

# Psychology Behind Rejection of Caste-based Reservations in the Private Sector: A Mixed Method Study Among Dalit Buddhists in India

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## Abstract

In a mixed method study focused on the urban ghettos in Mumbai, Maharashtra—Matunga Labour Camp, Shell Colony, P.L. Lokhande Marg, and Ramabai Nagar—a sample of Buddhists ( $N=162$ ) reported variations in support of reservation in the private sector. It was discovered that a minuscule section of them have come to reject caste-based reservations in the private sector. Using mixed methods, combining a descriptive statistical analysis of survey data and a reflexive thematic analysis of interview data, this article attempts to explore the psychological motivations underlying the rejection of reservation in the private sector. The analysis suggests that a section of Dalits want to perceive themselves as equally “meritorious” as the upper castes. This is however a reaction to a deep feeling of inferiority, reflecting internalization of the psyche of the oppressors. Besides, the fear of being marked out as a ‘Dalit’ at the workplace is more pronounced by availing of reservation. This sustained fear of getting stigmatized stems from internalizing “disgust” and believing the stereotypes held by the upper castes. The discomfort with self-identity also leads to a cognitive dissonance that perpetuates itself in practices like concealing caste identity. Ultimately, this rejection is rationalized by advancing the claim that reservation in the private sector will reinforce caste identity. This article contributes to understanding the psychological grounds for negative attitudes towards reservation in the private sector among Dalit Buddhists.

## Keywords

Dalit-Buddhists, private sector, caste-based reservations, feeling of inferiority, caste identity, psychology of caste, mixed methods

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## Introduction

Indian society has been a deeply hierarchical one nestled, as it is, in the edifice of the caste system. The caste system has been a source of inequality and exploitation. At the lowest rung of the caste hierarchy were placed the Dalits, who have since been oppressed, marginalised, and subjected to discrimination. Considered to be “untouchables”, they had to face the worst kind of restrictions and hardships as a result of being denied access to all and any possible sources of income and education. Dr. Ambedkar, father of the Indian Constitution and crusader of social justice, rightly pointed out in his *Annihilation of Caste* (1944) that, “As an economic organization Caste is therefore a harmful institution, in as much as, it involves the subordination of man’s natural powers and inclinations to the exigencies of social rules” (as cited in Moon 2014: 48).

Acknowledging the historical injustices, in the post-independence period, the Indian Constitution provided special provisions for disadvantaged groups in order to bring them into the mainstream. As Sheth (1987) has noted, the entire package of reservations aimed to address three fundamental concerns: to eliminate social and religious disadvantages, to enable all socially disadvantaged groups to participate on an equal footing with others, and to safeguard the interests of all the groups, also known as the weaker sections, against all sorts of social injustice and exploitation. The intellectual and political contributions of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar were crucial in bringing the reservation policy. His efforts in this regard date back to the pre-independence period, beginning in 1919 with the submission of a statement to the Southborough Committee to the forging of the Poona Pact in 1932<sup>1</sup> (Thorat & Kumar 2008: 2).

The affirmative action provisions were severely contested in the Constituent Assembly. They were challenged once again when the underprivileged groups started to make use of the democratic procedures and constitutional guarantees in the 1970s and 1980s (Thorat, Aryama & Negi 2005, foreword by Shah: ix). Large-scale political debates, including agitations, notably in North India, erupted in the 1990s after the central government announced the implementation of the Mandal Commission Report, which further increased the pre-existing quotas for the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) by another 27 per cent (Deshpande 2013: 1). Thus, the policy of reservation has been one of the most contentious issues in India.

Reservation or affirmative action policies have been a central theme in the intergroup conflict between the caste-dominant and the dominated in India. It was also utilized to humiliate the Dalits by calling them “Sarkar che jawai” meaning sons-

<sup>1</sup>The political ramifications of the Poona Pact are a matter of several discussions. Kanshiram has attacked the nature of the Dalit politics that sprang from it. He argued that the making of independent Dalit leaders after Ambedkar was hindered since the electoral chances of popular scheduled caste politicians became significantly reliant on their good ties with non-Dalit voters. Hence, *chamchas*, or stooges, came to the fore instead of real and genuine leaders. See, Abhay Kumar Dubey (2001). *Anatomy of a Dalit power player: A study of Kanshi Ram*. In Ghanshyam Shah (Ed.), *Dalit identity and politics*. SAGE Publications.

in-law of the government who attract special treatment among many other things.<sup>2</sup> Gudavarthy (2012) also echoed the same argument to show how Dalits are stigmatized and reminded that what they are receiving is a type of “charity and not parity” (p. 55). Today, in the neo-liberal economy, there has been a withdrawal of the welfare measures of the State. The policies of liberalization, privatization, and globalization have led to the shrinking of the public sector. It severely restricted the number of job opportunities in the public sector, resulting in fewer prospects for SC/STs and OBCs in government administration and state enterprises (Thimmaiah 2005: 745) Therefore, the traditional policy of reservation has become redundant or rather has been virtually abolished.

Additionally, the Dalits continue to struggle in the new economy. Many studies, for example Weisskopf (2004), Thorat, Banerjee, Mishra & Rizvi, (2015), Deshpande (2011), Thorat & Attewell (2007), and Jodhka & Newman (2007), show the prevalence of market discrimination in India. This research indicates how hiring strategies and practices based on the notion of caste in the private sector and corporations have been detrimental to Dalit interests. Since familial networks<sup>3</sup> frequently play a large role in access to jobs, caste remains an important aspect in both economic and social life (Omvedt 2005: 137). In light of this context, it is critical to examine how Dalits feel about the extension of reservations into the private sector. Therefore, I wanted to investigate whether there is a section of the Buddhist community in Mumbai that has come to reject reservation, or, to put it another way, holds a negative attitude towards reservation in the private sector, and if there is, what psychological motivations may be responsible for it.

