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The ethnographic approach to social mobility

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Abstract: The ethnographic approach has much to contribute to our understanding of social mobility. This paper provides a discussion on ethnography as a method and approach to writing and description, and reviews some ways in which themes related to social mobility in the developing world have been explored ethnographically. It discusses the themes that these studies cover in terms of two frames: the social construction of mobility and the fields within which mobility plays out.

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1   Introduction: ethnography as an approach

This paper discusses the significance of the ethnographic approach to the study of social mobility in the context of the developing world. It begins with a brief discussion on ethnography as a method and then details how the ethnographic approach has been useful, and has contributed, to the understanding of various aspects of social mobility.

Ethnography has long been associated with the disciplines of anthropology and sociology (while also being used by geographers, in cultural studies, political science, and so on).[1] Ethnography as a confluence of methods and theory is dedicated to the description (*graph*) of people (*ethnos*), and is hence 'the practice of writing about people' (Barnard 2000: 4). Ethnography generally refers both to a complex of methods (as opposed to being a single method) and to a mode of writing and description. The purpose of ethnography is to explore societies and cultures in the context and flow of everyday life. Atkinson and Hammersley (2007: 3) succinctly summarize the various elements of an ethnography with regard to the collection of data:

> [E]thnography usually involves the researcher participating, overtly or covertly, in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, and/or asking questions through informal and formal interviews, collecting documents and artefacts – in fact, gathering whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the emerging focus of inquiry.

Hence, as a complex of methods, ethnography includes within it a collection of tools—from observation (usually participant observation) to in-depth interviews, biographies, genealogies, and sometimes surveys. Fieldwork is hence crucial to ethnography, which involves a detailed and long-term engagement (often many years, rather than a few months) in one or multiple sites, following the ebb and flow of everyday life. The focus can be on the mundane and quotidian along with the eventful. Ethnographers often participate in these lives in some way or another. They conduct in-depth interviews, often free flowing rather than structured, record conversations heard in passing or reactions to events, and collect all sorts of data from the field. Part of this data collection enterprise could be a household survey, which not only elicits expected data (e.g. details of the respondent and other family members) that can be quantified but also encourages the recording of observations and interactions in the survey encounter. Crucial to the implementation of this range of methods, qualitative and quantitative, is the encounter between the ethnographer and the respondents who are the subjects of study. It is this encounter and the context of interactions built up over time that lend value and intensity to all the research methods employed by an ethnographer.

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[1] These disciplinary boundaries are themselves contested across the Global South and the Global North (Atkinson and Hammersley 2007; Barnard 2000). For instance, social anthropology is subsumed within sociology in some countries (for an example see the discussions on the development of sociology as a discipline in India by Chaudhuri 2003 and Jodhka 1998). This has had an effect on the way that ethnography itself has been seen. Burawoy (2003) provides a rich discussion on the possible reasons why anthropologists and sociologists (at least in the North American case) have tended to view ethnography so differently. According to him, repeated revisits of their own or others' field sites are fairly usual for anthropologists, whereas sociologists 'seldom revisit their own sites, let alone those of their forebears' (p. 647). Further, for Burawoy the 'canonical texts of anthropology were ethnographic whereas that was not the case for sociology' (p. 648). He tentatively concludes that the different 'disciplinary projects' of anthropology and sociology are the reason for ethnography's dominance within the former (p. 648). Since this review covers the ethnographic method, it covers literature from across these disciplines.

Observation—and especially participant observation, where the ethnographer is in close contact, interacts, and participates with the subjects of research in their setting—is often a defining characteristic of an ethnography. From that process of observation, ethnographers engage in description. Their descriptions, which begin in the form of field notes, gradually lead to the ethnography as a body of description of the social and cultural life of a group and of the individuals who are part of that group. For scholars such as Clifford Geertz (1973) ethnography enables the understanding and interpretation of societies in their context, the model of that process where society itself becomes a text to be read and analysed. The significance of participant observation is emphasized by Alpa Shah, who points out that 'The insights of participant observation are based not only on what is said but also [on] that which is left unsaid and demonstrated only through action' (2017: 52).

The form the text may take has varied over time as ethnographies have developed. The parameters of an ethnography are shaped by place and time. An ethnography in that sense is framed by an examination of social relationships and cultural forms in a particular context. This was crucial to early ethnographic monographs, which also consequently gave an impression of an ethnography as fundamentally a 'village' study. The question of place has changed since the studies by anthropologists in the early 20th century, which focused on one site (Béteille 1965; Srinivas 1978), usually a small area such as a village. In later work on groups such as migrants it became essential to consider multiple sites or track flows. More recent work on virtual ethnography further strengthens the need to consider multiple, dispersed sites.[2] Even early urban sociologists, best identified in studies such as those of 'street corner society' (Whyte 1943; see also the Chicago School of Sociology), found a particular location and a group of people to anchor larger explorations. However, an awareness gradually emerged that, while social relationships and cultural forms are set in a context, they also move spatially in different scales. Scholars engaged in the study of migrant populations and diasporas have inevitably had to travel to different sites, but even other scholars—especially those studying urban populations—now recognize that people are in motion, whether in search of livelihoods, of education, or of anything else. Even if the particular group being engaged with ethnographically is limited to a particular space, ethnographers have realized that its location is connected to others. This emerges in the work of scholars such Bourgois (2003) and Goldstein (2003), who focus on people in a low-income area in great detail but do not lose sight of the connections between that site and the larger cities they are located in. For example, for Goldstein, while the focus is the people in a favela, the fact that they work in other parts of Rio de Janeiro and hence have broader connections must be taken into account.

The question of time is another important aspect of ethnography, where the social and cultural life of a given group of people is explored over a given period. Early ethnographers, with their emphasis on everyday life, produced synchronic work that focused on the present, but ethnographers now produce work that also pays attention to the present in relation to the past. In the process ethnographers combine fieldwork in the present with approaches commonly associated with historical research and the work of chroniclers, who conduct archival research and collect oral histories (see for example Fuller and Narasimhan's (2015) work on the Tamil Brahmins).

With regard to the study of social mobility, ethnography thus has much to contribute, as this review will discuss. It allows the tracing of upward and downward trajectories that individuals and families may experience and the ways in which people might articulate their position—as well as changes in those positions or what it means to be mobile—and their anxieties and aspirations. Since

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[2] See Marcus (1995) for a discussion on multi-sited ethnography; see Williams (2013) on virtual ethnography.

ethnographers have a free-flowing way of collecting data (not strictly structured) they are able to tap into feelings and failures in ways that survey researchers may not be able to. Further, since ethnographers are closely tied to a person's everyday, they are able to observe what people do, rather than simply what they say they do. This method often requires the researcher to think on their feet and to be able to relate to that serendipitous moment and react appropriately.[3] To give the reader a sense of the flexibility required of ethnographers, which this review will discuss in detail, it will be useful to consider briefly an example from research in India.

