CASTE IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA

SECOND EDITION

Surinder S. Jodhka

Caste in Contemporary India

Caste is a contested terrain in India's society and polity. This book explores contemporary realities of caste in rural and urban India. It examines questions of untouchability, citizenship, social mobility, democratic politics, corporate hiring and Dalit activism. Using rich empirical evidence from the field across Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Delhi and other parts of north India, this volume presents the reasons for the persistence of caste in India from a new perspective. The book offers an original theoretical framework for comparative understandings of the entrenched social differences, discrimination, inequalities, stratification, and the modes and patterns of their reproduction.

This second edition, with a new Introduction, delves into why caste continues to matter and how caste-based divisions often tend to overlap with the emergent disparities of the new economy. A delicate balance of lived experience and hard facts, this persuasive work will serve as essential reading for students and teachers of sociology and social anthropology, social exclusion and discrimination studies, political science, development studies and public policy.

Surinder S. Jodhka is Professor of Sociology at Jawaharlal Nehru University and Senior Affiliate Fellow at the Centre de Sciences Humaines, New Delhi, India. His research interests include the dynamics of rural transformations and agrarian change; social inequalities – old and new – and their reproduction with a focus on the social life of caste and the varied modes of its articulation in contemporary India; and the political sociology of community identities. His recent publications include *Contested Hierarchies, Persisting Influence: Caste and Power in 21st Century India* (ed. with James Manor, 2017); *Inequality in Capitalist Societies* (with Boike Rehbein and Jesse Souza, 2018); *The Indian Middle Class*: *Oxford India Short Introductions* (with Aseem Prakash, 2016); *Interrogating India's Modernity* (2013); *Caste: Oxford India Short Introductions* (2012); *Village Society* (ed. 2012); and *Community and Identities: Contemporary Discourses on Culture and Politics in India* (2001). He is the editor of the Routledge book series 'Religion and Citizenship'. He is among the first recipients of the ICSSR-Amartya Sen Award for Distinguished Social Scientists for the year 2012.

'*Caste in Contemporary India* is a significant contribution to caste studies, a valuable resource for academics and non-academics alike interested in understanding caste in rural and urban India today.'

Hira Singh, York University, Canada,
in *Contributions to Indian Sociology*

'The book is accessible, well written and informative in charting the efforts of those struggling to create a new dawn for Dalits and the distance that remains to be traversed. As such, it is essential reading for those wishing to comprehend this enduring form of inequality.'

Hugo Gorringe, School of Social and Political Science,
University of Edinburgh, UK, in *Economic & Political Weekly*

'The significance of Jodhka's very readable collection of essays is his twin focus on the structures of society that seek to oppress others, whether these emanate from caste based linkages, economic and social class differences, and even reconstituted or reconstructed caste identities, as well as on the lived experience of both those who seek to oppress as well as those who are weighed down by not just the external characteristics of their oppression but more significantly, their experience of this oppression in everyday life.'

Meenakshi Thapan, Delhi School of Economics,
New Delhi, India, in *The Book Review*

'This book, by one of India's foremost sociologists, illuminates the meanings and practices of caste in the present . . . Accessibly and clearly written, and based on research carried out over a good many years, [it] will inform public discussion as well as academic debate over a matter of vital importance for Indian society.'

John Harriss, Director, School for International Studies,
Simon Fraser University, Canada

'The combination of Jodhka's formidable intellect and a wealth of empirical data in this superb book provokes a radical rethinking of contemporary manifestations of caste in both familiar and

unfamiliar contexts . . . [This] sheds striking new light on social and political transformation in India today.'

Nandini Gooptu, Head, Oxford Department of International Development, University of Oxford, UK

'The book is important in capturing the peculiarity of caste – namely the ways in which caste is reproduced in different forms and is reinstated while co-opting contemporary changes in the social milieu. It is, therefore, a rich source for comprehending caste realities in their present context, not only for Dalit studies specifically or studies on Punjab but also for the wider sociology of humiliation and discrimination.'

Vinod Sartape, in *Journal of Punjab Studies*

'Opens up new areas of reflection by adopting an interesting approach . . . It meticulously draws its material from impressive fieldwork and always remains extremely readable . . . [T]his compilation . . . contributes greatly to Dalit studies and explores important issues.'

Alexandra de Heering, in *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal*

'While this book is historically and theoretically informed, its strength lies in its relentlessly empirical approach . . . [The] call to develop a comparative perspective on caste is the key takeaway from this insightful and highly accessible book.'

Anuj Bhuwania, in *Books & Ideas*

'Studies of caste in India were frequent and quite comprehensive in the earliest research conducted by social scientists. However, those studies were flawed and somewhat biased. Jodhka's insightful and thorough work on this important topic brings everything up to date. This is a powerful and important investigation based on solid empirical research . . . For advanced students of South Asia and educated general readers, [this will be] essential.'

J.J. Preston, Sonoma State University, in *CHOICE* review

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With a New Introduction

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For
Sohail and Anhad

Contents

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Glossary

achhoots	untouchables
atta chakki	flour mill
baba	leader of a religious sect/an old man
basti	small settlement
bhandara	a kind of *langar* (see below) where food is served free to the devotees
dargah	Sufi shrine
dera	a kind of religious centre, generally identified with a guru or baba
dharna	sitting in protest, generally in front of the office of the relevant department
fakir	Sufi saint
gaushalla	cow shelter
Gurbani	Sikh religious text of the *Guru Granth*, the Sikh holy book, literally, from the mouth of the Gurus
gurukul	traditional Hindu residential school
jati	a unit of caste
kanal	unit of measurement; about one-fifth of an acre
karma	a notion of Hindu religious philosophy that says that your current life is a result of your past deeds, including those in the previous life
dharma	a notion in Hindu religious philosophy referring to duty
kasai	butcher
kirana	grocery
langar	hot meal served free in the Sikh gurdwaras
mela	fair
sant	Saint
sarpanch	president (of a local body)
shaheed	martyr
shuddhi	process of religious purification
smadh	the place where a reverential person is buried
thanedar	a middle-level police officer
varna	a notion of caste hierarchy derived from the Hindu religious philosophy
yajna	a Hindu ritual

Preface and Acknowledgements

The political landscape of India and the ongoing processes of social churning provide fascinating grounds for social science research, which could have wider comparative and theoretical implications. A society marked by diversities, divisions and hierarchies has been undergoing some very profound changes. Beyond the quantitative markers of growth rates and share markets, relational structures in its wide range of settlements, communities and linguistic/cultural regions have also been witness to an unprecedented pace of change, particularly during the post-1980 period. *Caste in Contemporary India* published in 2015 was an attempt at exploring and understanding some of these processes in the regional context of northwest India and around the subject of caste. The second edition of the book carries a brief new Introduction.

The book evolved over a period of time, primarily through my empirical studies of the rural and urban settings in the northwestern states of India. I first started working on caste in 1999, when I received an invitation from André Béteille to write a paper on the changing status of Scheduled Castes in Punjab for a special issue of the *Journal of the Indian School of Political Economy*, which he was to edit along with its editor Nilakantha Rath. Over the years I have had the opportunity to interact with both of them and have learnt a great deal more. Soon after the special issue of the journal appeared I was approached by Action Aid India to participate in their countrywide study of the current status of untouchability in rural areas. I was asked to explore the situation in Punjab. It was an opportunity I had been waiting for. The study (Chapter 1) was carried out with the support of a local Punjab-based Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) and its head Jai Singh. I also received support from Manjit Singh, Department of Sociology, Panjab University, Chandigarh, and a group of young scholars from the region.

Part of my work on the dynamics of caste in rural Punjab was also supported by the Delhi-based Indian Social Institute and its

then director Prakash Louis. With their support I explored the emerging tensions and conflicts around caste question in rural Punjab. Chapter 2 presents some of that work. My studies of caste and emergent rural conflicts around the caste question in Punjab during the first decade of the present century helped me explore the question of caste and politics from a different perspective. Chapter 3 of the book partially draws from a piece I was asked to write for *Oxford Companion to Politics in India* by Niraja Gopal Jayal and Pratap Bhanu Mehta. Their comments on a first draft of the piece were of great help in developing my ideas on the subject.

