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The Scaffolding of Inequality: *Social Categories and Labour Mobility in Construction Market of Lucknow*

Kapil Kumar Verma* and Prashant Kumar**

Abstract— Caste as social capital plays an important role in one's access to opportunities; marginalised communities throughout India are forced to take up low-wage manual jobs. Construction labour is one of the well-known unskilled/skilled jobs in the unorganised sector in India, characterised by low pay and lack of social security. It is usually filled by members of marginalised communities who have inadequate access to any opportunities to break their cycle of poverty and institutional oppression. These also have certain geographies whereby the work is concentrated in the urban areas, and employment tends to be irregular, sometimes characterised by association with a particular intermediary or contractor. The job involves backbreaking work pertaining to carrying bricks, gravel, and cement, and there is a certain level of hazards. The occupation also involves persons from marginalised

communities, especially Dalits and backwards Castes, because they are generally landless or have very little land holding, not enough to make ends meet and support the family. The State of Uttar Pradesh is the most populous State in India, and its capital, Lucknow, lies at the crossroads of migrant labour for people seeking employment in the city. At the same time, it is also a hub for people going to other locations for work. The occupation in construction labour is one of last resort and a desperate attempt at survival in lack of adequate means and opportunities, and this lies at the nexus of migration, marginality and lack of opportunities.

Keywords— Labour, Caste, Construction, Wage labour, Lucknow, Discrimination

I. INTRODUCTION

Construction in the year 2023 employed 7.1 crore people in India. The majority of them were unskilled workers (81 per cent). Those who seek employment in this sector tend to be those who neither have skills nor capital and are in poverty. Among those below the poverty line, the highest number is those of Scheduled Castes and Tribes. As per a Rajya Sabha Question reply, the poverty rate amongst SC in urban and rural scenarios is 21.7 and 31.5 per cent, respectively. For Other

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Backward Classes, the poverty rate is at 15.4 (urban) and 22.6 (rural). For ST, it is at 45.3 per cent (rural) and 24.1 (urban) compared with an Indian average of 25.7 (rural) and 13.7 (Urban). Considering these circumstances, SCs and OBCs tend to congregate in the lower rung of society and, lacking adequate access to resources and capital, end up in low-pay and low-skill jobs. In addition to ending up in that kind of job at such workplaces, the opportunities and access are also distributed on caste lines of graded inequality. In addition to caste, gender and religion also impact social and economic arrangements.

The Caste has been an important determinant of occupations available to the individual in the Indian Subcontinent. In any complex society, division of labour and differentiation is bound to happen. In any subdivision, the unnatural aspect of caste is its loss of open-door character that is seen in other class systems. As Dr Ambedkar puts it, the market and industries are dynamic, and without the freedom to adjust oneself to changing circumstances, it would be impossible for one to gain a proper livelihood. The Marginalised castes have always had precarious access to economic opportunities, and they may be paid such wages as the oppressor castes may deem appropriate, along with a limitation on the choice of occupation coupled with ghettoised living.

Certain castes, because of their earlier privileges like land and accessibility, could take advantage of mobility opportunities. But marginalised castes had quite less of it, while most of the SCs were landless. Marginalised communities end up aggregating in construction and agriculture because they lack proper education and resources to gain educational opportunities. They either do not hold land, or the plots are too small for sustenance. Life in the village is centred around feudal relations; thus, they rush to cities for better pay and employment opportunities. The paper tracks the migration and employment opportunities in Lucknow's construction market, particularly locating the caste and gender intersectionality. It has an impact on the social welfare and upliftment of these communities.

The marginalised communities are stuck in poverty and discrimination that perpetuates their cycle of poverty, and they are bound to take up jobs in the construction labour market. For women, the construction workplace is a challenging scenario. They are less likely to be recruited for work, and there are concerns about adequate access to sanitation facilities and safety for women.