## Reservations in India: Psychological Aspects

In India, not everybody among the Dalits has equally benefitted from the reservation policies. However, it did help to create a small middle class among the Dalits. Jogdand (2017) has similarly argued that the reservation policy has not improved the condition of the greater Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) masses; rather, it has aided in the development of a “microscopic middle class” inside the community itself. Moreover, it also offered social security to the beneficiaries and their family members (Jogdand 2017: 2). Hence, the reservation policy brought positive changes by assuring social mobility to a sizeable section of the marginalized masses. However, social mobility came at a psychological costs discussed below.

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<sup>2</sup>In an interview with Sunil Kadam, a prominent social and political activist, this issue was raised.

<sup>3</sup>Ghanshyam Shah (2017) has argued that in the neoliberal era since individuals are unable to rely on the State, they are driven to seek protection in primordial social organizations, which is broadly referred to as ‘social capital’. He shows that this has resulted in the revitalization of the old cultural ethos, which legitimizes and strengthens caste relationships. See, Ghanshyam Shah. (2017). Neo-liberal political economy and social tensions. *Economic & Political Weekly*, 52(35), 62–70.

In his seminal work, Goffman (1963/2009) describes stigma as “an attribute that is deeply discrediting.” Dalits have endured the stigma associated with being at the bottom of the caste hierarchy since ancient times. Many studies have shown that reservation has led to the additional stigmatization of the Dalits or scheduled castes. For example, Patel (2008) investigates the stigmatised typical image of incompetence built around the Scheduled Castes (SCs), who have benefitted from reservations in education and services for the earlier seven decades. She contends that stereotypes are a potent tool in everyday encounters and that the use of frozen images constructs stigma. She also deals with the issues of deflecting stigma through various means like concealment of caste names and changing surnames which form a part of impression management (p. 105). Gudavarthy (2012) has also argued that the system of reservations in India has the particularly crippling drawback of causing several social groups to increasingly experience different types of public humiliation, anger, and abuse. He further substantiates this by referring to Fraser (2008), who argues that stigmatisation is a mode of “adding the insult of misrecognition to the injury of deprivation”(p. 55). Deshpande (2019) also shows that university students who receive Affirmative Action (hereafter AA) benefits are stigmatised by their peers, but they may not internalise their peers’ beliefs of their low worth. She further contends that it is not possible to draw the conclusion that weakening or doing away with AA would lessen stigma towards target groups. Besides, Jogdand, Khan & Mishra (2016) have also drawn attention to the evident stigmatisation and humiliation of reservation beneficiaries. They argue that claims such as, there has been a decline in merit and efficiency in education and administration due to the increasing admission of candidates from the reserved category, are manifestly humiliating since such claims undermine centuries of victimisation and add to the stigmatisation of the beneficiaries (p. 556). In short, it can be said that stigmatization has been a major psychological consequence of the policy of reservation. And to escape this stigmatization individuals have adopted various means. What remains to be explored is how the Dalits feel about reservation, particularly in the private sector.

## **Present Research**

The demand for the reservation in the private sector has been a relatively recent one. It came to light after the Bhopal Conference of 2002 organized by Dalit intellectuals and activists with the support of the Congress government in Madhya Pradesh under the leadership of Digvijay Singh. The Bhopal document, an outcome of this conference, reflected the aspirations of a small yet influential Dalit middle class. It stressed the necessity of economic empowerment of the Dalits. Among other things like more reservations in higher education for improved academic accomplishments, it made a strong case for a share in business/industry through policies based on affirmative action in the private sector, and professional jobs in the emerging, higher-paying economic sectors (Pai 2014: 45).

Given this context, it becomes intriguing to look into what the Buddhists, the most numerous among the Dalits of Maharashtra, think about the extension of reservation to the private sector. As Gokhale (1993) has argued, the Buddhists or erstwhile Mahars are a distinct community among the Dalits of Maharashtra for two reasons. Indeed, due to their functional role in village society, they occupied a unique position among the lower castes. Furthermore, under the direction and leadership of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the key architect of the Indian Constitution, the Mahars became the very first untouchable community to revolt against the adversities and disabilities posed by the exploitative caste system (Gokhale 1993: vii). They have been the most assertive among the Dalits of Maharashtra. Through this study focused on the four ghettos of Mumbai—Matunga Labour Camp, Shell Colony, P.L. Lokhande Marg, and Ramabai Nagar—I attempted to acquire their perspectives on the reservation in the private sector. It was discovered that a minuscule section of them have developed a negative attitude towards reservations in the private sector. This article, thus, attempts to explore the psychological motivations underlying the rejection of reservation in the private sector, thereby, establishing a linkage between caste and psychology.

## **Method**

As this article attempts to explore the psychological motivations underlying the rejection of reservation in the private sector, a mixed-method investigation was utilised. The quantitative phase was carried out first, followed by the qualitative phase. The purpose of this arrangement was to first identify those who reject reservation in the private sector and then explore their psychological motivations for doing so. In Study 1.1 the researcher undertook charting of the Buddhist community's preference on the said question and looked for variations between the select ghettos with the help of a Likert-type question. This research required respondents who "Strongly disagree", "Disagree" or "Neither agree nor disagree" to the question, "There should be reservation in the private sector". Study 1.1 made it possible to identify such respondents. Once this phase was completed, the researcher went on to Study 1.2, wherein unstructured interviews and focus group discussions were conducted with such respondents. A reflexive thematic analysis was undertaken to discuss the findings of this phase. The analytic process for the same has been discussed in detail later. The sample and two phases of this research are as follows:

## **Sample**

Table 1 shows the demographic composition of the sample. A total of 162 respondents were identified for this study. Responses from people of diverse age groups, education levels, sex, etc., were sought. About 40 respondents were identified from each area so that the differences become visible and proportionality will be maintained.