The work presented in Chapter 4 was supported by the World Bank and was completed with active support from the Indian Institute of Dalit Studies (IIDS). I am particularly grateful to Maitreyi Das of the World Bank who commissioned the work and offered useful feedback on a first draft of the report. Sunil Gautam and a few other researchers from the IIDS assisted with the fieldwork and data processing. The work presented in Chapter 7 was also completed with support from the IIDS and was funded by Christian Aid. Sukhadeo Thorat, Managing Trustee of IIDS, and Anand Bolimera of Christian Aid took active interest in the research work. Tanvi Sirari assisted me with the fieldwork for this study.

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The work also benefited from others who participated in the larger collaborative project—Sukhadeo Thorat, Paul Attewel, Ashwini Deshpande and S. Madheswaran. During my collaborations with IIDS I also had the opportunity to learn from my interactions with its wider network: Martin Macwan, Ghanshyam Shah, R.S. Deshpande, Ramya Subrahmanian and Paul Divakar. Besides Chapter 5, versions of Chapters 1, 4 and 6 also appeared in *Economic and Political Weekly*. I am also grateful to the Oxford University Press for allowing me to draw from my chapter (Chapter 3) first published by them. I would also like to express my gratitude to Nitasha Devasar and Shashank Sinha who encouraged me to do this book and kept pursuing me on this. The time required for bringing all this work together as a book was made possible by the Indian Council of Cultural Relations that nominated me for one of their Chairs at the Lund University in Sweden, where I was hosted by the Swedish South Asian Studies Network (SASNET) and the Department of Political Science during 2012–13. While the ICCR officials in Delhi and those at the Indian Embassy in Sweden, particularly the Ambassador Ms. Banashri Bose Harrison, provided all the required support, my hosts in Sweden made sure that I had access to everything that I needed for my work, including warmth of friendship and social support. I also presented some of this work in different seminars in Sweden and elsewhere in Europe during my stay and received useful comments. I am particularly grateful to Anna Lindberg and Lars Eklund of the SASNET and Tomas Bergstrom, Catarina Kinnvall, Winnie Bothe, Ted Sevensson and Kristina Jönsson of the Department of Political Science. I also benefited from interactions with Staffan Lindberg, Goran Djurfeldt, Olle Frodin, Agnes Djurfeldt, Åke Sander, Kristina Myrvold, Neelambar Hatti,Rajni Hatti Kaul and Harpreet Singh. Over the years I gained a lot from criticisms and comments from professional co-travellers. I would particularly like to mention Dipankar Gupta, Gurpreet Mahajan, Rammanohar Reddy, James Manor, Anand Teltumbde, Satish Deshpande, John Harriss, Simon Charsley, Boike Rehbein, Ravinder Kaur, Nandini Sundar, David Mosse, Luisa Steur, Gopal Guru, Jesse Souza, Nandini Gooptu, David Gellner, Sudha Pai, Badri Narayan, Hugo Gorringe, Jules Naudet, Rajeshwari Raina, Dhruv Raina, Mary John, Aseem Prakash, Padamnabh

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This book would not have been possible without the active support from Sneha Sudha Komath, my wife, who has always been the most demanding critic of my writings.

Introduction to the Second Edition

There is something curiously odd about the popular narratives on caste in contemporary India. For a large majority of the mainstream middle class of urban Indians, caste is an inherently illegitimate subject. In the emerging modern and democratic India, it ought to have no rightful place, as many among them would suggest. Even talking and writing about caste is akin to encouraging its persistence in everyday life. Strangely enough, on the other hand, there is also a growing recognition of its presence and significance as a fact of life. This is the case not only with the domain of electoral politics and statecraft, but also with the apparently open spheres of corporate capital, the emergent labour markets in the fast-changing Indian economy and in the sprouting urban morphologies. More importantly perhaps, it is not just the 'caste warrior' or the political activist who argues for a caste perspective on things Indian; even social science scholarship is increasingly inserting the caste-variable in a wide range of empirical and conceptual research. Significance of the 'caste-variable' is now widely recognized by policy regimes, both at the regional as well as at the national level.

Since the time of its birth in the shadow of colonial masters, the new class of Western-educated Indian elite, almost exclusively from the traditionally upper castes, looked at the reality of caste as a source of embarrassment. Its presence and practice in everyday life, for many of them, only reinforced the colonial stereotype of India's traditional cultures as grounded in irrational religious belief and inhuman practices of exclusion and hierarchy. One of the core components or requirements for becoming modern and democratic was to abandon caste and other such beliefs and move forward, towards a society based on individual achievements and a rational civic life. The prevailing dominant view among the social scientists also concurred with this common sense drawn from the Western idea of modernization. The decline of caste was not only desirable but also inevitable. Any evidence of its persistence is thus to be viewed and understood as an anomaly. In other

words, this mainstream middle class's discomfiture with caste is rarely articulated as a political or sociological fact. Their disapproval of the practice emanates from what they have learnt from the colonial masters.

In other words, caste in such narratives is seen primarily as a cultural hangover, which works to hinder India's progress. The theories of human evolution and social change that were being crafted in 19th-century Europe and their growing influence across regions and cultures of the world, particularly in the colonies, provided 'scientific' grounding to the modernist middle-class view of caste. The texts of social science scholarship and their conceptual frames, structural-functionalism or even radical Marxism, anticipated that as an aspect of traditional culture and ideology, caste would inevitably decline and eventually disappear on its own. The processes of urbanization and industrialization, development of capitalist economy, modernization of mental frames and social institutions and democratization of the political system would all make the caste system redundant and meaningless. With economic development and social progress, quite like the modern Western world, Indian society too would see a shift away from a closed system of hierarchy to an open system of social stratification.

This 'imperative of disappearance' of aspects of traditional cultures continues to be an influential trope on the possible progressive futures of a strong nation-state. Even those who argue for a 'revival of the ancient Hindu *rashtra*' invariably view caste divisions as a challenge to their notion of the nation and the communitarian identity of Hinduism. Here, too, caste is viewed as a source of corruption to be overcome merely ideologically.

However, caste shows no signs of disappearing in the near future. On the contrary, it appears to be far more active and agile in the early decades of the 21st century than perhaps ever before. Caste-based communities increasingly mobilize themselves not merely because they continue to see themselves as collective subjects, but more importantly because they perceive their collective identity of caste to be the source of their vulnerabilities *and* strengths. Those on the lower end of hierarchy see caste as an obstructive material reality that inhibits their participation in the emergent structures of opportunity: in electoral politics, quality

education and the corporate economy. Those on the privileged side also wish to hold on to their monopolies, often in the names of merit and modernity. Caste is thus a resource, a form of capital, whose value depends on where one is located in the traditional hierarchy, which itself is indicative of the unequal resources that caste communities possess.

Interestingly, however, despite the obvious and noisy evidence of its resilience, many in urban India continue to believe that caste would and should have disappeared by now had it not been politicized and used by wily actors in India's electoral politics. Its institutionalization through the reservation policy, the quotas for Scheduled Castes and Other Backward Classes, is also cited as the other reason for its continued survival. Even when its presence is recognized as a substantive reality, it is generally viewed as a typical case of 'change and continuity'. The underlying assumption being that its continued presence is a result of incomplete modernization of India's economy and its cultural values. As the process of development matures under the neo-liberal market regime, caste is bound to disappear on its own, provided it is allowed to be forgotten by the political entrepreneurs of Indian democracy.

Against this popular middle-class common sense, the book constructs a different trajectory of caste. In order to undertake such an exercise, we ought to move away from a purely culture- and tradition-centric view of caste and recognize its materiality. The popular religion-centric view of caste provides a simplistic and ahistorical view. Even though we could find references to the *varna* model of hierarchy in the Hindu religious texts and their invocations in everyday life, the reality of caste is not exhausted by these ideational structures. Caste also shaped regulated land relations and settlement patterns. As a social institution, ecological possibilities, economic processes and political upheavals would have also shaped caste, differently in different regions. Caste continues to evolve and change even today.

Large volumes of available empirical studies, including those presented in this volume, clearly show that the institution of caste has seen many significant changes in the recent past, perhaps more rapidly than ever before. These changes have been experienced at almost all levels and in almost all regions of the country. However,

the processes of change have not followed a single evolutionary or linear path of progression. More importantly, even when the institution of caste and the social and economic structures sustaining it undergo major shifts, it does not disappear. Even in regions where the change in social and economic domains of rural life has been quite 'radical' and the older order of caste has nearly disintegrated, caste-based divisions and inequalities continue to matter and often overlap with the emergent disparities of the new economy, both rural and urban.

