

# Where the Path Leads

## The Role of Caste in Post-University Employment Expectations

*This study attempts to trace the differential pathways that dalit and non-dalit students from comparable elite educational backgrounds traverse in their journey from college to work. While the training they receive in the university world is quite comparable, dalit students lack many advantages that turn out to be crucial in shaping their employment outcomes. Dalit students support the affirmative action policy completely, which allows them to break their traditional marginality. Our findings suggest that social and cultural capital (the overlapping of caste, class, family background and networks) matter a great deal in the urban, highly skilled, formal and allegedly meritocratic private sector jobs, where hiring practices are less transparent than appear at first sight.*

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The long range purpose of this study is to identify a group of educationally comparable university students from different caste backgrounds (in particular, “reserved category” or dalit students and the “non-reserved category”) on the eve of their entry into the labour market and to compare them in terms of job expectations, job search methods, actual placements, and the differential role that social networks (friends and family) plays in determining their options in the world of work. The students in question have similar educational credentials, although they come from divergent personal backgrounds.

Our work is still in progress: the students were interviewed in what they expected to be their last year of university (undergraduate or master’s studies) for a baseline survey. We are in the process of following them out into the labour market, with the intention of tracing their job search experiences and their actual placements. Most especially, we intend to focus on those aspects of differential experience that may come to distinguish these two groups of students if/as they encounter discrimination in higher education and the sorting process in the labour market.

Affirmative action policies intended to correct for historic exclusion has a long history in India and in the United States (US), and in both places, critiques involving charges of reverse discrimination have been persistent. Underlying the issue is a popular view that minorities in the US are reaping enormous benefits from affirmative action, while qualified whites are languishing on the unemployment lines. In order to explore the legitimacy of the critique, sociologist Deirdre Royster (2003) developed a longitudinal study which inspired the present paper. Royster followed 50 graduates (25 black and 25 white) from Baltimore’s Glendale Vocational High School to examine the school-to-work transition for working class black and white men.<sup>1</sup> She found in her carefully matched sample, that race continued to be a powerful predictor of wages and employment. Black and white men’s trajectories began to diverge only two or three years after high school graduation.

Royster argues that the most powerful explanations for the differentials lie in the constitution of social networks that can be

mobilised in the pursuit of employment. “Other things being equal – and in this study they are”, she points out, “the stronger one’s network, the better one’s chances of making stable labour market transitions”.

White men’s networks were undoubtedly stronger than black men’s. Black men mainly know workers, while white men know bosses as well as workers. Young white workers are neither permanently ejected from nor unduly stigmatised within networks if they “act out” or get into trouble. Young black men have to be extra careful not to confirm widely held stereotypes regarding their alleged irresponsibility and unfitness as workers. Young white men get many of their first experiences working in the small businesses of family members or neighbours, where mistakes can be quickly and quietly corrected. Young black men’s first jobs may be in white owned firms where early mistakes confirm racially biased suspicions.

Was the pattern of black disadvantage and white success recognised by the men Royster followed into the labour market? Interestingly, the answer is not only “No”, but a folk theory of white disadvantage developed instead. White men, who were extremely successful compared to their black peers, thought that racial quotas had limited their occupational options, giving their black peers an unfair advantage over them. White men described the job process as meritocratic if they got the job but as biased in favour of blacks if they did not or suspected that they would not get the job.

The purpose of the present project is to understand the extent to which similarly qualified Indian students diverge in the labour market according to their caste backgrounds and, secondarily, whether a similar interpretation of “caste advantage” develops in the context of reservations.

### Research Design

Our sample is primarily drawn from the three national universities in Delhi: Delhi University (DU), Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), and Jamia Milia Islamia (JMI).<sup>2</sup> All the students in our sample have completed their undergraduate

programmes and we have information about their final exam performance.

There were differences in undergraduate academic background between reservation and non-reservation students. Fewer dalit students had first class honours in their undergraduate degrees than non-reservation students (40 per cent versus 46.3 per cent) but this gap was not as large as one might have expected, owing no doubt to the selection pressure induced by minimum scores on the post-secondary entrance exams. For both groups, most had entered their postgraduate training with second-class undergraduate degrees (57.14 per cent of dalits, and 53.7 per cent of non-reservation students). Over half of non-reservation students reported previous job experience, compared to about one-third of dalit students. Non-reservation students were also more likely to report various computer skills.<sup>3</sup> In common with Royster's study, our Indian sample represents the most able students, who are quite likely to experience success in the labour market given their educational background.

The baseline questionnaire was administered to an initial sample of 108 students from DU (all in Economics), JNU and JMI (in mixed disciplines) in April of 2005. Given that dalit students were a small proportion of the DU sample (owing to a low number of reservation students who met the rigorous minimum entrance standards and the high dropout rates from the economics programme),<sup>4</sup> we added a second cohort of students in April 2006 from DU (again in Economics) and from a mix of disciplines at JNU and JMI, with matching dalit and non-dalit students in each academic field.

