

Experiences of Social Mobility Among the Informal Sector Workers

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Abstract: The paper discusses the real-life experiences of social mobility among informal sector workers. The focus is on the various elements and mechanisms of mobility in order to analyse the experiences of social mobility. The method used in this paper is an in-depth interview. Further paper discusses the aspects like the meaning of social mobility to the respondent, the significance of aspirations for the respondents in understanding experiences of social mobility, the barriers faced by respondents to their mobility, and how they overcome these barriers. The paper analyses the experiences and findings of fieldwork.

Keywords: Social mobility, social capital, cultural capital and 'waiting'.

Introduction

In this paper, through in-depth interviews, an attempt has been made to analyse the real-life experiences of social mobility among informal sector workers. Elements of social mobility which have been discussed in the paper are aspirations of mobility, mobility itself, and unemployment among the workers in a university campus in Delhi. Further, the paper also discusses the mechanisms of mobility, such as marriage and networks. Also, in the paper, an attempt is made to understand how respondents perceive social mobility. Through asking respondents about the benefits of coming to Delhi from their village or home town. The discussion goes into finding the reasons for moving to Delhi. After that, the paper discusses the significance of aspirations in the lives of respondents. Other factor, like education, is identified by the female respondents as important to her family's story of mobility, while cultural capital is considered important by both respondents. Further, barriers to social mobility in the lives of respondents are discussed and how they overcome these barriers in their lives. At the end paper throws light on the method used in research and field work.

Rationale for Selection of Specific Respondents and Method of Research

After the initial analysis, the decision was taken to conduct the in-depth interview within the university premises. Another reason which directs this research to a university campus is due to constraints like resources and time duration. The respondents include both males and females. One of the female respondents belongs to the Haldwani district of Uttarakhand. Her caste affiliation falls in the general category; she migrated to Delhi twenty-one years ago after getting married. Her husband was already in Delhi before their marriage. She has two sons; her elder son is pursuing a career as a chartered accountant, and her younger son is in class twelve. While a male respondent belongs to Uttar Pradesh. He came to Delhi in 1996, and his elder brother had worked in Delhi before that, through whom he got a job at the university. Another male respondent has six children who stay in the village along with his wife, while he stays in Delhi with his brother. The researcher came in contact with the respondents through snowball sampling. The respondents engaged in informal work and got the researcher in contact with the other workers. Some of them work in the hostel's mess kitchen. Some male respondents are from Uttar Pradesh, which has the highest population in the country and is one of the least developed states, facing the challenges of unemployment and poverty. Some respondents are from the newly formed state of Uttarakhand as well, from the hill districts of Uttar Pradesh. Uttarakhand is a well-developed tourist state, but it still facing challenges of unemployment mainly due to geographical constraints.

Meaning of Social Mobility to Respondents and Their Experiences

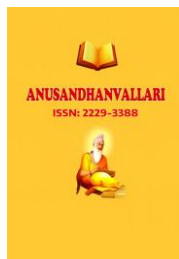
According to Anthony Heath (2003), social mobility is generally referred to as the movement of individuals within the stratification system of society. Another perspective, according to Heath, which is rarely applied in the study of social mobility, is to focus on the movements of groups in the stratification system of society. According to

Sorokin, “social mobility is understood as any transition of an individual or social object or value - anything that has been created or modified by human activity - from one social position to another” (Sorokin, 1959, pp. 303). On the basis of different concepts and approaches of social mobility, the respondents’ narrative to the questions asked is analysed in aspects of inter- and intragenerational social mobility.

On asking one of the female respondents, how does she perceive the life of her family since they have come to Delhi? What has changed till today? The respondents articulate it in the following manner: Firstly, a female respondent begins by saying that *they did not get anything in Delhi; our native place was better. But then she says that the lives of their children will change, and in fact, it has changed. They have a lot of facilities for studying. The lives of their children will completely change if they do well in their studies.* But she said their life is the same as they have to do a lot of physical work even today. Their children get everything on the table, she said: *“ek glass pani bhi ni uthane deti main aapne beton ko”* (I do not let my sons even to pick even a glass of water). She feels that there has not been any improvement in her life since childhood because she has been doing a lot of physical work. While a male respondent says that: *“mujhko kuch nahi lagta hai”* (he does not feel anything, replies in a frustrated manner). On asking what difference he feels in his life in comparison to his previous generations? Respondent replies: *“Jahan par vo the vahan hum bhi aa gaye hai ghuma phira ke”* (in the end, we have also reached the same level where they were). In one way, the respondents feel that they have not achieved any kind of upward mobility in their lives. They do not feel that they have succeeded in achieving intergenerational or intragenerational mobility. The responses of the respondents give the impression that they fail to perceive social mobility in their lives.