The realities of caste in contemporary times are also not exhausted by analyses of electoral politics. Caste matters in multiple ways and in different spheres of social, economic and political life, sometimes visibly, sometimes not so visibly.

Caste, as it has been lived and experienced on ground, has always had significant diversities across regions of the subcontinent. Chapters of this book empirically explore its contemporary realities in a region where Brahmanical Hinduism has historically not been very strong. Some chapters of the book also explore domains of social life that have conventionally not been studied by students of caste in India. Though all the chapters are based on empirical studies carried out in northwest India, the framework that the book tries to present hopefully helps us understand social hierarchies and persistent inequalities in other societies as well. The social structure of Indian society or its system of caste divisions is not unique, as is often believed. Status hierarchies have existed and continue to matter in different societies. They also intersect with changing modes of economic, political and social life in ways very similar to the dynamics of caste in contemporary India. An engagement with the subject of caste could thus help us develop comparative frameworks for understanding modes and patterns of persistent social differences, discrimination and reproduction of social inequalities in the world today.

Introduction

The Idea of Caste

The idea of caste appears to be so obvious and still raises questions that do not have easy and simple answers. Caste is almost universally seen as a traditional institution of the Hindus, structured around the hierarchies of *varna* and *jati*. In modern India, with the expansion of democracy and rapidly changing economic orders and educational systems, the idea of caste should have lost its appeal and value. But it has not. On the contrary, the public presence of caste today is, in many ways, far more pronounced than it was five or six decades back when the stranglehold of traditional social order was much stronger.

What exactly is happening to caste? The contemporary Indian context does not allow for a simple answer to this question. There are multiple and varied experiences of caste in today's India. The answer is likely to depend on the context in which the question is asked. It may also depend on whose experience of caste is being considered while answering the question. There could be, and there are, more than one answers to a question like this. The 'caste question' today is no longer simply an academic matter, a subject for empirical enquiry and analysis. Its academic discussions invariably take on moral and experiential dimensions.

However, this is not to propose celebration of multiple subjectivities. Nor is it meant to suggest that the reality of caste can be understood or described only by those who themselves experience it. In other words, the inference should not be that it has become impossible to empirically engage with the caste question. On the contrary, it has become all the more important to constantly interrogate the emerging and rapidly changing, often in conflicting ways, realities of caste and make sense of the ways in which they are being contested and differently articulated in relation to the given social, economic and political contexts. We must begin our engagement with caste today by recognizing these complicated intellectual landscapes in which contemporary discourses on the subject are being carried out.

It perhaps may have been much easier for sociologists and social anthropologists to engage with the caste question in the early decades after India's Independence. Those who studied India's village life in the 1950s and 1960s offered rich accounts of caste. However, their audiences were primarily their own colleagues, fellow social scientists. Even the post-colonial developmental state was not much interested in the detailed descriptive accounts of the systems of hierarchies constructed by scholars. Today, however, the framing of the caste question cannot be divorced from its contestations in everyday politics and social life.

Thus, critical engagement with the framing(s) of the 'caste question' has become as important as its empirical exploration.

We must ask, what kinds of conceptual frameworks have been used to study caste and where have they come from. Determining where we stand today will enable us to consider what remains to be explored and explained to make sense of the present context(s). This introductory chapter attempts to comprehend the conceptual journeys of caste and to present the larger theoretical context to the empirical questions that I then propose to engage with through my studies on the dynamics of caste in contemporary India, presented in the following chapters of this book.

The Popular View

According to the popular textbook view, caste is an ancient Indian institution, derived from the dominant religious ideology of the Hindus. The religious system of the Hindus underlined the significance of varna, *karma* and *dharma*, pronounced in a text called the *Manusmriti*. These ideas produced a hierarchical social order, structured around the notions of purity and pollution. The varna system divided Hindus into four or five mutually exclusive categories with Brahmins at the top, followed in order of rank by Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. Beneath the four varnas were the *achhoot*s (untouchables), occupying a position at the very bottom of the social order.

There are many problems with this account of caste. Notwithstanding its almost universal acceptance, it is a relatively modern construct. As a number of historians and social anthropologists have pointed out, this simplistic representation of caste as a uniform structure throughout the Indian subcontinent came to be viewed as the common sense about Indian society only during

the British colonial period, sometime towards the end of the 19th century (Appadurai 1988; Banerjee-Dube 2008; Charsley 1996; Cohn 1968, 1987; Dirks 2001; Raheja 1989; Samarendra 2011; Sharma 2002).

This view of caste sees it primarily as a uniquely Indian cultural or ideological reality that distinguishes the traditional social order of India from the modern West. Unlike the inequalities of class in Western societies that are assumed to have emanated directly from the economic structure, caste hierarchy functioned independently of material realities or political dynamics.

The labelling of caste as a 'traditional institution' in contrast to the 'modern West' also presupposes that Indian society is at an evolutionary stage different from the West. It assumes that caste will eventually disappear on its own, with the unfolding of the processes of economic development, modernization and urbanization.

The history of contemporary India has obviously not conformed to this model of social evolution. The process of modernization, as one would understand it in this framework, was initiated in the region by the British colonial rulers sometime in the middle of the 19th century, when they introduced the railways, Western-style secular education, modern factories, modes of mass communication, and modern administrative systems. This process received a manifold acceleration after India's Independence in 1947 with the introduction of development planning, a democratic system of governance and a 'modern' Constitution with an elaborate legal and administrative framework that actively worked to undermine the traditional order of caste.

Although India today continues to confront many social, economic and political problems, it cannot be characterized as an 'underdeveloped' country with a traditional social and political order. Rather, many in the world today are seeing it as an emerging 21st-century economic power. Even though demographically two-thirds of its population still lives in rural areas, India is no longer an agrarian economy. The social and economic organization of large parts of the country has fundamentally changed as an increasing number of people have become part of the urban economy and are adopting its ways of life even while living in rural areas (Gupta 2005; Jodhka 2012a, 2014; Lindberg 2012). Democratic politics has also been gradually deepening, reaching almost every social category and region of India.

All these processes have transformed the Indian society, including its caste system. As sociologists and social anthropologists have been reporting for over a century, the ideological hold of caste and its institutional order is no longer as strong as it used to be until the middle of last century. However, while the change has been profound, caste has neither dissolved nor disappeared.

It may appear, as it indeed does to many middle-class urban Indians, that caste survives not because it continues to structure social relations, or the Hindu mentalities, but because of its politicization by wily actors of India's electoral politics, or because of the state policy of caste-based quotas (reservations) for Scheduled Castes and Other Backward Classes. However, this cannot explain the everyday caste violence and atrocities frequently reported in the popular media, spatial and social marginalities of certain caste communities, continued emphasis on caste endogamy and reproduction of an unequal social order, of which caste remains an important component. The studies presented in this book and a large amount of other literature generated by social scientists on contemporary India clearly corroborates this. Caste matters beyond electoral politics in today's India. The question therefore is not simply to examine the empirical claims of such a formulation but also to question the underlying assumptions of the conceptualizations that look at caste merely as a cultural or ideological reality. Even culturally, the notions of hierarchy and pollution continue to produce prejudice and discrimination in contemporary Indian life.

However, caste has never simply been a religious or ideological fact, as it was constructed by the Orientalists, and later by some sociologists and social anthropologists. It is rather surprising that such a notion of caste, which looks at it merely, or primarily, in terms of cultural 'difference', continues to persist. In reality, caste exhibits stark material disparities, physically segregated settlements like ghetto communities, institutionalized violence, including untouchability. Hierarchy and purity/pollution are undeniably some of the core ideas around which caste is organized. But they also produce human effects, social inequalities, economic disparities, deprivation, and violence. The popular textbook view of caste somehow does not convey these rather obvious facts and effects of its everyday functioning. Thus it becomes important that we begin with an interrogation into conceptual trajectories of caste and try to evolve alternative ways of conceptualizing it.

Conceptual Trajectories of Caste

As I have argued elsewhere (Jodhka 2012b), one way of mapping the history of the conceptual trajectories of caste could be through dividing them into three 'moments': caste as tradition; caste as power politics; and caste as humiliation. While not mutually exclusive, they can help us understand the changing modes of social scientific engagements with the subject of caste.