**Table 1:** Demographic composition of the sample

		<b>n=162</b>	
		<b>Number</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<i>Gender</i>			
	Male	94	58.02
	Female	68	41.98
<i>Age</i>			
	18-30 years	49	30.25
	31-40 years	23	14.2
	41-50 years	28	17.28
	51-60 years	31	19.14
	Above 60 years	31	19.14
<i>Education</i>			
	Up to 9th	21	12.96
	10th to 12th	66	40.74
	Undergraduate	9	5.56
	Graduate	44	27.16
	Post-graduate	20	12.35
<i>Marital Status</i>			
	Married	94	58.02
	Divorced	1	0.62
	Widowed	19	11.73
	Single	48	29.63
<i>Annual Income</i>			
	Up to 1 lakh	27	16.67
	1-3 lakhs	63	38.89
	3-5 lakhs	20	12.35
	5-8 lakhs	36	22.22
	8-12 lakhs	9	5.56
	12-15 lakhs	6	3.7
	Above 15 lakhs	1	0.62

### Study 1.1

In the initial stage, the researcher began by mapping the perception of the Buddhist community over the issue of reservation in the private sector. A Likert-type question was administered to all the respondents. As there was no priori probabilistic structure for identifying the population, a cluster sampling approach was followed. The locations were carefully selected after confirming that the bulk of the locals were Buddhists. As a result, these locations might be considered “Dalit spaces or ghettos” or simply “areas with a preponderant Buddhist population.” Four clusters selected from Mumbai city were, namely, P.L. Lokhande Marg, Ramabai Nagar, Matunga Labour Camp, and Shell Colony. The interviews and discussions were conducted primarily in Marathi and took place in private Buddhist homes as well as public settings like Baudha Vihar (such as Sugat Vihar in Sahakar Nagar or Supparak Baudha Vihar in P.L. Lokande

Marg). The respondents were often highly amiable and ready to express their opinions. They freely shared their ideas as if it was a duty towards their community.

P.L. Lokhande Marg is a slum locality in Chembur. The dwellings are mostly one-story. Two-story houses are also present. But mostly in such cases, the attic serves as a dwelling area. The living conditions were deplorable. Narrow lanes, crowded dwellings, and public toilets, all of which are typical of slum areas, can be found here. For the first data collection, housing societies like Ajanta, Sahdeep, Mahatma Phule Nagar (Number 2), etc., were included. These societies are further divided into chawls. For instance, the Sahdeep society has the Katare Chawl, Salve Chawl, and Jagtap Chawl.

Ramabai Colony is also a slum settlement on the Eastern Express Highway in Ghatkopar. In comparison to the P.L. Lokhande Marg slums, the living conditions here are improved. Many of the homes were well-furnished and had their own private bathrooms. With the 1997 Ramabai killings, which saw 10 Dalits killed during police firing amid demonstrations over the desecration of a statue of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, this locality gained national attention. Since then, Ramabai Ambedkar Nagar has been a hub of Dalit activism. People frequently gather around the Babasaheb Ambedkar Monument near Gandhkuti Vihar and D.B. Pawar Chowk to debate and discuss various concerns.

While in Matunga Labour Camp, the majority of the chawl-style buildings are three stories tall. Single- and double-story chawls are still present, however, they are further split into several wards. Formerly, this region was renowned for housing the migrant working class, mostly those who worked for the railways or the numerous textile factories that were originally located in Bombay. Ever since Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's time, the Matunga labour camp has served as the Dalit movement's stronghold. It was a focal point for both the workers' movements and the Ambedkarite movement.

In contrast to this neighbourhood, Shell Colony or Sahakar Nagar is home to Dalit families who are employed in white-collar occupations and are a member of the Dalit middle class. Here, both Samrat Ashok Nagar and Everest Society are decent neighbourhoods with bungalow-style row homes. Besides, there are also four-storied buildings like the Nalanda Society, Bahujan Seva Society, and others. These societies have a preponderant Buddhist population.<sup>4</sup> The fact that the living conditions here are good sets it apart from a ghetto, nevertheless.

### **Procedure**

This was entirely Android and ODK-based data collection. The responses that were saved were automatically coded as 1 for Strongly disagree, 2 for Disagree, 3 for Neither agree nor disagree, 4 for Agree and 5 for Strongly Agree.

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<sup>4</sup>All these co-operative housing societies were established as part of the "PWR 219" housing scheme, which aimed to give people from backward classes and oppressed groups access to homes. This plan required a 90:10 ratio, meaning that 90 per cent of the members had to fall under the backward category and 10 per cent under the open category.

## Results and Discussion

**Table 2:** Overall frequencies for “There should be reservation in the private sector.”

	<i>n</i> =162	
	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Strongly Agree	94	58.02
Agree	37	22.84
Neither agree nor disagree	6	3.7
Disagree	24	14.81
Strongly Disagree	1	0.62
<b>Total</b>	<b>162</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 2 shows that 58 per cent of the respondents strongly agreed that there should be reservation in the private sector, followed by 23 per cent of the respondents who also agreed to the question. While almost 15 per cent of the respondents disagreed that there should be reservation in the private sector. This shows that the majority of the respondents support reservation in the private sector.

