

Stigma and Social Mobility in Aravind Malagatti's *Government Brahmana*

J. S. Jayasree¹, Dr. S. Sivashanthi²

¹Ph. D Research Scholar, Department of English, Erode Arts and Science College, Erode.

²Assistant Professor in English, Department of English, Erode Arts and Science College, Erode.

ABSTRACT

This article examines the relationship between caste stigma and social mobility in *Government Brahmana* by Aravind Malagatti. The text interrogates the paradox of upward mobility within a caste-based society where structural discrimination persists despite educational and professional advancement. Drawing upon the theories of stigma by Erving Goffman and caste analysis by B. R. Ambedkar, this study argues that the label “Government Brahmana” reflects a satirical exposure of caste hypocrisy. While education and state employment create possibilities for mobility, stigma continues to regulate identity, belonging, and social acceptance. The article demonstrates that Aravind Malagatti’s narrative transforms lived humiliation into political critique, revealing that social mobility within caste society remains incomplete and deeply contested.

Keywords: Dalit autobiography; caste stigma; social mobility; identity politics; Tamil Dalit writing.

INTRODUCTION

Dalit autobiographical writing in Tamil literature has emerged as a powerful form of resistance against caste oppression. Among its significant contributions is *Government Brahmana*, where Aravind Malagatti critically examines the paradox of caste mobility in post-independence India. The title itself is ironic. It juxtaposes “Government” a symbol of constitutional equality with “Brahmana,” the highest caste category in the traditional hierarchy. This combination exposes the absurdity of caste-based labeling in modern democratic institutions.

The phrase “Government Brahmana” is often used sarcastically to describe Dalits who gain education or government employment and are perceived as socially elevated. However, the term does not erase caste; rather, it marks difference. Social mobility becomes conditional and fragile. Aravind Malagatti observes: “However far we go, they remind us who we are” (Aravind Malagatti 27). This statement captures the persistence of stigma. Advancement does not dissolve caste memory. Instead, it generates new forms of exclusion.

To understand the dynamics of stigma in *Government Brahmana*, it is useful to draw upon Erving Goffman’s theory in *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. Goffman defines stigma as an attribute that deeply discredits an individual, reducing them “from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one” (Goffman 3).

In caste society, stigma is hereditary. It is not based on individual action but birth. Aravind Malagatti’s narrative illustrates how caste identity becomes a “spoiled identity” in social interaction. B. R. Ambedkar argued in *Annihilation of Caste* that caste is not merely division of labor but division of laborers (Ambedkar 50). It fixes status permanently. Even when Dalits achieve economic mobility, caste hierarchy continues to structure social relations. Thus, social mobility in India must be read through caste-conscious lens rather than purely economic framework.

Education plays central role in Dalit empowerment. Post-independence policies, reservations, and constitutional safeguards created access to state employment. However, Aravind Malagatti demonstrates that mobility through education produces ambiguous consequences. She writes: “They said we had become ‘Government Brahmanas’ because we studied and worked in offices” (Aravind Malagatti 41). The phrase is double-edged. On one hand, it acknowledges achievement. On the other, it mocks upward mobility. It suggests imitation rather than transformation.

Ambedkar emphasized education as primary weapon against caste oppression. Yet Aravind Malagatti reveals that while education opens doors institutionally, it does not erase social prejudice. Mobility remains superficial if societal attitudes remain unchanged. The title itself demands close reading. “Brahmana” traditionally refers to the priestly caste occupying top of hierarchy. By prefixing it with “Government,” Aravind Malagatti exposes the contradiction between constitutional modernity and traditional caste ideology. The label suggests that Brahmin hood can be temporarily granted through state employment but only in sarcastic discourse. True caste status remains hereditary. This irony functions as critique of tokenistic inclusion. Dalits may enter institutions, but symbolic power remains unequally distributed.

Mobility also produces anxiety. Individuals navigating new spaces experience tension between origin and aspiration. Aravind Malagatti reflects: “In the office I felt watched; at home I felt changed” (Aravind Malagatti 63). This dual consciousness reveals fractured identity. The mobile subject belongs fully neither to dominant space nor to original community. Stigma thus operates internally as well as externally. Goffman explains that stigmatized individuals must constantly manage impressions to avoid humiliation (Goffman 15). Aravind Malagatti’s narrative illustrates this psychological labour.

In *Government Brahmana*, social mobility through education and government employment does not translate into social equality. Instead, new spaces such as offices and educational institutions become arenas where caste is subtly policed. The stigma attached to Dalit identity does not disappear; it transforms into coded behaviour, insinuation, and social distancing. Aravind Malagatti writes: “They would first ask casually about my village, and then about my caste, as though it were a harmless curiosity” (Aravind Malagatti 72).