Caste as Tradition

Tradition has always been the most common mode of conceptualizing caste. Its history dates back to the early engagement of Western and colonial scholars and rulers with the cultures of the South Asian region. However, this is not to suggest that caste hierarchies did not exist in the pre-colonial period or that the British rulers or Western theorists invented caste. Categories such as varna, jati or *zat* (endogamous group) and the corresponding social divisions and hierarchies of status have indeed been present in different parts (though not everywhere) of the South Asian region, in a variety of forms and structures, for a very long time. As the historical and anthropological scholarship on caste has convincingly shown, the Western idea of 'caste' simplified the diverse and often contested realities of the 'native' social order as neatly demarcated groups (Dirks 2001; Raheja 1989).

The Western view of caste evolved over a period of time, through the writings of Orientalists, missionaries and colonial administrators. It was through these writings that a view of Indian tradition emerged, much of which eventually became a part of the nationalist common sense about Indian society and, in many ways, continues to be influential even today, within and outside of India. Since the Western world saw India as one of the ancient civilizations, the classical Hindu texts assumed critical significance for understanding its 'essence'. An obvious assumption that accompanied these interrogations of India's civilizational culture through the ancient texts was that 19th-century India was not very different from the times during which these texts were written. As Bernard S. Cohn rightly argues,

> [t]he acceptance of a textural view of the society … also led to a picture of Indian society as being static, timeless and space-less.

> Statements about customs which derived from third century AD texts and observations from the late eighteenth century were equally good evidence for determining the nature of society and culture in India. In this view … there was no regional variation and no questioning of the relationship between prescriptive normative statements derived from the texts and the actual behavior of indi-viduals and groups (Cohn 1987: 7–8).

By the late 19th century, British rulers came to believe 'that caste was the foundational fact of Indian society, fundamental both to Hinduism (as Hinduism was to it) and to the Indian subcontinent as a civilizational region' (Dirks 2001: 41).

In addition to being an institution that distinguished India from other societies, caste was also an epitome of traditional Indian society, a 'closed system', in which succeeding generations did similar kinds of work and lived more or less similar kinds of lives. In contrast, Western industrial societies were portrayed as 'open systems' whose social stratification was based only on class and where individuals could choose their occupations according to their preferences and abilities. If they worked hard, they could move up the social ladder and change their class position. Such mobility on an individual level was impossible in the caste system.

This Orientalist 'book-view' of caste was reproduced in the language of modern social science by Louis Dumont in his well-known *Homo Hierarchichus* (first published in French in 1966, with its English translation coming out in 1971). Like the Orientalists, Dumont argued that caste represented the cultural 'difference' between India and the West. As an ideological system, it functioned very differently from the cultural patterns of Western societies. He was dismissive of those who saw caste as linked to material circumstances. The perspective of political economy could explain the inequalities in a Western society, he argued, but not in India.

The idea of inequality is central to Dumont's notion of caste. However, he contrasts the hierarchy of caste with the Western view of inequality, which he sees as material disparities. The core ideology of the West, according to Dumont, is individualism and equality. In India, inequality is a cultural fact, a legitimate and valued mode of social organization, over-determined by Hindu religious ideology. Accordingly, India and the West could neither be compared nor studied with a common sociological framework

because their underlying structures are fundamentally different. If the West is a modern society established on the ideas of individualism and equality, India, by contrast, is a kind of traditional culture based on ideas of 'totality' and 'holism'. In India, inequalities of status and hierarchy are more critical than economy or politics/power. 'Status encompassed power', as Dumont put it (1998). Even though the king was powerful, the Brahmin's status was superior to him. As Gloria G. Raheja sums up Dumont's argument,

> [t]he most pervasive and persistent Western view of Hindu society sees hierarchy as the sole ideology defining relations among castes. In this narrow view, caste is seen as focused on the Brahman value of purity, while the king and the dominant caste … are taken to represent only a residual, devalued, and non-ideological sphere of 'political' and 'economic' relations (Raheja 1989: 79).

Thus, for Dumont caste is a hierarchical system, naturalized and legitimized by the Hindu religion and resting on the distinction between pure and the impure.

> This opposition underlies hierarchy, which is the superiority of the pure to the impure, underlies separation because the pure and the impure must be kept separate, and underlies the division of labour because pure and impure occupations must likewise be kept separate. The whole is founded on the necessary and hierarchical coexistence of the two opposites (Dumont 1998: 43).

At the extremes of the system of caste hierarchy are the Brahmin on one end and the Untouchable on the other. The pure must 'find its logical opposite, the impure, for it to be a complete system' (Gupta 1981: 2095; see also Quigley 1993).

Dumont's book has been among the most influential works on the Indian caste system. However, his conception of caste has also been highly criticized for providing a one-sided account of the caste system, such as the Brahmins would have liked to tell (Berreman 1991: 87–88; Mencher 1974). Dumont's sources were primarily texts, written and retained by Brahmins. Critics have pointed out that he ignored the corpus of empirical literature describing the working of caste because it did not conform to his notions. Even his choice of textual sources was selective. The classical texts do

not provide such a unified view of caste as presented by Dumont (Das and Uberoi 1971).

Historians point out that even in ancient times, caste was a contested and evolving reality, and like other aspects of Indian society, it continued to change with time. For example, the status of Brahmins in a given region or kingdom depended on their relationship with the king. Only when a Brahmin became the priest of a king or acquired control over great amounts of land did he begin to enjoy high status (see Gupta 1981; Thapar 1975). The village-level system of caste relations was also part of a larger political authority, beyond the village (Fuller 1977, 1984). James Manor is right when he argues that '[t]he old caste hierarchies were rooted in materiality. They did not just exist in people's minds, at the level of ideas, beliefs and imaginings … Caste and caste hierarchies had, and still have, tangible substance' (Manor 2010: xxii).

This ends up overemphasizing the differences between India and the West by characterizing the former as holistic and hierarchical and the latter as individualistic and egalitarian. It also produces a homogenous and simplified view of India, with no agency of its own (Appadurai 1988; Béteille 1986; Inden 1990: 65). The reality is that hierarchy operationalized itself in India in many ways in different regions and contexts. Scholars working on caste also point out that there have always been multiple notions of hierarchy and an absence of consensus among caste-groups on who is 'high' and who is 'low' in the various status hierarchies (Deliège 1993; Gupta 2000).

Caste as Power

The main point of contention in Dumont's thesis is the relationship between the status hierarchies of caste on one hand, and realities of power and materialities of everyday life on the other. However, the two were never independent of each other. Even M. N. Srinivas's work on Sanskritization shows how material success could change the social status of a group in the caste hierarchy. Such a process of group mobility could operate only when a 'lower' caste had acquired some measure of material success (Srinivas 1966).

Interestingly, prior to Dumont's standardization of the Orientalist view of caste, many scholars in the West had looked

at caste from a comparative perspective. The most notable among them were Max Weber (1864–1920) and Celestin Bouglé (1870–1940). Weber found nothing unique (or uniquely Indian) about caste. He saw caste divisions as a special case of status-based divisions that, according to him, are found in almost all societies. However, status groupings might 'evolve into closed caste', although not always and everywhere. For Weber 'social-status' differed from the 'class situation' because 'class' is a function of the economic order, 'status situation' is determined by the 'social estimation of honor' and 'style of life'. This would normally result in segregation based on ethnic groupings. However 'ethnic segregations' could turn into 'closed caste' in situations 'where the consequences have been realized to their full extent'. In such situations

> [s]tatus distinctions are … guaranteed not merely by conventions and laws, but also by rituals. This occurs in such a way that every physical contact with a member of any caste that is considered to be 'lower' by the members of a 'higher' caste is considered as making for a ritualistic impurity and to be a stigma which must be expiated by a religious act. Individual castes develop quite distinct cults and gods (Weber 1946: 188–89).

Although caste is an extreme case of status group distinctions, Weber emphasizes that it is not unique to India.

> The 'caste' is, indeed, the normal form in which ethnic communities usually live side by side in a 'societalized' manner. These ethnic communities believe in blood relationship and exclude exogamous marriage and social intercourse. Such a caste situation is part of the phenomenon of 'pariah' peoples and is found all over the world. These people form communities, acquire specific occupational traditions … They live in a 'diaspora' strictly segregated from all personal intercourse, except that of an unavoidable sort, and their situation is legally precarious. Yet, by virtue of their economic indispensability, they are tolerated (ibid.).

