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Caste and the Division of Laborer's Linkage in the Indian Labor Market: Special Reference to the Rickshaw Pullers in Lucknow City, Uttar Pradesh, India

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Abstract

This study attempts to understand the Indian labor market specially the occupation of rickshaw pullers, which is primarily concerned with marginal communities who have been constitutionally identified as Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribe (STs), Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and religious minorities. In this regard, the essay articulates how a persistence caste system influences the choice of opting for any occupation in the Indian labor market despite constitutional guarantees (see. India's Article 19 [1] [g]) to practice any occupation, trade or business. To examine the above social issue, this study applies survey method, which was conducted from March 2021 to October 2022 with 350 rickshaw pullers in Lucknow city, India. This present study concludes by examining Ambedkar's views on caste and occupational preferences, focusing on how occupations such as rickshaw pulling, manual scavenging, cremation-related services, septic tank cleaning, waste collection, leatherwork, barbering, and fishing remain associated with historically marginalised social groups, whose limited access to landownership, education, property, and other assets has weakened their economic opportunities.

Keywords

Ambedkar, Caste, Division of Laborers, Rickshaw Pullers, Lucknow City

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Introduction

"Productive castes", shaped by historical oppression and socio-economic inequality, can be typified by lowest income levels, leading to low savings, limited investment, reduced creativity and a healthy life (Ilaiah, 2018, 1996). These low-income caste groups are compelled to survive as unskilled laborers, working as agricultural workers, daily wage workers, manual scavengers, rickshaw pullers, etc. These laborers have been considered the backbone of the Indian informal economy, but suffer from a 'vicious circle of poverty' or 'poverty trap' (Prasad, 2018). Oscar Lewis (1959) argued that a 'culture of poverty' among laborers is not merely an economic condition; rather, it is a complex set of values, attitudes, and behaviors that is transmitted from one generation to the next. Key factors within this framework include fatalism, a present-time orientation (characterized by a lack of long-term planning), weak institutional participation, marginalization, and social exclusion.

Since independence, India has upheld the freedom to choose one's occupation, regardless of one's religion or community affiliation. A glance at the statistics reveals that most individuals engaged in manual scavenging belong to the Dalit and OBC communities (Lakshman, 2024). A similar trend is observable in the occupation of rickshaw pulling. While it is obvious that these professions are not strictly restricted to any specific caste or religion and theoretically, anyone can undertake them an examination of primary data indicates that most rickshaw pullers engage in this work out of sheer compulsion. They do so from necessity rather than by choice. Moreover, it appears that due to structured socio-economic multi-layered inequalities, they are unable to secure equal opportunities in other professions (Sen, 2025; Prasad & Akundy, 2021). Historically, the society of Uttar Pradesh is woven into a complex tapestry of caste, class, land relations, and socio-cultural traditions. Within its social structure, the caste hierarchy not only determines social status but also profoundly influences socio-political behavior and economic patterns. These unequal socio-economic patterns and crisis of belonging also have been highlighted by noted writer and poet Omprakash Valmiki in his writing titled "*Joothan*"[1] as well as "*Thakur ka Kuan*"[2] (Valmiki, 1989, 1997).

John Kujur and Amarendra Das (2026) point out that there are many barriers to a school education for SCs and STs in eastern India with reference to SDG4. Similarly, many studies show that more than 40 per cent dropout cases are still found among OBCs, SCs, and STs in India. If we look through an economic lens, it is found that the false idea of meritocracy undermines institutional diversity and social correction or 'positive discrimination'. According to World Inequality Report 2026, the top 10 per cent own more than 60 per cent of the total wealth of India. This concentrated wealth is heavily skewed toward so-called Upper Castes (World Inequality Lab, 2026).

[1]Joothan means (leftovers) symbolizing humiliation and caste oppression.

[2]This poem indicates toward rooted structural socio-economic inequality in Indian society.