II. METHODOLOGY

The study aims to capture the marginalisation of Scheduled Castes and Other Backward Castes communities in the

construction market in Lucknow. It also examines the gender and economic dimensions of discrimination and lack of access. The study begins with a pilot study of a few contract construction workers at an educational institute in Lucknow. The sample also tries to capture the diversity and intersectionality of labour and caste, gender and religion. The research examines their economic situation, migration, housing, education and wages. The interviews are conducted on a larger scale at the Telibag and Badnam Laddu construction labour markets, which are the main labour markets in Lucknow. The total number of labourers interviewed is fifteen, whose interviews are conducted to capture their circumstances as to work availability, financial situation, land ownership, accessibility to work and discrimination. The paper makes a subjective analysis of the intersectionality of caste, class and gender in the Lucknow Labour market. The interviewed participants were generally selected at random, the interviewer first tried to look into the demographic data of the participant. Then, the migration and history of work in the sector. The interview further looked into the family details as to land ownership, marriage and education or employment for children. The question of discrimination, when asked directly, could not be answered well; thus, alternative questions like access to work based on caste

and workplace treatment were relied on. Further, certain questions about access to government schemes were also posed, specifically as to labour cards, Ayushman cards and ration cards. The labour market is a crowded area, but certain emphasis was placed on securing some privacy for the participant, especially when caste related questions were asked.

III. LABOUR AND CASTE RELATIONS IN INDIA

When Dr. Ambedkar said that 'Caste is not just a division of labour but also of labourers,' he meant that Caste not only separates the workers based on the profession but also based on graded inequality of purity and pollution. This emerges in the relative depravity of labour and access to opportunities. Prof. Thorat has further proved that caste discrimination is significant in the private sector, especially regarding access and lack of equal opportunities. Caste relations have not remained stagnant, though their relationship with the feudal economies has weakened. Under the Capitalist model, these inequalities may not have been uprooted. The System of graded inequality has moved from explicit depravity to subtler forms. The efforts by the State to enhance economic opportunities for the marginalised communities have remained half-hearted and inadequate. The research on the effects of caste in formal and informal workplaces in North India has linked discrimination to

having more impact on the denial of opportunities as compared to the discriminatory treatment on wage rate.

These inadequate access and power relations emerge in the study. Most of the contract labour jobs are generally done through contact and caste-based networks. When asked about contract jobs, upper caste participants had either worked in contract jobs or gained some work through the network. While the Scheduled Castes were most likely to come to the labour market to seek daily work. This gatekeeping of the contract work was also visible in interviews. Amit, who is an Upper Caste labourer (name changed), had his son in a contractual job at a mall, while no participant from OBC or SC had access to some sort of contractual work opportunities in the family. The region and gender categories also add a layer of vulnerability and exclusion in the market. One may be able to appreciate the systemic inequalities better by having a profile of the market.

IV. A PROFILE OF THE CONSTRUCTION MARKET IN LUCKNOW

The construction market is usually held every day, 365 days of the year, in open squares or on roads from where the workers are picked up by those requiring their services. In Lucknow, the predominant ones are at Telibagh, Alambagh and near Badnam Laddu. The majority of labourers coming to look for work are men, while the number of women

workers seeking daily wage work is quite limited. There is a seasonal variation in the market as well. During winters and monsoons, the opportunity for work reduces drastically. The availability of work and wage is optimum during the harvest season as a large number of labourers are usually tied up in agrarian work; thus, those in the market get more work due to less supply of labour. In the winter, the number of days for which labour can get work can range from 2-4, while this number is more abysmal for women workers.

Fifteen participants were interviewed for the study, of whom two were contract workers, rest were daily wagers. A majority (78%) of the migrant workers interviewed were men. The average age of participants was 38.4 years. Around 23% of the respondents had studied up to the 9th class, and 19% up to the lower primary. About 58% had received no formal education. The high rates of illiteracy and limited education, often just at the primary or middle school level, created significant obstacles for migrants trying to integrate into the formal labour market. This, in turn, perpetuated a cycle that forced many into the informal economy. 76% of participants were married, 24% were unmarried. The main reason for migration is to increase or supplement family income (93%), while 7% migrated for better medical services. The majority

(75%) of the workers are intra-state migrants, 25% are from other states like Chhattisgarh and Bihar. Intra-state workers are mainly from eastern UP districts like Azamgarh, Ambedkar Nagar, Raebareli, Unnao, Varanasi, etc.