Another important contribution to this tradition of scholarship was by the French scholar Celestin Bouglé. Although he made a distinction between class-based economic inequality and the status hierarchies of caste (because in the latter hierarchically divided

occupational differences also created a sense of repulsion for the other groups), like Weber he also did not think that it was unique or peculiar to India or to the Hindus. It is 'no more than the syntheses of elements which are present everywhere' he underlined (Bouglé 1971: 30). It is such comparative perspectives which recognize the specificity of an institution like caste and of the Indian society but do not reduce them to the mere fact of 'cultural difference' that would help in developing a conceptual framework and would lead to a better understanding of caste.

Thus, the second moment of caste revolves around the ideas of power and politics of caste. This fact about caste has been widely recognized and studied by students of Indian society. 'Hierarchy' and 'status' are not simply matters of cultural difference. As Max Weber believed, they are also dimensions or forms of 'power' (see Giddens 1980). The fact that status in India also had some kind of religious recognition did not mean that its experience as a relationship differed from the experience of power and domination. Moreover, its reproduction in everyday life would have been possible only through the operation of power, whether coercive or legitimate.

In the Indian social sciences, 'caste as power' is no new formulation. During the 1950s and 1960s, when sociologists, social anthropologists and other social scientists began to explore micro settings of Indian society through village studies and analyses of democratic and electoral process, they observed and described the various dimensions of the relationship of caste and power in great detail. A major contribution to empirical studies of caste was by Srinivas, who introduced the concept of the 'dominant caste' (1955: 18). He observed while doing his fieldwork in southern India that the ritual status of a caste-group became relevant only when it was accompanied by the other forms of dominance, most importantly material prosperity.

> When a caste enjoys one form of dominance, it is frequently able to acquire the other forms as well in the course of time. Thus a caste which is numerically strong and wealthy will be able to move up in the ritual hierarchy if it Sanskritizes its ritual and way of life, and also loudly and persistently proclaims itself to be what it wants to be. It is hardly necessary to add that the more forms of dominance which a caste enjoys, the easier it is for it to acquire the rest (Srinivas 1959: 3).

Several village studies also showed that the practice of untouchability was about control over the lives of the untouchables — a relationship of power (like slavery) that was reinforced through coercion, if necessary. In his study of a south Indian village, André Béteille described it vividly:

> Brahmins were often dependent on non-Brahmins for dealing with Adi-Dravidas. When an Adi-Dravida misbehaved, a Brahmin mirasdar might ask his non-Brahmin tenant to fetch the miscreant from the cheri, tie him to a tree, and give him a beating. Physical force … was one of the most effective sanctions against the Adi-Dravidas (1996: 168).

Scholars like Nicholas Dirks and Guleria Goodwin Raheja too have theorized caste by giving centrality to power. The 'original caste', Dirk argues, was a diverse reality and did not follow any single principle, as Dumont suggested. Through his study of a kingdom in Tamil Nadu, he shows the absence of any 'ontological separation of the "religious" from the "political" domain'. Religious institutions and the domain of power (of the king) were completely intertwined. The king drew his power from religious worship.

> Temples represent the pre-eminent position of the king by granting him the highest honour in the temple, before even the learned …. Brahmin. Religion does not encompass kingship any more than kingship encompasses religion. There are not two distinct forms of power … King and Brahmin are both privileged but by different forms of divinity in a world in which all beings were … generated from the same ontological source (Dirks 1989: 61).

Similarly, Raheja argues that 'there are several contextually shifting ideologies of inter-caste relationships apparent in everyday village social life. Meanings and values are foregrounded differently from context to context, and they implicate varying configurations of castes' (Raheja 1989: 81).

In her own study of prestation rituals in an Uttar Pradesh village, Raheja found the centrality of the dominant caste Gujjars even in the ritual life of the village.

> Gujjar dominance is absolute. They comprise slightly more than one-half of the total population, but they hold virtually all of the

> land. They are regarded as the jajmans not only with respect to their own domestic and agricultural rituals, but also in relation to the ritual life of the village as a unit (Raheja 1989: 98).

Many empirical studies of the unfolding of democratic political process in contemporary India further reinforce this relationship of caste with power and how it could easily adapt itself to modern democratic politics.

Humiliation and Discrimination

The third 'moment' of caste looks at it as a system that institutionalizes humiliation as a social and cultural practice. Though the idea of power is subsumed in this perspective on caste, it approaches power critically rather than in a descriptive or functionalist mode (as is the case with many writings in the second moment). It also develops a critique of the so-called Indian tradition as a mode of authority and domination. The origin of this formulation can be traced in the writings of the 19th-century reformers like Jyotiba Phule and Dalit idealogue B. R. Ambedkar (Omvedt 1976, 1994). However, the third moment of caste first begins to acquire visibility and academic respectability only in the late 1980s and 1990s.

The social churning experienced by Indian society during the 1970s and 1980s produced many new trends. It was around this time that the dominant discourse of nation-building and development framed at the time of India's independence from the colonial rule, the 'Nehruvian agenda', began to disintegrate, both morally and politically. This generated a space for the emergence of newer forms of politics, often identity-based, including of those on the margins of Indian society (Jodhka 2001).

Until the 1980s, the dominant political discourses and the State initiatives for development had largely remained 'caste-blind'. Even in electoral politics, Scheduled Caste communities were mostly aligned with the mainstream political formation, the Congress Party. An autonomous discourse of Dalit politics and identity, in whatever form it existed, was confined to only a few pockets in states such as Maharashtra, Karnataka or Andhra Pradesh. It was a concern of the urbanized and upwardly mobile individuals from Scheduled Caste background who had benefited from 'reservations'. Their articulation of the Dalit question was also largely

confined to cultural forms, most prominent of which was the field of regional language literature (Mendelsohn and Vicziany 1998).

However, over the years, the size of the Dalit middle class grew, primarily because of the growing effectiveness of the State policy of quotas in government jobs and educational institutions. As they grew in numbers, Dalits also felt more confident in articulating their experiences of discrimination in the workplace and the continued caste-based prejudice against their communities in the society-at-large. They began to form separate associations of Scheduled Caste employees and mobilized to resist different kinds of perceived discriminatory practices at their workplace or outside in the society (ibid.).

It was about this time that Ambedkar was rediscovered as a universal icon of Dalit identity and as someone who could symbolize their aspirations (Zelliot 2001). India celebrated the centenary of Ambedkar's birth in 1991. While other major figures in India's nationalist movement, such as Nehru, Patel or even Gandhi, appear to be losing their political appeal, Ambedkar has continued to grow in stature and significance. No discussion of caste today is possible without invoking Ambedkar and his critique of caste and Hindu society.

The shift in academic discourse on caste has also been facilitated by some substantive changes in caste relations on the ground. Recent studies have pointed to a process of loosening of caste hierarchies and traditional structures of power and domination. On the basis of his work in Rajasthan, Oliver Mendelsohn has argued that although Srinivas was correct in talking about 'dominant caste' during the 1950s, such a formulation makes less sense in present-day rural India. The 'low caste and even untouchable villagers were now less beholden to their economic and ritual superiors than was suggested in older accounts' (Mendelsohn 1993: 808). Similarly, 'land and authority had been de-linked in village India and this amounted to an historic, if non-revolutionary transformation' (ibid.: 807). Disintegration of jajmani ties reported from different parts of the country created new possibilities of mobilizations (Karanth 1996; Sahay 2004) and assertions. It is in this changed context of a combination of factors that the new agency among the Dalits has to be located. The new class of political entrepreneurs that has emerged from the ex-untouchable communities used

the idea of 'Dalit identity' and mobilized the Scheduled Caste communities as a united block with the promise of development with dignity. Some of them, such as Kanshi Ram and Mayawati, have been quite successful in translating these mobilizations into electoral successes (Chandra 2000; Pai 2002; Shah 2002).

The third moment of caste enables us to frame the caste question differently. As mentioned earlier, the origin of this kind of conceptualization could be found in the writings of B. R. Ambedkar, along with Phule, who developed a political critique of caste. Caste for them was not simply an innocuous feature of the Indian society or its traditional culture. They pointed to its negative dimensions and disabling effects on those located lower down in the hierarchy. Not only did they view caste as a source of innumerable ignominies and disabilities, exploitation and humiliation for those at the bottom of the caste hierarchy, but they also critiqued the Hindu society. The system of caste hierarchy 'disorganized' and 'demoralized' the larger society that practised it. The 'anti-social spirit' of caste had 'poisoned the mutual relations of the sub-caste' (Ambedkar in Rodrigues 2002: 268–386). Unlike in a class society, where inequalities could result in revolutionary change, '[i]n a system of graded inequality, the aggrieved parties are not on a common level … Even the low is a privileged class as compared with the lower. Each class being privileged, every class is interested in maintaining the system' (Ambedkar 1987: 320).

