Caste, Stigma and Well-being

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Methods

Ethnographic observation, focus groups, and a quantitative questionnaire have been deployed to study a select sample of Dalits & Dalit Buddhists living in an urban slum in Pune city, Maharashtra State, India. Analysis aims at unpacking the relationship between untouchability, stigma, and cultural psychological identity.

Emerging findings I

- Dalits who have not converted are more deprived in all domains as compared to Dalit Buddhists
- Dalit Buddhists continue to experience denial of full participation in everyday life but to a lesser extent.
- Both groups have developed a range of psychological, cultural and political strategies to resist discrimination and contest stigma of Caste.

Emerging findings II

Refashioning new religious, cultural and political identities by establishing direct vertical lineage with The Buddha through Dr. Ambedkar, and delinking with Hindu Gods

Emerging findings III

Dalit conversion to Buddhism: mechanisms

- Religious conversion is not absolute. It is instrumental, incremental, and additive. Many subjects access all available religious sites in parallel.
- Conversion to Buddhism is expressed chiefly through political or activist activities rather than as an inner transformation of the psychological 'Self'.

Discussion

Emerging findings indicate:

- Shifts in ritual practices and re-organisation of social spaces & behaviour amongst Dalit Buddhists.
- Dalit's continue to associate with Hindu rituals for their overall well-being. Dalit Buddhists, however, view Hindu rituals as barriers to accessing modernity.
- The nature of stigma related to Dalit caste identity include embodied components related to purity and pollution.
- The authors hypothesize that escape from stigma of caste may involve a shift from somatic to psychological experiences of suffering.
- The next phase will quantify the association of stigma with caste identity, and compare with stigma related to severe mental illness by deploying an ethnographically derived scale.

Conclusion

This study provides a vital theoretical contribution to the study of well being of socially excluded populations, with potential for a) psychological and social intervention on caste related stigma in India, b) transfer of such insights to other marginalized groups both within India and elsewhere.

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- *Dalit (Fr. Sanskrit) means 'ground', 'suppressed', 'crushed', or 'broken to pieces'. The term is used in the context of the oppression faced by 'untouchable' castes. Dr. Ambedkar, Father of Indian Constitution, and an untouchable himself, is credited with providing a spark for the transformation of hundreds of thousands of Dalits to Buddhism.

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