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To cite this article: Ravinder Kaur & Nandini Sundar (2016): Snakes and ladders: rethinking social mobility in post-reform India, Contemporary South Asia, DOI: [10.1080/09584935.2016.1203864](https://doi.org/10.1080/09584935.2016.1203864)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09584935.2016.1203864>



Published online: 22 Aug 2016.



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## Snakes and ladders: rethinking social mobility in post-reform India

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The question of social mobility in a terrain of increasing inequality has gained particular urgency in post-reform India. We approach social mobility not as a one-way ascent toward the top, rather as a risk-laden enterprise prone to fluctuations that include both incremental gains and the possibility of sliding downwards. We argue that to ‘move up the ladder’ is not merely a matter of individual choice or hard work in the face of odds as free-market believers have long held. It is as much an outcome of collective political bargaining, privileges that dominant class and caste status affords, access to resources and, indeed, occasional luck. Two propositions follow. First, we suggest that the state remains albeit as a reluctant enabler of social mobility in the age of markets. Second, the participation in the new economy hinges also upon one’s ability to ‘dress up’ for the part, to be able to craft one’s look as if one belonged to spaces – work or leisure – that one desires to inhabit. The work of appearances, we suggest, does not operate at individual levels alone, it also encompasses the nation’s spectacular projection of itself in the global political economy.

**Keywords:** social mobility; inequality; neoliberalism; capitalism; class; caste; economic reforms; India

In 2015, the Patels of Gujarat took to the streets to demand ‘reservations’ or quotas in government jobs and educational institutions, the Indian version of affirmative action. At one time, the landowning Patels, a dominant caste both economically and politically, had been viscerally against reservations; their argument this time was that if reservations could not be abolished, then Patels must be included. Among the several conspiracy theories attempting to explain this incongruous spectacle was one attributing it to a master ruse by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, to have all caste-based affirmative action abolished in favor of reservation for poor people of all castes. This open-ended speculation signals the lack of a readily apparent explanation for the plaintive cry for state help by a dominant group, and the seeming paradox of group-based claims to deprivation in a liberalized market economy like Gujarat’s, where individual aspiration and market forces have supposedly triumphed.

In the past decade or so, the Gujarat model has become popular shorthand for the promise of economic development that liberalized markets offer. In corporate circles, Gujarat is invoked as a progress report card, a showcase of potential upward mobility to make a stronger case in favor of greater liberalization of the Indian economy. Through

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its relative success in attracting foreign and domestic investments via the ‘Vibrant Gujarat’ program, Gujarat is routinely exhibited as a sign of the entrepreneurial prowess of its people skillfully harnessed by the state. This highly publicized Gujarat model is what Narendra Modi used as a political vehicle to win an absolute majority in the 2014 general elections to form the current government. His election campaign slogan *Acche Din* or good times conjured the magical arrival of the new epoch that the people had long awaited, an era when collective dreams of upward mobility would finally be realized (Kaur 2015). The magic of open markets would deliver what decades of Nehruvian ‘mixed economy’ could not: the upward mobility of citizens harnessed to the economic success of the nation. The post-colonial nation, buoyed by the markets and the dream of good times, would finally realize its rightful place on the high table of global powers (Kaur 2016). Or so the popular discourse unfolded.

It is precisely this uplifting narrative that was punctured by the Patel agitation. It is not surprising then, that the leader of the agitation, a young man called Hardik Patel, has been charged with sedition, a colonial era law, which makes ‘disaffection against the government’ a crime punishable with imprisonment ranging from three years to life.<sup>1</sup>

