Caste and Life Satisfaction in Rural North India

DEAN SPEARS

The article explores the association between caste and life association, an indicator to measure the subjective well-being of people. In addition to reporting the differences in life satisfaction across caste categories in rural North India, where the Dalits and Other Backward Classes experience lower levels of life satisfaction as compared to the upper castes, the article also examines whether these differences can be accounted for merely by the association of caste with poverty.

Dean Spears (*dean@riceinstitute.org*) is at the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, Princeton University. He is a visiting economist at the Indian Statistical Institute, New Delhi.

How important is caste to lives in rural India? Is caste a "thing of the past," as is sometimes argued in India's metros? If caste does appear to matter, is it merely because low caste people are poorer on average? Or does caste itself continue to importantly shape people's lives?

Randomised, experimental studies provide one important form of evidence that caste still matters in today's India. For example, Hanna and Linden (2012) organised an experiment which revealed that teachers discriminated on the basis of caste in grading answer sheets of students. Thorat and Attewell (2007) documented an effect of caste and religion in an audit study that randomised applications to jobs. Deshpande and Spears (forthcoming) have conducted experiments which show that identifying particular beneficiaries of charitable donations increases giving by Indian participants, unless the identifiable beneficiary belongs to the Scheduled Caste. Such studies offer the valuable advantage of unambiguous identification of cause and effect; however, it can be difficult to assess whether the cases of discrimination that such experiments can reveal add up to an important effect in how people of differing caste ranks experience their own well-being—for example, in a little-known prize for clean villages (Lamba and Spears 2013), or in small donations to charities.

This article reports another form of evidence for the continuing relevance of caste: rural Indians' reports of their evaluations of their lives. Life satisfaction is one measure of "subjective well-being;" an approach to measuring welfare using surveys that has recently attracted attention from economists. Angus Deaton (2013), the 2015 Nobel laureate in economics, has particularly raised the profile in economics of survey measures of life satisfaction, while carefully documenting the possibilities and pitfalls of such measures.

I use survey data from rural North India to ask whether lower caste respondents report lower levels of life satisfaction on average, and whether this difference can be accounted for merely by the association of caste with poverty. To my knowledge, this is the first article reporting differences in life satisfaction across caste categories in rural India.[1]

Life satisfaction is important among measures of social well-being because it is an integrated evaluation of life as a whole, "the thoughts that people have about their life when they think about it," as described by Kahneman and Deaton (2010: 1). To be sure, survey-reported life satisfaction is not the same thing as utility or well-being (Fleurbaey and Blanchet 2013); people may acclimate to good or bad changes that matter or may have different concepts of the "best possible life," which dampen apparent differences. Yet, Kahneman and Deaton (2010) conclude that life satisfaction is "a serious contender for the best tool for measuring the degree to which individuals view themselves as achieving their goals, both material and other."
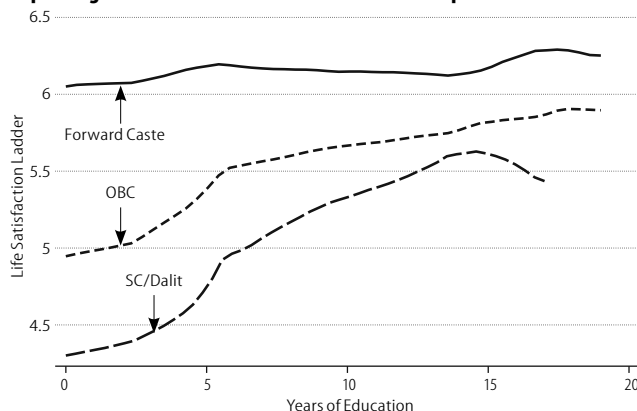
Statistical Method

Do Dalits and Other Backward Classes (OBC) in rural North India report less life satisfaction than higher caste people, and if so, is it merely because they are poorer? I investigate this question using data from the Sanitation Quality, Use, Access and Trends (SQUAT) survey data collected in rural Bihar, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh in 2013–14 by a team of researchers, including the author. These data and their representative sampling strategy have previously been described in detail in this journal by Coffey et al (2014). The cleaned SQUAT data set and questionnaires are publicly available online.[2]

To concentrate on the association between caste and life satisfaction, we restrict the sample to all households that belong to the "Brahmin caste," "General/Other