This “casual curiosity” is a mechanism of surveillance. Caste identification is rarely direct; it is extracted through coded questioning. Once revealed, identity alters social interaction. The modern office, which claims neutrality, reproduces traditional hierarchy in disguised form. Drawing upon Erving Goffman’s framework, this process reflects what he calls “information control” (Goffman 42). The stigmatized individual must decide whether to conceal or disclose identity. In caste society, concealment is nearly impossible because surnames, dialect, and region function as markers. Thus, mobility produces constant anxiety.

Upward mobility also imposes representational pressure. The Dalit individual in institutional space is often treated as symbolic presence rather than autonomous person. Aravind Malagatti observes: “If I made a mistake, it was not mine alone; it became proof of what they thought about my people” (Aravind Malagatti 85). This line exposes collective burden. Success must be exceptional; failure confirms stereotype. The individual carries community stigma into professional space. Here, B. R. Ambedkar’s insight becomes relevant: caste creates “graded inequality” (Ambedkar 60), ensuring that prejudice persists even when legal equality exists. Structural attitudes do not vanish with employment status.

The label “Government Brahmana” signals conditional acceptance. It suggests that Dalits can be temporarily tolerated within state structures but not fully absorbed into upper-caste identity. Aravind Malagatti remarks: “They called us Government Brahmanas, but never simply Brahmanas” (Aravind Malagatti 48). The qualification matters. It reinforces boundaries. Government service is external layer; caste remains core identity. Mobility is perceived as artificial elevation rather than organic belonging. This phenomenon reveals contradiction in post-independence India: constitutional democracy coexists with caste memory. Institutions provide opportunity, but social perception lags behind.

Caste stigma intersects with gender in complex ways. As a Dalit woman, Aravind Malagatti negotiates dual marginalization. Patriarchal attitudes operate both within and outside community. She reflects: “For a woman like me, education was seen as defiance” (Aravind Malagatti 94). Here, mobility challenges not only caste hierarchy but gender norms. Female mobility is treated with suspicion. Independence becomes transgression. In professional spaces, she experiences another layer of scrutiny: “They measured my speech, my clothes, even my laughter” (Aravind Malagatti 101).

This surveillance reflects gendered policing. Respectability becomes tool of control. Thus, stigma is no single-axis but intersectional.

Mobility creates internal division. The educated Dalit subject may feel estranged from both dominant caste society and original community. Aravind Malagatti notes: “Some in my own village said I had forgotten where I came from” (Aravind Malagatti 109). This accusation reflects suspicion toward upward mobility. Success can be interpreted as betrayal. Thus, stigma operates from multiple directions. Goffman explains that stigmatized individuals often develop “divided self-perception” (Goffman 112). Aravind Malagatti’s narrative illustrates this division vividly. She must constantly negotiate belonging.

From a Marxist perspective, social mobility is linked to economic class transformation. However, caste complicates this model. Economic advancement does not automatically alter ritual status. While Karl Marx argues that material conditions determine social relations (*Communist Manifesto* 14), Aravind Malagatti's experience suggests that caste ideology persists beyond economic change.

Even after entering government service, she writes: "My salary changed, but their eyes did not" (Aravind Malagatti 118). This powerful contrast reveals limits of class analysis in Indian context. Economic mobility may modify lifestyle, but caste-based perception remains entrenched. Thus, Ambedkar's framework proves more accurate for analysing stigma in caste society. Social mobility remains incomplete without annihilation of caste ideology.

Another subtle marker of stigma is language. Accent, dialect, and manner of speech expose caste origin. Aravind Malagatti indicates: "They laughed at my Tamil, polished theirs as if it were superior" (Aravind Malagatti 122). Language becomes cultural capital. Standardized speech is associated with upper-caste refinement. Linguistic difference reinforces hierarchy even in modern institutions. Thus, mobility demands cultural assimilation. The Dalit subject must modify speech, behaviour, and even posture to fit institutional norms. This assimilation reflects hidden violence of respectability politics. While mobility offers financial stability, it extracts psychological toll. Continuous monitoring produces stress and self-doubt. Aravind Malagatti confesses: "There were days I wished I could disappear rather than explain myself again" (Aravind Malagatti 137). This exhaustion reveals emotional burden of stigma management. Mobility does not free the individual from caste consciousness; it intensifies awareness. Hence, social mobility within caste society is paradoxical it empowers materially while wounding psychologically.

Despite these challenges, Aravind Malagatti refuses silence. She asserts dignity and challenges discriminatory behaviour. She writes: "I decided I would not bow my head for their comfort" (Aravind Malagatti 145). This assertion transforms stigma into resistance. Instead of internalizing shame, she politicizes it. Education becomes tool not merely for mobility but for critique. Through narrative itself, Aravind Malagatti reclaims agency. Writing becomes act of self-definition against imposed labels.