At the workplace 15% of the workers had adverse experiences based on caste identities, such as differences in work and dignity when it emerged that they were members of Scheduled castes (formerly untouchables). Workers also experience separation from their families, housing challenges, exploitative labour practices, caste discrimination, and psychological abuse. Alarming, a vast majority (70%) of migrant workers are unaware of their legal rights, highlighting a critical gap in their knowledge and access to opportunities. When inquiring about affiliation with any labour union, most of the workers replied in negative. There is a lack of a formal or any kind of grouping amongst the labourers. The only point of their identity as construction workers that could be said to be more visibly present was the labour card, but no other forms of solidarity could be seen.

V. SOCIOECONOMIC INEQUALITIES AND CHALLENGES

The labour market in India is segmented on caste, religion and gender lines. In such a market, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes are most vulnerable. The effect of discrimination hurts them in wages as well as in securing employment. They

mostly lack any agricultural land, or whatever land they possess is not viable. The labour market has an angle of intersectionality where multiple social factors come together. The factors like caste, religion and gender together divide the labour market and fragment any solidarity that may arise. The labour market consists mainly of men, and employment and better pay are the main drivers of their migration. The Construction Labour market tends to be divided on caste, class, gender and religious lines, and this is essential to understand them individually and at the intersection of all of these.

Caste

Caste is one of the main sources of stratification in Indian society, defining one's life chances, opportunities, and outcomes as to health, education and employment. It has been proved that Scheduled Castes tend to be poorer, and in any set of parameters, they tend to be poor, and these issues are linked to their social categories. It has been systematically proved that caste is the source of a large number of privileges that are considered earned via merit. At the same time, it is also a source of disadvantage to the marginalised, especially SC and STs. Migration provides them with a certain degree of anonymity. Even after migration, they may still encounter various forms of discrimination, direct or indirect. To evade Caste, some individuals display typical upper-caste

features to evade detection. One labourer described, 'I am from a lower caste. I wear a tilak and have a 'shikha' (tailcut hair), which sometimes leads people to mistakenly believe I belong to an upper caste. However, once they inquire and learn about my true caste, their behaviour towards me at the workplace changes. Due to this caste-based discrimination, many labour workers from my community feel compelled to claim they are from upper castes falsely, says Bablu Kumar from Unnao. Trying to hide or Sanskritise is one coping mechanism that has evolved by some individuals to evade caste. In spite of many efforts for education and opening opportunities, they find themselves in low-paying and low-skill jobs. Chief amongst them are construction and agricultural labour. The progress that was made in the last few decades is having a setback due to a lack of investment and neglect.

Land

In India, social standing and financial stability have always been based on land ownership. Due to their highly unequal distribution and high rates of landlessness, Scheduled Castes (SCs) suffer greatly from a lack of land ownership. Effective land reforms, the allocation of surplus land, and the preservation of tenancy rights were all suggested by the National Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (NCSCST). Acknowledging that there is a

shortage of land because of population increase. A large number of labourers who migrate to construction work tend to be landless or with very small holdings. In addition to their own field, they work in the fields of larger land-owning castes in their village. Some also complain of interference in water rights or the grabbing of land by upper/dominant castes. Mukesh (name changed) speaks of his agricultural holding rendered uncultivable because 'Thakurs' would not allow water to flow to his fields. Many labourer households from marginalised communities lack land ownership. Around 40% of respondents do not own land, and among those who do possess land, the size is often insufficient to sustain their livelihoods. Around 70% of those who own land have less than 2.5 acres of land. The agricultural produce is not enough to meet the annual food requirements of 75% of the families. 90% per cent of families avail rations from the Public Distribution System.

Income disparities and Skill deficit

There are significant pay differences between the Upper Caste and the Scheduled caste employees, with 38% of the discrepancy being attributable to discrimination or unexplained reasons and 62% to differing characteristics, mainly educational background. The most important element was found to be graduate-level education, which accounted for 70–88% of the attribute-based

salary differences between male Upper Castes and non-Upper Castes.