Dickey's (2010) work on the middle class in Madurai, a town in southern India, is a good example of how an ethnographer's long engagement in the field allows them to trace multiple generations of the same family as they move both in and out of certain class positions and deal with sometimes precarious situations. Interacting with members of the same family over two and a half decades enables Dickey to trace their life histories and experiences, as well as to specifically draw on the trajectory of mobility experienced by Anjali, a young, upwardly mobile woman whom Dickey first met in 1985. The ethnographic approach allows Dickey to build the story of the everyday struggles, the ups and downs, the sacrifices and the negotiations the family as a whole, and Anjali individually, have to make in order to survive and to meet their desires for upward class mobility. Survey research might not have captured how these ordinary people overcome the hurdles they unexpectedly face or how small events may have very big repercussions on how families experience mobility (in this case an accident that befalls Anjali's father throws the family's plans off target). This example indicates the potential of an approach based on long-term intimate exchange that pays attention to everyday life in detail and in a holistic manner for a researcher interested in exploring how the issue of social mobility plays out in practice.

Ethnography does not, however, claim to provide a macro picture; nor does it provide mere micro case studies.[4] What it aims to do is to locate larger socio-economic processes in the lives of human beings and societies. It seeks to do so by providing detailed descriptions of everyday life in which broader social, political, and economic processes are reflected. In this way one might find that forms of action and meaning that seem marginal can have significant consequences in shaping a research agenda. In this context, Laura Nader (2011) points out that descriptions within an ethnography are not mere descriptions but form the departure point for theorizing about human social and cultural life. Again, relating this to Anjali's story (Dickey 2010), we find that Anjali was able to take advantage of the spurt of jobs in the IT sector due to the investment her parents had made in her education. However, the story is not so straightforward; perseverance, the ability to learn and acquire cultural capital (which her family lacked) from observing others around her, and familial strategies and sacrifices gave Anjali the advantage she needed to get ahead and start her own business. However, family illness threatened the stability of the family, bringing real fears of downward mobility (see also Krishna 2011 on health and social mobility). As Dickey discusses, what may have seemed a matter of individual social mobility is in fact deeply influenced by family and in turn influences the chances of mobility of the rest of the family. From one family's story we are able to see the effect of broader socio-cultural processes on the opportunities for mobility that are available.

In a connected vein, ethnography, due to its long-term and detailed engagement in the field, allows the researcher to question the presuppositions that may exist regarding the phenomenon they are exploring. How do the people being studied define social mobility? What are the categories respondents use to understand social mobility, which may not be terms that are in everyday use in

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[3] I thank Patricia Jeffery for highlighting this point.

[4] Case studies have been used as a way of documenting everyday life (notably Max Gluckman 1940).

the way that, say, class or caste is? What is the context of the discussions around social mobility in terms of time and place for the differently located groups? By paying attention to how people live out their lives and imagine the possibilities of their lives, ethnographic research helps challenge the limiting definitions and presuppositions academics and policymakers may hold (Shah 2017).

Hence, the ethnographic approach richly complements quantitative approaches by providing a sense of the lived everyday experience of people from different communities inhabiting particular contexts, and helps redefine the concept of social mobility itself.

This paper will look at some of the key ways in which social mobility in the developing world has been explored ethnographically by anthropologists and sociologists. Section 2 discusses how ethnographers have defined and used the concept of social mobility. Sections 3 and 4 provide an analytical frame for social mobility with regard to the social construction of mobility and the fields within which mobility plays out. With respect to the fields of mobility, the paper then explores family, labour and class, race and caste, gender, spatial mobility, and religion in different subsections. Section 5 discusses the interconnections between inequality and mobility; and Section 6 concludes.

2   Definitions of mobilities

Among sociologists, especially quantitative sociologists, social mobility has been seen as movement between positions of social stratification, either intergenerational or intra-generational. This is complicated by movements between social structures, as well as physical or geographical movements, and the experiences of such movements. In this context, before proceeding with a review of the ethnographic approach to social mobility, it is worth taking some time to consider how disciplines themselves have imagined 'mobility' as contrasted with 'social mobility', which is the focus of the current project. This is significant, since geographical and spatial movement has implications for social mobility chances.

While anthropologists do not seem to directly address 'social mobility' as understood in terms of intergenerational movement between social strata (with some exceptions discussed in this review), they address key thematics within the broader field. Anthropologists have looked in great detail at the different components of social mobility, such as questions of class and inequality, labour, caste, race, space, migration, and aspirations. Hence, a wider net must be cast to get a full sense of the contribution anthropologists and sociologists who practice ethnography have made to the study of social mobility.

The broader field of mobility research suggests how social mobility is a product of interconnections between various social processes. An example of this can be seen through the work of three prominent anthropological associations: the American Anthropological Association (AAA), the European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA), and the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences (IUAES). While the AAA and the IUAES have no committees or networks dedicated to social mobility, the EASA has an 'anthropology and mobility network',[5] which produces the Berghahn *Worlds in Motion* book series on 'how people, objects and

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[5] The EASA has two networks that are relevant to students of social mobility: the 'anthropology of economy network', though its obvious focus is not on economic mobility; and the 'anthropology of labour network', which poses questions on precarity and the reproduction of inequalities.

ideas move across the planet'.[6] One of the books in this series, on the 'methodologies of mobility', states:

> Mobility research calls attention to the myriad ways in which people, places, and things become part of multiple networks and linkages, variously located in time and space. Some scholars, mostly in sociology and geography, have drawn attention to a 'mobility turn' in social theory to indicate a perceived transformation of the social sciences in response to the increasing importance of various forms of movement (Salazar et al. 2017: 2).