The first follow-up was conducted in November-December of 2006, which is roughly a year and a half after the baseline survey for the first part of the sample, and roughly six months after the baseline survey for the second part of the sample.<sup>5</sup>

### Preliminary Results

These analyses include 173 students who were completing postgraduate degrees from four universities in the Delhi area. Over half (53 per cent) were graduating from the MA programme in Economics from DU. Most of the remaining students (38 per cent) were completing degrees at JNU. About 35 per cent were women and 65 per cent were men.

Nearly 28 per cent were reserved category students. Reserved category students were disproportionately men: 83 per cent of the reserved category students, compared to 58 per cent of non-reservation students were men.

In terms of religious or communal background, for the sample as a whole 71 per cent were Hindus and 12.7 per cent were Muslims. The remainder of students were Sikhs, Buddhists, Christians, and Jains.

(a) *Diverging expectations*: Long before our sample confronts the labour market, their expectations of what they will find has diverged by reservation/non-reservation status. In bivariate comparisons, graduating reservation students had significantly lower occupational expectations than their non-reservation counterparts. The average expected monthly salary for reservation students was Rs 19,510, while non-reservation students expected to earn about Rs 24,470.

We asked each student to describe their ideal job but also to tell us what job they realistically expected to find. The contrasts between reservation and non-reservation students in terms

of expectations were sharp. The majority of dalits listed jobs in the public sector: 45 per cent mentioned administrative services/IPS, and another 28 per cent would ideally seek jobs as teachers or academics or researchers.

Non-reservation students were much more likely to report an ideal job as a business analyst or corporate planner (19 per cent of non-reservation students compared to 9 per cent of dalits) or in the social or development sector (15 per cent compared to 2 per cent for dalits). Relatively few non-reservation students viewed the administrative services as an ideal job (12 per cent compared to the 45 per cent of dalits).

The largest area of overlap in terms of ideal job was in teaching, academic and researcher jobs: many non-reservation students thought that ideal (30 per cent), as did 28 per cent of dalits. Also confirming the lower expectations of dalit students, a small minority of dalit students (2 per cent) thought of clerical type office jobs as ideal whereas none among the non-dalits did.

The expectation among dalit postgraduates that they would find jobs in the public sector was further confirmed by the proportion who had taken the requisite civil service exams. At the time of the baseline survey, far more reservation students (nearly 67 per cent) had taken the civil service exam than non-reservation students (34 per cent).

(b) *Family businesses, family connections, parental education*: The differential ability of reservation and non-reservation students to benefit from family resources – ranging from business where they might find jobs, to social networks that could be activated in the search for employment, to the cultural capital (or “know-how”) that will help inform a student of advantageous options – is very pronounced. For example, nearly 18 per cent of non-reservation students said that someone in their family owned a business where the student might be employed compared to only 8.5 per cent of reservation students.

Students were asked whether they expected to rely on family connections in finding a job. About 20 per cent of non-reservation students said they were likely to use family connections for this purpose, compared to about 10 per cent of dalit students. These two findings parallel Royster's observations about the advantages white men can call on in turning to friends and family members for employment in the small business sector.

Differences in family background (measured by parents' occupations) for the two groups of students are quite stark. The occupational distribution of fathers of the non-reservation students shows that the single largest category (16.5 per cent) is either self-employed or in big business. Thereafter, we find fathers who are managers or in the banking sector (11.5 per cent each). Ten per cent of the fathers are doctors, engineers, software engineers, or in the IT sector. Another 10 per cent are farmers. Smaller proportions (around 5 per cent each) are lawyers or chartered accountants and academics/researchers.

In contrast, the fathers of almost 33 per cent of reservation students are farmers. Even though both categories list “farming” as father's occupation, the follow-up interviews reveal that the dalit fathers are noticeably smaller farmers compared to non-dalits. This is followed by 15 per cent of the fathers who are academics/researchers, and lawyers, chartered accountants and have been part of the voluntary retirement scheme (VRS) (9 per cent each). Then 8.6 per cent are government servants or members of the civil service. Other than farming, all the other professions either have reservation quotas for public sector jobs or the

courses that lead to these occupations (medicine, engineering, law) can be pursued in government institutions via quotas. There is a small proportion, roughly 4 per cent each, in the development sector and manager/banking.

We asked the students if their mothers worked outside the home. Fifty-eight per cent of the non-reservation students had non-working mothers compared to 81 per cent of dalit students. Thus, an overwhelming majority of dalit students in our sample come from single income families. The distribution of occupations for mothers who are working is much wider for the non-reservation students as compared to the dalit students.

As the qualitative section to follow makes clear, family background plays a major role in the selection process during job interviews and on this score, relatively few dalit students can claim similar background characteristics.