The Patel demand for reservation raises several questions: first, why is it that in India’s most market-friendly state and among its most politically empowered community, reservation is still seen as the primary avenue to mobility? Why is the market not seen as sufficient? Second, does reservation in fact help in increasing upward mobility – what is the relationship between caste, education, employment, and a higher status than the one your parents possessed? This, of course, assumes that formal employment through education confers a higher status than landed property or politics, even if the economic payoff may not be very different. Third, what is the relationship between democratic assertion of a particular group and their socio-economic mobility – does the latter follow from the former or vice versa? In the politics around ‘hurt sentiments’, where diverse groups call for bans on films, books, paintings, or exhibitions (Blom and Jaoul 2008; Ramdev, Sandhya, and Bhat-tacharya 2015), claiming that their religious or caste sentiments have been hurt, there is no necessary link to objective indicators of discrimination. The higher up in the hierarchy you are, the greater chances you have of succeeding in your claim to being hurt or even being outraged (Sundar 2012). To what extent then does the assertion of immobility or economic stagnation depend in practice on a community’s greater upward mobility? And finally, how justified are we in thinking of mobility in group terms – castes, communities, gender and so on rather than focusing on individual pathways – when the crux of the anti-reservation demand is that it is the individual’s socio-economic status which should matter, not their caste.

This special issue rethinks the question of social mobility in a terrain of increasing inequality in post-reform India. The contributors explore how the promise of mobility packaged as ‘growth’ in multiple registers and scales (self, community, nation) is manufactured within the nation, and mediated by global networks of migration, investments, remittances, commodity and consumption flows. They ask from different vantage points how inequality is lived and experienced in everyday life, and the ways in which individual emotive experiences of hurt, shame, outrage and aspirations shape as well are shaped by patterns of social mobility or the lack thereof. The ‘great transformation’ brought about by India’s neoliberal economic reforms offers a distinct ethnographic location from where to rethink the meanings and practices of social mobility in unequal societies.

In India, historically, while there has been significant work on inequality, especially caste inequality, it has not always been addressed together with the question of social mobility. In part, this is because of the vicissitudes of Indian social science – mobility is not a

question that economists have been much interested in, and sociologists have lacked the quantitative skills to measure mobility. Moreover, mobility is not as much of an issue in an agricultural society where land is inherited, as against in a society structured by formal employment. In recent years, however, debates over inequality, equal opportunity and social mobility have come together in a variety of fields – such as the provision in India’s Right to Education law that reserves 25% of seats in private educational institutions for ‘economically weaker sections’, to affirmative action in institutions of higher education, and the skills development program started by Narendra Modi’s government to simultaneously cater to industry’s needs for trained labor and the desperate need for employment among India’s significant youth demographic. Given the speculative trajectory of capital, however, the very question of mobility – usually taken as a sign of upward movement – needs to be re-examined in the age of markets in India.

We approach social mobility not as a one-way ascent towards the top, but rather as a risk-laden enterprise prone to fluctuations that include both incremental gains and the possibility of sliding downwards. This ever-present risk of oscillation becomes especially apparent in the absence of social safety nets in a free-market economy that can otherwise cushion or neutralize setbacks. We argue that to ‘move up the ladder’ is not merely a matter of individual choice or hard work in the face of odds as free-market believers have long held. It is as much an outcome of collective political bargaining, privileges that dominant class and caste status affords, access to resources, and indeed, occasional luck. The past three decades of economic reforms that introduced the *mantra* of liberalization, privatization and globalization (LPG) as a recipe to ‘lift millions out of poverty’ have brought mixed results. If expansion of the middle class and the ongoing spectacular transformation of Indian urban centers into ‘global cities’ has been one part of the story, the other part is the increasing number of urban poor and rural migrants who move to cities in search of employment. The ongoing crisis in the farming sector, caused in part by the commercialization of agriculture, has augmented the scale of migration to cities.<sup>2</sup> In short, the processes of social mobility, the aspirations to ‘move up’, unfold along the decline of the developmental state on one hand, and on the other, the uncertainty of the ‘trickle down’ magic of free markets.

The themes central to this enquiry are (a) the increasingly ambiguous, often contradictory, role of the Indian state as an agent of social change in the post-reform decades, and (b) the skewed nature of the post-reform economy where traditional farming and industrial manufacturing remain stagnant or in decline, whereas professions related to personal consumption and services are on the rise. The enquiry into the patterns of social mobility, thus, is intricately linked to the fundamental shifts set in motion by the economic reforms. The 1990s reforms brought a significant change in the policies and rhetoric of the Indian state that adopted the ‘big market, small state’ formula of neoliberal capitalism. The success of the free-market state was now measured by its ability to bring in investments, transforming itself into a saleable commodity to global investors, and most of all by working to implement its own eventual demise (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009; Kaur 2012). The old rhetoric of *mai-baap sarkar*, the all-knowing paternalistic state, gave way to the uplifting discourse of the market, where individual talent and skills would create prosperity. This shift to markets also exposed the bulk of the population to greater risk as the state began to withdraw even the existing minimal support to its most vulnerable citizens.<sup>3</sup> The current moment in India’s history, then, constitutes a double misstep – the state’s gradual withdrawal from the social sector coincides with the appearance of visible cracks in the promise of free markets to bring in prosperity.