While the focus of this work is broadly on migration and the spatial movement it entails, migration is itself crucial to social mobility opportunities, and lack of migration opportunities could be an indicator of strong social mobility barriers. For example, the intersection between the spatial and the economic is explored by Osella and Osella (2000). Here they talk about 'the modern search for upward social mobility', which they then discuss as the 'mobility project' (p. 8) of an ex-'untouchable' caste, the Izhavas (primarily agrarian labourers and 'toddy tappers'). These people describe mobility in terms of 'progress'—in terms of both material or economic progress through jobs in the neoliberal economy and cultural or social progress, as well as in terms of the types of houses they occupy, the way marriages and festivals are celebrated, whether 'liberal ideas' are held, and so on. However, this desire for 'progress' does not come without baggage, which includes the suffering of those that do not 'live up to the group endeavour' (p. 9). To further complicate the definition the Osellas use, they talk about 'capital' beyond the economic, in terms of symbolic, social, and cultural capital, which they see as important to the Izhavas' claims for group and individual mobility (p. 11). Mobility is then seen as a way to express status and lifestyle. In all of this, the possibility and experiences of migration, both long and short range, are crucial to how the Izhavas experience progress and achieve some measure of upward social mobility.[7]

In contrast to this engagement in anthropology stands the discipline of sociology as predominantly practised in the Global North. Social mobility and stratification have been central to the discipline for the better part of the past hundred years, since Pitirim Sorokin's (1927) landmark study. This work has been predominated by questions that speak to establishing the macro level patterns of social mobility, and the mechanisms, such as education, that influence these patterns. This work also focuses on the comparative perspective (the use of large-scale datasets and cross-national comparisons is a hallmark of this work). Its focus has been on either the 'attainment of education, occupation, and income' (Treiman and Ganzeboom 1990: 109; see also Blau and Duncan 1967) or class mobility (Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992). This research on social mobility within sociology is reflected in the work of the Research Committee on Social Stratification and Mobility (RC 28) of the International Sociological Association (see Goldthorpe 2003 for a discussion of the significance of this Committee in terms of the 'progress' of social mobility research[8]). This research work has now, according to Treiman and Ganzeboom (2014), reached the fourth generation,

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[6] Available at: https://www.easaonline.org/networks/anthromob/ (accessed December 2019).

[7] See Benei (2010: 204) on spatial mobility as an indicator of social networks crucial to social mobility.

[8] Goldthorpe's discussion on the 'progress of sociology', for which he uses social mobility research as an example, does not mention a single ethnography of social mobility. The (unstated) assumption seems to be that for sociology as a scientific discipline to progress it needs to have specific outcomes in terms of data, techniques, and some comparative element which might not be present in an ethnographic study. He is also dismissive of critics who believe that social mobility research has being dominated by 'quantitative' methods (p. 29) and argues that the focus of research has been on its 'doability', for which quantitative methods might be most appropriate. Could we read this defence of the quantitative approach and its doability as a limitation of the qualitative approach, where fieldwork is seldom strictly structured?

which is typified by the use of even more advanced quantitative techniques and more cross-national comparative work.

In this context, this paper speaks to the different components that make up the experiences and contours of social mobility, which has been the focus of social anthropologists and some sociologists, rather than the patterns and trends in that mobility. These components of mobility include everything that influences people's lived experiences of mobility (e.g. labour, class, caste, race, status, religion, space, gender) as well as everything that influences their opportunities for mobility (education, capital, etc.) or that reproduces inequalities (e.g. the family).

There is a vast body of work within anthropology and sociology around these themes and components. This review engages with and arranges this work within two larger frameworks. The first is the social construction of mobility; and the second is the fields of mobility. Some of the mobility themes covered in this review will apply to both frameworks.

3   The social construction of mobility

What we mean by the social construction of mobility is the way that ideas of mobility are articulated and understood by the subjects of the study: either individuals or groups. Social mobility can be seen as a construction in relation to the following three components: aspirations, family, and education. In terms of aspirations, ethnographers have looked at the idea of how people in the middle class, or moving into the middle class, make claims for belonging to that class. This contrasts with the raw numbers of those who constitute that class, or move in and out of it. Further, what social mobility could be, is articulated through the family—for instance, how aspirations are understood and constructed. In addition, education offers ideologies. Education is a pathway to social mobility, but it is also a way to learn about aspiring, since it is through education that we apparently learn to do 'better things' or at least to encounter the values that influence behaviours oriented towards claims of social mobility.

A large body of work on socio-economic change has explored the role of aspirations. What seems to define attempts at achieving mobility is the aspiration for mobility. This could involve attempts to secure certain forms of work in the new economy in contrast to professions that were in heavy demand before. One example of this can be seen in the work of Upadhya (2011, 2016) on the IT industry in Bangalore, India. IT work is seen as high-status and thus coveted in the modern economy. The IT industry is celebrated for apparently enabling a wider demographic to aspire to higher paying jobs in the new economy. Upadhya (2007) argues that, while this is not the case in reality and those who enter this industry are fairly homogeneous in terms of urban, middle class, and upper caste locations, the belief in the possibilities for mobility that this industry opens up remain strong.

Aspirations can also pertain to matters of lifestyle and self-styling, as seen in studies of beauty pageants in Indonesia (Long 2013). Being chosen for a beauty pageant is a sign of having done better than one's peers and to be constantly improving oneself. So, while mobility is about work, it is also about expressing status and lifestyle (Appadurai 1996). More widely, it encompasses changes in our understanding of categories such as class (Fernandes 2000 on the middle class in India). Whether mobility in real economic terms has been achieved or not is a different matter, but aspirations indicate how people express a desire for mobility. To express a desire for mobility is itself very political—groups that have been marginalized socio-economically and politically may find that their aspirations for, and attempts to achieve, mobility are challenged (Bobo 2009 on race in the US; Jodhka 2012 on caste in India).

Through discussion of aspirations, ethnography has also been effective in directing our attention to larger values such as the concept of a 'good life'. Attention to aspirations will guide an understanding of a 'destination' that is not known, but that is constantly worked upon and worked towards, sometimes over lifetimes, as Kleinman (2006) points out in his ethnographic portraits of well-known individuals and ordinary respondents in China and the United States. The significance of aspirations is also seen in Fischer's (2014) comparative study spanning Europe and South America. In his contrast between impoverished Guatemalan coffee farmers and middle-class German shoppers, Fischer focuses on the idea of the 'good life'. He states:

> Coffee production provides a path for upward mobility for small producers: it stokes aspirations and channels agency; its mode of production feeds into established family and community social networks; and it provides a sense of dignity through control over one's own means of production (2014: 140).

Claims to upward mobility come along with anxieties over non-recognition of the claims, as well as fears of downward mobility. In her study of South India, Dickey (2012) comments in detail on these anxieties and how they are manifested, especially among young people. Those who are upwardly mobile do not always fit in with their group of origin; nor are they easily accepted by the destination group. This leads to anxieties around 'performing' class in terms of language, behaviour, and values, which can vary from context to context and include both work performance and daily comportment.