(c) *Job search*: Both reservation and non-reservation students searched for jobs in similar ways, using university-sponsored placement cells, answering newspaper advertisements, submitting resumes by mail and over the web, turning to family connections and off campus “head hunters” or placement firms. However, reservation students were significantly less likely to use campus job fairs or placement cells and were significantly more likely to depend on newspaper ads than their non-reservation counterparts. Again, this illustrates the preference for public sector/government/university jobs on the part of dalit students, as a lot of private sector jobs are not advertised and government/public sector organisations cannot recruit without advertising.

(d) *Time to find a job*: About 47 per cent of the non-reserved students expected to find their jobs in two months. Seventy-five per cent expected to find their job in eight months. Ninety-two per cent expected to find the job within a year. The maximum time quoted was two years. The average expected time was 5.25 months.

The expected time was, on the whole, longer for reservation students. 45 per cent of the reserved students expected to find their ideal jobs in eight months. Eighty-two per cent of this category expected to find their jobs within a year. Ninety-one per cent of the sample expected to find a job within 18 months (as compared to 12 months for the general category). The average time expected was 9.6 months.

### Moving into the Labour Market

These group differences are clearly reflected in the follow-up interviews we conducted to learn more about their subjective experience of the educational process designed to prepare them for entry into the professional labour market, as well as their initial experiences with employment, often taken during their final years of education.

(a) *Reservations are critical*: Almost without exception, the dalits in our sample endorsed the purpose of reservation policy and were convinced that without it, they would have had no chance to obtain a higher degree. “I am here because of reservations”, noted Mukesh,<sup>6</sup> a political science student at JNU.

Because of my background, even though I had the talent, I could not study because of financial problems. We never got a chance to buy books, to get tuition. But we got through because of reservations. I am ahead by a few steps because of reservations.

Indeed, for Mukesh, quotas in higher education not only enabled his ascent in the university world, it literally enabled him and his

fellow reservation students to “open their mouths”, meaning speak their minds and “go to the centre of society”, where they can “meet other people...and get a platform”, The silence imposed by marginality, caste prejudice and poverty breaks down when dalit students are introduced to another world and a different future.

For students who know the origins of reservation policy, the practice is understood as a noble commitment to equality, struck by the hero of the dalit social movement, B R Ambedkar. This history is sacred to dalit students, for it represents the first victory in a long and unfinished struggle for human rights and full equality. As Bir Singh, another political science student at JNU, explained that campaign remains as vital as a source of inspiration for the poor and excluded:

Ambedkar...used his education to free the SC/ST and OBC and to...solve their problems...on the basis of equality, liberty and fraternity. He wanted to make them live with self respect and why he was able to do that? Because of education, because of the participation in this society in the form of reservation in every sphere of life. Education has created an ideal image in the minds of those people who are illiterate an example where a person (girl or boy) who comes from a rural area [can] enjoy taking reservation in education institutions. He is learning, reading and becoming a very high status profile person. That gives an example which... gives courage and pride to the rest of the illiterate, poor people, who are not getting [an] education, who are suppressed socially and educationally.

Karunanidhi, a student of history at JNU, who comes from a rural area near Madurai in Tamil Nadu, is all too familiar with life under the heel. “I am from a very remote background”, he explained. Without reservations, he would have been stuck in a community where his safety was at risk.

In my [native] place... [it] is very brutal, very uncivilised. They can kill anybody for a simple reason... Because of reservations in higher education, I am here. I could not even imagine being here at JNU without reservations... After my graduation [from undergraduate school], I worked continuously for six to eight hours [in a factory near his home]. If there is work, we have to work, we cannot delay. “Sir, I am tired I worked so long!” You can’t say that. If they call you, you have to go and work there whether you are sick or not, whether your father is sick or not... This kind of exploitation is there... I was working in Tiruppur [and the] rules and regulations of the company were on the wall... in English and Tamil. But whatever goes on in the company is just the opposite... There is no clean toilet...no hygienic environment [in the factory] for the workers. The girls are really exploited by the [hiring] agents and higher positioned people in the factory. If these people asked girls to go to bed with them, they cannot [be] denied. They force the girls, though these people are educated. I think educated people do this kind of exploitation more than others.

Reservations rescued Karunanidhi from a future of this kind.

Globalisation is creating enormous opportunities for the Indian economy, most of which fall into the private sector. It is common knowledge that big money is to be made there. Increasingly the public sector is seen as a backwater of inefficiency and students who can manage it are flocking to the high technology sector.

Our interview subjects were well aware of this trend and worried by it since reservations do not presently apply to the private sector. Even if they are willing to trade lucrative opportunities (that may or may not be available to them on the grounds of bias or skill) for the accessibility and security of the public sector, this alternative is disappearing. The solution, they argue, is to see

reservations extended to the private sector, to continue Ambedkar's mission of social justice to the domain where all the action is likely to be in the foreseeable future.

Amit, a political science student at JNU, argued that "both sectors should have reservation".

