Urban Middle Class Dilemma: A Social Psychological Review of Ajay Navaria's *Unclaimed Terrain*

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Abstract

The rapid pace of Indian urbanization and positive discrimination policies have led to the emergence of an urban well-to-do Dalit population who now have to face evolved modes of social exclusion and discrimination. This paper looks at affectations of these mechanisms through the lens of social psychology scholarship on intergroup interactions and its effects on relative cognitive performance of individuals coming from different social and cultural locations in the short story collection *Unclaimed Terrain* by Ajay Navaria, a Hindi Dalit writer from Delhi. The paper deals with implied cognitive threats in the forms of stereotypes, stigma, ambivalent discrimination, skewed power share, hierarchical structures, status quo justifications, affirmative action policies and the resultant coping mechanisms employed by Navaria's urban middle class characters.

Keywords: Dalit literature, urban middle class Dalits, social psychology, reservation policies, ambivalent discrimination

"People know about the [Ku Klux] Klan and the overt racism but the killing of one's soul, little by little, day after day, is a lot worse than someone coming to your house and lynching you."

–Samuel L. Jackson (Mehta, 2019)

Post-liberalization, urban spaces in India have experienced rapid expansion and are home to an emerging well-to-do Dalit population. Unfortunately, these spaces seem to have developed modern modes of social exclusion and discrimination which highly influence movement

of erstwhile untouchable communities through them. As a result, despite lacking a homogeneous identity on account of geographical, economic and cultural differences, Dalits residing in various urban centres share anticipated social experiences of stigma and stereotypes. Such experiences have the potential to inculcate anxiety, awkwardness and fear in Dalit individuals which is well represented in the writings of Ajay Navaria, a Hindi Dalit writer from Delhi. His stories explore experiences of urban middle class Dalit (henceforth UMCD) individuals who have achieved somewhat financial prosperity but face evolved forms of discrimination in urban spaces. This paper looks at Navaria's Dalit characters in his short-story collection *Unclaimed Terrain* through the lens of social psychology's works on intergroup interactions and its effects on relative cognitive performance of individuals coming from different social and cultural locations.

Social Psychology: Into the Minds of the Dispossessed

The last century saw the emergence of social psychology notably under Norman Triplett, Kurt Lewin and Gordon Allport which attempts, "to explain how the thoughts and behaviours of individuals are influenced by the actual, imagined or implied presence of others" (Allport, 1998, p. 5). This results in a multifaceted conception of cognitive experientiality which amounts to selfhood and is catalyzed by social factors surrounding the person. Social psychologists emphasize social inhibitions like stigma, stereotypes and discrimination as extensively marring cognitive potential of individuals, rendering a highly dynamic selfhood. This paper deals with such inhibitions and behavioural exchanges in sections to follow.

Stereotype

"Show me your bag. What did you steal?...Your pants are really great. Where did you steal them from?" He [Patel's son, Vinayak] grabbed the back of my pants and let out a loud laugh. All his buddies started laughing too."   –(Navaria, 2013, p. 160)

Walter Lipmann defined stereotype as a 'picture in our heads' in his book *Public Opinion* (Lipmann, 1922). Vinayak and his friends, here bully the Dalit narrator based on their pictorial imagination of Dalit individuals as thieves and destitute. These casteist stereotypes emanate from a general public tendency called base rate fallacy, according to which people are influenced more by easily recalled stories and pictures than

by statistical information (Bar-Hillel, 1980). So, even after having been informed of the narrator's pants being a gift by Father Samuel, Vinayak and his friends make an erroneous correlation between the narrator's caste and negative-extreme behaviour (here theft), they associate with it.

Stereotypes constitute certain beliefs about castes and perceptions of their extreme behaviour that serve to maintain caste divisions. They are a result of a fundamental attribution error which is the tendency of observers, when analysing another individual's behaviour to underestimate the impact of situation and to overestimate personal disposition (Heider, 1958). These dispositions are extended to the whole group they belong to, something social psychologists regularly caution against and term group homogeneity[1]. Rina Sawhney in the short-story "Yes Sir" after having heard Ramnarayan Tiwari's predicament (unable to find Durgadas for plumbing issues) exclaims, "This is just how these SC people are, Tiwari" (Navaria, 2013, p. 62). Tiwari who had recently been served a favour by his Dalit boss quickly denounces Sawhney by saying, "No, no, madam, they are not alike" (Navaria, 2013, p. 62). Rina here unjustifiably accredits a certain stereotypical image of Dalit individuals, resorting to outgroup homogeneity. Tiwari, on the other hand, having been witness to a non-conciliary act to such a homogeneous image, has reformed views and outrightly objects to homogenizing Dalit individuals. Thus, to overcome homogenizing tendencies, intergroup interactions like Tiwari and his boss are of paramount importance as they provide more reliable individuated behavioural information.