Naudet (2018), in a comparative ethnographic study of the consequences of social mobility, compares the experiences of upward mobility in India, France, and the United States. He asks how people who have experienced mobility away from their social class of origin reconcile with their attained positions. He uses in-depth biographical interviews to build 'narratives' of upward social mobility (from lower occupational class origins, i.e. low-skilled work, including agricultural) of 'people who had succeeded in three fields: the senior civil service, the private sector, and the academic world' (p. 46). His main aim is to look at the 'tension between the class of origin and the attained social class' (p. xvii) or final destination across a range of societies marked by different degrees of 'closure'. His conclusion speaks to anxieties that the upwardly mobile may face:

> In India, narratives of social mobility primarily reveal a strong attachment to the background of origin: Indians who belong to the Dalit community tend to define themselves in opposition to the dominant castes, using a counter-cultural ideology. They continue to define themselves in relation to the Dalit identity and have strongly internalized the imperative of 'paying back to society' (Naudet 2018: 279).

Where does one learn, or pick up, ideas about and orientations to particular forms of behaviour? One primary way is through the family. Families often produce our ideas and introduce us to concepts such as class, caste, and race, as well as defining how they are understood. In Donner's (2008) work on maternity and middle-classness in Kolkata, the role of women in educating children is framed within the family, which inculcates values and attitudes that are crucial to constructing middle-class identity and aspirations of upward mobility. We learn to aspire—and the limits of what we can aspire to—within the family. Other aspects of the family will be discussed in the next section.

Education has been tied closely to the project of social and spatial mobility. The modernization thesis expected that with an increase in industrialization societies would move from ascription to achievement. Education was to be the panacea (for a discussion of this in the Indian context see Vaid 2018). For instance, providing new skills and upgrading old ones to enable a population to take advantage of economic changes has been a feature of most development states. Xin Liu (2000)

in his study on rural life in post-reform China shows how education, among other things, enables people to escape the stigma of backwardness (which is referred to as 'dead brains' by his respondents). People from the most marginalized regions of China are seen by others as poorly educated and unsophisticated; they then have a desire for skilling to overcome this. The question of skills also becomes interesting in the work on IT sector workers, mentioned previously, who are seen to possess certain skills, training, and values that have high financial worth and that offer a chance for social mobility (see Upadhya 2011 for India, and Xiang 2016 for China).

While education has been seen as an investment for the future (Valentin 2017 on Nepal), education itself can be limiting. Jeffrey (2010) in his ethnography of young men in Uttar Pradesh, North India, finds that some of them are neither here nor there: they are unable to benefit from the possibilities of upward mobility that education was to have given them due to their caste or other location and due to the absence of suitable work, and they are no longer able to engage in the 'traditional' work of their families since education leaves them unequipped to engage in 'manual work'. Over time, Jeffrey observes, their families begin to withdraw their sons from education, since beyond a minimum level this education has no obvious return to them in the labour market (see also Donner's 2017 review of anthropological work on the middle class for a discussion of this liminal position). Education, then, provides the possibility and the idea of mobility; but it can also be constraining.

4   Fields of social mobility

By fields, I refer to the sites and relationships where struggles for capital and mobility are played out; for example, in the labour market or the caste structure.[9] These fields include themes or topics that ethnographers have explored or studied, even if they have not directly addressed social mobility, as these themes nevertheless constitute aspects of social mobility, especially insofar as they help us understand how social mobility plays out in everyday life across the world and in ways that make us question our presuppositions.

Does the concept of social mobility presume that the Global North is a model for others to emulate? As a sociological concept social mobility appears to presume a narrative of progress and linear movement and improvement. It is a concept that is embedded in the experiences of the Global North. While issues of race have been predominant in the American case, the Global South enables an even more complex engagement with the concept of social mobility, as we see an intersection of categories such as ethnicity and race with others such as class and caste in ways that cannot be predicted. For example, the narrative of modernity in postcolonial India emphasized the gradual displacement of caste, yet caste persists (Fuller 1996). In parts of postcolonial Africa, ethnicity and tribe remain important politically.

Osella and Osella's (2000) research highlights this complexity. They find that the Izhavas' 'existing stigmatised caste identity was repudiated' when class mobility was aspired to and achieved through the creation of 'a new group identity centred around generalised ideals of "progress" and "mobility"' through 'education, respectable employment, thrift and accumulation of wealth, abolition of untouchability, entry into the mainstream Hindu fold'. However, they go on to discuss the only partial 'success' of this project since Izhavas have indeed gained education and entered spaces that were earlier barred to them. They find that 'while the hated "avarna" tag remains,

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[9] This relates to the work by scholars such as Bourdieu, who saw field as a kind of social arena (see Jenkins 2002 on Bourdieu's use of field. Osella and Osella (2000) also provide an interesting discussion on the field.

Izhavas have gone some way towards re-defining themselves as non-untouchables. At the same time, new economic opportunities have significantly increased economic differentiation within the caste' (2000: 16). So, the Izhavas' experience shows how in some ways social mobility proceeds along expected lines (in terms of economic improvement), and yet social and cultural barriers to mobility persist to some extent. In this case, drawing on Nandu Ram (1988), one could say that social mobility is marked by dissonance.

In the following subsections, some of the key fields in which social mobility is played out and experienced by individuals and collectives will be explored. While it refers to certain ethnographic texts as examples, the ensuing discussion will also suggest how social mobility is experienced in unpredictable ways.

4.1   Family

In discussions on inequality and mobility the family is seen by anthropologists as significant. Donner (2017), in an important review summarizing ethnography's contribution to the body of anthropological work on the middle class across the world, underlines the role of the family, and asserts that 'in many instances ethnography demonstrates how whole families are united, often across two generations, in the attempt to create environments within which the home gains in importance precisely because futures are meant to be realized through children and their upbringing.' Families both sustain desires for social mobility and protect themselves from the possibility of failure.

This creates pressures within and between families to control scarce resources. Within families, not only are resources differentially distributed—due to gender, or inheritance issues, for instance—but also families make every attempt to prevent downward mobility and encourage upward mobility. This implies that those families that are already privileged are able to maintain their privileges and to exclude others who may threaten their position. This can be seen through arguments against state-sanctioned reservations or affirmative action in education and employment institutions. This affirmative action is seen as un-'meritorious', whereas using social networks, and cultural capital, is not (see Thorat and Newman 2010 for a collection of papers on this theme). One example is Jodhka and Newman's (2007) interview-based study, in which they interviewed human resources managers in New Delhi and found that 'family background' was used as an indicator of 'merit' by the managers. This notion of 'merit' hides the power of cultural and social capital and gives the illusion of a level playing field for all.

Families ensure, or attempt to ensure, upward social mobility opportunities for their members through elite closure, through the use of networks and the exploitation of barriers to get their children into select schools, into particular jobs, and so on. Hence, while the family provides the social construction of mobility by helping develop ideas of mobility aspiration, it also helps more directly by providing economic, social, and cultural capital to make things possible (see Béteille 1993; for a discussion on capital see Bourdieu 1986).