Now in India, it is the private sector that is getting bigger. Even in Delhi, just see the size of the public sector, it is very small. So SC/ST, OBC and minorities should all get reservations. If they don't... where will these people adjust?

As long as discrimination (institutional and individual) persists, dalit students argued, reservations will be needed. The reservation policy levels the playing field at the vital choke points of social mobility. As Bhim, a reservation student studying Korean at JNU, points out, social engineering is necessary to modernise the country, to move it past a traditionalist, antiquated social system ridden with superstitious beliefs that are themselves anti-meritocratic. "Because of reservations", he notes, "people of backward classes are developing".

I think there should be reservation in both private and public sectors. Upper caste people are holding important positions in both sectors. In public sector all the positions at the top level are held by upper caste people and they are also filling these positions with their relatives. If we are getting any jobs, we are getting only low level jobs... [Still], because of this policy, people are coming from remote areas, they are getting admission, doing their courses and progressing well in their lives.

Of course, these students are aware that their sense of legitimacy is not shared by the dominant classes and castes in India. The reservations policy is condemned for punishing innocent non-reservation students for the damage done in the past, reinforcing caste lines rather than striving for a caste-free society, and exempting dalits from the rigours of market competition. Paralleling Royster's findings on working class whites, Indian critics of reservations argue that it replaces one form of discrimination (against dalits) with another, equally pernicious form (against non-reserved students or workers).

These perspectives are unconvincing from the viewpoint of our dalit interviewees, though, who argue that the most powerful special privileges actually accrue to high caste Hindus who can tap into exclusive social networks, bank on the cultural capital their families bequeath to them, or pay the bribes that are demanded by employers for access to jobs. As Rajesh, a student of Korean language and culture at JNU, notes, these forms of advantage are never criticised as unfair:

Some people get admission in medical [school] after giving Rs 25-30 lakh [in bribes]... They don't get admission on the basis of capability. The entry of these people is not ever opposed, but people are against the SC/ST/OBCs who get in on quota. They say that these SC/ST/OBC doctors are [incompetent], leaving their scissors and threat inside the patients' bodies during surgery. But people who [gain] admission through capitation fees, paying huge donations, why are these things [not] said about them?

(b) *Entry into labour market:* At this point in our study, 73 per cent of the reserved students are still enrolled in advanced degree programmes at the three universities from which we pulled our sample. However, given the needs they face to support themselves and their families, they are often seasoned in the ways of the labour market even before graduation.

Our first observation of their experience searching for work is that despite their status as students from elite universities, caste

always figures in the matching process. For many civil service positions, the lists of candidates to be interviewed are organised by caste and the information is not received in a neutral fashion. Om Prakash, a sociology student at JNU, applied for a teaching position – one of the 1,500 positions advertised that year. "They had written in the list... in a bracket [next to my name] 'SC'."

Some [interviewers] were asking something of the SC candidates, but some other person was talking like this "yeah one knows how much talent they are having and what they can do" [sarcastically, derisively].

Several of the dalit respondents explained that because they lack "push" (pull) it was clear that they had no chance. An influential network of supporters is required to push ahead of the crowd for desirable jobs both in the public or private sector. At times money is the issue. Bribery is reportedly quite widespread. One respondent reports giving Rs 10,000 for a job he did not get and explained that he was unable to get the money back. For most of these students, jobs known to require bribes are simply off limits: they do not have the money and cannot apply. Chandrabhan, a political science student at JNU, applied for a civil service position in a panchayat in his district headquarters. He was required to submit the application at the home of the council's headman rather than the official office. But when he tried to get information on the requirements of the post through his father, the headman excoriated his father for thinking that this highly qualified son would be seriously considered:

He told my papa, 'Why is [that boy] going for that job?'. Actually, some influential people were going for that job, he told me. You cannot give money; you need to give a lot of money. That was really a shock for me. Someone like me goes for a job, then you get such a response.

Even perfectly legal hiring practices impose barriers on dalit students from poor backgrounds. For example, travelling to an interview may be prohibitively expensive. Rakesh took three examinations for jobs with the national railway company and when called for interviews, could not afford the expense of staying overnight or paying for his food. "One interview was in Calcutta", he explained, "another was in Guwahati. I had to go there and stay there and have meals there. For this, I need money that I was not having, so I could not attend that interview."

Caste barriers can be subtle as well as direct. Employers recognise the signal of surnames that are caste identified and students know that their names trigger employment interview questions that non-dalits are never asked. In particular, when private sector employers raise pointed questions about the legitimacy of reservation policy itself, a policy that presently does not apply to these firms, students are placed on the defensive. This was a common experience for reservation students.