On asking the question about what difference do they see in them and their counterpart who did not migrate and stayed in their native village or town? One of the respondents says that she has gained a lot, she has knowledge, and she can read now. She knows how to talk to others, and then she says *“sab kuch sikha hai”* (have learned everything). It can be analysed by discussing Bourdieu’s notion of capital. According to Bourdieu (Ritzer, 1966), capital can be divided into three forms: economic capital, which includes material assets, income, etc.; cultural capital, which includes education, tastes, preferences and status, etc.; and social capital, which includes contacts, networks and links, etc. All these forms of capital can be converted into each other. When a female respondent says she knows now how to talk to others, and her awareness that she should have fewer children, that is a part of cultural capital. In the long run, this awareness helps to educate her children and gain upward social mobility, as her family size is small because she was aware of family planning. Her awareness about the importance of education in today’s world passes these ideas to her children, as mentioned above. This trajectory of intergenerational mobility in the story of a respondent’s family supports the view of Satish Deshpande that “three broad kinds of resources are necessary to produce the results in competitive exams that qualify as indicators of merit: (a) economic resources (for prior education, training, materials, freedom from work, etc); (b) social and cultural resources (networks of contacts, confidence, guidance and advice, information, etc); (c) intrinsic ability and hardwork” (Deshpande, 2006, p. 2443).

Therefore, not only economic capital but also cultural and social capital in the form of guidance, advice and information, etc., play an important role in producing the results in today’s competitive examination system, which are the indicators of merit. One of the female respondent has two children because she was advised by doctors and other near and dear ones in Delhi. Another female respondent says that her sister, who is still in the village, has four to five children and ignored family planning. She mentions that it makes her anxious when she hears that someone has four or five children. She says *“shahar shahar hota hai”* (city is always better). She sometimes feels that she should have been born in the city and have studied. In future, if any of the respondent succeeds in life, then it is an example of the conversion of cultural capital to other forms of capital. While one of the male respondents has six children, so cannot afford to educate children in Delhi, the family is staying in a village in their native place. Lack of family planning can be the reason behind it, as the respondent cannot bring a family of



six children to Delhi. Another respondent's wife lacked the knowledge of family planning that a female respondent could gain in Delhi. Whereas a respondent says *one's way of talking changes, especially in places like Delhi, one learns a lot*. Some boys who have come from the village have not learned even how to talk in a civilised manner. They are the same as they were after 10 years of staying in Delhi. Another respondent mentions that I have learned "*duniya-dari*" (rules of the world), whereas my counterpart, who stayed in the village, is still grazing cows and buffalo in the village. They do not have a choice, as they cannot buy goods of their choice because they do not have money. Further, respondents believe that money gives them the choice, and choice further gives them the experience of social mobility; they and their family have access to the necessary goods of day-to-day life, which many people in their native place lack.

Some respondents view possessing certain types of cultural capital, like knowledge about rules of life, family planning, and learning the way of talking to others, as part of their mobility in their life and consider their failure in the accumulation of economic capital in their own generations. Respondents perceive these achieved elements of cultural capital as credentials which provide them respect and dignity in society. Cultural capital in the form of choice, in terms of possession of a range of goods, in the case of a respondent's learning certain forms of behaviour, in the case of other respondents, 'provides them with social mobility'. So initially, on asking the first question, it is difficult for some of the respondents to perceive any kind of social mobility in their lives, but in replies to the second question, they not only perceive social mobility in their lives but also share their experiences of social mobility. It seems social mobility is viewed by the respondents in a contextual and relative sense. In comparison to their native places' counterparts, respondents can perceive and feel that they have achieved the intragenerational social mobility in their lives, while in comparison to society in Delhi, they do not articulate any experience of upward or downward social mobility.