Looking at caste and economic opportunities, both have significant correlations. For instance, we can cite manual scavenging as another pertinent example, a field in which the workforce consists predominantly of individuals from Dalit and marginalized communities. This is largely because they do not find it easy to secure employment in other sectors. Furthermore, due to the social stigma associated with this onerous profession, members of so-called "upper castes" tend to refrain from engaging in manual scavenging, as it has historically been regarded as a socially degrading occupation and is viewed through the lens of social stigma (Prasad & Srihari, 2017). This implies that, in India, the "division of labor" that is, the allocation of work remains, to a significant extent, caste-based, thereby profoundly influencing the social and economic opportunities available to individual.

Social Identity and Anguish of Labors

B.R. Ambedkar's critique of the caste system and its implications on Indian society has remained foundational to get an understanding on the persistent inequalities in the social stratification (Ambedkar, 1936). He presented a seminar paper on, *Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development*, at Columbia University (in 1916), wherein he proposed an extreme analysis of the caste system as a strict hierarchical division of society aligned with hereditary occupations and endogamy (Ambedkar, 1916). This mechanism predetermined social position and established repressive circumstances that delayed development, equal treatment, and self-sufficiency. Later on, in his writings, including (*Annihilation of Caste 1936*), Ambedkar developed his criticism, believing that the caste system reinforced social, cultural, economic, and political inequalities primarily through the stratification of laborers, which was not only functional but also highly hierarchical (Ambedkar, 1936). Ambedkar emphasized the distinction between the 'division of labor' and the division of laborers by pointing out that the caste system is a reaffirmation of a graded inequality among laborers. The division of labor is vital in the progress of society as is the case in many civilizations. The caste system in India goes a step further though as even the laborers are in a hierarchical order. The caste system is not merely a division of labor; it is a system of assigning people to certain roles based on their birth, so that a certain set of people could not be in higher positions, and that inequality would be practiced. This graded hierarchy is supported by the historical foundations of the caste system which are discussed in the ancient manuscripts, the Rig Veda, namely, the Purusha Sukta. The classification of society into four varnas (Brahmins (priests), Kshatriyas (warriors), Vaishyas (traders), and Shudras (laborers)) established the basis of a social arrangement that placed the Brahmins at the top and Shudras at the bottom of menial labor. The caste system also excluded those not included in the Varna system, referred to as Ati-Shudras or untouchables, who were not part of the Varna system at all, and

had to do the work thought to be unclean or contaminating such as scavenging and skinning dead animals.

Ambedkar explained that caste and its effect on work is especially influential in the context of the historical and modern Indian labor market. There not only has limited career options of the individuals depending on their births, but have also been structural imbalances that continue to be experienced even to the next generations. The labor market is exaggerated by caste, despite the legal changes and the introduction of a democratic constitution, which is based on equal rights. However, according to caste hierarchy, certain divisions of laborers are rated at one level higher than the other (Ambedkar, 1936). These inequalities have not been eliminated due to the shift of a traditional caste-based economy to a modern industrial one (Madheswaran & Attewell, 2007).

Identity and Sociological Imagination

The construction of 'social identity' as a 'rickshaw wala' becomes significant in the context of rickshaw pulling occupation. The idea of 'social identity' proposes that a person's sense of 'self' and 'others' are built upon group memberships, creating an "us vs. them" mentality. People often categorize themselves into in-groups, compare them favorably to out-groups to boost self-esteem, and align behavior with group norms. The term '*wala'* is often used for a certain identity with different contexts. For instance, '*dodh wala*' (for a milkman or Yadav community), '*choodi-wala*' (for a glass-seller or Manihar caste), '*rickshaw wala*' (for a rickshaw puller or downtrodden people), among others. The above words are emphasised to indicate occupation identity. The word '*wala'* also identifies the area to which a person belongs, for example, '*gaon-wala*' (for villagers) and '*shahar-wala*' (for urbanites) (Prasad, 2018). Article 19 (1) (g) of the Indian constitution allows for one to carry on any occupation/business without any social obligation. Sociologists and anthropologists in India have examined both the hereditary nature of certain occupations and the possibilities for occupational mobility. An overlap in choosing any occupation can be seen at present (Lewis, 1959; Prasad, 2015) and no anthropologists have so far claimed that the stigma or social identity which is based on occupations has been removed.