Two propositions follow as we rethink the questions of inequality and social mobility in the post-reform context. First, we suggest that the state is a *reluctant enabler* of social mobility in the age of markets. This proposition may first seem counterintuitive, as the post-reform Indian state has thoroughly internalized the neoliberal rhetoric of market-enabled mobility. Yet, it is also faced with the actual ineffectiveness of markets to bring in large-scale social mobility, as the simmering political discontent shows. The choice before the state is double-edged – to either acknowledge the failure of the free-market project after nearly three decades of liberalization or face volatile political unrest among disaffected, though often dominant, groups and communities who perceive themselves to be ‘left behind’ in this shift to markets. Caught in this internal schism, the state reluctantly distributes access to public resources even as it continuously reaffirms its faith in markets. In short, the discourse of ‘small state’ notwithstanding, the state still remains a central agent, even if uncertain and unwilling, of social change in the market economy.

Second, mobility must be understood in the context of status and self-imaging which leads us inextricably into capitalism’s world of appearances, where self-presentation and refashioning of one’s self in order to fit into the new economy becomes critical. The *work of appearances* does not operate at individual levels alone, it also encompasses the nation’s projection of itself and its constituents in the global political economy (see Kaur in this volume). In what follows, we unpack these themes to make sense of the yet unfolding patterns of social mobility in post-reform India.

### The open edge of markets

At the heart of the question of social mobility lies the condition of inequality that increasingly defines our world in the age of markets. The problem of inequality has long been addressed within scholarship in different ways at different historical moments – from studies of development and modernization as paths to progress after the mid-twentieth century to poverty, exclusion and discrimination in more recent times (Sen 1983; Patnaik 2007; Myrdal 2008 [1968]; Banerjee and Duflo 2012; Acemoglu and Robinson 2013; Deaton 2015). The renewed focus on inequality comes in the wake of the financial crisis in Euro-America, where scholars and public policy experts alike began questioning the well-established fundamental belief in the ‘trickle down’ promise of the market economy, while drawing attention to the dangers of growing inequality in society. Joseph Stiglitz frames this debate in unambiguous terms in his aptly titled book *The Price of Inequality* (2013), where he argues that ‘inequality today and the way it is generated actually undermines (economic) growth and impairs efficiency ... growth has been stronger in periods in which inequality has been lower and in which we have been growing together’ (7–8). This widely debated work is significant in many ways. First, it argues from an insider’s vantage point where the ability of capitalism itself to create sustainable human progress is not questioned. Instead, the role of unregulated and unchecked capital or, as the popular term goes, ‘rogue capitalism’ in creating speculative bubbles serves as an explanatory frame. Second, inequality is seen as undesirable because it is found to be responsible for undermining growth. This approach toward inequality departs from the common assumptions and old debates on ‘optimal inequality’ as a necessary condition that provides incentive to individuals to strive and innovate (Freeman 2012; Hasanov and Izraeli. 2012). Christine Lagarde, the head of the International Monetary Fund, for whom excessive inequality is constitutive of bad economic policy, has articulated this ongoing rethinking on inequality emphatically. She recently stated that ‘reducing excessive inequality is not just morally and politically correct, it is *good economics* (her emphasis) ... everybody

will benefit from these policies, because they are essential to generate higher, more inclusive and more sustainable growth' (Lagarde 2015). Whether this line of argumentation is crafted merely to appeal to the capitalists to whom Lagarde routinely speaks, or is rooted in the belief in market-led economic growth, this discourse of reducing excessive inequality has gained currency in industrial societies ravaged by financial crisis. Perhaps the most notable in this context is the opinion articulated by *The Economist*, the leading open markets publication. It stated that 'inequality has reached a stage where it can be inefficient and bad for growth' as it is caused by rent-seeking rather than fair competition and hard work (The Economist 2012). Apparent in this narrative is the distinction between good and bad capitalism where the latter is responsible for *accentuating* inequality that is harmful for economic growth (emphasis ours).

