“Caste and Punishment—The Legacy of Caste Culture in Norm Enforcement”

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Non-technical summary

Well-functioning groups enforce social norms that restrain opportunism. Social norms are enforced by informal sanctions that are often imposed by those who obey the norm even though sanctioning is costly and yields no material benefits to the punisher. What affects the willingness of individuals to play this key role in society? This study shows that individuals’ life-long position at the bottom of an extreme social hierarchy – the rung of so-called *untouchables* in the Indian caste system – markedly reduces the willingness to punish opportunism that hurts a member of their own community.

The Indian caste system is an excellent setting for studying the effects of social structure on the willingness to altruistically punish norm violations because individual mobility across castes is basically absent, whereas the greater freedoms that low caste individuals have enjoyed in the last 50 years have created a substantial overlap between high and low caste groups with respect to wealth, education, and political participation in village government. This means that the study can identify the *causal* impact of caste status on individuals’ willingness to sanction norm violations.

The novelty of the findings in this study is to provide the first evidence that individuals assigned to the top stratum of an extreme social hierarchy have a substantially greater willingness to altruistically enforce a cooperation norm that helps their groups than do individuals assigned to the bottom stratum of the hierarchy. Those at the bottom of the caste
hierarchy—members of castes that were traditionally subject to the practice of untouchability—adopted an attitude toward norm enforcement that was closer to pure self-interest than did individuals at the top of the caste hierarchy. The result is reminiscent of an older perspective that stressed that in order to dominate a group thoroughly, the group had to be *pulverized* and *atomized*. In this view, many of the restrictions historically imposed on the low castes—such as exclusions from public celebrations and bans on marriage ceremonies and other shared rituals—make sense because they prevent the low castes from developing positive group identities that promote collective action. In a world in which everybody was completely selfish, such restrictions would make little sense, whereas if one takes into account the possibility of altruism towards one’s own group, these restrictions may help the high castes maintain their superior position.

The results indicate that a regime that deprives a group of basic rights may shape the repressed group’s culture in ways that diminish members’ willingness to altruistically punish violations of cooperation norms, with effects on the group’s ability to enforce informal agreements and to sustain collective action. The caste system may exert a self-perpetuating influence on social preferences that renders the low castes less able to change the caste system. The endogeneity of the willingness to sanction altruistically thus may be part of a vicious circle that contributes to the maintenance of untouchability. Although untouchability is illegal under the Constitution of India, very recent work by Bros and Couttenier* demonstrates the systematic use of violence across Indian districts to enforce untouchability rules. Our study may help to explain why. The historical legacy of the denial of basic social and economic rights may be to diminish the repressed group’s *capability* to punish opportunism and therefore to sustain collective action and enforce contributions to public goods, which perpetuates the vulnerability
and exploitability of the group.