes did not have any right over land (ref. to the orders' in society 1.2.3 above). Though during British rule and after those restrictions were removed not much has changed as regards the pattern of ownership of land. A glance at the data on land distribution is enough to tell us that land is still very largely owned by the 'forward' castes. This in turn provides a distinct advantage to the 'forwards', those who are at the 'top' according to the scale of land ownership to go to the 'top' in the scale of occupations.

## 2.4 Job-Reservation

It is in the context of the above mentioned movement from 'top' to 'top' that the numerous job-reservation and other educational facilities for the backward castes attain significance. Job reservation on the basis of birth facilitates the faster upward mobility of people who are at the lower rungs of society. This is the progressive aspect of reservation. The regressive aspects are two. Firstly, it protects the children of the parents who have already reached the 'top' against competitors from outside the caste who are poor. Secondly, it provides undue advantage to such children as compared to the poor in their own caste. One way of doing away with the regressive aspects is by bringing in, the often mentioned, criterion of level of income which is simply impracticable. The more practicable procedure would be to remove progressively those who have made it to the 'top' from the 'reservation list' by a birth criterion. Take for example the criterion such as 'after entering the reservation list only two generations can avail the reservation rule'. That is to say, if A's father has not made use of the reservation rule and A has made use of it then A's children and grandchildren can make use of it. From then on they join the general pool. The question as to how many generations should get the reservation facility may be answered by finding out the 'time' it takes for one to make it to the 'top', where the 'top' is appropriately defined.

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