Social and familial networks allow individuals and groups to sustain losses or advance socio-economic and political interests (Granovetter 1983). Networks also serve as conduits of information flows, especially with regard to the labour market. In her life histories Benei (2010) discusses how extended family networks play out. For mercantile groups these networks are a source of capital. Falzon (2004) shows this in his ethnographic and archival work on the Sindhi trading community's diaspora spread across India and Europe, where he finds that extended kin ties are key to creating a home abroad and pursuing economic activities and mobility projects.

Because of their engagement with the same family or sets of families over a sustained period, ethnographers are able to capture these processes, as well as differences in how families negotiate positions for their different members. Benei's (2010) analysis of the life histories of members of the same family 'illuminates how, within a given family, choices may be made according to individual potentialities, while other decisions are a matter of contingency.' A macro perspective might not capture these nuances (see also Dickey 2012).

4.2 Labour and class

Early anthropologists were interested in the process of social change; contemporary anthropologists continue to engage in this in one way or another. Two important areas in which social change has been explored—in research on the working class as well as the middle class—are labour and class.

With regard to studies on the working class, the focus has been on changes in what it means to be a factory worker and what implications this has for the working class. At the same time, these studies have attempted to locate the working class in a regional and local political context. Sanchez's (2016) work on the steel town of Jamshedpur and Parry's (1999) study of the Bhilai industrial area are examples of this contextualization. Parry's work is especially significant in showing how the making of a working class in a central Indian factory town reflected on imaginations of progress and movement, in the shift from rural to advanced urban areas.

In contrast to work on the formal economy, the Marxist approach to the informal economy is also interesting. In many countries in the developing world, the informal sector is a much larger component than the formal. Keith Hart's (1973) work on inequality in West Africa through the migration of low-income workers within Ghana is an important early discussion on the informal sector. Constable's (2007) work on Filipino and other Southeast Asian labour migrants in Hong Kong focuses on domestic maids as labour migrants. This multi-sited ethnography is able to trace their movement and changes in the work they do. Opportunities for movement improve conditions back at home for the families of women who migrate and become maids in Hong Kong. There is also work on activism within the working-class movement; for instance, Werbner's (2014) work on activism and working-class culture in Botswana reveals greater assertion by marginalized groups and hence a kind of political mobility.

There has also been substantial work on the middle class around the world. The focus of anthropologists is often on the meaning of 'middle class' and how this has changed over time (see, for instance, Fernandes's 2000 discussion on the definition of the old and new middle class in India).[10] Other anthropologists have responded to this through field engagements; for instance, Donner's (2008) detailed work on Kolkata and Dickey's work on social mobility in Madurai (2010, 2012, 2013), which show how the understanding of what the middle class is, and the language in which that understanding is expressed, have changed over time among local residents. This language is tied to claims of status mobility. Ethnographers have therefore looked more at what it means to be a member of a particular class and how such meanings change in relation to differing socio-economic conditions and experiences of mobility. Donner (2017) states that 'Almost inevitably being middle-class is closely related to earlier forms of unequal status, which feed into the way it is marked and reproduces power relations, in particular through racialized or hierarchical idioms like caste'.

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[10] Measures of what constitutes the middle class have also varied (see Krishna and Bajpai 2015 on the use of 'transportation assets' to define the middle class).

One example of this can be seen in the ethnographic study by Fuller and Narasimhan (2015) on the middle-classness of the Tamil Brahmin upper castes in Tamil Nadu. The Tamil Brahmins were historically the most prominent land owners in South India and due to their educational attainment dominated white-collar work in the bureaucracies. This enabled them to transition to urban areas, move into other forms of work in the modern economy, and take advantage of transnational circuits. In the process, the socio-economic advantages they held in a site where caste dominated transferred into other areas and times.

The focus in the sociology of the developed world has been intergenerational class mobility, especially as indexed by occupation, but this form of movement does not seem to be central to the work on mobility[11]of anthropologists, whose focus is more on lived experience and on locating class in relation to other categories. For instance, June Nash, a proponent of Marxist anthropology, in her work on mine workers in Latin America, shows how class intersects with aspects of racial inequality (Nash 1993). In turn, James (2019) finds that the economic approach in locating and understanding the new middle class in Kenya and South Africa is limiting, and argues that attention should also be paid to other facets, such as religion, and the role they play in constructing a class identity.

4.3   Race and caste

Race and caste are distinct markers of social stratification and, while they do not fit into a class framework directly, are significant across the world, as they speak to an ascriptive, essentialized form of difference. Race in the context of social mobility has been seen either as a critical barrier or as an advantage to social mobility. Bourgois's (2003) notable study of Hispanics in a low-income area of New York city comes to mind. Many of the residents in such areas are caught in a circle of crime. However, when they do attempt to leave the illegal world behind, their race and their lack of social and cultural capital prevent them from doing so.

Social mobility research in some contexts, especially India, has been dominated by a focus on caste (see Silverberg 1968). The emphasis on caste (and hierarchy) has also rendered it a 'gatekeeper concept' to an understanding of Indian society and its complexities (Appadurai 1986). This has led to the essentializing of India as a caste society, which has implications for any comparative project of which India could be a part.

The Dumontian (1970) perspective of India as representing 'homo hierarchicus', versus Europe as representing 'homo equalis', epitomizes this distinction. The orientalist obsession with the 'closed' nature of Indian society, where little if any mobility was possible, is a part of this trope, derived mainly from a text or 'book' view rather than a 'field view' (Jodhka 1998). This is not to state that work on social mobility did not exist in Indian sociology, but not until Srinivas discussed the concept of Sanskritisation (from the root word *Sanskritic*, which implies the upward mobility of castes through emulation) did it take centre stage. Interestingly, while Srinivas himself does not refer to it, the basic idea behind Sanskritisation, that of emulating a reference group, was discussed much earlier by Tarde, whose work was discussed by Ambedkar (1916) (see also Marriott 1968 for more on the reference group theory). Srinivas's own work among the Coorgs (1952) led him to discuss how certain rituals and practices associated with the so-called upper castes were emulated by the so-called lower castes in a desire to claim upward mobility (his original treatise was about emulation of the Brahmins, initially termed 'Bhraminisation'). This work evolved further when he discussed the emulation of the 'dominant castes' (numerically, materially, and politically dominant

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[11] While some, like the Osella and Osella (2000), do look at the nature of change in occupations, mobility is seen mostly through other categories, such as caste.

in a region) and their role in social mobility and Sanskritisation (Charsley 1998). These claims to upward mobility are, however, not simple; nor are they uncontested. Many instances of violent suppression indicate the control exercised by those who have power in an attempt to keep others out of power (Jodhka 2012; Vaid 2014).