Incidentally, this influential position is also shared by Amartya Sen, who together with Jean Dreze questions the viability of high economic growth when the bulk of the Indian population is faced with skewed human development indicators such as education, health and malnutrition, or what they call 'underdevelopment of physical and social infrastructures and human capability' (2013). Sen and Dreze advocate 'participatory growth' that aligns economic growth with human development that helps to create a skillful, creative and healthy working population. In many ways, the approach is not especially radical, since this is precisely what the social welfare model in some industrial societies is built upon. But it is deemed radical in the Indian context, given that in the quarter century of economic reforms, the emphasis has been on liberalization and privatization, coupled with an almost obsessive belief in a trickle-down formula. The poor and the marginalized have been further pushed away from a political agenda setting that increasingly builds around the language of growth and investments rather than citizen welfare. Though these positions appear to be similar, they differ in one fundamental aspect. While Euro-American commentators like Stiglitz (2013) and Atkinson (2014) articulate the collective fear of not recovering from, and perhaps falling ever deeper into, the 'Great Recession' that began with the housing market collapse in 2008, commentators like Sen and Dreze and others articulate the collective anxiety of the masses who risk 'being left behind' in India's much-celebrated economic leap.

This subtle though important distinction within seemingly similar positions also underpins the current debate on the 'precariat' that Standing (2011, 2015) describes as the 'new dangerous class' born out of global capital's insatiable search for ever cheaper labor to increase profits. This creates the condition of precariousness that entrenches societal inequality and thereby instability among the already vulnerable groups. The precariat, in many ways, is what Hart (1973) described as 'informal labor' already in the 1970s, except that the precariat is now framed as a societal danger that will ultimately implode. Standing describes the downward journey of a mainly Western working class that was once unionized, was secure from the vicissitudes of life through government-supported welfare programs, and had an important voice in the political arena. This class, he suggests, is becoming increasingly precarious as it moves from secure employment to short-term contracts, and lack of welfare support that further marginalizes it to the fringes – often the right-wing fringes where anger and frustration find an outlet. In other words, what Standing describes is the dissolution of the solid working class that eventually forms a newly disenfranchised global class ever pushed to the margins.

This new global class formation born out of stark inequality has been contested by Breman (2013), who speaks from South Asia to question the basis of Standing's empirical examples, almost entirely located in the advanced industrial societies of Euro-America. He points out that the largest groups of 'flexible', informal labor are not located in Europe but in the world outside. For example, 90% of the labor force in India is informal, whereas only

3% of vulnerable labor exists in the USA and the EU (ILO 2013; also see Agarwala 2013). Standing's story of the downward mobility of the working class barely allows us to make sense of the Indian context, argues Breman, as conditions in India and other developing countries are far worse than that which Standing narrates. The development of labor-capital relations follows a different historical trajectory, where the working class was never really able to bargain for the benefits of formal employment. The proportion of formal unionized labor in India has always been small, and thus, the notion of a stable working class undergoing downward mobility by losing its class position is not the story of the Indian work force. The bulk of the Indian labor force has always been vulnerable, or as Breman remarks provocatively 'if they are not involved in downward mobility, it is because they cannot sink any further than where they are' (Breman 2013, 136).

So how might we theorize social mobility in India? Or, for that matter, much of the world where labor is largely informal and footloose. In the absence of social security that still protects citizens of Euro-America in varying degrees, social mobility in India is largely a speculative enterprise. And increasingly, in the post-reform era, the upward ascent on the social ladder is increasingly predicated on one's entrepreneurial abilities. The promise of the markets, then, is the broader frame within which individual and collective dreams of social mobility are negotiated and contested. And it is the domain of markets and economic reforms that we need to focus on in order to understand changing forms of social mobility.