Notwithstanding the success of Indian democracy and the increasing participation of the historically marginalized groups/communities in the electoral process, along with more than six decades of development and quotas for Scheduled Castes, caste-based disparities have not disappeared. In other words, caste discrimination continues to be an important indicator of deprivation and marginality. Caste also plays an important role in the modern urban economy. For example, ownership of industry in India has historically been concentrated in the hands of a few social/cultural groups, and jobs at the top are always kept within close networks based on kinship (Munshi 2007; Rutten 2003; also see chapters 4 and 5, this volume). Recruitments for other jobs are opened to outsiders only when the required personnel are not available within the community or the wider kin-group. Caste begins to reproduce

itself in the form of a hierarchy of network through degrees of monopolization over social and cultural capitals.

Thus, in this discourse caste appears to be a system of domination and exclusion. Max Weber's distinction between coercive power and authority or domination may be invoked here to demonstrate that caste has historically been an institutionalized form of domination, supported by a set of values, norms and institutions, some of which continue to the present day, while others have weakened or disintegrated. However, a radical break with the caste system has not yet taken place. In the absence of a comprehensive structural change, caste asserts itself as a coercive power, perhaps more often than before, because of the weakening of its ideological hold. The increase in caste-based atrocities is an evidence of this.

The second dimension of caste in this perspective would be its role in creating disparities. Caste does not simply imply power in the cultural sense of the term. It is also a structural and material reality where inequality is institutionalized by an unequal distribution of resources. Inequality due to disparities refers to a very different set of attributes when compared with Dumont's notion of inequality that refers to a cultural hierarchy — something that exists only as an ideological category and is derived from the dialectical opposition between pure and impure, as it exists in the Hindu mind. Disparities, on the other hand, refer to inequalities such as entitlements and ownership of resources. It is closer to Marx's notion of means of production. However, the nature of disparities and inequalities in a caste society is different. They are, to use Ambedkar's expression, graded inequalities (Ambedkar 2007).

The third dimension of caste in this perspective is its institutionalized system of discrimination and denials. Discrimination and denial have been socially and culturally institutionalized in India in a group-specific way. They have resulted in a pattern of disadvantages that in turn produced deprivations and poverty among certain groups. Denial was culturally institutionalized; it had legitimacy and long-term implications for the social and economic status of some caste-groups and communities. For example, ex-untouchable communities were not allowed to own and cultivate land or become peasants. Such customary practices could not be explained away by simply referring to the dialectics

of pure and impure. It defined and limited the rights of different groups of people. More importantly, the effects of such practices are felt even today by a majority of Dalits. The absence of assets, such as agricultural land, makes them highly vulnerable, economically and socially.

It is also the moment when caste is again being viewed in a comparative perspective. Those representing marginalized groups within the caste system begin to demand recognition by international agencies, at par with other forms of descent-based discriminations, such as race. A good example of this is the manner in which several activists and social organizations representing Indian Dalits presented their case at the UN World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance (WCAR), held at Durban in 2001. Caste, they argued, was similar to race because the nature of discrimination in the two was almost the same. This resulted in a debate in which some academics questioned their claim on literal grounds, viz., the anthropological validity of caste being race. In fact the activists were saying something very different. Using the framework of 'rights', they were asking for recognition of their experience of discrimination at the global forum. As Martin Macwan puts it: 'For millions of dalits and their sympathizers … the event was … an opportunity to voice the realities of discrimination born out of their own life experiences to a world in search for solidarity'.[1] Another advocate of Dalit rights, Anand Teltumbde, similarly underlines that the 'essence of both, casteism and racism, lay in discrimination on the basis of descent' (2009: 18).

This shift was not merely conceptual and political. The third moment also asks for a more practical engagement with caste through state policy and global action by those working for human rights and wellbeing. It places the reality or processes of discrimination at the centre of discourses and conceptualization of caste. If caste is discrimination, engagements with it would raise moral and political questions about its victims and the possible ways to combat it.

[1] http://www.india-seminar.com/2001/508/508%20martin%20macwan.htm (accessed on 21 February 2013).

As mentioned earlier, this book has emerged out of several empirical studies that I have conducted over the last decade and more in rural and urban areas of northwest India, primarily in Punjab, Haryana and the national capital Delhi. A part of the study presented in this book was also carried out in a town in western Uttar Pradesh. All these regions have experienced significant economic and social change during the post-Independence period and belong to the relatively developed and prosperous parts of contemporary India.

The studies presented in different chapters of this book were carried out over a period of around one decade and are based on a combination of qualitative research and quantitative data collected through primary-level surveys. Choice of method was mostly dictated by the nature of questions being researched rather than any disciplinary preferences. For example, though the subject discussed in chapter 1 is qualitative in nature, its scope required some amount of quantification. It is nearly impossible to provide a view of changing patterns of untouchability from 51 villages of the region without some amount of tabulation, particularly when one is trying to capture perceptions of a diverse set of communities. The second chapter is entirely qualitative, primarily based on case-study method. Similarly chapters 3, 5 and 6 are also mostly based on qualitative research carried out through in-depth interviews, observations and historical analyses. However, chapters 4 and 7 needed base-line surveys before one could initiate a more serious engagement with respondents through qualitative interviews. Given that some of these subjects had hardly been researched earlier, it was only through initial base-line surveys that one could identify the potential respondents for qualitative interviews.

These studies offer an account of contemporary practices and manifestations of caste. While they show that much has changed over the last four or five decades in the ways in which caste is experienced and articulated, the reality of caste shows no sign of dissolving or disappearing. These studies also question the popular understanding of caste as a cultural and ideological fact. Even when caste has seen a significant ideological decline, it remains a critical issue for those who have traditionally been at the lower end of the caste hierarchy. In other words, we need to explore what makes it possible for caste to reproduce itself even outside its 'traditional'

social universe, the Indian village. Caste-based atrocities occur even in those areas where the old relations of hierarchy have lost their relational and 'functional' frames. It is challenging to understand this survival of caste in contemporary India, which is increasingly becoming 'modern' and urban.

These empirical studies raise several theoretical and political questions, both about the nature of social change being experienced in contemporary India and the popular conceptualizations of caste, inside the social science academy and in the popular imagination. I return to these questions once again in the concluding chapter of the book.

Part One

Hierarchies and the Politics of Citizenship

I

Pollution and Prejudice

Vestiges of Untouchability in Rural Punjab

The ideas of purity and pollution are almost universally recognized as the core defining features of the caste system. The practice of untouchability emanated directly from such ideas. They also institutionalized hierarchy, a social and cultural practice that advocated contempt for those located lower down in the social rank by the higher-ups. The ideas of purity and pollution thus provided legitimacy to the power of caste, which often translated into 'naturalization' of symbolic (Bourdieu 1984) and 'physical' violence, a normative system of social inequality.

Though caste is popularly viewed as originating from the Hindu religious philosophy, everyday economic and political life was also organized hierarchically, almost everywhere in the subcontinent and virtually across all religious communities. This was believed to be the case particularly in rural India where caste differentiation was seen to be required for the working of the agrarian economy and for the social integration of the village community through institutions such as the *jajmani* system.

Even though the institution of caste has survived in its many different *avatar*s, the paradigm within which it works and is articulated has undergone many changes over the years. Perhaps the three most important things that have happened to caste in relation to untouchability, over the last century or so, are (*a*) a legal de-recognition of the practice of untouchability; (*b*) a gradual disintegration of the hierarchical framework of rural social life, the jajmani system, in which its economy and politics were organized; and (*c*) a near-complete change in the consciousness of those at the receiving end of the hierarchical system. Those located below the 'line of pollution', the Dalits or untouchables, no longer accept it as their fate or a part of the given social/cultural universe that

they do not have the right to question. As citizens of a democratic country, they assert for rights and expect equal treatment from others as human beings and political subjects (Mendelsohn and Vicziany 1998: 1; Manor 2012). Whatever might have been the case in the past, there would be very few among the ex-untouchables today who would regard themselves as impure or justify their low status on grounds of their misconduct in some previous life, a 'fact of nature' (Charsley and Karanth 1998). Today they 'all aspire to more comfortable material circumstances; all demand more dignity' (Deliège 1999).

