

The 'Dalit' Category and Its Differentiation

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# The 'Dalit' Category and Its Differentiation

*Divisional and hierarchical differentiation is a feature of the dalits of Gujarat, and the same goes for dalits in other parts of the country. It is necessary, therefore, to exercise caution while making general statements on oppression of dalits, for such discrimination by the upper castes is usually jati-specific.*

A M SHAH

'Dalit' is now a widely used category in social science as well as popular discourse. There were in particular a spate of writings and speeches on the dalits during the past one year on account of the UN Conference on race. A field sociologist like myself, however, found many of the statements on dalits at variance from ground realities. One would ask: Is 'dalit' an undifferentiated category? Are the dalits a unified and integrated community? Are there no divisions among them? Is there no inequality within them? One can understand if politicians use the category in an undifferentiated manner on account of their vested interests. One can also understand if journalists use it in a facile manner on account of their superficial knowledge of the society at the ground level. But it is difficult to understand how social scientists also use it in an undifferentiated manner and make grandiloquent statements about the dalits.

The ethnographic literature since the middle of the 19th century provides descriptions of divisions among what were then called untouchables, depressed classes, and harijans. After their being called scheduled castes during the past 50 years or so, the Constitution provides lists of such castes for various states. These lists should make one pause before making general statements. Even a comparatively small state like Gujarat has a schedule of around 30 castes. There is sub-regional distribution of these castes, such that any one local area includes only about half-a-dozen of them, and any one village includes hardly two or three, sometimes even one, of them.

Every dalit caste, called 'jnati', 'nati', 'nat', 'jati', 'jat' in Gujarati, is an endogamous unit. Manubhai Makwana, a sociologist and occupant of the Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Chair at Gujarat University, Ahmedabad, has recently published in

Gujarati a book [Makwana 2000] and a paper [Makwana 2001] on scheduled castes in Gujarat, in which he has described what are called 'pargana' divisions in three major dalit castes. The vankars (weavers) are divided into 31 parganas, and the chamars (leatherworkers) and bhangis (scavengers) into 13 each. Lancy Lobo has also described such parganas in an unpublished report [Lobo 1991] on his project on the vankars of central Gujarat. Each pargana is an endogamous group of members of the respective 'jati' living in a specific number of villages and towns in an area. In many cases the pargana has a written constitution. Makwana has reproduced a few constitutions in his book [Makwana 2001]. The constitution lays down rules and regulations for the members of the pargana, particularly on marriage, bride price, wedding expenses, divorce, mortuary rituals, punishment for violation of rules, among others. Each pargana has also a panch (council of leaders).

Use of the word 'pargana' for these caste sub-divisions is significant. It meant an administrative unit consisting of 50-100 villages during the Mughal, Maratha, and early British rule. (Pargana began to be called taluka later.) This indicates that the parganas have existed among the three dalit castes for a long time, and that they have a territorial jurisdictional connotation.

The process of division of a jati does not stop at parganas. Makwana reports that a considerable number of parganas are each further divided into sub-parganas. This entire structure of division, sub-division and sub-subdivision of jatis among the dalits is similar to the 'ekda', 'gol' and 'bandho' divisions and their sub-divisions among upper caste 'jatis' I have analysed at length first in my paper [Shah 1982] and then in mine and Desai's book (1988). Most castes in Gujarat, whether dalit or non-dalit, follow the same principle of internal division. Only the words for divisions are different. A sub-division and, where sub-

subdivisions exist, a sub-subdivision is the most effective unit for endogamy.

Neither Makwana nor Lobo informs us if there are movements to encourage inter-pargana marriages in the various dalit jatis similar to movements to encourage inter-ekda, inter-gol and inter-bandho marriages in upper castes in modern times. And, of course, one would like to know if marriages take place between the various dalit jatis, violating the stringent rule of jati endogamy, and how such violations are dealt with by the concerned jatis. Lobo, however, says there is a hierarchy between the three major parganas among the vankars of central Gujarat, namely, charotar, bhal and chhyasi in a descending order, and that hypergamy prevails between them. For example, while bhal girls are given in marriage to charotar boys, charotar girls are not given in marriage to bhal boys. Hypergamy is perhaps as widespread among the dalits as among higher castes in Gujarat.