This debate on the efficacy of open markets in bridging social inequalities and wealth gaps has gained a particular urgency after nearly a quarter century of economic reforms. Do open markets enable laboring subjects to overcome deprivation? How is mobility even conceived of in absolute and relative terms when labor is increasingly becoming informal and flexible? Consider the following: while the Indian state has made 'Make in India' its flagship campaign to turn India into a manufacturing destination in the global political economy, the share of organized labor as well as growth output in the manufacturing sector has actually fallen in the past years (Economic Survey 2015, 109). In the financial year 2012–2013 alone, more than 400,000 jobs were lost in the factory sector (ASI 2015, S3-2). What is especially noteworthy in this decline in the organized work force is that it occurs even as the number of factories has actually gone up marginally by 1.93% (ASI 2015, S3-5). The recent data show that capital investments have increased by roughly 11% just when the actual employment has decreased by 3.7% in the same period. This negative correlation points to a deeper trend in Indian manufacturing: more capital-intensive investments mean more automated operations and a lower share of low-skilled and unskilled labor. The marginal growth in labor force, if at all, is on account of skilled labor and managerial jobs that automation requires (Kapoor 2014). In contrast, the unskilled labor is either turned into contractual labor or displaced further into the informal sector.

If manufacturing remains in decline, the service sector has seen a particular rise in the new post-reform economy. The official category of service sector contains a vast array of disparate economic activities related to government and private enterprises and from tradable to non-tradable work. This includes software development, communication, hospitality, travel, real estate, construction and banking industries, to name a few. The service sector has gained the most in the past three decades, rising from 35% to more than 50% of India's GDP (Economic Survey 2015, 113). Its growth coincides with the boost in call centers, business outsourcing, hospitality and a range of personal consumer services in the retail sector, especially in the past decade. The changing urban contours with new spaces of habitation and leisure like gated townships, high-rise office complexes, shopping malls, multiplex cinemas and food courts signal these fast-paced economic activities at work.

The emerging picture of the new economy or the ‘great transformation’ from agriculture to industry, with a shift in comparative mobility, simplifies a much more complicated picture, of dynamism in certain fields of commercial agriculture, and the large pool of dead end stagnant jobs generated in the service industry. It also ignores large areas like fisheries, mining, or forestry, where opportunities for employment or entrepreneurship play out very differently. What becomes visible is an uneven landscape, where employment growth is skewed in favor of a service sector that requires a variety of skilled labor. To participate in the new economy, then, means to be able to demonstrate possession of a specific set of personal and professional skills that require investments in education and access to opportunities. This unequal economic landscape also points to the fragile nature of growth in post-reform India where a large part of the workforce remains unskilled and excluded even as the state seeks to distance itself from the most vulnerable sections of society.

### The reluctant state

The calls to dismantle the Nehruvian developmental state gained strength in the 1990s when India’s shift toward capitalism began. If big dams, public sector industries and mega infrastructure projects initiated in the 1950s stood for a self-reliant developmental state, by the 1980s, the flagship public sector enterprises had been dubbed as superfluous ‘white elephants’ draining the Indian economy. This was after more than four decades of ‘mixed economy’ policies, the middle of the road economic approach that sought to bring together elements of planned economy and free markets in the era of non-alignment of Third World nations. The promise of capitalism was to help realize the economic potential of India said to have been obstructed in the ‘license raj’ era of bureaucratic red tape and state control of industries and financial markets. The freedom of markets, now deemed the ultimate condition of liberty (Fukuyama 1992) from state control, was advanced as a precondition for achieving the goals of prosperity and development that the Nehruvian developmental state had failed at. In this shift toward capital, the state would ideally be rendered obsolete. And the market would take over the project of wealth creation while allowing prosperity to ‘trickle down’ to the citizenry at the bottom rung of the economic ladder. Yet, despite the rhetoric, the state has never been rendered obsolete in the age of markets. This became especially evident during the 2008 financial crisis, when the American investment banks weighed down with bad debts and large-scale losses had to be bailed out via loans provided by the American government. The state’s intervention was even seen as a necessary course correction to contain ‘out-of-control’ markets and as a moment to rethink the idea of unfettered capitalism.<sup>4</sup> What we are witnessing, then, is a condition where the state remains albeit as a *reluctant* agent, unwilling and unwanted, even when it is rhetorically effaced within the ‘small state, big market’ neoliberal discourse.<sup>5</sup>