Stigma

Stigmas, unlike stereotypes, are relatively more institutional while stereotypes are related to the cognitive and affective behaviours in the observer. Erving Goffman defines stigma as an "attribute that is deeply discrediting and that reduces the bearer from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one" (Goffman, 1963, p. 3). Stigmas make up for highly unreliable affective forecasting about individuals. Yet, stigmatized Dalit individuals undergo living conditions fashioned by this manufactured mark on their heads. The narrator in the short-story "Scream" has to go through such a humiliating experience in his anthropology class on account of his physiology. He recounts:

"One day in the anthropology class, Kulkarni Sir, was lecturing on human races. When he came to the Negro race, he looked directly at me and said," You! Stand up." He pointed at me, smiled and said, "Look, here

is the Negro race. Thick lips, wide nose, prominent brow, round skull. But with more heights." All the students burst out laughing. Everyone but the Dalit students, who could not laugh. (Navaria, 2013, p. 163)

Stereotypes and stigma function through categorization which involves visual appearances, vocal modality and overall demeanour among other factors. These factors act as poor markers for categorization in Indian society (rendering Kulkarni Sir's co-relation baseless) as caste lacks any racial physiological marker and cuts through class lines. Here, names and residential locality become influential categorizing markers. Don Operario and Susan T. Fiske explain this process of automatic categorization. They write, "initial categorization often occurs outside of perceivers' awareness, and the effects of categories on perception can go unnoticed. Once a target is placed within a category, numerous cognitive effects that facilitate stereotyping can take immediate hold" (2003, p. 33). It is followed by minimizing the distance between the target and a popular stereotypical exemplar of any particular category in order to index the individual. This robs the observed individual of its due attentional focus but the perceiver gains by successfully conserving its cognitive expenditure. Rina Sawhney and Ramnarayan Tiwari's interaction mentioned earlier illustrates this well. Rina carelessly homogenizes all SCs by resorting to stereotyping and saves her cognitive energy that would have been spent had she paid attention to individual qualities of every person (Navaria, 2013). Tiwari's protestation to her is symbolic of the caution one must exercise while leaning towards convenience of stereotyping. It is through the process highlighted above that stereotypes coupled with stigma, work as powerful oppressive tools of maintaining caste hierarchy and its power dynamics.

Power, Hierarchy and Status Quo Justification

By virtue of higher societal position, upper castes can afford to pay less individual attention to Dalits and thus engage in more stereotyping processes. Operario and Fiske point out that lack of motivation, satisfaction with social sketches and a possible desire to stereotype might lead to powerful perceiver's propensity to avoid examining subordinate's traits and situations (2003). As a result, a collectivized identity for dispossessed groups is manufactured and stigmatized. Conversely, stereotypes formed by subordinate groups are directed to be more individuating in a hope of increasing positive future outcomes

of interactions with the powerful lot (Fiske R. E., 1984)(Fiske S. L., 1990). Thus, Dalits remain more likely to blame individuals or situational factors for their casteist experiences rather than upper castes in totality, in the hope for pleasant future interaction in public spaces. Like in the short story "Sacrifice", Kalu blames his poverty instead of his demeaning profession or the upper castes for stigmatized behaviour allocated to his caste. He chastises the narrator saying, "The problem isn't with the profession, it is poverty. They treat us as untouchable because we're poor" (Navaria, 2013, p. 25).

In spite of the fact that stereotyping and stigmatizing is undertaken by all castes, power imbalance hinges on benefits of the exercise in favour of upper castes. Power provides currency to stigma and stereotypes imposed over Dalits. It grants them longevity and naturalizes hierarchical differentiation to the extent of legitimizing discriminatory institutional, economic and legal practices (Gilbert, 1998). A powerful homogeneous group is invented by overestimating the presence of shared opinions, behaviours and traits (false consensus effect). This process assumes an implied consensus over popular negative stereotypic representations of subordinate groups, thus dispossessing them from their power share (Ross, Greene, & House, 1977). The caste system in India, similarly assumes and tries to instil fraternal consensus in individuals of the same caste despite having different economical or localized issues. Ramnarayan Tiwari, a peon in the short story "Yes Sir", assumes that AGM Rammurti Mishra (both distinctly Brahmin names) is going to empathize with his casteist trepidations. He complains to Rammurti, "What else, saheb, kaliyug is here. Brahmins are forced to wash the dirty dishes of the lowborn…I mean, shouldn't we find it disturbing that a low-caste quota case gives us orders when a learned Brahmin like you should have been in his seat?" (Navaria, 2013, p. 52).