The disparity in incomes and opportunity persists in the Indian labour market; a lot of it is attributable to the endowment, but still, a lot of it remains unexplained even when the education and qualifications are the same, which can be attributed to discrimination. Educational qualifications are not present in the labour market, but the opportunities and wages add up. The wages tend to be uniform in the labour market, but SC labourers generally have fewer working days in a month in the labour market in Lucknow.

In the labour market, a distinct division exists between masons and labourers. Masons stand on the footpath with tools, while labourers generally stand on the road itself at the market near Badnam Laddu. This separation reflects the different roles and engagement methods within the construction work. An interview conducted among daily wage labourers revealed that their earnings typically fluctuate between Rs 400 to Rs 500 per day. However, during off-seasons, such as the rainy season and extreme winters, their daily earnings can drop to around Rs 300. For masons, the earnings range from Rs 600 to Rs 700 per day.

Religion

In India, religion is another discrimination category that is highly visible in Indian life, from segregated localities to discrimination in public life. Muslims are one of the most deprived classes in India, victims of discrimination and marginalisation that includes violence and segregation. During the interview, a respondent, Rabina Khatoon from Azamgarh, stated, "There is less discrimination when it comes to finding work in Lucknow city, but the problem arises in the villages. Many people do not choose me because of my religion." She further adds that in the last few years, her situation has deteriorated; she was struck off government schemes because of her religious affinity.

Gender

Discrimination against women explains a lot many issues in labour markets, especially the unexplained gaps of income gaps. Women with similar levels of education are paid less than men, which is proof of wage discrimination. This trend applies to all women, but the differences between castes indicate that SC women may find it most difficult to escape this trend. While some Indians, both male and female, may argue that caste is irrelevant because it has no bearing on their lives or because they do not personally discriminate based on caste, Dalit women cannot enjoy this freedom because they face a combination of poverty and gender discrimination that keeps

them uneducated, underpaid, malnourished, and ill. This pattern of discrimination and inadequate access is visible in data as well as the lived experiences documented in the study. The proportion of women in daily wage labour is low due to the social stigma associated with it. A male labourer named Mukesh Kumar from Mohanlalganj shared his perspective, stating, "If we send our wife to work in construction for daily wages, people in our village say, 'Look at him; he is living off his wife's earnings.'"

A female participant told us, "We face significantly lower chances of securing work opportunities compared to our male counterparts. The concerns regarding safety lead many women to prefer working alongside a companion—be it male or female—or to decline job offers altogether," said Kamla Devi, a 34-year-old migrant worker from Chhattisgarh. Another perspective emerges when husband and wife both work in the industry. A couple from Chhattisgarh, Reema Devi, aged 25, and Pintu Sahu, aged 28, are both part of the labour market in Telibagh. Pintu works as a tiler, while Reema engages in labour work. Pintu shared, "When I receive a tile work assignment, and the owner allows me to bring a labourer, I choose to bring my wife. This arrangement allows her to earn and increases her chances of finding work, as opportunities for her can be quite limited." This

highlights the couple's collaborative approach to navigating job opportunities.

The social network and caste location play an important role in gaining employment through references. The labourers who dealt with partially skilled jobs like fitting, painting were generally coming to the city with the help of contacts, and they would help them in negotiation and gaining contractual work. This tends to be localised, and sometimes mixed groups may come to the city, but amongst the mixed groups, caste hierarchy would still persist in their treatment with each other. The higher caste individual who had enabled others to come would not have to do chores, as others are dependent on his goodwill to remain in the job. The independent migrants have a hard time finding contractual jobs and are generally found in the free labour market.

Women are not just oppressed by gender. But caste together, the intersectionality as defined by Crenshaw can be an important tool of social justice, and a Dalit feminist perspective can help in having an honest conversation about oppression and discrimination against women. The study reveals a pervasive discrimination otherness of women. The important observation is the absence of Dalit women altogether from the market, deeming household help work is better than construction, and how a woman can be a

breadwinner? These male gaze-centric ideas were dominant in the construction market.