The above discussion of marriage has a theoretical significance. Frequently, caste, whether dalit or non-dalit, is described as based on descent – and therefore it is considered abominable. But there is no descent without marriage, except in the case of fictional descent, which is rare. One does not require a knowledge of complicated discussions of alliance versus descent theories in anthropology to understand this point. Once the primacy of marriage over descent is recognised, the rule of endogamy becomes critical in defining caste, which in turn confers critical significance to defining differentiation among the dalits, or for that matter among all Hindus, on the basis of endogamous divisions and sub-divisions. Endogamy is a strong mechanism for boundary maintenance.

We have very little information on the nature of interaction between the various dalit castes. It is possible that there is greater interaction between the leaders of various dalit castes, but the same is not always discernible between ordinary dalits. During my fieldwork in a village in central Gujarat, I found that there was much less interaction between the two dalit castes, charmar and senwa, than between each of them and their upper caste patrons. The senwas kept hardly any cattle and therefore did not need the chamars' service of skinning dead cattle. And the chamars required very few ropes and strings the senwas made. On the other hand, both the chamars and senwas worked as agricultural labourers for and provided their respective specialised services to upper caste landlords. Moreover, the two castes lived in separate neighbourhoods at two ends of

the village site, with two separate wells for drawing water for domestic consumption.

Besides the question of frequency and intensity of interaction between dalit castes, there is the important question of hierarchy among them. Many observers have commented that there is untouchability among the untouchables. In the same vein, we may say there are dalits among the dalits. It was for a long time almost taboo to talk about this subject in public. But it is wide open now, and political leaders are busy providing for reservation quotas within the quota for dalits.

I have described at some length elsewhere [Shah 1987] the hierarchy among the dalits in Gujarat on the basis of available data. Briefly, the dalits have reproduced among themselves a hierarchy on the model of the caste hierarchy in general. There is at the top a small caste of garodas (derived from the Sanskrit word 'guru'), who are priests for other dalit castes. They have been claiming for quite some time to be gaud brahmins and have adopted brahminical surnames such as vyas, joshi, pandya and shukla. Similarly, just as there are castes of bards for the upper castes, there is a bardic caste of turi barot for the dalits. There is also a caste of dalit mendicants called dhed bava or sadhu. The garodas, turi barots, and dhed sadhus are accorded certain sacredness.

The bhangis (scavengers) are at the bottom of the hierarchy and the most underprivileged. Between the garodas and bhangis there is a large caste, the higher stratum of which is traditionally vankar (weavers) and the lower stratum dhed (menial servants). In modern times, many vankars have become workers in textile mills and other industries and employees in government and other establishments. Makwana has written a monograph on small-scale industrial and commercial entrepreneurs among vankars [Makwana 1990]. The dheds, on the other hand, are mostly leatherworkers and scavengers. There is no research on how such diverse strata coexist as part of a single endogamous caste unit. Is there hypergamy between them?

The chamars (leatherworkers) and senwas (rope-makers) occupy positions intermediately between the vankar-cum-dheds and bhangis. The bhangis are the most oppressed. I witnessed a dramatic expression of their resentment against the vankars a few years ago. At the inaugural function of a seminar on removal of untouchability I was attending at a university in Gujarat, a vankar leader was seated on the dais while a bhangi leader was seated among the audience on the floor.

As soon as the function started, the bhangi leader got up and made an angry speech against the seating of the vankar leader on the dais. In the process he spoke about how the vankars discriminated against the bhangis.

It can be seen from the above discussion that among the dalits of Gujarat there is differentiation of divisional as well as hierarchical type. It is well known that there is similar differentiation among the dalits in other parts of India too, and survives the dalits' conversion to Christianity or Buddhism. It may be noted that I have hardly touched upon the kind of differentiation that has come about within every dalit jati and between the jatis due to the policies and programmes of positive discrimination during the past 50 years or so. There are several success stories: of garodas and vankars, and of mahyavamshis of south Gujarat about whom Y A Parmar has written a lot. With so much differentiation among the dalits, considerable caution should be exercised at least by social scientists, if not by intellectuals in general, while making general statements about discrimination against and oppression of the dalits. It is important to recognise that usually discrimination against the dalits by upper castes is not indiscriminate but jati-specific. Atrocities against them are also selective, not indiscriminate. There are various degrees of discrimination and oppression by upper castes against the dalit castes, and there is discrimination and oppression among castes within the dalit category. Vague general statements not only violate against reality and provide a false picture, but also harm the welfare of the most deprived and marginalised among the dalits, such as the bhangis. [E]

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