**Table 3:** Location-wise frequencies for “There should be reservation in the private sector.”

		<i>n</i> =162	
		<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<i>Ramabai Nagar</i>			
	Strongly disagree	0	0
	Disagree	5	3.09
	Neither agree nor disagree	1	0.62
	Agree	5	3.09
	Strongly Agree	29	17.9
<i>P.L. Lokhande Marg</i>			
	Strongly disagree	0	0
	Disagree	5	3.09
	Neither agree nor disagree	2	1.23
	Agree	9	5.56
	Strongly Agree	24	14.81
<i>Shell Colony</i>			
	Strongly disagree	0	0
	Disagree	10	6.17
	Neither agree nor disagree	0	0
	Agree	12	7.41
	Strongly Agree	20	12.35



<i>Matunga Labour Camp</i>			
	Strongly disagree	1	0.62
	Disagree	4	2.47
	Neither agree nor disagree	3	1.85
	Agree	11	6.79
	Strongly Agree	21	12.96
<b>Total</b>		<b>162</b>	<b>100</b>

It can be gathered from Table 3 that only a minority of respondents (total 14.82 per cent) disagree that there should be reservations in the private sector. Such respondents are found more in the area—Shell Colony compared to the other areas. In terms of percent, Shell Colony has 6.17 per cent of respondents who disagreed which is double that of the others. As discussed earlier, Shell Colony is comparatively better off than the other three areas. The respondents here have a better standard of living due to their white-collar jobs and are a part of the Dalit middle class (DMC). Among such respondents who disagreed, there is an urge to dissociate from the stigma of the past. Also, they have access to resources like good education, which gives them the impression that they can get by with or without reservation. Besides, they felt that their children were as “meritorious” as the upper castes and hence can survive in the open competition. This aspect has been discussed further in the results of the thematic analysis.

### *Study 1.2*

In the second stage of this study, only those respondents who marked their responses as “Strongly disagree”, “Disagree” or “Neither agree nor disagree” to the question, “There should be reservation in the private sector” were identified. In total, 31 such respondents were found. With the help of unstructured interviews and focus group discussions, an attempt was made to gain in-depth insight and understanding of their position. As this problem is treated qualitatively, an attempt was made to examine the respondents’ thought processes. Each of these interviews and discussions was then transcribed along with the field notes for thematic analysis.

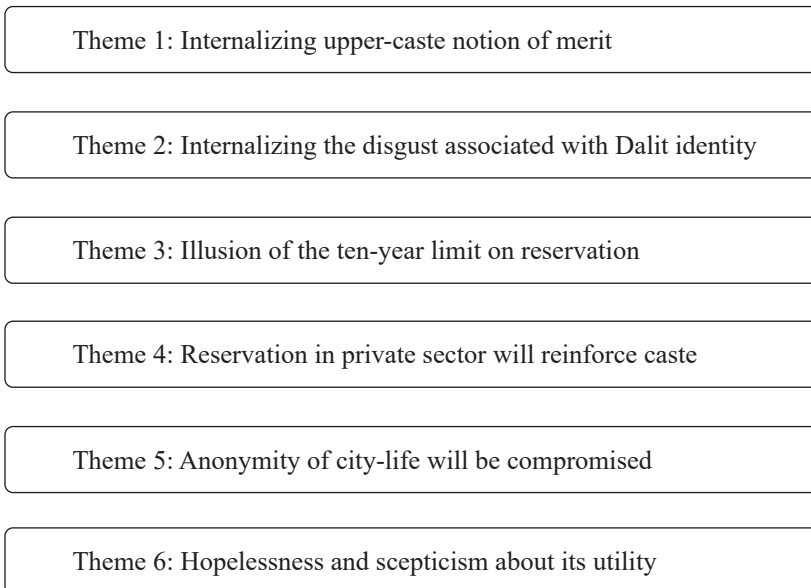
### *Analytic Process*

The reflexive thematic analysis was largely similar to that suggested by Braun & Clarke (2006, 2012) you will find descriptions of many techniques that psychologists and others have developed to help them pursue a shared understanding of why humans think, feel, and behave the way they do. These are the tools that we use to conduct our rational analyses. The variation was that a subset of 10 interviews was read first to look for potential themes. The sample required that the ten interviews from Shell Colony be read first since it had the most number of respondents in the “disagree” category and no respondents in the “neither agree nor disagree” category, whereas, all the other areas had some respondents in the “neither agree nor disagree” category.

Further, the initial codes were written. While doing the coding, the researcher took a more interpretative stance than a descriptive one in an attempt to accommodate the context of the respondent's argument. Sometimes, even for a single piece of the data, more than one code was used. For instance, lines like *Majhe colleagues vegveglya jaatiche aahe, koni mala vicharla tarch mi jaat sangto. Tasa hi jaati peksha maitri mahatva chi. Tyanchya sobat Diwali vagaire sajari keli tari kahi harkat nahi.* (English Translation: My colleagues belong to different castes, if somebody asks me about my caste only then I reveal it. As it is friendship is more important than caste. There is nothing wrong with celebrating Diwali or other festivals with them.) This was coded as "desire to be anonymous" and "desire to assimilate". Subsequently, each of the remaining interviews was similarly coded. The researcher decided which potential themes to pursue and to identify the presence of those themes in the text of the remaining transcribed interviews. Further, any miscellaneous and ancillary theme was also noted. After going through all the transcripts the researcher reviewed, modified and developed certain themes that aptly captured the psychological motivations behind the rejection of reservation in the private sector.