This reluctant state in the age of markets becomes particularly visible in the influential discourse of what is popularly known as ‘Dalit capitalism’, where capital accumulation appears as the prime mode of Dalit resistance against upper caste oppression. The idea of Dalit capital operates along the general trajectory of the free-market belief that access to financial credit and business opportunities will lead to social inclusion and eventually level out centuries long disadvantages (Iyer, Khanna, and Varshney 2011; Aiyer 2015). The inspiring narratives of Dalit millionaires who turn adversities into opportunities are increasingly invoked to showcase entrepreneurship as a tool of social empowerment (Kapur, Prasad, and Babu 2014a, 2014b). The capitalist is presented as a transformative agent of social mobility that overcomes the traditional, the static pre-modern via a liberal infusion of financial credit among those historically excluded from society. In short, the

account of Dalit capitalism is that of capitalism's ultimate triumph, and that too where state interventions ensuring affirmative action have seemingly failed to enable the big leap into modernity.

Yet, the uplifting message of this discourse never fully addresses the history of Dalit exclusion that kept the ownership of the means of production out of their reach. The question of Dalit entrepreneurship is not just about the lack of credit flows as is often suggested, but how caste discrimination and prejudices, based on so-called traditional idioms of purity and pollution, shape the exchange of goods and services in the market (Prakash 2015). In the language of markets, these old prejudices are translated into questions of individual capabilities, skills and qualifications of Dalits to be able to perform managerial tasks or to undertake any other profession unrelated to their caste. In fact, this translation of caste prejudices into market-friendly language signals the limit of markets as a liberating force. The point here is not to dismiss the phenomenon of Dalit capitalism, but rather to draw attention to social barriers and restrictions that constitute markets too. For all the celebration of capital as an agent of human emancipation, it has increasingly become difficult to explain away its inadequacies and constraints as inequality grows in different parts of the world.

The most influential contemporary critique of capital yet, interestingly, comes from within the pro-market line of argumentation. Piketty (2014) in his recent work shows that when the return on wealth exceeds growth in income, it inevitably leads to a disproportionate rise in the capital stock. This creates greater inequality, as concentration of wealth in fewer hands continues via inheritance and unearned rentier income on property through generations. What hinders this ever-widening gap is taxation imposed by the state that redistributes wealth within the society. In other words, capital does not 'trickle down' wealth on its own, as has long been believed, but results from an active state policy to tax its wealthy citizens. This critique also challenges the idea that entrepreneurship and grit alone is what is required to achieve social mobility. In relation to Dalit capitalism, it serves as a reminder that much of the socio-economic mobility and educational progress among Dalits was initiated via state-led reservations in the public sector. The recent phenomenon of the Dalit middle class is an outcome of these sustained state policies over several decades (Jaffrelot 2008). Piketty's work is a call to bring back the state as a social leveler at a moment when wealth gaps have increased even amidst the ruins of the financial crisis.

In India, the state was never fully obscured, even when it had absorbed the logic of neo-liberal markets. Consider the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government's slogan of 'reforms with a human face', that sought to conjoin capitalism with some form of wealth redistribution. The initiation of the 2005 National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) is one such example that ensured the 'right to work' by guaranteeing 100 days per year of work to unemployed unskilled rural workers. If NREGA was the state's response to the growing rural crisis brought to the surface via farmer suicides, crop failures and drought-like conditions, it was also an admission of the failure of the market to lift up the depressed rural economy. In the same vein, the demand for reservations from the state by the Patels in Gujarat and Jats in Haryana more recently underlines the failure of the markets in bringing prosperity. If at all, it vividly reveals the pattern of the new market economy, and the spaces excluded from it.