This, however, has not necessarily meant an alleviation of their social conditions everywhere. Not only do a large majority of them continue to live in deprivation, the decline of traditional structures of patronage and their growing assertiveness has invariably been accompanied by growing instances of violence and atrocities against them.

This chapter presents findings of an extensive survey conducted during 2000–01 with the help of a team of researchers. The study was carried out across 51 villages selected from different sub-regions of the northwestern state of Punjab. It used three sets of tools. First, we carried out a survey of 683 respondents, all from rural areas. We also collected qualitative data from the 51 study villages and conducted intensive interviews with select respondents (around 75) spread across the villages. The operative questions were (*a*) to examine the nature of change in caste in a region such as Punjab that had experienced significant change in its agrarian social structure with the success of the Green Revolution; (*b*) to understand what had changed and what remained of caste in rural Punjab; and (*c*) to study the strategies that Dalits used to move out of the social universe of caste, socially, culturally, and economically.

Untouchability and the 'Line of Pollution'

As mentioned earlier, the idea of the 'line of pollution' has been an important category in the academic literature on caste. It has also been a critical point of distinction in the policy and official discourse on caste. For example, identification of the 'Scheduled Castes', the listing of caste communities for the State policies of affirmative action or reservation has been largely based on this idea. This administrative grouping of caste communities into

Scheduled Castes and 'others', 'general', has perhaps become the most obvious distinction in the popular imagination in India today.

Nowhere in the line of hierarchy is the rigidity of caste as sharp as it is around the line of pollution. For example, for those above the line of pollution, including those designated as Shudras, but touchable, in the traditional scriptural system of hierarchy, impurity was relative. Those above this line could contest their positions in the ranking order, either through the use of force and power or by gradually adopting the lifestyle of the 'upper castes', a process Srinivas described as Sanskritization (Srinivas 1966). However, for those located below the line of pollution, the so-called untouchable communities, impurity was nearly absolute. Only rarely could it be overcome within the framework of tradition.

However, notwithstanding its critical importance, the idea of the 'line of pollution', as we understand today acquired a distinctive character only in the late 19th century, and more clearly in the early decades of the 20th century. The Hindu scriptures, where the system of caste hierarchy was presumably codified in its purest form, are rather vague about it. An English translation of a passage from Manu's text states: 'The Brahmana, the Kshatriya and the Vaisya castes (*varna*) are the twice-born ones, but the fourth, the Sudra, has one birth only; there is no fifth (caste)' (quoted in Charsley 1996: 3).

It was through several years of deliberations, among the colonial administrators and the social and religious reformers of the late 19th/early 20th centuries, that the notion of a 'pollution-line' was worked out, primarily for the purpose of a positive State action for reforms in the system and for improving the status of those located at the lower end of the caste hierarchy. The early colonial administrators who had developed their understanding of Indian society and its caste system from scriptural sources, found it hard to make sense of untouchability when they were confronted by its practice, particularly when it came to enumerating caste. Even when they realized that distinguishing between Shudras and untouchables was empirically critical, it was conceptually difficult within the varna model. Despite the fact that *chatur* (four)-varna model of hierarchy was not of much help for dealing with caste in everyday life, they remained preoccupied with the varna system of hierarchy.

Charsley (1996) argues that it was through the consistent efforts of Herbert Risley, the Commissioner of the 1901 Census, that the term untouchability, as we understand it today, came to be recognized in the colonial administrative discourse. However, the concept of 'untouchability' itself originated in the writings of the local reformers. The first statement on the subject of untouchability was made by G. K. Gokhale, in a resolution he moved in a conference of social reformers at Dharwar in 1903:

> We may touch a cat, we may touch a dog … but the touch of these human beings is pollution. And so complete is now the mental degradation of these people that they themselves see nothing in such treatment to resent (quoted in ibid.: 6).

The first category to club and classify the untouchable communities that became popular sometime during the 1870s was that of 'Depressed Classes'. By the early 20th century several social organizations emerged with a focus on their welfare. However, a section among the reformers began to feel that the word 'depressed' did not convey the specific form of disability experienced by those 'inflicted' by pollution. The Maharaja of Baroda, Sayaji Rao Gaekwad III, wrote in 1909 in *The Indian Review* that 'untouchableness' was 'additional to more widely shared difficulties such as poverty and illiteracy'. He criticized the term 'depressed classes' for being 'too elastic' to include even those from the Brahmin caste, who did not experience 'pollution'. He therefore suggested that the 'specially disadvantaged' needed to be designated as 'untouchable' (ibid: 7). Gradually the term took off, and by the 1920s it was also being used by the colonial rulers in their administrative reports.

The experience or reality of untouchability had indeed been a fact of life. However, its construction and acceptance by the colonial State and the nationalist politics completely changed the discourse on caste, and it has had far-reaching implications for the way caste came to be understood, and for the way the State was to engage with it. As we know, this conceptual distinction continues to play a critical role in contemporary India. Its official recognition in the Government of India Act of 1935 and the listing of the Scheduled Castes initially by the colonial state, and its later recognition and extension by the Indian Constitution after Independence for State policy of reservation, transformed the discourse of caste quite fundamentally (Galanter 1984: 121–30).

Article 17 of the Indian Constitution formally abolished the practice of untouchability right at the time of its inception in 1950. Over the years, the Government of India enacted a few more legislations to protect the Scheduled Castes from violence of different kinds. These include the Untouchability Offence Act in 1955, Protection of Civil Rights Act in 1976, and Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Prevention of Atrocities Act in 1989. However, the formal or legal abolition of untouchability did not mean the end of its practice. The available literature from different regions of India shows that though the older structures of social and economic life have been declining, prejudice against the untouchables has not gone away, and in some regions it remains quite strong (Navsarjan and RFK Center 2009; Shah et al. 2006).

Caste and Untouchability in Contemporary Punjab

The dominant trend in much of the literature on caste has been to look at it in unitary terms, a system present everywhere in India and, more or less, in a similar form. Not much attention has been paid to the historical specificities and material conditions of the different regional contexts. Mainstream theories of caste, for example, have almost unanimously worked with a varna model of hierarchy, as mentioned earlier, which places Brahmins at the top and the untouchables at the bottom.

However, in actual reality a considerable amount of regional variations exist in the manner in which social relations among different groups of castes have historically evolved. Sociologists working on the subject have repeatedly pointed to the fact that there are different sets of caste-groups in different regions and 'the preoccupation with purity and pollution was not equally marked in every part of the country' (Béteille 2000a: 172). The specific historical trajectory, the patterns of politico-economic changes experienced during the post-Independence period and the composition of different ethnic communities determined the actual working of caste relations in a given region.

Even when the fact of regional variations is recognized, sociologists and social anthropologists have not seriously engaged with it empirically through studies and documentation of these variations and their possible implications. Strangely enough, despite having the largest proportion of Scheduled Caste population in

the Indian federation, Punjab has not been very widely studied for the understanding of caste. While we have some literature available on the nature of changes experienced in caste relations in Punjab over the past four or five decades, or, more recently, on the Dalit social movements (see Jodhka 2000; Judge and Bal 2008; Juergensmeyer 1988; Puri 2004; Ram 2008; Saberwal 1973, 1976), the Punjab experience has so far not been seen to be of any relevance for conceptualization of the caste system and the changes taking place therein. There has virtually been no detailed empirical documentation of the practice of untouchability in rural Punjab.

Demographically, divided among 39 different communities, the Scheduled Castes in Punjab made for 31.9 per cent of its total population in the year 2011, proportionately higher than any other state of the Indian union and much higher than the all-India average of around 16.6 per cent. Being relatively less urbanized than other caste-groups, their proportions are even higher in most of rural Punjab. There would be many villages in Punjab where the Scheduled Caste population would exceed 40 or, in some cases, even 50 per cent.

Punjab is also one of the few states of India where the Hindus, who constitute more than 80 per cent of India's total population, are in a minority, constituting less than 40 per cent of the total state population. Ever since its reorganization in 1966, Sikhism has been the majority religion, with a population of more than 60 per cent. Punjab also has a small proportion of Muslim and Christian populations. Another important aspect of the demographic composition of religious communities in the Punjab is their uneven rural–urban distribution. Despite being in a minority at the state level, the Hindus overwhelmingly dominate urban Punjab while the Sikhs are concentrated more in rural areas, where in some districts they make up to nearly 90 per cent of the total rural population.