As reported elsewhere,<sup>7</sup> employers are given to asking questions of all applicants about their "family background" For students from non-reservation backgrounds, the questions appear innocuous, and indeed they are regarded by everyone as a standard human resources practice. For reservation students, however, truthful answers may be stigmatising to the point of disqualification. Their fathers do not have the kinds of occupations that confirm the student's suitability for professional jobs; their families are "too large"; and most of all, the student may end up revealing the degree to which he or she is burdened by demands for support from their families.

Nathu Prasad, a political science student at JNU, applied for a job at a national research centre. He expected to be asked “about my NET exam or my MA, but there was no need to ask about my background, income source and all these things”.

They asked me about my parents, what they do. So I said they own a small bit of land, they are farmers, but they also do small business. I got the feeling that I was being singled out for these kinds of questions. I later asked some other boys who were there and they said that they had not been asked...

I don't think that these questions were neutral... I knew the topic that I had to speak on, they knew my qualifications, so if they had asked about that I wouldn't have had any problem. Problem is that by asking other questions, they can find out about our 'low label'.

Bidyut faced a harsh barrage over his family's circumstances following an equally discomfiting litany of remarks about reservations policy from the director of the firm. Everything from his regional origins to his parental occupation was at issue:

Explain where you belong to [I was told]. I said I am from Orissa. So how did you come here to Delhi?... He asked me so many questions about my caste, my family..... First he asked me, if you are from Orissa, why don't you settle down there... I said that in Orissa, the opportunities are very less, there is no chance [to make it]. I have been in Delhi already for one decade, so I want to join a job here because there are more opportunities. I am very interested in joining a good institute like yours. Then he asked: tell me about your background, what does your father do? I told him I come from a very poor background. My father was a farmer, he died recently. Now my mother is there, my elder brother is there. I am very much responsible for my family, so I want to earn some money.

The director went on to imply that someone from his background should be applying elsewhere, forcing Bidyut on the defensive to make the case for why he should be considered at all. It was made clear that people who come from his family background were not welcome:

You people are struggling for life, so you are not that competent, [he told me]. I answer that is not true.... They don't like SC/ST candidates in the private sector.

Dalit students are aware that these barriers are out there in the labour market well before their graduation from higher degree courses. For some, concern runs so high that they decide to conceal the truth in hopes of landing the jobs they want. Arshad, a computer science student at JMI, knew that he would face discrimination on this basis and hence reconfigured his biography to look less stereotypically disadvantaged:

My family background was asked, but I did not tell them the reality, that we are six brothers and sisters. I told them that I have one brother and one sister. They asked me 'What is your father?' I told them he is a teacher. I thought it could have some positive impact because my family background will look like a small family and father is a teacher.

In order for reservations policy to be operational in education and public employment, caste identity must be affixed to qualify. SC status is made clear in official records from high school graduation certificate to university files. If this knowledge was merely part of a bureaucratic record, the story would stop at that. But it becomes part of a moral narrative in which the student's right to the education he has received, his genuine talents, and his fitness for a job are questioned by those who hold negative

assumptions on all three counts. In a society where educational opportunity is extremely scarce relative to the demand, in which good jobs are highly coveted since there are too few for all of the qualified people seeking them, the job interview becomes more than a means of matching applicants to positions. It becomes an occasion for political debate that throws dalit students on the defensive.

## The Other Side of the Fence

Students in India – reserved and non-reserved alike – face extraordinary competition for spaces in higher education and public/private employment. At the same time, India's unparalleled growth has opened up opportunities for university graduates and the sense throughout our interviews was that students with advanced degrees can look forward to a much better future than might have been true in the past.

The non-reservation respondents reported far more favourable interviews and selection procedures when job hunting than reserved students, as well as a more positive “interpretive disposition”. By this we mean that matching procedures that reserved and general students both experience are interpreted by the former as indicative of questionable intent, while experienced as neutral or even positive by general students.

Few general students were asked about their caste or religious background. This was clearly a difference that mattered, but it must be noted that many reserved students were not asked about caste either. Their last names signal their caste membership in some instances, and questions on family background reveal the rest. The non-reservation students were able to bring to bear on the job interview, fluency in English, confidence in their academic skills, and advanced knowledge of what they would be expected to demonstrate in the way of “fitness for the firm” than dalit students, whose cultural capital was weaker.

General students did not see themselves as privileged because of these qualities, even if they recognised that the distribution of these skills was differential. These are merely the talents that firms are looking for, including ease in social situations like interviews. This parallels one of Royster's findings that white men did not see themselves as advantaged, but rather as the neutral case.

(a) *Job interviews*: Bharat, a sociology student at JNU, typified the reaction of general students to their job interview experience. It was an occasion overlaid with tension, because an evaluation is in progress. But on the whole, the interview was a learning experience, not a test of cultural fitness:

...the interview...teaches you a lot to handle the tension...Just adjusting to the ambience, the environment of the interview, helps a lot. So many questions are asked and one question is followed by another. You need to keep your mind cool enough in special circumstances.