### **Work of appearances**

The buoyant service sector has opened a wide variety of jobs previously unavailable in the Indian economy. These include employment in the call center industry and business processes outsourcing of a varied kind that connect the global North and South across different

time zones. The participation in the new economy, we argue, hinges also upon one's ability to 'dress up' for the part, to be able to craft one's look *as if* one belonged to spaces – work or leisure – that one desires to inhabit. This aesthetic labor required in fashioning one's self to 'fit in' the new economy has neither been recognized nor seriously examined. And yet, appearances matter especially when a vast majority of employment is flexible and short term, requiring constant entries and exits in the job market. Consider the opportunities that the entry of multinational firms might make available, and the individual strategies devised to gain access to these seemingly more attractive jobs. The political disquiet over the introduction of foreign direct investment (FDI) in the retail sector, signaling the arrival of multinational retail chains like Walmart and the displacement of millions of small shopkeepers, has largely overlooked the modes of self-perception and status seeking adopted by those looking for employment in these multinational companies. Here lies the difference in being a pizza delivery man in a uniform, a sales-clerk in a department store, a sanitation employee at the airport, or a beauty parlor masseuse from a *chotu* in a *kirana dukan*, a full-time domestic worker, or a *maalish wali*, in terms of the kind of self-respect that comes from nomenclature. This change in personal appearance, the adornment of official clothing, the insignia on a name tag associating one with a recognized organization can hardly be dismissed as merely a superficial makeover. For one, the change in looks also allows entry into spaces that one has been excluded from previously, the acquisition of new mannerisms and a mode of being makes a difference in how one is perceived by others, and how one perceives oneself in relation to others. What appear to be *minor upgrades* in terms of absolute wage hikes may be experienced relatively as far greater experiences of mobility in status terms. These subtle and subjective aesthetics of appearance constitute incremental paths of mobility in the new economy that have been overlooked thus far.

To be sure, the question of appearances or looks has long been viewed with suspicion given the association of market society with the negation of its own essence when 'all that was once directly lived' is turned merely into spectacular appearance (Debord 2005). This has been called the 'colonization of everyday life', when social life succumbs to the overpowering market forces and where advertising, branding and commodification reduce the organic society to an illusion of itself. One might ask when have spectacular objects, commodities and bodily signs of power, influence and belonging not mediated society? And is not the notion of a directly lived life itself not an illusion? In short, we need to move beyond the vectors of falsehood and truth, deception and authenticity in order to understand how appearances are put to work in the new economy. And to what extent do appearances become productive modes of drawing attention to oneself, and what might be the limits of this everyday spectacle. The work of appearances, we suggest, however, is not just a question of 'standing out' in order to draw attention to oneself, it is as much a quest for 'blending in' with dominant groups. Or to put it differently, even if the art of self-makeover does not affect a *real* shift to another identity, it does create caste or class *ambiguity* that is at least provisionally less exclusionary in nature. The ambiguous appearance enables some room for self-improvement and enhancement, so that paths of mobility are not foreclosed to the less privileged individuals.

### Mapping social mobility

In order to map social mobility, then, we need to move beyond the formulaic indexes of deprivation, given that social and economic inequality does not always match up evenly when laid over each other. The focus on absolute gains in terms of income and wealth of households do not always allow us to understand how mobility is experienced and signaled

to others around us. Central to these discussions is the question of definition and measurement of social mobility, apart from the question of whether it is absolute or net mobility that is being measured. The former is a reflection of the total number in motion, and influenced by larger structural changes such as the shift from a crises-ridden agricultural sector to industry and services. Assessments of relative mobility, particularly as they intersect with caste and gender, are thus better for measuring changes in patterns of social inequality.

Vakulabharanam and Motiram, and Vaid (this volume) grapple with the problems posed by data, using National Sample survey data, as well as data from a National Election Study of 2009. Both papers find that overall, there has been growing inequality post-liberalization, and much less mobility than would appear from the rhetoric of liberalized India. The maximum mobility has been among the urban elite. Within the latter, migration and education are major driving factors, though the role of initial endowments in enabling both migration and education suggests that the effects are not unidirectional. Vaid shows that caste and class remain significant determinants of mobility, except at the upper end – but there again, the caste effect comes in at the level of creating the initial educational endowment, rather than directly influencing occupation.