Social thinker and activist Kancha Ilaiah argues that 'productive' and hard work have been devalued by Brahmanism. Therefore, such castes who have been directly involved in material production (agriculture, animal husbandry, weaving, etc.) could not get social recognition or pride. He critiques the Hindu social order and offers a new perspective on dignity of labor, division of labor and indigenous knowledge of marginalized communities (Ilaiah, 2018). The anguish (that arises from social stigma or social identity) of the hardworking working class (Dalit and Backward castes) who often migrate to cities can be heard through the medium of '*birha* folklore' (Prasad, 2022, pp. 142-145).

Revisiting the Discourse on Caste

Two important books by Ambedkar, '*Annihilation of Caste*' (1936), and '*Who Were the Shudras*?' (1946) offer powerful and radical critiques on the Hindu caste system. It is a landmark work that significantly shaped academic discourse and social movements in India. His critical examination of caste and the historical construction of social hierarchies provide a vital framework for understanding the origins and persistence of caste-based discrimination. Similarly, Louis Dumont's work *Homo Hierarchicus* (1980) posits that the caste system was deeply rooted in a religious worldview, which governed not only social relations but also occupational roles. According to Dumont's analysis, caste was both a social and economic order, exemplified by the elevated status of Brahmins in religious roles and the systematic exclusion of Dalits from certain occupations and social spaces. Therefore, Ambedkar made a few constitutional provisions to remove stagnancy in rigid caste system.

Social Mobility and Caste System

The impact of constitutional provisions on caste and social change have been observed by M.N. Srinivas after 1947. He introduced the concept of Sanskritization, describing how lower castes attempt to improve their social standing by adopting the customs and occupations of higher castes. Sanskritization, Westernization, Modernization, Secularization of caste, etc., are a few concepts which explore the entire saga of social mobility (in the caste system) in contemporary India. Similarly, his seminal book "Remembered Village" highlights that Okkaligas (a landowning caste) are an influential factor and play a greater role in power processes because a caste becomes dominant when it owns a few attributes like an influential social network, wealth, prestige, political power and high ritual or social status (Srinivas, 1955). Rural economic structures have remained relatively unchanged, as lower-caste communities continue to be concentrated in low-paying, unskilled occupations.

Nevertheless, the concept of socio-economic changes starts following the introduction and implementation of the Community Development Programme (Dube, 1958), yet marginalised groups (like the OBCs, SCs, STs and landless laborers) tend to stay disadvantaged and the relation between caste, class, and modernity occurs in new forms (Jodhka, 2017). Equally, Thorat and Newman (2009) recorded how caste-based discrimination is still practiced during hiring procedures and how occupational immobility has imprisoned the marginalized communities in low-wage jobs. According to Breman (2007), the informal economy tends to exploit the lower-caste workers. The first author, having spent over two years in the field during his PhD, found that the majority of rickshaw pullers belong to lower castes; this clustering of castes indicates that the problem of systemic marginalization persists. Madan (1971) expounds that rickshaw pullers are usually the marginalized in society with

a significant number of them living in rural regions where poverty levels are at a high of 68 per cent. These sections are plagued by unemployment, illiteracy, poor health and unequal distribution of resources; although the rickshaw pulling activity is relatively better paid in comparison to rural working options (Strand, 1989). Rickshaw pulling is still strenuous, and people engaged in this activity are subjected to severe health issues, financial crisis and marginalization. Most rickshaw pullers come from a disadvantaged economic background, which complies with the features of chronic poverty. Rickshaw pullers, despite a certain upward mobility, have had high health risks and their children tend to have low intergenerational economic mobility which restricts their future labor opportunities (Begum & Sen, 2012). Thus, the above issue raised causes the phenomenon of 'cognitive dissonance' among rickshaw pullers since they contrast (their previous unemployed and social stigma) with less fortunate groups and they tend to defend inequality as the only natural reason.