## Analysis and Discussion

As shown in the Fig. 1, the researcher developed six themes which discuss the respondents' psychological motivations behind rejecting reservations in the private sector:



**Figure 1:** Various themes identified

## Internalizing the Upper Caste Notion of “Merit”

As Kalantzis, Cope & Issaris (1988) have pointed out, the primary function of the “merit” principle is to sort human resources in a certain manner. However, the idea of merit is conditioned by culture and formed through history. Yengde (2019) has argued that those who enjoy the privileges of caste, their cultural and social capital<sup>5</sup> becomes ‘merit’. One might acquire merit, if one enjoys privileges like access to good schools, educated parents, cultural bonds, and community networks. Ultimately, as Mehta (2005) has also discussed, the pertinent question that arises is who gets to decide what merit is (p. 211). Therefore, in a caste society like India, merit is a relative term. With the help of numerous other research, Crosby, Ferdman & Wingate (2001) have pointed out that meritocratic policies in the United States, although seeming to be race-blind, have in fact helped to sustain and even expand privileges for Whites. Furthermore, the criteria employed to determine “merit” in most organisations are based on majority-culture norms. In a similar vein, Omvedt (2005) argues that words like “merit” enable us to overlook or push aside the reality of unending social identity-based exclusion and discriminatory processes in society. Thus, they are misleading and insulting (p. 206). This word has frequently been used by the upper castes in their defence of the private sector’s effectiveness as a result of the absence of quotas in the private sector. They think that reservations will reduce productivity and render private-sector businesses just as inefficient as those in the public sector.

Mostly while rejecting reservation in the private sector, the respondents would claim that “We are as meritorious as the Brahmins”. Here, Brahmins are taken as the reference group by the respondents. These had internalized the interpretation of merit based on upper castes’ hegemonic definition of “merit”. A respondent (female, 46) had contended that,

We don’t need the crutches of reservation, our children are as qualified as those of the Brahmins. It is not that we have progressed because of reservation. It was mainly Babasaheb’s ideas and philosophy that brought us ahead in life.

Another respondent (female, 51) argued that,

*Amchi mula general madhun pan spardha karu shaktat. Ti pan tyanchyach itki hushar aahet. Savarnanpeksha ti kuthech kami nahi.* (English Translation: Our kids can compete even in the general category. They are also as smart as theirs. They are no less than the Savarnas.)

This form of feigned superiority complex is but a reaction to a deep feeling of inferiority. While it masquerades as a positive self-perception, such an argument

<sup>5</sup>According to Pierre Bourdieu, social capital is formed via relational networks, particularly institutionalized ones such as the family. He refers to the social milieu in which human beings are socialized as a “habitus.” Individuals thus conform to the rules and behaviours of their group in order to gain from the system. See, Elaine M. Power (1999). An introduction to Pierre Bourdieu’s key theoretical concepts. *Journal for the Study of Food and Society*, 3(1), 48–52. <https://doi.org/10.2752/152897999786690753>

turns out to be self-destructive in a larger context since the Buddhist community lacks the kind of cultural and social capital that is essentially needed to construct “merit” in the neo-liberal set-up. It is also a fallacious argument since the actual purpose of reservation is to enable the participation of marginalised sections, granting equity in opportunities, thereby, fostering social justice. While subscribing to Dr. Ambedkar’s ideals does result in intellectual, spiritual, and societal upliftment, it does not serve as a shield against social and economic inequality and discrimination. Thus, they have internalised the Brahmanical worldview and prefer to interpret “merit” in absolute terms. Alternatively, it also shows that they have internalised the positive stereotypes surrounding the upper castes. Jogdand (2023) demonstrates this with the help of an example of how engrossed reading and being smart is associated with being Brahmin, while Dalits are stereotypically taken as “intellectually inferior” reflected in the reluctance to see a Dalit doctor (p. 45).

The cultural indoctrination makes the respondents hold the Brahmins as a reference group. This form of cultural imperialism has been formulated by Young (1990) wherein a dominant group’s experience, culture and interpretation of social life is imposed on the oppressed group. Further, she believes that it leads to double consciousness because one’s being is determined by two cultures: a dominant culture and a subordinate culture (1990: 60). This is also the case with Buddhists. So while they say that the Brahmins are “meritorious” and hold that they are also “meritorious” like them, they also acknowledge the contribution of Dr. Ambedkar’s ideas and philosophy.

### **Internalizing the Disgust Associated with Dalit Identity**

It was found that the respondents also rejected reservation in the private sector because they felt that it portrayed them in a negative light. A respondent (male, 27) had maintained that,

*With reservation, people assume that even those with 35 percent marks are able to get into respectable institutions. They do not realise that the difference in the cut-off for the reserved category and the general category is not much, so they blame us for stealing their seats.*

They do not want to be labelled as “reserved category” or “Dalit” as it is taken to be synonymous with “unmeritorious” or “indolent”. They would wish to refrain from reservation in the private sector to escape this stigma of Dalit identity which equates itself with poor academic performance. This demonstrates that they have internalised the disdain of the upper castes towards Dalits and the “reserved category” and seek to escape that disgust through the rejection of reservation. It is indeed, surprising, that such a thought process could come up at a time when most assertions based on caste revolve around the demand for reservations. Even dominant castes like Jats, Gujjars and Marathas are protesting for this exact demand today.

This is symptomatic of internalized oppression. As Rosenwasser (2002) has argued, internalized oppression is when members of a group come to believe the negative messages and stereotypes that others hold about them. Marginalized groups learn to despise themselves rather than see that these detrimental views are ingrained in them by a socioeconomic political system that pushes them to blame themselves and their people (Rosenwasser 2002: 54). So, despite understanding that it is not true that all SCs are unmeritorious, these respondents felt guilty to such an extent that they declined reservations in the private sector. They are also sometimes compelled to dispel those negative stereotypes by not revealing their Dalit identity.