Ambivalent / Subtle Discrimination

In urban spaces, blatant discrimination tends to mutate itself into forms like ambivalent discrimination that implies the presence of deep-seated negative beliefs about Dalits ingrained through a casteist upbringing, despite a strong personal endorsement of egalitarianism and vows to avoid practising discrimination. According to Amélie Mummendey and Sabine Otten, these ingrained beliefs tend to surface at the slightest available opportunity of rationalizing differentiation

"by reasons independent of prejudice and without deliberate intention to disadvantage the outgroup" (2003, p. 122). Ambivalent prejudices manifest as a duality between public egalitarian attitudes and personal conscious/unconscious negative perceptions. In Jaiprakash Kardam's short story "No Bar", the protagonist Rajesh, an income tax officer visits a self-proclaimed highly-progressive family after seeing a matrimonial advertisement stating caste-no bar.They declare to Rajesh that, "We are very open-minded people. We do not recognize any caste and communal distinctions. Such talks signify backwardness. All marriages in our family have been inter-caste" (2003, p. 53) (my translation). An enamoured protagonist develops the belief that "caste distinctions and discrimination is an ill plaguing illiterate people. Where does the educated society recognize caste differences?" (2003, p. 56). These beliefs are shattered as the same girl's father after sensing Rajesh's Dalit background exclaims, "At last 'No Bar' does not mean that [we will marry] any Chamar or Chuhra (Dalit castes)…" (2003, p. 60). In this way, casteist ambivalent discrimination inhibits social interactions of upper castes with Dalits and reserves inter-caste relations and social mobility for upper castes exclusively.

Implied Cognitive Threats to Dispossessed

The culture of a region is generally defined as the system of enduring values, assumptions, meanings, practices and institutions shared by a large group of people passed from generation to generation (Lo Schiavo, 2018). These systems are mired with differing valuations and behaviours accorded to individuals based on their social location. An undervalued self like Dalit, becomes a site infused with socially manufactured hurdles. This leads Dalit-self to suffer from cognitive dissonance, according to which an individual experiences discomfort or dissonance when its thoughts, beliefs or behaviours are inconsistent with each other (Festinger, 1957). In other words, a gulf of discrepancy between the outcomes and expectations about basic human rights promotes a feeling of being mismatched to the society which leads to experiencing moral outrage, resentment, grief and hostility. Siddharth Nirmal, a prosperous Dalit character in Ajay Navaria's short story "Subcontinent" ponders over his office situation of which he cannot make sense, leading to cognitive dissonance discussed above. He thinks to himself:

> Why do Kardam and Paswan come to see me so often? Why do they tell me their troubles? Why am I the only such officer there…Why don't Gupta and

a few others greet me when I come to office? Why does everyone rush to do every bit of work for my deputy, Thapliyal? Is it because of his Brahmin surname? Why…why? Are we different? Are we separate from them…are we aliens? Mleccha? Lowly? Untouchable? (2013, p. 101)

Siddharth's trepidation emanates from not being accorded respect by office colleagues of different caste backgrounds which he deserves after having achieved a reputable professional stature. Not being able to reconcile his surroundings, Siddharth's internal monologue forms a good example of is-ought discrepancy leading to mental distress and the individual questioning its acquired status as unsuitable to its being.

Such experiences tragically threaten to serve as compelling evidence for behavioural confirmation of stereotypes. This conundrum of self-fulfilling prophecies[2] faced by Dalits arises from a consciousness of the stereotype itself. Don Operario and Susan T. Fiske quote a study by Claude Steele in their essay "Stereotypes: Content, Structures, Processes, and Context" where, "African Americans who are reminded of their group membership (and therefore made aware of alleged academic deficiencies) and women who are reminded about women's alleged mathematical deficiencies, perform significantly worse on standardized tests compared to other group members who are not reminded of the stereotype" (2003, p. 23). Notably, this conformational behaviour is not elicited by a biased perceiver but simply the implied presence of stereotype led to group members confirming it. A casteist person's cognitive behaviour already intuitively suffers from confirmation biases which encourage it to seek, produce and interpret information to verify its existing beliefs. A behavioural confirmation from the stereotyped castes lends its ill-formed biases ground in reality.