Castes and the caste system have not disappeared (despite Srinivas's (2003) premature 'obituary' on caste as a system); rather, caste has evolved and is entwined with everyday processes (see the discussion on the substantialization of caste by Fuller 1996) in the economic, political, and social domains. Much fieldwork (e.g. Mayer in Fuller 1996) has pointed to the persistence of caste in one form or another in the everyday lives of people (in marriage especially). This has repercussions not only for patterns of mobility in terms of opportunities to be mobile, but also in terms of experiences of social mobility.

Jodhka and Newman (2007), in their interviews with HR managers in private-sector firms in and around Delhi, bring out the subtle and not so subtle ways in which caste still pervades recruitment (with repercussions on social mobility). Interestingly, managers who do not see caste as a significant factor in the hiring process do not have any qualms about invoking 'family background', a catch-all term used to refer to the variables that are significant for them in their hiring process. When teased apart, family background is composed of elements of caste and class along with certain regional stereotypes (the rural versus the urban, the north versus the east, etc.).

It is not until the work of Osella and Osella (2000) that an attempt is made to directly engage with questions of social mobility, experiences of mobility, and 'ideologies which support or thwart it' (p. 8). Their work on the Izhava caste of rural Kerala mentioned earlier is especially interesting, as it questions the assumptions of modernity and change by exploring a group who are both socially and geographically mobile, by participating in migration labour chains to the Gulf states. They find

> a complex and not entirely predictable picture of modernity. We find rupture and rapid change, but also continuities and a sense of appropriateness: Izhavas see themselves as having always had a substantial 'affinity' with modernity and progress. Modernity and progress are experienced not as linear, positive trajectories, but as ambivalent: material advancement sometimes brings social advancement, but often involves suffering and separation, leading simultaneously to exclusion and stigmatisation of community members who fail to live up to group endeavour. Modernity and progress also transcend modernist reason, tinged with luck and magic (p. 9).

They also point out that there are 'several parallels between caste and ethnicity, caste in no way making the South Asian experience unique and incompatible with other forms of differentiation' (p. 10). This challenges the exceptional aspect of caste, allowing us to compare it with race and ethnicity and other markers of community that can shape experiences of social mobility (e.g. see Pandey's 2013 comparison of Dalits in India and African Americans in the US).

Further, the differentiation within castes is seldom captured by macro studies on occupational mobility. Harriss (2016: 30), for instance, in his discussion of the 'Slater villages', concludes that 'there is qualitative evidence of the decline, if not the demise of landed caste power [...] and the increasing assertion of Dalits'. Though he warns against 'overgeneralising', there is evidence of upward mobility among Dalits as well as of differentiation: not all Dalits across the villages have done equally well. Similarly, Fuller and Narasimhan (2015) discuss the ambivalent position of

priests in Tamil Nadu (which is fairly applicable across the country). While they are Brahmins,[12] they are 'conventionally regarded as inferior by other Brahmins' (see also Parry 1980 on the priests of Varanasi, formerly Benaras).[13] Fuller and Narasimhan observe that, while some priests may work with larger temples or be employed overseas, and hence may be fairly well off, a majority of them, 'owing to their low status and poverty, are unhappy with their lot and want their sons to take up secular employment instead. Many have done so and the Brahman middle class now includes priests' descendants' (Fuller and Narasimhan 2015: 188). This heterogeneity within the upper castes is significant to a full understanding of desires for social mobility, but such nuances are seldom captured by large-scale survey-based papers.

4.4 Gender

There is a long-standing debate on the exclusion of women from social mobility analysis. The 'conventional' approach to social mobility argued that the position of women in the labour market (their intermittent engagement) meant that their inclusion in social mobility studies added little to an understanding of mobility patterns. In contrast, the 'individual' and 'joint' approaches called for the inclusion of women for a more rounded understanding (Crompton and Mann 1986; Szelenyi 2001).

In the anthropological literature, women's engagement in the labour market has been studied in its own right. For instance, Ong (1987) focuses on female factory workers in Malaysia and finds that factory work opens up opportunities not previously available to women, but that these women have to deal with 'changing positions within the family, the village and the labour process and wider society' (p. 4). This has implications for their status and social mobility, but also leaves them open to a wider public gaze that is inevitably loaded with negative possibilities and societal criticism—regarding, for instance, what women wear and where they work.

Constable's (2007) Filipino migrants to Hong Kong are able to improve family status back home thanks to two processes: financial mobility, since they are able to send remittances to their families, and status improvement due to out-migration to a first world country. However, there are limits to how much status can be negotiated. While conditions and opportunities for their families improve and their own bargaining power in their families back home changes due to their migration, they remain low-status domestic workers (see also Frantz 2008 on Sri Lankan maids in Jordan).

In many other contexts women's labour is seen as secondary to men's. Maria Mies's (1981) ethnography of women lace workers in a small town in southern India provides an interesting view of gender and work. These women, who are often the sole earners in their families, do not consider themselves to be (nor do their families consider them to be) the household heads. This is because their work is carried out within the home. They seldom have a direct engagement with the 'market', this often being mediated by male members of the family.

Interestingly, a socially mobile family is likely to withdraw women from low-status work. For instance, de Neve (2011) in his work on Dalit and OBC (Other Backward Classes) factory workers in Tirapur finds that, as the husband's job improves, claims to middle-classness are made through

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[12] The spelling of this caste name in English varies: Brahmin or Brahman.

[13] This could also be because priests require patrons and hence their position is dependent. Madan (1965) makes a similar distinction within the the Kashmiri Pandits, a Brahmin community. The distinction he makes is between the 'Karkun', which refers to those in secular occupations or professions, and who are the patrons of the 'Gor', that is, those who work as priests.

women's labour market withdrawal. This is another example of how experiences from the Global South help us understand social mobility more broadly.

4.5 Migration

As mentioned earlier, many anthropologists and other scholars who employ ethnography as an approach do not employ the term mobility in the same sense that social mobility is understood by sociologists and economists. Any quick survey of the anthropology literature will show that the term mobility is often used to refer to movement that often falls within the ambit of migration studies. Even sociologists contributing to mobility studies have emphasized their interest in migrants, migration networks, and various kinds of people on the move—from labour migrants to tourists (see Urry 2007).

