

## OPINION

Relevant for: Indian Society | Topic: Structure of Indian Society incl. Caste system

Last week, scholars from Dartmouth College, US, made public their research, *Intergenerational mobility in India*, which sought to explore whether it was possible for someone to be born at the bottom of the pyramid and yet move up the social and economic value chain. The study has thrown up [some very interesting claims](#).

One, while the pick-up in economic growth has benefitted lots of people, it has failed to generate the kind of social churn that one would have expected.

Two, it shows that while this is true for the overall population, key segments of the population, such as Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs), have witnessed impressive upward mobility.

However, at the same time, the study concludes that there was no change among Muslims.

Without getting derailed by the needless polemics, we should welcome the findings of the study. It confirms what has been apparent for sometime now and, more importantly, it holds out lessons, for the past, present and the future polity of India.

One, it confirms that the economic and social milieu in India has been gradually undergoing a transformation. Not just over the last 30 years, as claimed popularly, but going back another decade.

The primary trigger has been the relaxing of laws and, thereby, greasing of the wheels of commerce and the economy.

Formally, this process was kicked off in the Sixth Five Year Plan launched by the then prime minister Indira Gandhi. Of course, this process was accelerated with a burst in 1991 under the tutelage of former prime minister P.V. Narasimha Rao and finance minister Manmohan Singh.

These changes basically unleashed the forces of growth, which manifest itself in so many facets, including urbanization. This was most starkly visible in the 2011 Census. Not only did it confirm a spurt in urbanization (about one-third of India now lives in urban areas), it also showed that economically, the country had begun to trade up—especially in terms of basic amenities. *Mint* had mined this data and published a series: [Trading Up](#). In short, it showed that whether it was for metrics such as financial inclusion, connectivity through roads or telephones or sanitation, larger segments of the population, including the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, had gained.

Two, this trading up of the populace drove down poverty levels (presently estimated at a record low of 22%) and also unleashed aspirations—something that was exploited by Prime Minister Narendra Modi to script an audacious victory in 2014, wherein the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) scored an absolute majority on its own.

If anything, the aspirations have only gathered momentum since. It has forced the Union and state governments to take greater heed of pressure groups.

Three, and very importantly, this social churn among SCs and STs is triggering a backlash, at times turning violent, from the upper echelons, who overnight find themselves socially

disenfranchised and consequently insecure. The main reason has been the trickle-down effect of seven decades of affirmative action combined with urbanization—which, unlike rural India, provides for anonymity to SCs and STs, and consequently social security.

In fact, now there is an increasing demand from caste groupings like the Marathas and the Jats (also the landed class), reeling under years of agrarian distress and marginalization of the agrarian economy, to be included in reservation quotas. Since this is outside of what the Constitution of India provides for affirmative action, politicians, especially incumbents, are in a pickle.

This is actually queering the political playbook for the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, adding unprecedented unpredictability on how various social groups will vote. In the elections held in Gujarat, the opposition exploited this to its advantage and almost pulled off an upset against the ruling BJP. Nationally though, it may not work out as easily given that many other externalities will come into play.

But then, it is clear that the glass ceiling posed by caste is beginning to be breached.

At the same time, it would be naive to think that centuries of social oppression can be reversed overnight. Let us say the battle has just begun.

*Anil Padmanabhan is executive editor of Mint and writes every week on the intersection of politics and economics. His Twitter handle is @capitalcalculus.*

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