Figure 1: Among Rich and Poor, Higher Caste Respondents Report Higher Life Satisfaction Than Lower Caste Respondents
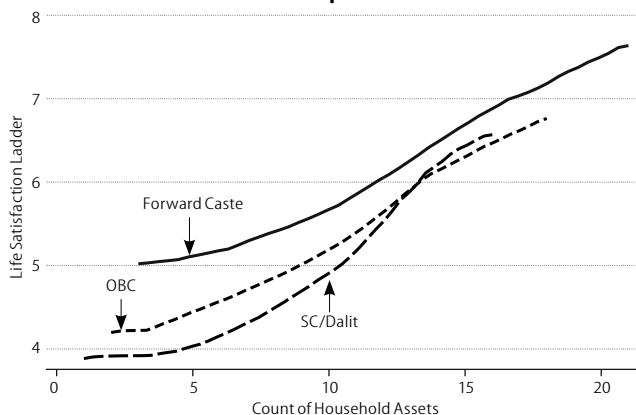
Source: Computed by the author from the SQUAT data.

Figure 2: Among Better and Worse Educated, Higher Caste Respondents Report Higher Life Satisfaction Than Lower Caste Respondents

Source: Computed by the author from the SQUAT data.

high caste," "OBCs," or "Scheduled Caste (SC/Dalit/Harijan)." Throughout the study, I have used three categories. The Brahmin and general castes have been combined, and the term "forward caste" has been used to represent them. All households in the sample are rural. Each household had one respondent, randomly selected from among the adults listed in the household. The life satisfaction question was asked about the respondent's own life; so from each household, I have only used data about the household member who was randomly selected for the survey.

The life satisfaction measure used was the Cantril Self-Anchoring Scale, the same measure of life satisfaction used by Kahneman and Deaton (2010). Respondents were asked:

> Think about a ladder. The top-most step of the ladder shows the best possible life for you, and the bottom-most step shows the worst possible life for you. According to you, on what step is your life at the moment? Please point it out to me.

The interviewer showed the respondent a picture of a ladder and either marked the step towards which the respondent pointed, or if the respondent first said a number, then the corresponding step was marked. Among the 2,939 responses that I studied, the median level of life satisfaction was five, with a mean of 5.5 and an interquartile range from three to nine. Three hundred and thirty-four respondents reported a minimum life satisfaction of zero, and 634 respondents reported a maximum life satisfaction of 10.

The SQUAT survey asked the respondents about the number of assets owned

by their households out of a list of 21 assets, selected to resemble the asset list used in the India Human Development Survey. As a measure of household wealth, I have used the count of these assets that the respondent reported owning, as well as a set of 20 indicators for the respondent's own level of education.

The SQUAT survey was a multipurpose survey with hour-long interviews on a range of topics. Life satisfaction was measured at the beginning of the interview; the number of assets owned was enquired about approximately one-third of the way through the interview; and caste was asked about approximately two-thirds of the way through the interview. Therefore, neither the asset- nor caste-related questions could directly influence the life satisfaction measure (Deaton and Stone 2013).

Results

Figures 1 and 2 offer an initial, visual summary of the result, using locally weighted regressions of reported life satisfaction on household asset wealth (Figure 1) and years of the respondent's education (Figure 2), separately by caste group. Three patterns are apparent in the two figures. First, all three lines slope up, indicating that better educated people and people in richer households, as measured in assets, evaluate their lives to be more satisfactory than less educated people and people in poorer households on average. Second, higher caste respondents report higher levels of life satisfaction than lower caste respondents on average.

Third, the lines are vertically separated, indicating a gap in life satisfaction throughout the distribution of rich and poor and levels of education. To the extent that this measure of asset wealth captures what is important about the socio-economic status for life satisfaction suggests that wealth cannot fully account for the average difference in life satisfaction across caste groups. Rather there appears to be differences in life satisfaction by caste, even at the same level of socio-economic status. Note that in Figure 1, the Dalit and OBC lines appear to cross at the highest level of wealth. However, only a small percent of surveyed Dalit households have over 14 assets (the median Dalit household has eight of the measured assets), so this convergence is probably not statistically meaningful.[3]

The regressions in Table 1 (p 14) verify the statistical significance and quantitative robustness of the differences in reported life satisfaction across caste categories. Moving across columns, column 2 adds fixed effects for the 13 surveyed districts of rural North India and column 3 adds fixed effects for the 324 villages, meaning that the association between caste and life satisfaction in this column is computed only from differences within the same village. In both the panels, these fixed effects do not change the coefficients on the caste categories.