Some of them recollected anecdotes about how they were singled out in schools or colleges due to SC scholarships or freeships. A respondent (male, 45) shared his experience:

*In school, the teacher would read out our names loudly and scold us that if we did not fill out the SC freeship form, we will have to pay the full tuition fees. After this, the entire class would mock us. And we would feel isolated.*

They do not wish to undergo similar humiliation at the workplace. They would like to assimilate into the culture even including the festivals of the majority, at least, in the public sphere.<sup>6</sup> As David & Derthick (2013) have shown, internalized oppression is related to lower levels of enculturation and higher levels of assimilation. This, therefore, brings out the necessity to create space for Buddhist culture and ideals. Alternatively, Van den Berghe (1987) has noted that people assimilate and acculturate when doing so is clearly in their best interests. People generally prefer to remain as they are, that is, to maintain their ethnic identity, in the absence of such personal benefits to change (p. 186). Hence, an individual's sense of deriving benefits from the system plays an important role here. A lot, therefore, depends upon the willingness of the Buddhist populace to develop their own cultural symbols.

## **Illusion of the Ten-year Limit on Reservation**

Among those who rejected reservation in the private sector, a common reason was the belief, rather ill-founded notion that Dr. Ambedkar was in favour of having the reservation system only for a span of ten years after its implementation. A respondent (male, 23) argued that "Babasaheb had said that reservation must be only for ten years". He said,

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<sup>6</sup>In one of the houses in Matunga Labour Camp, during the Ganesh festival, a Ganpati idol was installed. The reason was that their granddaughters were obstinate and insisted on getting it because all of their friends had placed Ganpati idols in their homes. The Buddhist community often looks down on such families. Recently, a well-known Marathi theatre and film actor too enraged his Buddhist-Dalit community by installing an eco-friendly Ganpati idol. See, Chandan Haygunde. (2017, August 31). Buddhists worshipping Ganesh face 'harassment, threat of social boycott.' *The Indian Express*. <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/maharashtra-buddhists-worshipping-ganesh-face-harassment-threat-of-social-boycott-4821602/>

Respondent: *Baryach lokkanna mahit nahi aahe pan Babasahebanna pan hech hava hota ki daha varshanpeksha jast aarakshan nako.* (English translation: Lots of people don't know but even Babasaheb wanted that reservation should not be for more than 10 years.)

His friend (male, 27) backs him up by saying, *Ho mala pan mahit aahe. Mi ek post vachili hoti FB var tyat hech mhantla hota, apyach mansane takli hoti.* (English translation: Yes, even I know. I had read a post on Facebook which said the same, it was posted by a fellow Buddhist.)

The same argument is utilised by the upper castes shrewdly as a defence whenever there is a debate about reservations. This is also a vile strategy to make the oppressed masses believe that it is high time that they should give up reservation. As Sarkar (2022) has noted, this type of argument tries to make the oppressed castes feel guilty by making them think that they have benefited from reservation for far longer than they should have or were intended to and that their refusal to give up these privileges is now the root of social inequality.

Recently, one of the judges on the bench that presided over the case involving the constitutional validity of reservation policies for economically weaker sections made a similar argument. According to him, "The idea of Baba Saheb Ambedkar was to bring social harmony by introducing reservation for only ten years" (Ananthkrishnan G. 2022). This falsehood of the ten-year limit on reservation policies has made inroads into these predominantly young Buddhist minds. They have come to believe that they are adhering to Babasheb's ideas while in fact, they are unknowingly consuming false propaganda. Such misinformation is frequently shared via numerous social media sites.

In reality, reservations for disadvantaged groups in public employment and educational institutions did not have a time limit. As Bhaskar (2022) has shown, Ambedkar was never in favour of a set time restriction of 10 years for political reservations for SCs and STs. Dr. Ambedkar asserted for a 'larger time' (Bhaskar 2022: 6). Ignorance about this has led them to believe that if Babasaheb did not want reservations for more than 10 years, there must be some logic behind it. Such a thought process has also motivated them to reject reservation in the private sector. This also points towards improper inculcation of Dr. Ambedkar's thoughts and inadequate socialisation, mainly, of the Buddhist youth into Dr. Ambedkar's life history and philosophy.

## **Reservation in the Private Sector will Reinforce Caste**

It was found that respondents would also think that reservation in the private sector will reinforce caste. A respondent (male, 47) assuming a rational posture argued that, *Jo paryant aapan jatichya aadhare aarakshan ghenar, toh paryant jaat nasht honaar nahi. Mi tar mhanto shaalet pan jaat lau naka* (English Translation: Till the time we

keep availing caste-based reservation, caste will not be destroyed. I say, do not even put your caste category during school admissions).

Another respondent (female, 29) remarked,

*Mala Kamble adnavaacha sthal aala hota. Mi nahi sangitla. Pawar, More asta tar theek asta. Tari pan jaat ashich jaat naste. Category madhun aalyavar te apyala veglach dhartat. Khasgi kshetrat arakshaana mule jaat ulat ajun pakki hoil ani vadhel.* (English Translation: I had got a marriage prospect with the surname - Kamble. I rejected it. Had the surname been More or Pawar, it was fine. Even then, caste is not going to disappear. Once you are appointed through the reserved category, they hold us as “different”. Reservation in the private sector might strengthen caste and bias.)

It was gathered that such respondents believed that since a bitterness has already developed towards them because of *savalatis* (colloquial Marathi word for reservation benefits and concessions), reservation in the private sector would further aggravate the resentment and also jealousy felt by the others towards their community.

