

Transacting Caste in Modern Times: Changing Social Identity through Surnames in Urban Gujarat

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Abstract: With rapid socio-economic changes in Gujarat, the practice of untouchability also has changed. Surnames have always been important markers for caste, but in a globalizing urban environment, it has become perhaps the most prominent marker of caste identity and therefore carrier of discrimination. Caste revealing surnames can result in ostracization of Dalits and exclusion from institutional and non-institutional resources, such as housing, private sector jobs, education, business and marriage, etc. Many Dalits, in order to access the mainstream society, increasingly attempt to 'pass' as non-untouchables or as 'pure' caste-Hindus by changing surnames. This study explores the phenomenon of changing surnames among Dalits and how it affects their opportunities for social mobility. Why do Dalits want to change their social identity by changing surnames? Does changing social identity accommodate Dalits as equals with the Savarnas? What are the risks and uncertainties after changing the surname? This paper addresses these questions and assesses the impact of changing surnames on the lives of urban Dalits.

Key words: Surname changing, caste identity, social identity, passing, urban Gujarat

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