Upadhyia also looks at the role of education in driving mobility, focusing on engineering colleges in the professions-obsessed culture and economy of Andhra Pradesh. She shows how the control exercised by dominant caste groups is reproduced through their investment in educational businesses, tying in with successful migration strategies. She also shows how, ironically, state subsidies to engineering education end up creating a glut of engineers, and slotting youth into differentially rated colleges depending solely on their ability to pay, regardless of the meritocratic language of university admission programs. The focus on education also highlights the leading role played by the state as primary provider of both education and prestigious employment. In India, a ‘permanent’ government job with promotion and pension has remained the ultimate dream for millions of youth. The colonial and post-colonial state has thus played a far greater role in mobility than the market, including in terms of the support provided to capital (Chibber 2006). It is only since the 1990s, once the middle classes had benefitted from state education and employment that the market began to be seen as the main driver of mobility (see also Deshpande 2010).

Studies of public sector companies show that state employment, especially when located in well-provisioned townships, has been a significant leveler (see Struempell and Parry 2008), but this is often accompanied by mass displacement and downward mobility for those unfortunate enough to live on the resources that public sector enterprises seek to mine or dam. Moreover, studies have shown that caste and social discrimination perpetuates itself in formal work settings in the modern industrial and financial sector, whether public or private, in both recruitment and behavior at work (see essays in Deshpande 2011; Jodhka 2012; Thorat and Newman 2012). There is, however, little work comparing mobility and discrimination across the private and public sectors in terms of the differential impact of affirmative action versus the alleged indifference of the market to social identity.

Even in new avenues of employment with seeming mobility, such as the service sector and its soft skills training, disciplinary hierarchies are reproduced, as well as elements of resistance (Goptu 2013; Srivastava 2015). What the private sector sells, unlike the public sector, is the dream of equality in consumption. Large-scale changes in consumption, such as access to packaged goods or technology, are *seen* to be mobility, whether or it not it represents objective increase in indicators like income, health or nutrition. Zabaliute (this volume) shows how access to images and sites of elite consumption, even if made possible only through a certain degree of disguise, self-distancing and what one might term ‘class-passing’ similar to racial passing, is part of the experience of mobility for young urban males.

Kaur (this volume) takes a different tack, examining how adversity, lack and the need for coping strategies are celebrated as innovation and progress in the new idiom of mobility. India's famed practice of everyday '*jugaad*' or improvisation is converted into a new 'business model' suitable to Indians whose natural capacity for scientific engineering has been unleashed in a liberalized economy. The ultimate effect, of course, is to absolve the state from its failure to provide basic services and even more importantly, lets off capitalism for its role in creating inequality and precarity.

Mobility in all these contexts is as much a marker of continuing inequality as an alternative or a means of escape.

## Funding

This issue originated out of a workshop co-organised and co-funded by the Styrelsen for Forskning og Innovation through the project Nation in Motion: Globalisation, Development and Governance, and the Department of Sociology, Delhi University. The workshop was held at the Department of Sociology, Delhi University, in November 2013.

## Notes

1. See <http://www.ndtv.com/india-news/surat-court-rejects-hardik-patels-bail-plea-in-sedition-case-1287418>
2. The farmer suicides have become symbolic of the ongoing rural crisis. See 'Agri Crisis: Punjab Saw 449 Farmer Suicides in 2015', *Hindustan Times*, March 1, 2016. <http://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/agri-crisis-punjab-saw-449-farmer-suicides-in-2015/story-Qyu5NP4nYcdZketsqrVRWM.html> (Accessed March 3, 2016).
3. Already in its first year, Narendra Modi's government cut the health budget by 20%. See 'India slashes health budget, already one of world's lowest.' December 23, 2014, Reuters News Service <http://in.reuters.com/article/india-health-budget-idINKBN0K10Y020141223>
4. An unusual discussion took place at the 2012 Annual meeting of the World Economic Forum, Davos. The theme of the WEF meeting, considered the high table of global capital, was the 'Future of Capitalism' where bankers, industrialists, politicians together expressed concerns about unfettered capitalism and discussed their doubts about its capacity to improve the state of humanity. See, for example, Schwab (2012).
5. An example of this double-edged discourse is the popular middle-class refrain 'despite the state' that suggests that India's economic growth happened despite the state and not because of it. Here, state intervention is particularly seen as undesirable.

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