Discussion of Social Stratification and Caste-based Inequality

The research attempts to understand the consequences of caste-based orientation of choosing a job and economic growth, especially in the informal sector. Although legal changes have taken place and the constitution has been amended to guarantee equal treatment to all caste groups, the caste system continues to be a major impediment towards the realization of a truly egalitarian society in India as envisioned by Ambedkar more than 100 years ago. Ambedkar's work on the caste system in Indian society highlights the persistence of graded inequality as a foundational element in the structure of caste-based discrimination. It is found that even when economically poor *dvij-caste* ("twice-born") persons retain higher socio-cultural status and respect, their lower economic condition is often seen as '*daridra-narayan*' (dignified) rather than 'polluting'. Being poor often has been correlated or glorified with the myth of Sudama and Krishna's friendship. A poor Brahmin traditionally can become a priest (even if poor) but a poor Dalit is subjected to and has to engage with so-called 'unclean' occupations.

Even if individuals from marginalized castes wish to adopt a new occupation, such as becoming a priest or a *kathakar* (religious storyteller) or even opening a restaurant in their hometown, the caste system historically restricts them through socio-cultural norms and caste-based discrimination. If someone transgresses the traditional occupational ascribed custom, he/she has to face humiliation and social boycott (Yadav, 2025). In contrast to a flexible division of labour based on ability, caste enforces a rigid division of a labourer's system in which occupations are assigned by birth rather than merit. According to B.R. Ambedkar, this system restricts social mobility and deprives people of the opportunity to choose their career paths based on their talents and aspirations. It is a 'social fact' that caste not only paves the way for the division of labor but also promotes the division of laborers. Resultantly, due to lack of education and stable jobs, Dalits and Adivasis are still languishing in poverty and disenfranchisement.

Methodology

The research is based on survey method. The survey was performed in Lucknow city of Uttar Pradesh, and a sample size of 350 rickshaw pullers was chosen (for the doctoral thesis of the first author). Field survey was used to get the demographic profile and economic status which included caste affiliation, income levels, landholding, marital status and education level. The lived experiences of the rickshaw puller have been understood using a few case studies.

This work attempts to understand the wider connotations of caste-based orientation of occupational choice and economic formation in the informal sector. Regardless of reforms in the law and constitutionalism, the caste system continues to be a major obstacle to the realization of a genuinely egalitarian nation in India as described by Ambedkar. This study applies Ambedkar's framework on caste and labor to the case of rickshaw pullers with reference to Lucknow city.

Contemporaneity of Ambedkar's Framework on Caste

Sociologically, rickshaw pulling represents an important site for examining the intersection of caste, class, migration, and informal labour. Although this occupation is not exclusively associated with scheduled castes, the historical marginalization of Dalit communities, combined with landlessness, limited educational opportunities, and restricted access to formal employment, has contributed to their significant presence in such precarious urban occupations. The relevance of Ambedkar's works on the critique of caste in modern India becomes particularly evident when examining marginalized laborers, such as rickshaw pullers in cities like Lucknow. Historically, menial works associated with lower-caste groups are unsustainable and lack social upward mobility (Kurosaki et. al., 2012). The rickshaw pulling profession is a symbol of helplessness and poverty trap in which caste-based labor divisions persist, where those from marginalized communities are often relegated to informal, precarious jobs with little chance of upward mobility. A few studies on the cycle rickshaw sector highlights that the representation of SCs, STs and OBCs is higher than other caste groups (Census of India, 1981). Similar results also recurred from our primary data collected in Lucknow city (see. Table 1). However, the presence of lower and backward castes is often higher in such jobs (fisheries, piggery, barbering, shoe polishing, manual scavenging, etc.) which are stigmatised with 'lower social status' (Nandhi, 2011). For instance, Government of India conducted a survey as per the provisions of MS Act, 2013 for the identification of manual scavengers and it was found that more than 97 per cent (i.e. 43,797 out of 58,098) manual scavengers are from Dalits and Backward castes.[3]