They held that extension of reservation in the private sector would also give the upper castes another arrow in the quiver to attack them. One respondent (male, 47) used the phrase, *Aadhich makad tyat maddya payala* (Literal translation: *Already a monkey and now on top of it drunk too!* which means bad getting worse) to explain this phenomenon. Another respondent (male, 25) echoed the same thought process,

*Even if a boy from our community becomes a bureaucrat, he is identified as Dalit IAS or Dalit IPS officer. Similarly, if there are quotas in the private sector, it will strengthen the already present resentment against our community.*

First, it shows that although reservation policies have not introduced caste, in a caste-ridden society like India, the upper castes are unwilling to accept Dalits in top positions and stigmatize them for being beneficiaries of reservation. Second, the respondents have extrapolated this to argue that the same would happen with reservation in the private sector. Hence, they tend to argue that reservation in the private sector will reinforce caste.

## **Anonymity of City Life will be Compromised**

For a few young respondents, Dalit identity was not a very significant factor or rather it was inconsequential. They harped on having friends from other communities and felt that it was not necessary to carry their identity at workplaces or the public sphere. They feared that affirmative action would bring the stigma of ‘being Dalit’ back again. One respondent (female, 28) contended that,

*At the office nobody cares about my caste so why should I go and tell them that I am a Buddhist....All my close friends know about my identity and they are okay with it. But others tend to judge you on that, so it's better to disclose my identity only when asked about it.*

In their study on attitudes towards affirmative action as a function of racial identity, Schmermund, Sellers, Mueller, & Crosby (2001) found that support for affirmative action was highest among people for whom group identity was the most significant component of a sense of self, among people who were most proud to be black, and among people who think that oppressed minorities should create alliances. Similarly, considering Dalit identity as secondary and trying to subdue it by being anonymous was a tendency among these respondents. They had come to like the feeling of being “anonymous” in the public sphere.

Another respondent (male, 39) remarked that,

*Mumbai sarkhya shahara madhe yevda farak padat nahi. Office madhe koni swatahun jaat vicharat nahi. Jast Punjabi, Sindhi aani Gujarati aahet. Tar swatahun sangnyachi garaj padat nahi. Aata amhala performance varun bagitla jaata, mag amhala jaati varun baghitla jaanar.* (English Translation: In a city like Mumbai, it does not affect much. Nobody asks about caste at the office. Many are Punjabi, Sindhi and Gujarati. So the need to go and tell them on my own doesn't arise. Now they look at us through our performance, then they will look at us through caste.)

Those young respondents who were already employed in the private sector were comfortable not disclosing their Dalit-Buddhist identity unless asked explicitly and specifically. Due to surname similarities, the majority of them were assumed to be from the intermediate castes. For instance, surnames like Pawar, Shinde, More, Kadam, Jadhav, etc., are often found even in the dominant and intermediate castes. Therefore, they have not experienced any overt discrimination as such. With the coming of quotas in the private sector, they will be expressly marked as Dalit. With this, the anonymity of city life will be compromised. It will be difficult for them to move around as a “non-Dalit”. This was mainly found among respondents in Shell Colony and Matunga Labour Camp.

The thought process that quotas in private jobs would rob them of this anonymity stems from social conformity and partial acculturation. As Naudet (2014) and Guru (2018) have shown, it becomes problematic for the Dalit middle class to relate with their group of origin when they move from one social class to another. They want to dissociate with their caste fellows because it reminds them of their repulsive or embarrassing past.<sup>7</sup> Hence, they try to fit in the new social class group by arguing against reservation even if they might have benefitted from it. The tendency to mask their caste identity or to keep it hidden for as long as possible is a product of this dissonance.

<sup>7</sup>Gopal Guru (2018) depicts how the Maharashtra Dalit middle class sought a reprieve from their humiliating history. Their previous lives had become so repulsive that they did not wish to be reminded of it. This he says was apparent when some Dalit middle-class families forbade their family members from viewing the TV series ‘Najuaka,’ which centred on a Dalit woman’s horrible ordeal (pp. 147-148).



The rest of the ghettos are well-known “Dalit bastis”, therefore a mere utterance of their place of residence invokes suspicion in the other person’s mind about their caste or community. A respondent from Ramabai Nagar remarked that “The moment they say that they are from Ramabai Ambedkar Nagar, they are taken as ‘Jai-bhim wale’ or there is some suspicion about that in the other person’s mind.” Thus, while ghettos have become safe spaces to assert and preserve their own identity, they nevertheless are stigmatised for living there.

## Hopelessness and Scepticism about its Utility

It was observed that respondents had little hope that reservation in the private sector would be of utility since they felt helpless within the already-existing system of reservation. Disillusionment with the existing system of reservation was conveyed by a respondent (male, 36) as follows:

Eighty per cent of our Bahujan population is fit tightly in the fifty per cent reservation bracket because of the court judgement. In that too, those who are needy are fighting with those who are comparatively well-off. Getting admission to a good school itself has become so difficult. Our applications are rejected because we stay in Ramabai Nagar. How much difference will reservation in the private sector make?

Another respondent (female, 53) said,

*Aajun pan amhi jhopyatch aahot, BMC chya jhaadukhatyat jast Dalit samaj aahe. Arakshanamule kahich changlya huddyavar gele, mothya flat madhe gele. Khasgi kshetrat arakshane tech hoil.* (English Translation: Even today we live in slums. Most of them working in the sanitation department of the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation are from the Dalit community. Only some have achieved respectable posts and live in huge apartments. The same might happen after reservation in the private sector.)

Schmermund et al. (2001) have argued, with respect to African Americans that their reactions to the affirmative action policy may also be influenced by their personal experiences with it. The same can be said about the respondents from the Buddhist community. Such respondents felt that they have already faced enough hardships and cannot rely on the State for their emancipation. They feel alienated and left to fend for themselves. Thus, they have become sceptical about the ameliorative effects of affirmative action in the private sector. Additionally, they were also not in the mood to assert or undertake protests to demand such reservations. A respondent (male, 48) contended that,

*Baudha samajanech ka rastyavar utrun andolana karaychi? Amhi ladnar aani fayda dusaryanna honar mhanje mehnat kare murga, anda khaye fakir.* (English translation: Why should only the Buddhist community step out onto the roads and protest? We will fight for it and others will simply enjoy the fruits of our labour).