Panel A is estimated without further controls; Panel B adds a set of demographic controls and controls for indicators of socio-economic status. These are intended to assess whether the differences by caste category in Panel A merely reflect

economic status. The coefficient on the asset count is statistically significantly positive in two of three specifications, but a quadratic term is never statistically significantly different from zero, suggesting that there is no important non-linearity in this particular case. A non-parametric set of controls for 20 indicators for the respondent's level of education does not statistically significantly improve the fit of the model.

of socio-economic status. The average disadvantage in life satisfaction among Dalits relative to the forward caste respondents, after accounting for differences in the extended controls, is approximately as large as the difference in life satisfaction associated with owning two and a half more assets. This would be an approximately 20 percentile increase in the asset score, at the median of the asset distribution; so, being a Dalit

Table 1: Differences in Life Satisfaction by Caste Category Are Statistically Significant and Quantitatively Robust

Dependent Variable:	Life Satisfaction Ladder		
Fixed Effects:	None	13 districts	324 Villages
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Panel A: Without extended controls			
OBC	-0.750*** (0.145)	-0.690*** (0.149)	-0.661*** (0.176)
Dalit	-1.339*** (0.185)	-1.282*** (0.185)	-1.332*** (0.210)
N	2,987	2,987	2,987
Panel B: Including extended controls			
OBC	-0.437** (0.140)	-0.349* (0.146)	-0.341* (0.170)
Dalit	-0.517** (0.186)	-0.485** (0.186)	-0.546* (0.216)
Assets	0.195** (0.0704)	0.160* (0.0704)	0.114 (0.0775)
Assets²	0.00130 (0.00300)	0.00257 (0.00297)	0.00436 (0.00325)
Age	-0.130*** (0.0309)	-0.123*** (0.0308)	-0.125*** (0.0320)
Age²	0.00150*** (0.000382)	0.00145*** (0.000380)	0.00146*** (0.000398)
Female	1.174*** (0.147)	1.206*** (0.149)	1.207*** (0.152)
20 education bins	$p = 0.20$	$p = 0.39$	$p = 0.17$
N	2,939	2,939	2,939

(i) Forward and general caste respondents are the reference category.
(ii) Standard errors clustered by village in parentheses.
(iii) * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.
(iv) N stands for the sample size, individual respondents.
Source: Computed by the author from the SQUAT data.

There are 295 distinct combinations of asset counts and years of education among these respondents. If, beyond what is included in the table, a further regression is estimated that non-parametrically controls for a fixed effect of each of these 295 bins of socio-economic status, along with district fixed effects and the age and sex controls, then on average OBC respondents still report 0.40 (standard error=0.16) rungs less life satisfaction than forward caste respondents and SC respondents report 0.65 (standard error=0.19) rungs less— differences that are at least as great as those in Panel B.

Conclusions

Lower caste people in rural North India evaluate their lives to be worse than higher caste people, and this difference is not explained by poverty. The results in Figures 1 and 2 and Panel B indicate that lower caste respondents report less life satisfaction, even at the sample level

is associated with a further reduction in life satisfaction, approximately as large as a quintile of the asset distribution, even after accounting for the fact that Dalits are poorer and less well educated on average.

The disadvantages of caste matter for subjective well-being and life satisfaction beyond the mere association of caste with poverty, and are easily discernible in the self-reports of rural North Indians. This statistical finding would be unsurprising to Omprakash Valmiki, who begins the preface to his memoirs with an enduring summary of life satisfaction: "Dalit life is extremely painful, charred by experiences" (2003: xiii).

NOTES

1 Bros (2014) has recently studied the association of caste in India with self-reported class classification, such as the "middle class." Although she controls for a measure of satisfaction in one robustness check, her analysis focuses on perceived economic class as its outcome variable. Several recent studies of life satisfaction in India make no mention of caste. In other

contexts, differences in life satisfaction have been studied, such as across racial groups in the United States (for example, Broman 1997).
2 The data set and questionnaires are available at www.riceinstitute.org.
3 The asset measure does not statistically significantly interact with the OBC or Dalit indicators if added to any of the regression specifications studied in this article.

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Obituaries

The EPW has started a monthly section, "Obituaries", which will note the passing of teachers and researchers in the social sciences and humanities, as also in other areas of work.

The announcements will be in the nature of short notices of approximately a hundred words about the work and careers of those who have passed away.

Readers could send brief obituaries to edit@epw.in.