[3]Retrieved from https://www.pib.gov.in/Pressreleaseshare.aspx?PRID=1776847&utm_source=chatgpt.com&reg=3&lang=2

Table 1: The socio-economic profile of the rickshaw pullers in Lucknow city

Variables	**Categories**	**Percentage (%)**
Migration	Migrant	86.0
	Non-migrant	14.0
Marital status	Married	82.6
	Unmarried	12.3
	Widower	4.0
	Divorce	1.1
Age-group	18-25	7.1
	26-35	24.6
	36-45	38.6
	46-55	20.9
	56-65	7.1
	66-70	1.7
Social categories	SCs	42.3
	OBCs	41.7
	General	15.4
	STs	0.6
Education	Illiterate	53.4
	Primary	20.3
	Secondary	12.9
	High School	12.0
	>High School	1.4
Monthly Income	<3000	14.0
	3000-4500	40.3
	4500-6000	27.1
	6000-7500	14.3
	>7500	4.3
Landholding	Landless	55.1
	<20 Biswa	30.9
	20 Biswa to 1 Bigha	8.9
	1 Bigha to 2 Bigha	3.1
	>2 Bigha	2.0

Source: Field Survey, 2021 to 2022

Table 1 shows that 86 per cent of rickshaw pullers are migrants and 14 per cent are inhabitants of Lucknow city. The migrant workers predominantly originate from neighboring districts or states. Regarding marital status, over 82 per cent of the rickshaw pullers are married, 13 per cent are unmarried, 4 per cent are widowers, and 1.1 per cent are divorced. Age distribution reveals that a large majority of the rickshaw pullers (most of whom are between the ages of 26 and 45 years) are in their working ages, 7.1 per cent of them are between 18 and 25 years of age and only 1.7 per cent above 66 years. The social structure of the respondents shows that 42.3 per cent are

Scheduled Castes (SC), 41.7 per cent are Other Backward Classes (OBC), 15.4 per cent belong to General Castes, and a few (0.6 per cent) to a small minority Scheduled Tribes (ST). The rickshaw pullers have a very low educational background. The primary data shows that 53.4 per cent of them never attended school, 20.3 per cent received education up to the primary level, 12.9 per cent completed secondary education, 12 per cent completing high school, and only 1.4 per cent pursued education above high school. The study found that rickshaw pulling is a low-income profession, exacerbated by the development of advanced transportation technologies, such as e-rickshaws and battery-powered rickshaws, which render traditional rickshaws obsolete. Income distribution among the rickshaw pullers shows that 14 per cent earn less than ₹3000 per month, 40.3 per cent earn between ₹3000 and ₹4500, 27.1 per cent earn between ₹4500 and ₹6000, 14.3 per cent earn between ₹6000 and ₹7500, and only 4.3 per cent earn more than ₹7500 per month. A significant finding of the study is the deprivation in landholding among rickshaw pullers. Due to the non-implementation of landholding acts, a majority (55.1 per cent) are landless. Among the rest, 30.9 per cent hold less than 20 Biswa, 8.9 per cent hold between 20 Biswa and one bigha, 3.1 per cent hold between 1 and 2 bighas, and only 2 percent hold more than two bighas of land.

Case Study and Observations

The study has found a strong relationship between caste and rickshaw pulling occupations, which is significant in their lives. Caste contributes to their continued socio-economic culture and political deprivation. Several affirmative policies, such as reservations, have improved the educational status of a few rickshaw pullers. The main objective of this research is to make hidden social realities visible. Sometime, hidden realities could not be mapped numerically or statically. Therefore, it becomes important to understand the lived experiences through narratives and case study.