While anthropology's engagement with mobility may not coincide directly with scholarship on social mobility, there are many points of connection. Ethnography enables the tracing of flows of movement between locations, and the exploration of how people make a place for themselves in a world of movement, in ways that are critical to social mobility experiences. The most notable study in this field is that of Osella and Osella (2000). What their work shows is that the participation of the Izhavas over several decades in migration flows to different Gulf states has not only enabled them to achieve economic improvement, but has also facilitated an increase in their socio-economic and political status in Kerala in relation to many other populations that might previously have held a higher caste and socio-economic status. Migration becomes a pathway to social mobility over time.

Social mobility of some kind is implicit in migration. An emerging body of work from Nepal indicates this process. People from Nepal have historically been a part of different migration chains, from searching for work in India (Sharma 2019) to joining military services in India and Britain (Seeberg 2015) to recent moves to the Gulf States. While many of these migrants may not be in high-end professions and may even be caught in risky or exploitative forms of work—as in the construction industry in the Gulf (Brusle 2012)—the remittances that are sent, comprising money, ideas, and practices picked up during their travels, offer a chance for families to improve their socio-economic conditions and status. This process is often messy. Studies of migrants from Sri Lanka who go to work as maids and of migration within the Middle East among different Arab populations (Frantz 2008) have shown that participating in migration chains can complicate kinship relations back home. Nevertheless, migration remains a way of enabling mobility, especially when conditions at home may not permit, or serve as barriers to, social mobility.

Apart from labour migrants, who often end up in low-paid blue-collar work, varying from unskilled to semi-skilled, educated middle-class populations also participate in migration chains. While the decision to migrate can vary, anthropologists like Alpa Shah (2006) and Jeevan Sharma (2019) have pointed out that migration for many young adults may be a stage in life before settlement. The history of migration from South Asia to North America and Western Europe in the second half of the 20th century also includes people from backgrounds that enjoy a certain social status. These high-skilled migrants nevertheless migrate to seek a 'better life' and invariably attain a higher status. This is the story featured in many studies of IT sector workers in North America, which illustrates mobility that may be personal and may result in larger transformations in community life in the diaspora and back home (see Shukla 2003).

Many migration studies scholars who have explored bifocal lives—that is, of communities that move back and forth between two or more places—have shown how status can be enhanced by re-investment in the home country. An example of this is Katy Gardner's (1995) work on Bangladeshi immigrants to the UK, who reinvest in 'Londoni' houses in Bangladesh that are a

mark of enhanced socio-economic well-being. While they may remain relatively marginalized minorities in the UK, these populations have moved ahead in Bangladesh (as previously discussed, Osella and Osella, too, talk of the impact of such remittances from the migrants to the Gulf States).

Studies of forced migration and refugees can also be of interest. Since the end of the Second World War, anthropologists have engaged in the study of (and with) displaced persons. What emerges from their studies of displacement and the experience of dislocation and loss is that loss may relate not only to tangible goods but also to political and socio-economic status. Studies of Greek Cypriot refugees (Loizos 1981, 2008), Partition refugees (Chatterjee 1992), Kashmiri Pandits (Datta 2017), dam-displaced populations in Africa (Colson 1971), Chagos Islanders (Jeffery 2011), and Palestinian refugees (Feldman 2008; Peteet 2005), to name but a few, have shown how displacement and dispossession often lead to downward mobility in terms of socio-economic and political status. These and many other studies that have focused on lives being rebuilt after displacement are inevitably testimonies of attempts to recoup losses and to reclaim lives of some worth. They indicate how this experience varies across different kinds of people. There are those who enjoyed a high socio-economic status before displacement, for whom downward mobility is acutely felt, and there are those who were marginalized socio-economically to begin with but who have also lost any political status they may had, as is the case with the Rohingyas. The key point to keep in mind is that migration as a form of spatial mobility is closely connected to questions of social mobility. For some migrants, migration is a path towards upward movement and a means of overcoming barriers to social mobility, whereas for others—and most probably a larger group—it eventually leads to downward mobility and lives marked by heightened precariousness.

In relation to space and mobility, the urban has for long been seen as a site of mobility—especially for women, as Vaid (2014) points out. In a fascinating essay on life in an Indian industrial town, the anthropologist Parry (2003) writes about the promise of the city for people from the village. Parry describes how the village becomes a 'waiting room' for people who see the urban as a place where a better life is available. The question of space has therefore also been integral to discussions of inequality (see Section 11).

4.6 Religion

The role of religion in socio-economic change has been recognized ever since the development of the modern social sciences. Max Weber's seminal text, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (2002), showed how economic change could be related to religious values. For Weber, Protestantism enshrined values and practices that helped the early capitalists, thereby enabling a new group of people to acquire significance and influence. Perhaps the most common and useful way to approach religion is to observe the role religious networks play. Osella and Osella (2000) show how the SNDP, a religious and political organization, helped Izhavas improve their lives in Kerala, especially by abolishing 'untouchability' (p. 14). In his study of the Pentecostal Church, Daswani (2015) shows how it helped Ghanaian migrants in the United Kingdom. In that sense religious networks provide safety nets to prevent downward mobility. Other studies have revealed an interesting way of coming to terms with economic change. Both Srinivas (2018), writing in relation to upper-caste and middle-class Hindus, and Fischer (2008), discussing Malaysian Muslims, explore how faith enables people to assimilate neo-liberal ideologies and encourages them to participate in a transformed middle-class life now defined by conspicuous consumption.

In that sense, apart from providing important social and economic networks, religions enable populations to come to terms with aspirations for self-improvement and change that do not necessarily comply with their notions of purity and piety. In this case it will also be useful to keep in mind how religious sects have historically enabled marginalized groups to challenge

discrimination and work towards improving their social and political status. The many Bhakti cults and other groups of the Satnam Panth were critical of the old caste-based hierarchies in India. They challenged these hierarchies through a range of practices. These practices included changing personal habits and uniting to form political groups to represent their interests and resist discrimination (Dube 1992).

5   Inequality

As we have seen, inequality is tied closely to social mobility. The absence of mobility is often related to heightened inequality. One can find the intersection of different fields and constructions of mobility in the larger rubric of inequality. Anthropologists have conceived of inequality in terms of relations of gender, class, caste (in South Asia), race (in Latin America and Africa), and access to space (urban sociology). This section will refer to ethnographic studies that offer new ways of approaching the larger questions of inequality and social mobility. How does one explore the lives of people trapped at the margins of any given society or the lives of those who control socio-economic and political life in society?

One seminal text in this field is *Vita* (Biehl 2013), which explores the lives of the abandoned in a Brazilian city. This ethnography not only portrays their lives in tremendous detail, making them come alive, but also locates their abandonment in the context of family conflict, failures of the welfare state, and neoliberal policies on the care of citizens. The book also shows what happens to people who fall through the safety net and who can never escape their marginal locations.