Disability and Workplace Injury

Disability is one of the statutorily recognised protected categories protected under the Persons with Disabilities Act, and now with the latest Right to Persons with Disabilities Act. But the issue lies twofold: first, as to the willingness of any employer to employ persons with disabilities and make reasonable accommodations, the second issue lies with the willingness of the State to enforce these protections. In addition to that, the disabilities arising out of work-related injuries are not addressed. One of the respondents suffered permanent injury due to work in a mill at Ludhiana, received no compensation, and rarely got any construction work. He sleeps on roads and in makeshift shelters in winter. He is a 26-year-old worker from Ambedkar Nagar who partially lost his hand in an accident. He says, "It is sad that there are no strict rules for providing workers' compensation who suffered permanent disability due to an accident while on the job. Many employers are hesitant to hire individuals with disabilities, and even when they are able to find work, it is frequently for limited tasks that offer low pay."

VI. WORKING CONDITIONS AND CHALLENGES

When the labour demand in agriculture was reduced due to mechanisation, the labour tended to migrate to urban work environments. As the labourers were assetless and uneducated, they would end up in low-paying and low-skill jobs. This was a very significant factor for the Scheduled Castes. As per Prof. Jodhka, "against a mere 8 per cent from the so-called general category, while as many as 29 per cent of the SCs were part of the casual labour force in 2004–5" This is also visible in the category of self-employment as there is a lack of employment generating assets as well so the self-employment potential is also lesser.

The conditions in the Alambagh labour market are particularly dire, with approximately 30% of the labourers residing in extremely precarious situations. Many of these individuals are forced to live in "Rain Baseras," shelters designed to provide temporary refuge from the elements but often lacking basic amenities and safety. Others find themselves sleeping on the "dividers," the narrow strips of land between roads, exposing them to the risks of traffic and harsh weather. This environment highlights the urgent need for better living conditions and support for these vulnerable workers. The Scheduled Castes (SCs) workers are the groups most

commonly found sleeping in Rain Baseras and on dividers.

The availability of daily work can often be uncertain, as there are instances where individuals may return home without any employment for the day. This situation affects women more frequently than men, highlighting a disparity in access to consistent work opportunities. Nearly all labourers engaged in contractual work were typically recruited based on verbal agreements. Additionally, subcontracting has led to the creation of a shadow economy, leaving many migrants outside of formal employment. According to the Factories Act of 1948, if workers exceed nine hours in a single day or 48 hours in a week, they are entitled to overtime pay, which should be twice their regular wage. However, in India, migrant labourers often work beyond these legal limits, with overtime becoming the norm, yet they are not always fairly compensated for the extra hours or additional work done.

Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 Pandemic disproportionately impacted the poor and marginalised. Due to poverty and landlessness, the marginalised tend to migrate most and thus were on the harshest receiving end of the pandemic. The lower caste labourers end up doing the hardest task while they are also the first to be fired. The marginalised children also

suffered a setback in their mobility to the urban schooling opportunities. During the interview, some respondents said that their children live with them. "Before the pandemic, I was living with my wife and children. My children were studying in a government school, but due to the pandemic, things worsened. I decided to send my wife and children back to the village because we had no savings left while living here due to high prices," says Varun Kumar, a migrant from Azamgarh.

State Support Mechanisms

The state under parents' patria is bound to take care of the most marginalised and underprivileged sections of the society. To a large extent, the construction labourers were able to benefit from the government-run schemes; chief amongst them was getting rations from the public distribution system under the National Food Security Act (NFSA) of 2013; a significant number of them did complain of a lower threshold and lack of inclusion of all family members. There also exists power and marginality dynamics in these policies; the Muslim woman responded and complained of her name being excluded from all the schemes of the government by the local Sarpanch in her village. The trend is also visible where most upper caste respondents are able to benefit from most government schemes. The SCs can benefit, but they lack adequate information access, and going to any government office means a loss of

workday and prospective income. In the interviews, 90% of workers have Aadhaar cards, 20% lack ration cards, and 61% do not possess e-Shram cards. If government schemes effectively reach labourers, they might have some reprieve from the uncertainty and risks associated with this sector.