Case 1: A Migrant Rickshaw Puller, Pappu, who Earlier was Working as Brick Kiln Worker

Pappu, aged 44 years, spent his childhood in Sitapur with his parents. He was thirty years old when he moved to Lucknow. He is from the Chamar caste, which is considered the lowest in social strata or caste-based social hierarchies. Earlier, he worked as child labour at a local brick kiln with his family members. He narrated that after the completion of schooling, he was subsequently forced to leave because of the financial constraints of his family. So, he began working as an unskilled labourer in the nearby *bhattha* (brick kiln). He was forced into a child marriage due to ignorance, and he now has three children. At present, Pappu is engaged in the rickshaw pulling occupation in the capital of Uttar Pradesh. He says, “Lucknow city offers a wider scope for daily earning,” while also doing seasonal work that allows him to earn extra money for his daily expenses.

Pappu took the help of his friend Ramesh when he went to Lucknow for the first time. Interestingly, because of Ramesh, he got a guarantee and could hire a rickshaw without paying any extra charges. Now he does not need a guarantor because he has established trust and has contact with rickshaw owners. At the end of the day, he frequently naps on his rickshaw. Due to his low earnings, he usually has his breakfast at a roadside stall to save money. The *thelas* (roadside stalls) often offer unhygienic low priced food. Like him, many rickshaw pullers are compelled to use unsanitary public restrooms daily. Due to intense rivalry in the rickshaw pulling industry and insecure employment, rickshaw pullers have been forced to live in a world of dim prospects. A famous poet Munawwar Rana writes, "*So jaate hain phutapaath pe akhabaar bichha kar, mazadoor kabhee neend kee golee nahin khaate"* (Spreading out a newspaper on the sidewalk, laborers fall asleep, they never take sleeping pills). Due to an unhealthy daily routine, Pappu has been suffering from a sleeping disorder and mental health struggles. He is not only facing an economic crisis, but also deals with social stigma after engaging in rickshaw pulling occupation. As a result, his social and personal life has become more vulnerable. He says, "There is a popular belief that if a person cannot perform other business, he joins rickshaw pulling occupation. Such beliefs and derogatory remarks create an inferiority complex among a hard working community. Lack of job opportunity in other occupations,[4] helplessness and family obligation are push factors by which a person is compelled for rickshaw pulling."

Case 2: A Migrant, Jagatpal, who Migrated from Rae Bareilly to Lucknow to Survive

It would be appropriate to bring up Jagatpal's story. He is 40-years-old and hails from Gaderiya caste (shepherd community), which is an Other Backward Class. The cycle or rickshaw is as a valued item that gave him a way to upward mobility. Talking about how 'rickshaw pulling occupation protected him from a life of absolute poverty,' he completed primary education from his native place Rajapur village, Rae Bareilly, but due to child marriage and parental responsibilities, migrated to Lucknow. During a financial crisis, he saw rickshaw pulling as a "money voucher" or an immediate source of revenue. After working for a month, he sent some money to his wife as per obligatory Indian social customs. He was roughly 16-years-old when he moved from Rae Bareilly to Lucknow in search of livelihood. He narrated how his joint family members depended on one bigha (0.25 acre) of fertile land. He started pushing rickshaws with the help of his friends because it was simple to get to the nearby city and offered quick money. With seven members in his family at his native place, economically, they are dependent on him. Therefore, he is required to send between ₹5000 – ₹6000 each

[4]Land is considered as backbone of rural economy. If we see the land holding pattern among Dalits, we find that half of the scheduled caste population in rural areas is still landless laborers.

month for domestic expenses. Although this amount is insufficient for the survival of seven people, it prevents his family from famine and hunger. He roams Lucknow in search of passengers from early morning till midnight. A study of his expenses and daily earnings reveals that it depends on the number of passengers he entertains in a day. Intense competition can be seen in rickshaw pulling profession. However, he accepted that there was a sufficient earning before e-rickshaws or battery rickshaws were introduced. He said, "I earned around ₹ 700 to 900 in a day, and occasionally more than 1000 rupees, but nowadays especially after Covid-19, I only make around ₹300 to 400." Throughout the conversation with him, we noticed that in the absence of a passenger, a rickshaw-puller parks nearby or under trees to rest and smoke *bidi* to combat fatigue.