In *Government Brahmana*, stigma is not merely a social label; it becomes an ontological condition shaping existence. Caste identity precedes individuality. The Dalit subject enters social space already marked. Erving Goffman describes stigma as an attribute that disqualifies a person from full social acceptance (Goffman 3). However, in the Indian caste context, stigma is not episodic but hereditary and permanent. It attaches to the body before action, before speech, before merit.

Aravind Malagatti articulates this reality powerfully: "Before I spoke, before I worked, before I proved myself, they had already placed me in a corner" (Aravind Malagatti 152). This line reveals stigma as pre-judgment. Social mobility cannot erase what society believes to be inherent. The Dalit body becomes a text already interpreted. Thus, stigma functions philosophically as a prior condition of being.

Modern India promotes narrative of meritocracy through education and government employment. Yet Aravind Malagatti's experience complicates this optimism. The term "Government Brahmana" suggests that mobility is symbolic, not transformative. B. R. Ambedkar argued that caste is a system of "graded inequality" (Ambedkar 60). This graded structure ensures that hierarchy reorganizes itself even within modern institutions. Legal equality cannot automatically dismantle social prejudice.

Aravind Malagatti reflects: "They respected my position, not my person" (Aravind Malagatti 168). This distinction is crucial. Authority derived from state employment commands temporary obedience, but personal equality remains denied. Mobility alters external status without guaranteeing internal acceptance. From a sociological perspective, this reveals structural illusion: institutions may appear inclusive, yet underlying attitudes remain caste-bound.

Another important dimension in *Government Brahmana* is tension between individual success and collective emancipation. Mobility achieved by one person does not necessarily transform community conditions. Aravind Malagatti writes: "What use is my progress if my people still stand outside the gate?" (Aravind Malagatti 176). This rhetorical question challenges liberal individualism. Advancement is meaningful only when it contributes to collective dignity.

Ambedkar insisted that social reform must aim at annihilation of caste rather than isolated upliftment (Ambedkar 72). Aravind Malagatti's narrative aligns with this philosophy. Education is not merely personal ladder but instrument of community empowerment. Thus, mobility must be redefined as collective process. The label "Government Brahmana" operates as discursive violence. Naming shapes perception. By calling Dalits "Government Brahmanas," dominant society implies artificial elevation while reinforcing Brahmin superiority. Aravind Malagatti notes: "Their words carried laughter,

but inside it was warning” (Aravind Malagatti 189). Language here becomes mechanism of containment. It reminds the mobile subject not to overstep invisible boundaries. This echoes Michel Foucault’s idea that discourse produces power relations. Naming does not merely describe; it disciplines. The term functions as symbolic regulation of aspiration.

Despite structural limits, Aravind Malagatti transforms stigma into narrative resistance. Writing becomes act of reclamation. By documenting humiliation, she converts private pain into public critique. She declares: “If they mark me, I will write the mark myself” (Aravind Malagatti 201). This statement represents epistemological reversal. Instead of accepting imposed identity, she authors her own meaning. The autobiographical voice disrupts dominant discourse.

In this sense, stigma becomes site of knowledge production. Experience generates insight into systemic injustice. The Dalit autobiographical tradition thus redefines literature as political testimony. While social mobility remains incomplete, Aravind Malagatti emphasizes moral courage. She refuses assimilation that demands silence.

She asserts: “I will stand where I am and speak” (Aravind Malagatti 214). This act transforms mobility from mere economic advancement into ethical stance. It challenges the expectation that upwardly mobile Dalits must distance themselves from their roots. Thus, true mobility lies not in imitation of upper-caste norms but in assertion of self-respect. The narrative ultimately gestures toward transformation grounded in Ambedkarite thought. Equality requires dismantling caste ideology at structural and psychological levels. B. R. Ambedkar envisioned a society based on liberty, equality, and fraternity. Aravind Malagatti’s work illustrates how far contemporary India remains from that ideal. Yet the very existence of texts like *Government Brahmana* signals resistance. Literature becomes platform for consciousness-building.

Government Brahmana offers profound exploration of stigma and social mobility in caste society. While education and state employment create opportunities for economic advancement, caste identity continues to regulate social belonging. The ironic title encapsulates contradiction of modern India constitutional equality coexisting with entrenched hierarchy.

Through lived experience, Aravind Malagatti demonstrates that stigma is not erased by mobility; it is renegotiated. Institutional spaces reproduce subtle forms of discrimination. Gender intensifies caste-based marginalization. Psychological burden accompanies professional success. Yet the narrative refuses despair. By transforming humiliation into testimony, Aravind Malagatti converts stigma into resistance. Her work aligns with Ambedkar philosophy that true liberation requires annihilation of caste rather than symbolic inclusion.

Ultimately, *Government Brahmana* challenges readers to rethink mobility not as individual escape but as collective transformation. The text affirms that dignity cannot be granted by state employment alone; it must be claimed through assertion, solidarity, and structural change.

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