VII. THE CYCLE OF POVERTY AND EXCLUSION

In labour markets, there is high congruence between caste and class. The high caste dominates white-collar and well-paying jobs. The caste tends to be a very good determinant of class outcomes. The empirical evidence shows that the higher castes tend to congregate towards service and white-collar jobs, while the reverse is true for lower castes. This flows from a lack of capital (social, economic or political). The same is reflected in the interviews with the construction workers regarding the position of marginalised castes, specifically. The early findings about the construction where the work allocation in the construction labour was on caste lines have not undergone substantial change, the graded inequality based on purity whereby "Superior and clean jobs are mostly held by 'mistries' and 'munshis' who belong to higher castes, while a great majority of workers are Harijans." This was explained based on the marginalised communities' lack of land and education. The situation has substantially improved on a

lot of indicators. The progress has stagnated in the last decade, the liberalisation (LPG) resulted in the loss of secured public sector jobs, while no mechanism was developed to compensate SC/ST communities to compensate them for this loss of potential capital formation. The difference in the household pattern is substantial. "Caste or religion significantly impacted a household's results regarding its place on the distributional ladder or its likelihood of being impoverished. Therefore, compared to Higher Caste households, SC, ST, and Muslim households were more likely to be in the lowest consumption quintile."

When Dr Ambedkar talked of mobilisation and liberation, the first step was 'To educate' in the process of 'to Organise and Agitate'. This first unit is not accessible to many marginalised workers. One participant was uneducated, and none of his children were pursuing education because they needed to labour to earn and sustain themselves. The loop/ vicious cycle of poverty is not breaking for so many, and this was most clearly seen for the Scheduled Caste workers. There was an absence of hope for the future as well in the workers, indicating a hapless situation for the workers.

The government support is inadequate, it is also unable to reach to the downtrodden and marginalised. Amongst the OBC participants, some individuals expressed the need for more

government programs tailored to their specific needs, such as ration cards for those in a state of migration. They also emphasised the importance of inclusive behaviour both in the workplace and in their communities. Thus, inequality and inaccessibility are indexed to caste and gender and religion as the dominant drivers of the Indian social setup that continues to oppress those at the bottom.

The cycle of poverty and exclusion for the marginalised castes persists because of their precarious access to opportunities for education, land and decent, secure employment. The higher castes have some access to all three, even if that is less or not very substantial that can help them in a crisis like COVID-19. The marginalised castes are at a great disadvantage when it comes to land; SC labourers tend to have none, or their access to water for the land has been impinged upon by the oppressor communities. Whereas reservation/ affirmative action helped some family members to get out of poverty through education, others who could not get a job are in much worse situations now, as opportunities for public employment have dried out. The public sector opportunities and governmental support have also remained insufficient. The cycle could only be broken by education, employment and social security; access to all of them is highly precarious for the construction workers.

VIII. CONCLUSION

The research sheds light on the lived experiences of marginalised workers from a subjective viewpoint. It captures the demographic composition of the market, wage rate, seasonal changes in supply and demand, and the issues in the lives of labourers. In contrast to statistical models and economist's understanding, this paper tries to supplement econometric understandings with the field understanding of the market. The key findings that emerge from this research consist of the daily lives of the marginal workers. Their demographic profile consists largely of marginalised communities. Among those, the index of inequality and vulnerability follows the caste lines. It also places weight on the statistical findings on discrimination, especially when awarding some work. The social capital of upper caste individuals still assists them in gaining public sector benefits as well as some secured employment for their children, at least, in addition to that, they tend to focus on education a lot. While the Scheduled Caste households tend to be much more vulnerable, deprived and unable to seek redressal of rights, generally without land, this further extends to a lack of education. One SC participant was neither educated

nor seeking education for the children due to poverty.

Through a subjective understanding of the labour market, one can understand the indexation of inequality on Caste lines, which is supplemented by the lens of religion and gender. This affirms the works of Sukhdeo Thorat and Ashwini Deshpande, where they statistically assess the impact of discrimination and inequality based on caste.

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