Another side-effect of behavioural confirmation is internalization of the caste's low status by "disadvantaged groups [who] accept the status quo when they perceive that their societal or institutional context follows appropriate social justice standards…People in those contexts may believe hierarchy-maintaining stereotypes reflect the truth about social groups, rather than see stereotypes as myths that perpetuate power differentials" (Fiske, 2003, p. 37). Fiske also points out that low status group members might not necessarily imbibe their negative cultural representations. They, "tend to acknowledge their group's disadvantaged status, but minimize perceptions of personal vulnerability to discrimination. In doing so, members of disadvantaged groups can maintain levels of self-esteem and personal control, and avoid feeling personally victimized"

(2003, p. 37). This interplay of acknowledging societal depravation but maintaining high personal morale are symptomatic of UMCD. In the above mentioned episode from "No Bar", Rajesh similarly acknowledges caste discrimination faced by Dalits but relegates it to the domain of illiterate society which he assumes to have evaded himself. As already noted, these beliefs come crashing down after the "progressive" family he approaches for a marriage proposal turns out to harbour casteist biases against Dalits. Such incidents act as regular reality checks for UMCD against building false narratives of escaping the entrenched caste system of Indian society.

Strolling Down Modern Brahmanical Streets

Cognitive dissonance leads a UMCD individual to undertake exercises to modify prevailing situations for resolving their discrepancies. Adding a positive social identity like government servant or business person to belief-schemes about oneself leads to favourable comparisons to relevant out-groups. Since belonging to underprivileged Dalit castes leads to unsatisfactory social identity, urban Dalits undertake certain identity management strategies like individual mobility, social competition and social creativity (Knippenberg, 1989) (Trafimow, 2003). For UMCD, individual financial mobility has been somewhat achieved that puts them in direct competition in public spaces. These public spaces are mired with casteist stereotypes which are rationalized by upper castes under the garb of merit. Steele and Aronson's study quoted in the last section demonstrate that tests of abilities and potential are heavily influenced by testing situations (affected performance because of pronounced judgement of one's background) and thus are not a reliable scale for comparing merit (Steele, 1995). A devalued identity like that of a Dalit, while interacting with judgmental situations, negatively impacts performance of individuals. One such study on stereotypes affecting an individual's performance in the Indian job market was carried out by Paul Attewel and Sukhdeo Thorat. They approached various private sector firms with manufactured resumes under distinct caste names. They found that "appropriately qualified applicants with a Dalit name had odds of a positive outcome that were 0.67 of the odds of an equivalently qualified applicant with a higher caste name" (2010, p. 45). Research findings of Katherine S. Newman and Surinder D. Jodhka also exposes the private sector's self-professed emphasis solely on merit and constant exposure to stereotype-laden testing situations for Dalit

individuals. They point out the problematics of basing job recruitment on merit only, saying, "the production of merit is itself a highly unequal business and hence, the linkage of modernism with merit, and merit with cultural capital, effectively eliminates Dalits, for example, from the competition" (2010, p. 57).

Ashwini Deshpande and Katherine S. Newman's research with students from most reputed Indian institutions and their expectations from the job market also points out that Dalit students "perceive[d] 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" (2010, p. 113). Quinn and Crocker analyse such differing affectations of collective representations. They maintain that collective presentations as "shared beliefs, values, ideologies, or systems of meaning...that affect the meaning of situations for the stigmatized may take the form of awareness of cultural stereotypes about one's group, understandings of why one's group occupies the position it does in the social hierarchy" (2003, p. 240). This is exemplified by the experience of Subhash Kumar, a UMCD protagonist of the short story "Tattoo" by Ajay Navaria, who goes through an anxious interaction with the gym owner whom he thinks is trying to judge his caste through routine questions. He finds himself overtly conscious of the bad condition of his shoes which symbolizes his uneasiness in being judged on his social background. He has to spend significant cognitive energy to overcome this uneasiness as he notes in the story, "A few more days passed like this, but I now felt apprehensive of someone commenting on my shoes each moment of every hour I spent in the gym. Finally, to be free of this, I took myself in hand—this is it! I should neither hide them nor be ashamed of them" (2013, pp. 119-120). It is notable how strongly a seemingly trivial situation can dominate experiences for UMCD.