The only negative experience Bharat could remember from his many rounds of interviews was one where he was “asked to come at 10 am and the interview began at 1:30 pm”. This was a “bitter experience”, he noted.

General students experienced a problem that many reserved students interpreted as caste discrimination: the pro forma interview, conducted for bureaucratic reasons only. For general students, the idea that a job has already been handed over to an inside candidate or someone with social connections superior to

their own is a recognised fact. It happens all the time. Preeti, a Delhi School of Economics student, described the experience in detail:

I went to another college [for an interview]. There was an internal candidate, so she was given the job and my interview lasted only 2-3 minutes. It was virtually decided that she had to be taken in. [The interview] was a formality for me. I did ask my professor [who was on the interview board] 'You won't ask anything else?' He said, 'Yes, I won't ask anything'. They were not treating me seriously. I know because just 15 days [before] I faced [an interview at another college] and the interview lasted a complete ½ hour and asked lots of questions.

Preeti did not understand this experience as a commentary on her fitness; indeed, she regarded herself as perfectly well qualified, but outmanoeuvred. The "wired" interview does not lead general students to believe that they will be shut out of upward mobility. If anything, it indicates to them that they too must cultivate their networks. For the dalit student, a wired interview is one more piece of evidence that they are going to face a very long uphill struggle for mobility because they don't have easy access to the "inside track".

The value of cultural capital, of understanding the social skills that need to be on display in an interview cannot be overstated. With so many applicants qualified on the grounds of skills and knowledge, Indian firms are looking for people who "fit", a matching process noted by American researchers of the labour market as well.<sup>8</sup> For general students, a university education is often a continuation of a lifelong process of cultivation not unlike what elite students in American ivy league universities experience. They move in to the task of job hunting with a degree of confidence that they have the social skills to function appropriately, to avoid being overly nervous, to project an air of cosmopolitanism that may be the final element that distinguishes them from other students with similar technical credentials.

Abhijit, a Delhi School of Economics student, described his experience with job interviews in tones strikingly different from even the most positive encounters among the dalit students:

Most of my interviews were very relaxed. No one was assessing my knowledge or anything, but...seeing how well and efficiently I contribute to the company. So, the positive feedback purely in terms of the fact that I had high success rate in terms of clearing interviews that is making me feel good. I was competitive enough to get a job later if I wanted to... None of my interviews were stressful at all. They were all very friendly for me. For example, when I had my interview with [information firm], he asked me why I want to work in Bombay? That is one of the cities that never sleeps and lots of stuff to do there. So the interview was more in terms of what I like, what I dislike and general chit chat about what I was looking to do in the future rather than quizzing me about, let's say what particular topics I had done in a particular [academic] subject or something like that.

Lacking cultural capital when they arrive in elite universities, dalit students – most especially those from rural backgrounds – are not in a position to improve their cultural exposure beyond what they acquire inside the university itself. This is not minimal. Coming to a place like JNU from a remote tribal region does indeed create opportunities for exchange and personal growth in a cosmopolitan direction. But if one must work at the same time, it will be hard to take this any farther. Not so for non-reservation students who may have many opportunities to widen their

horizons outside of the university during their years as students. Shreekant, a Delhi School of Economics student, commented on the ways in which he had been able to move outside of the university context to broaden himself:

What I expected, I got from my study at Delhi School...Other avenues...like travel, I got enough chances to travel around India or other places through the university. After some time, university education helped me to form a general (overall) understanding and also a social circle. Also helped me to gain general skills... There are so many ingredients [to being successful]. The most important thing is the peer group. There is a circle of friends/acquaintances in which one gains confidence, learns skills. A person like this will get access easily and he can be identified as a suitable candidate. Now here the background is equally important, so things other than intelligence matter a lot. Most of these ingredients are acquired with money. So [a person's] economic background gives a lot of privileges and it becomes a requirement to access several things. But someone who is less qualified at entry can be trained and learn the requirements of the job.

(b) *The family background test:* Virtually all of our study subjects reported being asked about their family backgrounds during employment interviews. Non-reservation students can offer biographies that are much closer to the upper-middle class, professional ideal. Hence the questions are rarely interpreted as offensive or prying. And the answers are almost always in line with positive images of family life, as Aditya, a Delhi School student recounted:

Couple of people asked me about my family background, about what my father does, whether I have any siblings or what my mother does? No one asked me about my religion or caste. I told them that my dad is a government servant, he is working in the Indian Railways and my mom is also in the Bank of [my region]. My sister is a doctor. So that was more courtesy, interested kind of questions that the interviewer broached up. They made me more comfortable rather than judging me on what my parents do or not do. I am sure I did not make any negative kind of influence at all in my case. It might have had positive impact to see in terms of my parents are well educated and my sister is also well educated and everyone is doing well.