Many respondents harboured resentment towards Maharashtra's non-Buddhist SCs,<sup>8</sup> believing that Buddhists are the only community that takes to the streets in protest, while non-Buddhist SCs come to reap the benefits of Buddhist protest and assertion. They claimed the same thing happened during rallies in support of OBC reservations and Mandal Commission, or in protest of Dalit atrocities. Further, they also argued that many of the SC candidates elected to the Maharashtra Legislative Assembly were non-Buddhist Dalits. Therefore, there was doubt in their mind that despite a strong assertion by the Buddhist community over the issue, it would be of lesser utility to them. However, when posed with the question that countries like the United States do have affirmative action and diversity policies which even Indians have come to benefit from, the respondents were appreciative of the US' efforts towards inclusion and diversity but felt hopeless that anything of that sort would happen in India.<sup>9</sup>

## Conclusion

This study found that a tiny section of predominantly young, middle-class, well-educated or employed Dalit-Buddhists disagree that there should be reservations in the private sector. It is surprising that despite being one of the most assertive communities among the Dalits of India, a section of the Dalit-Buddhist masses is unaware of the academic studies on job market discrimination, ill-informed about Ambedkar's ideas and thoughts, and, therefore, lack group solidarity.<sup>10</sup> This study

<sup>8</sup>Political parties like Shiv Sena also played a major role in creating a rift between the Dalits of Maharashtra. It appealed to the non-Buddhist Dalits in the early 1990s to join Shiv Sena and favoured them while criticizing and singling out the Buddhists. See, Suhas Palshikar (2004). Shiv Sena: A tiger with many faces? *Economic and Political Weekly*, 39 (14/15), 1497–1507. Also, Milind Dhaware (2013). Disunity and fragmentation among Dalit castes of Maharashtra. *International Journal of Innovative Research and Practices*, 1(9), 23–37.

<sup>9</sup>The Cisco and BAPS lawsuits show that South Asians transported caste inequality and discrimination with them to the United States. Seattle became the first city in the United States to outlaw caste discrimination on February 21, 2023. Earlier, notable higher education institutions in the United States such as Harvard University, Brown University, Brandeis University, and the University of California Davis have incorporated caste into their anti-discrimination policies in recent years. However, as Samos (2023) has argued more rigorous global interventions are needed to bring any real transformation. See, Sumeet Samos (2023, March 3). What does Seattle caste discrimination ban mean for India?. *Outlook*. <https://www.outlookindia.com/national/what-does-seattle-caste-discrimination-ban-mean-for-india--news-267013> Besides, Dalit employees in the US wish for non-South Asian managers as they offer fair treatment because they are not aware of caste. This demonstrates the persisting menace of caste. See, Rohit Chopra & Ajantha Subramanian (2022, February 11). The movement to outlaw caste discrimination in the U.S. *Time*. <https://time.com/6146141/caste-discrimination-us-opposition-grows/>

<sup>10</sup>This lack of solidarity can also be attributed to neo-liberalism. Jagannathan and Packirisamy (2019) discuss the lack of solidarity fostered by neoliberal social relations. Though they have examined it in the context of academic labour, intellectual, love, and personal lives, the underlying idea is that individuals are unable to connect with one another because they keep their vulnerabilities to themselves owing to the spirit of competitiveness and entrepreneurship that neoliberal social relations characterise and impose. See, Jagannathan & Packirisamy (2019).

shows that their cognition is largely affected by caste- based stigmatization. The insidious way in which upper-caste notions and ideas have seeped into their psyche points towards “internalized oppression”. The negative stereotypes have permeated their minds and thereby associating with Dalit identity has become uncomfortable. Acculturation and social conformity dictate that they argue against reservation despite having benefitted from it. While Ambedkar’s ideas and thoughts are highly respected, falsification and appropriation of his ideas by the hegemonic castes have misled the Buddhist youth into believing that reservation has stayed for a much longer time than was intended. Ultimately, the reinforcement of caste is being blamed on affirmative action or reservation policies, which is nothing but another hegemonic idea that has been internalized.

This is an exploratory study; no quantitative conclusions regarding the precise group of people who reject reservations in the private sector are drawn from it. It would need more data to demonstrate that particular factors, like income or age, and other social psychological processes influences this rejection. The article also acknowledges that this can be a future area of research that can be accomplished with the help of a larger data set. Furthermore, the thematic analysis that was used attempted to reflect the requirements of the sample. The emphasis here was on the issue at hand and the question that has to be answered.

Notwithstanding these limitations, this article highlights the psychology behind rejection of reservation in the private sector among few Dalits. In addition, this article emphasises the need to bridge this gap between the academia and masses. The organic Dalit intellectuals can make a greater impact on sensitizing the Buddhist masses about these matters and enlightening them about the more sinister and modern forms of exclusion. In the absence of which, this minority will remain mere consumers of propaganda, unconscious of their own exploitation.

Finally, we must also note that the majority of respondents in the study believe that there should be some sort of affirmative action, necessary to protect their interests in the neo-liberal era. Several countries, including the United States, South Africa, Northern Ireland, and Malaysia, have enacted anti-discrimination policies for social groups subjected to discrimination in the labour markets (Thorat 2005: 336). It is high time that India initiates certain policy and institutional changes to ensure diversity, equity, and inclusion in the private sector. It is also clear that we need to develop a more targeted approach to mitigate the negative impact of caste-based stigmatization on the minds of Dalits.

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