Aspirations and Barriers in Social Mobility

On asking about the aspirations, a respondent explains that she wants to change the lives of their children. It is her elder son who aspires and motivates her, and gives her confidence that things will change in future. Her son is the source of motivation for a respondent. Respondent mentions that: "*hum sirf is liye kaam kar rahe hai ke bachon ki life ban jaye*" (we are working so that our children can do something in life). Respondent says that they could not pay the fees of private schools, so they sent their children to nearby government schools. They have felt a lot of pain due to financial problems. A Respondent mentions that a major part of their salary goes to the household, and half of their salary goes into rent. Then, on asking about how she overcomes the barriers? She explains they sold their land, which they owned in the village, to educate their children. They had no money to pay their children's coaching fees. And at the early stage, a professor at their workplace used to pay her sons' tenth-grade tuition fee. Another respondent's daughter is studying in a government school hostel that's free of cost, and he spends whatever he is left at the end to educate his children in the village. The investment in children's education by both the respondents supports the view of Craig Jeffrey that "substantial numbers of people in Asia, Africa and Latin America, especially those from lower middle classes, have looked to formal schooling as a means of mobility" (Jeffrey, 2010, p. 10).

Therefore, the trajectory of mobility of the respondents passes through education as a mechanism and an opportunity for intergenerational social mobility. Both the respondents' priorities and commitment to future-oriented mobility strategies can be seen from the sacrifices they make for their children, especially in the case of a female respondent. The deliberate investment in the education of their children for future returns by the respondents on the basis of their knowledge converges with Craig Jeffrey's (2010) notion of deliberate 'waiting' to achieve intergenerational social mobility in life. The strategy of 'waiting' here applies to sacrifices made by parents in the present for future gain, so parents, along with their children, are continuously in the position of 'waiting' in present for future gain. It is more evident when a respondent's son says that things will change when his studies are completed, and the respondent hopes that the lives of her children will change. Some respondents

mentioned that they will leave their job when their children become successful and start earning well in life, and they are working to get their children's education completed. Despite having a health problem, one of the respondents is doing hard physical work and believes in investing economic resources into education despite financial constraints. Most respondents are in continuous 'waiting' as there is deliberate investment in the present with the hope of future gain and social mobility.

Mechanisms of Social Mobility

Mechanisms that are important for the social mobility in respondents' lives and their families' story of social mobility are education, networks and marriage. Education definitely seems to help in achieving intergenerational mobility, which may prove true in future. The network played an important role in the life of some respondents, as their relatives were already working in Delhi. This helps them to get a job. While marriage, in the case of female respondents, plays an important role, as their partners are already working outside their hometown. Through the mechanism of marriage only female respondents could migrate to Delhi, while their female relatives, who remained in their native place, failed to provide educational facilities to their children, to learn the particular forms of behaviour and information about life that is part of cultural capital. As some respondents work in university hostels, they have some kind of job security, as they themselves explained, therefore they could plan their own as well as their families' future. They have some kind of job security as well. Job security determines the family's future planning in diverse ways.

Experience from the Field

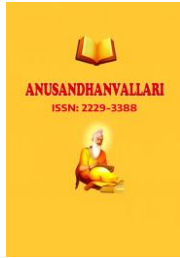
On the basis of the experience of conducting in-depth interviews, some reflection is done. A significant aspect is how profoundly the subject opens himself/herself for the questions, and as an interviewer, could understand different emphasis in the story of the interviewees. The challenge to understand causality was limited due to the research objective. Further, is the technique of in-depth interview providing details whose generalisation cannot be the representation of the general state of social affairs. Therefore, there is always a challenge for the interviewee to perceive the experience of social mobility. There is a relative and shifting sense of social mobility that poses a challenge for the interviewer to arrive at an absolute sense of social mobility. Despite the above points, the advantage that the in-depth interview method offers is the privilege to change the interview question and its language at the site of the interview in order to get the response to the questions. This advantage of the method helps to exclude the few short interventions made by the colleagues of the respondents and stick to the research objectives.

Conclusion

The paper discussed experiences of social mobility among the informal sector workers through elements of mobility like aspirations, lack of mobility, etc. and mechanisms of mobility, which include networks, marriage and education. Networks and marriage play an important role in achieving intragenerational social mobility. While education acts as an important mechanism of intergenerational social mobility. Respondent's responses to the questions show that they not only consider economic capital vital for social mobility but also cultural capital that includes learning particular forms of behaviour, ways of talking to others, knowing the rules of the world, educating their children, etc. In order to achieve social mobility in life, respondents and their families employ the strategy of 'waiting'.

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