While dalit students often perceive a hidden agenda in family background questions, for non-reservation students the same questions appear to be innocuous or sensible inquiries from a human resources perspective. They are not "gotcha" questions designed to discredit an applicant who is presenting herself as an educated, highly trained proto-professional.<sup>9</sup> Ashok, a non-reservation Delhi School of Economics student noted:

Yes I was asked about family background...  
*What do you think they were trying to get at?*

Maybe they were trying to understand if I will stay on in the organisation or leave soon. Because the one major problem that companies face is attrition. So, they do need a bit of an idea... They try and gauge if I will stay or not looking at a variety of factors. The way I told them, it should have been positive information for them. Or at least I felt that way. They must have thought that I will work there.

It is impossible to judge who has the "right story" on family background from these interviews and it is not clear that they are contradictory either. It is entirely possible that family background questions are used to identify caste or other background information that would be disqualifying in the eyes of employers who

are not willing to employ dalit applicants, or applicants with particularly needy families. It is also quite possible that human resource practice inclines firms to ask questions that help them ascertain the risks of attrition. The questions themselves do not provide a window on what they are used for when the winnowing process begins.

Yet if we couple these findings with the observations from studies of employer interviews [Jodhka and Newman 2007], there is some reason for concern that family background is used to “ratify” the claims presented on the surface by a job candidate to be a “suitable person” for a position, with siblings whose trajectories confirm his or her own “impression management” (to use Erving Goffman’s well known term). To the extent that this is the case, being able to give a socially acceptable answer about parental occupation or family size will be helpful. The converse could knock an otherwise qualified candidate out.

*(c) Equal opportunity:* Two distinct positions were evident among non-reservation students with respect to quotas. The first simply rejects the notion that they are appropriate at all, since the reservation policy is deemed as a violation of fairness principles and therefore an unfair tipping of the scales in what is meant to be a competition on the basis of merit. A variant of this view sees quotas as perfectly appropriate, but not if given along caste lines. Instead, economic deprivation or social backwardness should be the appropriate test. Here we see lines of convergence with many dalit students from rural areas who also resent the application of reservation to “the creamy layer” within their own caste.

The second recognises the legitimacy and purpose of reservation and seems to be enhanced by the interactive relations between dalit and high caste students. The more conservative posture falls in line with Royster’s findings among white working class students. The more liberal position emerges from contact and social relations of the kind that Orfield and others have argued will develop as a positive by-product of desegregation. Indeed, when advocates in the US argue for diversity in higher education, they make the point that mixing students up and insuring that classrooms represent a rainbow of experience will enrich learning and create tolerance. Both outcomes are clear in our sample.

Akhilesh, a sociology general student from JNU, exemplifies the conservative reaction to quotas. “I am not very happy with the Indian government actually bringing in such reservation”, he complained.

I think such barriers should not be allowed because when we are competing, we should compete on the basis of merit. Today one person is getting into IIT with no brains whatsoever, just by virtue of reservations. Whereas certain excellent students are not getting into IIT because general quota is full...

In jobs, also the same thing. Somebody who is an SC...gets the job and somebody like me who is not getting a job because I don’t have any caste certificate...It should be equal because we are all living in the same country. If you can really identify the poorest people who have very low annual income... I think then there is some reason to support reservation.

Many who share this view argue strenuously that the application of reservations will destroy the competitiveness of the Indian economy and drive away foreign investors because of the privileges insured by reservation. Hence they fuse personal exclusion with a national downfall in the making.

Other critics of reservations argue that the policy may indeed

be positive, but ends up being a colossal waste because the high drop out rates that SC and ST students suffer from negates their impact. These places could have been taken by non-reservation students who would complete their demanding courses, but instead are taking by people who had almost no chance, by virtue of poor preparation. Kavita, an economics student at Delhi University, was sympathetic in many ways to the cause of reducing inequality, but frustrated by the outcomes. “When I was a student,” she explained, “there were about 80 of us in college. Out of these, about 20 were from the quota.”

But by the time we reached the third year, virtually all of the reserved students dropped out, because they could not clear [pass] the courses... Reservation should be given to them only in things that help them gain employment. If the cut off [on entrance exams] is 90 per cent and you are admitting a person with 35 or 40 per cent in a course like economics, medical or engineering, you very well know that he/she cannot be. He is not fit to clear the course.

This student went on to explain that forms of social segregation inside the universities did not help matters. “They are not treated well”, she remembered, “when they go to colleges”.

[SC/ST students] have separate tables to lunch in college [dorms]. They get separate treatment. I don’t know whether these people actually gain out of these quotas because lots of stress. OK, there have been people who completed their degree, but see in our college, there were hardly any... General category students who were eligible could not get admission and had to go to other colleges or get into worse courses... So this reservation policy is not achieving its objectives at all.

What is the value, she asks, of a policy that produces drop outs and deprives the capable of a place because they lack a quota on their side? This is a view many non-reservation students embrace.