In contrast are the studies of elites, who are able to manage networks to maintain their hold on socio-economic and political power. Examples of these for the developing world are Jodhka and Naudet (2019) on India and Sumich (2018) on Mozambique. What anthropologists who study inequality show clearly in their work is the extent to which political, social, and economic institutions determine the capacities of individuals as members of collectives and how inequality can be either circumvented and challenged or sustained. The construction of who counts as a citizen is also tied to how people experience inequalities (see Chatterji 2006).

The question of globalization has been explored by a number of anthropologists in the field of inequality studies—not only in connection with labour but also in terms of how globalization shapes inequality and understandings of inequality, both at the level of policy and among people themselves. For Piot (1999), as seen through his fieldwork on West Africa, global ideas and ideologies are re-interpreted to fit local and regional needs.

Ethnography allows us to see the experiences of inequality and the suffering wrought by unequal economic, social, and political relations in daily life, especially for those facing socio-economic precarity, as in the work of Han (2011, 2012) on working-class people caught in debt in Chile, and James (2014) on indebtedness in South Africa.[14]

The urban has also been caught up in discussions about inequality. Inequality has been a spatial phenomenon where access to the city as a space or to facilities, in terms of basic needs, has been unequal. Work on urban spaces in Latin America (especially Brazil) has been testament to this awareness, such as Caldeira's (2000) study of gated communities in São Paolo. Social interactions

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[14] For a discussion on precarity, see https://journal.culanth.org/index.php/ca/precarity-commentary-by-anne-allison (accessed December 2019).

between different classes on a daily basis are explored in studies of those who work as domestic labour (Goldstein 2003 for Brazil; Ray and Qayum 2009 for India). Other studies that suggest a notion of 'insurgent citizenship' have shown the ways in which marginalized groups cope with and challenge divisions and obstacles to the access to city space through actions such as squatting (Holston 2007 on Brazil; Napolitano 2002 on Mexico). Interestingly, studies of migration to the city emphasize that a move to the city can provide some kind of renegotiation of status, either for women or for marginalized groups. Nevertheless, this involves dealing with questions of precariousness and insecurity, as these migrants occupy the lower socio-economic strata of an urban population (Constable 2007).

6   Conclusions

This paper draws together themes around social mobility as they are seen by ethnographers. According to the authors of the World Social Science Report on Inequality (ISSC, IDS, and UNESCO 2016), there is a need for a more complex and connected world of research, both locally and globally:

> The question of scale is closely related to mechanisms for the creation and reproduction of inequality. Understandings of inequalities need to shift from global to local contexts and patterns and back again. They need to encompass international and national processes, but also local experiences, effects and agency, drawing on local knowledge and taking into account local variables (p. 277).

In this context the ethnographic approach has much to contribute to the field of social mobility and inequality research. The emphasis on long-term engagement in the field, where understanding and interpretation rather than simply explanation are vital, the ability to map families and kin and engage with them informally, the flexibility to react to chance events, which a pre-determined scheme might not allow, and the reflexivity or awareness of the scholar's own social location and presuppositions, all make the ethnographic method significant.

Beyond field-based visits to a site, ethnographers have used tools such as genealogies and life histories to build narratives of movement and social change. For example, Eberhard (1962), in his study of social mobility in 'traditional' China, uses data spread over 800 years to trace the genealogies and movements of two South Chinese clans (the Wu and the Jung). Through his work Eberhard challenges the idea that 'sociological studies […] are short term and do not consider long-term developments' (p. 3). With regard to life histories, Benei's focus on members of one extended family in Kolhapur, Maharashtra, tracing their choices and behaviours, shows 'how structural conditions as well as personal family histories together with individual idiosyncrasies are closely interwoven in people's life-paths' (2010: 201) and how crucial being able to explore these is for researchers interested in processes and experiences of social mobility.

One of the key advantages of comparative surveys on social mobility has been the possibility of tapping into longitudinal data and in some cases panel data. Ethnography, too, allows 'revisits' to the field (Burawoy 2003 discusses this succinctly). An ethnographic revisit is a type of 'diachronic' comparison, as distinct from visits to 'different spaces contemporaneously', i.e. synchronically

(Burawoy 2003: 646).[15] An ethnographic revisit is rich with possibilities to study change as it happens. For social mobility analysis, the possibility of being able to map social mobility onto other changes occurring in the economy and broader society at the site is a considerable advantage.

For instance, Himanshu et al. (2016), in their discussion around revisits, argue that 'why some households remain poor and others move up the ladder' can only really be captured by longitudinal studies of changes, and these studies especially help to separate 'individual/ household behaviour from external factors, such as government policy' (p. 7). However, the ethnographic revisit is not without its challenges (see Simpson 2016). The key challenge is 'to disentangle movements of the external world from the researcher's own shifting involvement with that same world, all the while recognizing that the two are not independent' (Burawoy 2003: 646). Burawoy hence brings out the idea of 'reflexivity' in relation to ethnography generally. This is particularly important, since the researcher's own identity can sometimes influence access to the site itself (see the discussion by Beteille 1965).

In this context Burawoy (2003: 669) argues:

> At the same time that field notes are a running dialogue between observation and theory, field work is a running interaction between ethnographer and participant. It involves a self-conscious recognition of the way embodiment, location, and habitus affect the ethnographer's relations to the people studied, and thus, how those relations influence what is observed and the data that are collected.

In addition to the possible research impact of the 'biases of the individual researcher' (Harriss 2016: 32; Jeffery 2016: 58), the absence of comparability in village studies, lack of precision, loss of data, issues of recall, and confidentiality are some of the wider challenges mentioned by ethnographers (Harriss 2016: 31; Jeffery 2016: 52). Jeffery (2016) also mentions lack of foresight and information overload (p. 53), along with the possibility of becoming too embedded in the field to notice change or differences (p. 55) and being unable to separate cohort, period, and generation effects (p. 54) as further limitations.

Despite the possible limitations of the ethnographic approach (as for any other method), the possibility of marrying quantitative and qualitative techniques within an ethnography is powerful. For instance, Jeffery (2016), in her extensive studies in Bijnor, in Uttar Pradesh, North India (alone and with colleagues) since 1982, began her work with a village census, which progressed to 'semi-structured' 'informal conversations' with 22 key informants, her persistent and detailed engagement in the same site allowing her to trace members of the same families. Such studies, then, are able to raise issues of keen interest to social mobility researchers more broadly.

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[15] In this sense, Naudet's (2018) comparative work would fall into the latter, and some of the ethnographic articles covered by Himanshu et al. (2016) into the former.

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