Steele and Aronson's study further notes that in the absence of stereotype acknowledgement from testing agency (the half that was not asked for racial background), performance was proportionately distributed amongst all demographics. Thus, the stereotype threat does not dictate the totality of lives of stigmatized groups and ceases to be an issue once its consciousness is omitted from testing conditions. This echoes Ajay Navaria's proclamation during a recent interview with *The Hindu* that, "We are not Dalits twenty-four hours a day" (Sampath, 2018). It is thus the implied presence of the pervasive casteist gaze that turns a whole individual into a broken self (Dalit).

Affirmative Action Policies

The Constitution of India has adopted social welfare schemes, necessitated by caste-based stratification. Members from privileged castes tend to turn an apprehensive eye to such policies of social justice. This antipathy nurtures intergroup animosities as apparent from Ramanarayan Tiwari (Yes Sir) complaints about his boss Narottam Saroj that "He was made an officer under the quota…if it were not for the quota, he'd be pushing a broom somewhere"(Navaria, Yes Sir, 2013). General Manager Mahapatra (Subcontinent) also dismisses a complaint submitted to him by Kardam, a Dalit clerk, on being called "the quota guy" as "It's not as if Gupta used any caste-specific abuse. Kardam has indeed come through the quota…Why does it hurt him?" (2013, p. 101). In this way, affirmative action policies have been stigmatized by social elements aggrieved over their erosion of privilege. Such stigmas incite self-doubt and damaged pride within benefactors of affirmative action policies (Steele, 1991). This leads to reluctance in accepting positive or negative rewards, faced with an ever-present stereotypical suspicion on their abilities from casteist elements. The protagonist, Siddharth, a higher rank officer in the same story is hounded by the "…same whispers, the same poison laden smiles. Our 'quota is fixed'. I got promoted only because of the quota…that's it. Otherwise…otherwise, maybe I'm still dirty. Still lowborn" (2013, p. 100).

Coping Mechanisms of the UMCD

UMCD may downplay implications of their inferior standing by challenging or denying relevance of the discriminatory status criterion. Another alternative opted by them is to diminish their relationship with their group identity as that proves a hindrance in achieving social mobility (Trafimow, 2003). Rahul Valmiki in the short story "Tattoo" goes by the identity of Rahul Upadhyay given to him by his grandfather to escape being associated to lower caste status (Navaria, 2013). David Trafimow and Harry C. Triandis' study of social identity theory posits people's preference for social identities that elicit most positive social evaluations. According to them, "members of minority cultures have the dilemma of becoming assimilated by rejecting their own culture, or segregated by rejecting the culture of the majority. Involuntary minorities (such as African Americans and Native Americans) are especially likely to reject the culture of the majority" (2003, p. 373). In India, UMCD suffer the same dilemma in face of Brahmanical culture. Those with stronger

associations with caste identity strengthen them further while those with loose association opt for assimilation. Assimilation is lucrative as it brings with it hopes of gaining some power share in control of resources available to upper castes. Myron Rothbart cautions against superficiality of such assimilation by joking, "it is as if a farmer living at the boundary of Poland and Russia, after learning that his house is just inside the Polish border, exclaims with relief, "Thank God, no more Russian winters!" (2003, p. 56).

Another coping mechanism available to UMCD is switching to intragroup comparison to enhance one's self-esteem and escape feeling of collective deprivation. Studies report higher self-esteem in women who compared their salaries intra-sex then to men (Major, 1994). Siddharth's silence over Mahapatra's dismissal of a complaint from a Dalit clerk in the short story "Subcontinent" reflects this phenomenon. He compares and distances himself to his less-successful community members thinking "Otherwise maybe I'm still dirty. Still lowborn. Like Kishan, the office janitor. Like Kardam, the clerk. Because I'm their caste" (2013, p. 100).

Conclusion

Every year, on Republic Day, the state of India celebrates its constitutional promise to provide proportionate opportunities to every individual. This project is progressing at a slow pace, hindered by social inhibitions on members of the Scheduled Caste communities. To overcome these inhibitions, has to be in truest terms, India's tryst with destiny. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's following words from his last speech to the Constituent Assembly remain poignantly relevant today:

> On January 26, 1950, we are going to enter into a life of contradictions. In politics we will have equality and in social and economic life we will have inequality. In politics we will be recognizing the principle of one man one vote and one vote one value. In our social and economic life, we shall, by reason of our social and economic structure, continue to deny the principle of one man one value. How long shall we continue to live the life of contradictions? How long shall we deny equality in our social and economic life? (Partnered, 2016).

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