But they are not a monolithic voice. On the other side of the equation are non-reserved students for whom equality is a high principle and the barriers to achieving it for historically oppressed peoples clear enough. They embrace the purpose of reservation and see in it the possibilities of upward mobility. Among these supporters, there are differences of opinion nonetheless about the effectiveness of reservations for some of the same reasons that critics voice: high drop out rates. The lesson to be learned for these more progressive students, though, is not to abandon reservations, but redouble efforts to address educational inequality at much younger ages. Without a massive commitment to improving primary school education, they argue, we cannot really expect reservations to succeed. If not for reasons of equity, then for reasons of efficiency, differential investment is required.

## Conclusion

Following the lead of Deirdre Royster, this study attempts to trace the differential pathways that dalit and non-dalit students, from comparable, elite educational backgrounds, traverse in their journey from college to work. Since all of our respondents are not yet in the job market, this paper attempts to analyse their experience so far: their expectations and their understanding of how the urban, formal, skilled labour market operates, based mainly on early experience in the work world, prior to graduation.

As was true in Royster's study, students from these two groups bring very different levels of resources – in the form of family connections, financial security during their university years, obligations to support parental households, and the like – to the starting gate. Hence while the training they receive in the university world and the credentials they can claim when they finish, are quite comparable, dalit students lack many advantages that turn out to be crucial and are subject to scepticism on the part of employers who doubt the legitimacy of reservations (and by extension, the legitimacy of the credentials they present during the job search).

Perhaps as a result, dalit students from comparable degree programmes as their high caste counterparts have lower expectations and see themselves as disadvantaged because of their caste and family backgrounds. Because they arrive in college with weaker skills on an average, they are “playing catch up” and often do not succeed in pulling through even with more advantaged students, and hence enter the job markets with weaker English language and computing skills.

Dalit support for affirmative action in both higher education and jobs is unanimous and overwhelming, against the backdrop of discriminatory tendencies and their relative handicaps. At the same time, many (though hardly all) join many of their non-reservation counterparts in arguing that either reservations should be better targeted (toward poor and rural dalits, rather than second or third generation recipients of quota admissions, who are viewed as an internal “creamy layer”) or that reservations should be coupled with generous financial aid. The search for the “truly disadvantaged” continues in India as it does in the US, with complex political agendas in the mix.<sup>10</sup>

Our study so far suggests that social and cultural capital (the complex and overlapping categories of caste, family background, network and contacts) play a huge role in urban, formal sector labour markets, where hiring practices are less transparent than appear at first sight. [E]

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## Notes

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- 1 She uses the case study method (in contrast to the existing studies that rely on survey and archival data) to answer, what she calls, the “how” and “why” questions: causal factors in processes or events that develop over time. As she points out, the case study approach, which differs from aggregate level surveys and intimate ethnographic methodologies, nevertheless combines aspects of both. This is because it relies on semi-structured interviewing techniques that use some of the same questions with all subjects but allow for considerable unstructured discussion between the interviewer and the respondents.
- 2 We also have two students from the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), a distance learning university.
- 3 Most students had computer word-processing skills, but nearly 13 per cent of dalit students (and only 7 per cent of non-dalits) lacked that skill. Most students knew how to use Excel spreadsheet, but 27 per cent of dalits and 13 per cent of non-reservation students lacked those skills. Non-reservation students were also much more likely to have

skills in constructing computer presentations with PowerPoint (79 per cent compared to 55 per cent of dalit students).

- 4 Because the dropout rate of dalit students is very high, by the time they reach the final semester, it is impossible to match the non-dalit numbers with dalit numbers.
- 5 Retaining our respondents has been a challenge. Moreover, contrary to our initial (and their professed) expectation, not everyone from the initial sample entered the job market. Some failed to graduate and among those who dropped out without the degree, we were unable to contact any of the reservation students. Some decided to repeat the final year of the Master's programme in order to improve their grades and for this reason did not enter the job market.
- 6 In keeping with our promises of confidentiality, we have altered the names of the respondents to pseudonyms.
- 7 Surinder Jodkha and Katherine Newman, this issue.
- 8 Joleen Kirshenmann and Kathryn Neckerman (1991).
- 9 Erving Goffman (1961). Goffman uses the term “discrediting” information when describing the fault lines in an interactive setting that occur when someone makes a gaff and inadvertently reveals that their claims to a particularly identity are false.
- 10 Were this to be explored fully, one would have to take seriously the claim that urban dalits from civil servant families are relatively advantaged over their poor, rural counterparts, but still as a significant disadvantage in competing for managerial and professional jobs compared to their high caste counterparts. The parallel point has been made in the US context. Some have complained that middle and upper class black students are given the benefit of affirmative action, while poor whites are not. Yet proponents of affirmative action have argued that middle class blacks continue to face racial barriers and are less economically secure than their middle class white counterparts, owing to wealth differences (controlling for income). See especially Dalton Conley (1999) and Melvin Oliver and Thomas Shapiro (2006).

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