Jagatpal mentioned that he spends the night at the rickshaw garage where he cooks food with other fellow rickshaw pullers. To make ends meet, they make do with cow dung or wood as fuel. He mentioned that he had gastrointestinal problems because he is compelled to eat tainted roadside food due to shortage of time. Like Pappu, he too sends home remittances with the help of his friends or neighbours. After a month or an emergency period, he goes back to his hometown if there is any get-together, celebrations or harvesting season. However, despite not having a higher education, he is inspired and has a vision for education. His son and daughter pursue higher education and he hopes that his children will have successful careers. He said, "Nobody ever assumes that the kinds of a rickshaw-wala can pursue higher education and live quality of life." However, he is planning to open a shop in Rae Bareilly because of his ill health.

Case 3: A Muslim Migrant, Mohammed Rafik, a 45-year-old Rickshaw Puller

Mohammed Rafik and his father have long been residing in the old city of Lucknow. His social profile reveals that he is uneducated, landless, and the owner of a modest home in Lucknow. His wife, six children, parents, and siblings share a home with him. He told me that his father was also a rickshaw puller, and Mohammed Rafik has now continued the same occupation. He does not hold any formal education and it compelled him to pull a rickshaw from early morning till late night, and still only earns ₹ 150 to 200 daily. Rafik has realized that driving a rickshaw does not earn him enough money. When I asked him how he manages family expenses, especially a large family, he became quiet and with tears in his eyes, did not say anything. After a pause, he informed me about his loan and other sources of income. He opines that if the government will provide him with some financial assistance, he could be free from the shackles of debt and extreme poverty. He will be able to operate his own business for a sustainable existence. Furthermore he added, "If the Uttar Pradesh government will offer simple and low-interest loans, my bad days would perish." His elderly parents get pension and are another source of income for him. Besides, he does not have health

or social security insurance. He said, "We are illiterate, poor and have less knowledge of government policies. The price of products and services (inflation) rises daily while sources of income are stagnant for quite long time." An examination of his personal habits and expenses reveals that he indulges in smoking *bidi*, and occasionally drinks alcohol.

Mohammed Rafik goes to Charbagh Railway Station from his residence early morning and has to pay a daily rent of approximately ₹ 40/- to the rickshaw owner. If he does not pay the rent on time, the rickshaw owner may abuse him. If he violates a red traffic light to save time, the police beat and arrest him, and seize the rickshaw. Even the Lucknow Nagar Nigam officers demand bribes.

To sum up, if members of a marginal community have no other option for livelihood, they choose rickshaw pulling occupation as a survival strategy. This is an occupation in which a rickshaw puller can make money based on how much time he spends on pulling. Rickshaw pullers begin their day early and continue late into the night, a practice which creates health issues. Most rickshaw pullers hail from neighbouring districts and spend their lives in Lucknow. They send remittances to their families and remain in the city alone because they cannot afford the living cost if they bring their family. Due to an unhealthy living style, most rickshaw pullers suffer from chronic diseases. Many of them consume *ganja* (cannabis), *bidi*, alcohol, *paan, gutkha* (betel quid or chew tobacco), which creates not only health issues, but also creates 'social stigma' and 'economic burden' additionally.

Discussion

The above case studies found that rickshaw pullers were deprived of socio-economic status and continue to face exclusion and hardship to get basic services. Though essential for urban transport, their work is undervalued, and their social condition reflects structural inequalities. India has made a significant step towards achieving the vision of a "Viksit Bharat" (Developed India) with the 'sustainable development goal' of an inclusive society. However, caste-based disparities remain deeply ingrained in its social fabric. Addressing social inequalities requires a concerted effort to dismantle not just economic poverty but also the social structures that perpetuate exclusion and marginalization.

The study counted that caste identity as grounded in social realities play a great role in public affairs, but the preferences of adapting caste-based occupation are disappearing gradually. For rickshaw pulling, most of the rickshaw pullers predominantly come from disadvantaged caste groups and lower socio-economic backgrounds. Moreover, rickshaw pulling is still a 'social fact' and needs to be explored further from different perspectives including 'subaltern' or 'below'. The seminal works of Nicholas Dirks are crucial to understand 'caste of mind'. As Dirks (2001) argues that the modern Indian caste system is not an ancient, unchanging tradition, but rather a product of

British colonial rule. Dirks contends that the British "systematized" diverse social identities into a rigid caste framework for administrative control. We observe similar patterns in the process of 'politicization of caste' in which caste identities are used by political actors to mobilize voters, influence policies, and secure power, transforming traditional social hierarchies into political tools. It involves caste-based mobilization for representation, influencing candidate selection, and driving electoral strategies rather than just governance (Kothari, 1970). As a result, both democratic values and modern politics are embedded within local cultural practices, often leading to the rise of specific caste identities (like OBCs) as powerful political actors (Michelutti, 2020). This involves the "politicization of caste," where caste groups organize for power and representation.

Ambedkar argued that caste in India is not only a division of labor but also a division of laborers. It means the lower castes were historically confined to menial labor and social hierarchy placed Brahmins at the top, followed by Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras, with Dalits (formerly untouchables) occupying the lowest rung of the social ladder. The above referenced Ambedkar's writing suggests that Dalits have been historically excluded from access to natural resources and education. However, many new changes have been pointed out by contemporary political thinkers, such as, Christophe Jaffrelot (2003) who found that a wave of social change occurred after the emergence of caste politics led by Lalu Prasad in Bihar. To get rid of rooted inferiority and political exclusion of backward castes, former chief minister of Bihar, Lalu Prasad Yadav often gave "wake-up calls" in his speech: "*O gai charane walon / O bakri charane walon / O tadi peene walon / Vote dena seekho* (O! Cattle-grazers, O! Toddy drinkers, learn to vote) (Prasad, 2019). His ambition to break the socio-economic barriers and empower the lower sections could be heard in public addresses during his tenure.

Many studies show that upper caste individuals still occupy the majority of top positions in society (*The Hindu*, 2022; Pradeep & Goli, 2025). In contrast, lower caste individuals continue to be employed in menial and labour-intensive jobs such as rickshaw pulling, construction work, daily wage labor, agricultural work, brick-making, scavenging, and other marginalized occupations (Kumar & Gupta, 2025; Saxena & Alha, 2025). Moreover, rickshaw pullers from the general caste are also economically disadvantaged, but their socio-economic, cultural, and political status differs significantly from that of Dalit rickshaw pullers.

Ambedkar argued that caste continues to be a divisive force in entrenching inequalities. Therefore, the perspective from below in Indian sociology orchestrates the dissimilar social saga and ingrained subalternity attached to the rickshaw pulling profession.

Conclusion

India's demographic dividend and human resources hold immense potential for nation-building. However, this potential can only be realized if marginalized groups are empowered through equitable access to education, employment, and opportunities for skill development. Collaborating with private ventures and non-governmental organizations, the government can uplift rickshaw pullers and other deprived classes through targeted skill development programs and training. India is a welfare state that primarily aims to create a more equitable and prosperous society through the vision of Viksit Bharat@2047(Developed India) and Inclusive Bharat. This vision provides a roadmap for addressing existing disparities and promoting social and economic justice for all citizens. Yet, many other social reforms need to be incorporated to get rid of 'division of laborers' in India.

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