More interestingly, despite being non-Hindus, the 'low-caste' Sikhs have the distinction of being included in the Scheduled Caste list, a status that was not granted to their counterparts in other minority communities, namely, the Muslims and Christians. Even neo-Buddhist converts had been included in the list only from 1991. Interestingly this was despite evidence from sociologists that the conversions of 'untouchables' to Islam or Christianity did not make any difference to their status at the local level because the dominant upper-caste Hindus continued to treat them as before (see Desai 1976). In the case of Punjab, however, not only did a

section of Dalits follow Sikhism but a large majority of the dominant groups in rural Punjab are also Sikhs, for whom the practice of caste has no religious justification.

Unlike Hinduism, the Sikh religion decries caste. Its proponents often claim that one of the fundamental missions of its founders was to get rid of caste-based divisions and give dignity to everyone. However, this ideological opposition of caste by the Sikh Gurus could not eradicate caste from the local society. The locally-powerful material base of the caste system, the structure of agrarian relations where such divisions had become important functional prerequisites for the working of the agrarian economy, remained relatively unaltered.

Over the last century or so, the region has also witnessed some powerful movements of the Dalit communities for autonomy, with some degree of success, at least in some parts of the state (see chapter 6, this volume). Agrarian changes, following the success of Green Revolution technology in the region, and the growth of urban economy, have also prepared the ground for social change. It is in this context of change that the present study was conceived.

Untouchability in Rural Punjab

Untouchability is practised through a large number of minute and not-so-minute rules about dos and don'ts prescribed for different categories of people in different social settings. There are rules about what sorts of food or drink could be accepted by a person and from what castes. Segregation of different caste-groups into different settlements was also a mark of civic privileges and disabilities. Each caste was expected to consider a particular occupation as its legitimate calling. The prevailing ideology of caste discouraged individual choice of occupation, even employing coercion, if required, as a means to keep the system of occupational hierarchy going.

These traditional practices had indeed begun to change quite some time back. In his classic study of Gujarat villages, I. P. Desai observed a process of modernization and development in the 1970s and argued that a new 'public sphere' of social interaction had emerged where the practice of untouchability was quite low. The norm of caste and untouchability was beginning to be violated in the economic as well as occupational spheres. This included seating arrangements in schools, travelling in buses and

the postal services. However, when it came to traditional relations that included the domestic and religious life of people, the practice of untouchability survived (Desai 1976).

Nearly 25 years later, when Ghanshyam Shah visited the villages of Gujarat again with a similar set of questions, he found the process of change had progressed further. With the exception of admission of 'untouchables' into temples, houses of the upper castes and access to barbers' services, the practice had significantly declined. However, this change, as Desai had also underlined, was largely confined to the 'public sphere'. Untouchability continued to be practised, albeit with lesser intensity, in other spheres of life. These included access to a common source of water (20 per cent), entry to shops (20 per cent), working together with upper-caste workers on the farm (25 per cent), and seating arrangements in the panchayats (26 per cent) (Shah 2000).

Extending the classification used by Desai and Shah, the field data being presented here is divided into three sub-categories. The first section presents case studies and perceptions relating to the practice of untouchability/discrimination in, what can loosely be called, the 'private sphere' and the sphere of those relations that were traditionally governed by the framework of 'jajmani' relations. The second section focuses on the nature of changes and continuities in everyday social and economic life of rural Punjab. These include those spheres of relations that were not necessarily governed by the caste system but were influenced by the values of untouchability and hierarchy. The third category relates to modern institutions, which have traditionally not been a part of the rural life and are, at least in principle, outside the domain of caste.

Social Ecology of the Village

As per the traditional norms governing life in rural Punjab, Dalit settlements were to be located on the side where the sun sets (*lahindey-passe*, as it is called in Punjabi). This norm was perhaps never strictly followed. There were several villages where Dalit houses were traditionally not on the west. However, in a majority of the villages, Dalit houses were indeed constructed on the outskirts of the main village settlement.

Rural Punjab has witnessed some interesting and important changes in its housing patterns, particularly since the 1980s. The growing population and a continual expansion of residential areas

have, to some extent, diluted the old settlement structure of the village. As the newly prosperous upper castes make newer and bigger houses on the peripheries of the village, Dalit settlements do not remain as isolated as before. In fact, all categories of villagers have constructed new houses on the peripheries of the village, some in close proximity to Dalit houses.

There were also some interesting cases where upwardly mobile Dalits had purchased houses in upper-caste localities from those who had left the village for towns or had immigrated to a Western county. This was particularly visible in the Doaba region of Punjab. Of the 51 villages studied, as many as four villages had some manner of 'mixed housing' (three in Doaba and one in Malwa region). Interestingly, there was little resistance from the neighbouring upper-caste residents to Dalits buying houses in their localities.

Strangely enough, while the local processes of change seemed to be decreasing Dalit isolation in the residential patterns of rural Punjab, the state policy seemed to be reinforcing it. Providing housing to Dalits has been an important component of developmental schemes meant for their upliftment. A good number of villages in Punjab have such schemes working, under which residential quarters were built for Dalits. Such schemes are obviously welcomed by their beneficiaries who otherwise find it hard to construct a house. However, most of these housing schemes were located at a distance from the village and meant exclusively for the Dalits, reinforcing their segregation from the main village. Being located at a distance, these settlements also lacked certain amenities that were accessible to those living within the village. Some did not even have working electricity connections. Or, in some cases where such amenities had been provided, the back-up service was quite unsatisfactory.

The housing structure directly influenced the daily life of different communities in the village. Segregated settlements imposed restrictions on social interactions. For example, Dalit children growing up in such settlements had no opportunity of playing with children of other castes. Interestingly, rural Punjab has otherwise witnessed some loosening of restriction over children of different caste communities playing together. Of the 51 villages studied, Dalit children played quite freely with children of the upper castes in more than half of the villages. However, such restrictions were still 'strictly observed' in as many as 15 villages.

Unclean Occupations

One of the most popular views of caste associates it with some kind of division of labour, whereby the 'low-status' and 'unclean occupations' are identified with specific caste communities and are performed exclusively by members of the group with which it is traditionally identified. These occupations 'polluted' those who performed them and they had no choice out of it. Tasks such as clearing of dead cattle or scavenging were to be carried out by a specific group as a calling of their caste. Given their numbers, in practice not all Dalits in rural Punjab would have ever been employed exclusively as per the traditional occupational hierarchy, although the 'polluting occupations' were indeed carried out particularly by members of the caste community with which they were identified. A large majority of them were employed in the rural agrarian economy and worked with dominant-caste cultivators.

Many radical changes have occurred in the caste–occupation matrix in rural Punjab. First of all, large majorities of Dalits have consciously dissociated themselves from their traditional occupations. Only a small number (from less than 5 to a maximum of 10 per cent) would still be involved in such occupations across different sub-regions of the state. There were also caste-wise variations. The Chamars (including Ad-Dharmis, Ravidasis and Ramdasis) have almost completely moved away from their traditional occupation of clearing and dealing with dead cattle. They have even begun to distance themselves from the agrarian economy and seek employment outside it that would not involve any relationship with the locally dominant caste.

Who then does the work that was traditionally done by the Dalits, namely, scavenging or picking up of dead cattle?

Interestingly, some of these occupations were no longer identified with any specific caste-group in rural Punjab. For example, picking up of dead cattle had become a completely commercialized enterprise. The village panchayat generally commissioned the work to an individual contractor, who could even be from another village or a nearby town. The contractor would typically employ a few workers (not necessarily local Dalits) who worked on the dead cattle in the village abattoirs. Birds and dogs eat up much of the meat. The skin and bones have a lucrative market. Most of those involved in this 'business' are quite well-off and are often seen with envy by others.

Several other occupations, identified with the jajmani system, have also become commercialized and formalized. For example, barbers, carpenters, blacksmiths, and potters all now have shops in the village, invariably close to the local bus station. We also observed a clear and conscious process of 'dissociation' of caste-groups from occupations that were considered 'polluting' and degrading. There was also a degree of acceptance in the larger community of the switch-over of occupations. For example, several Dalits, including the local Balmikis, had opened barber shops and were providing services to clients from a wide range of caste-groups. Similarly, as the traditional carpenter moved out to town, or abroad, some local Dalits had taken over the occupation. All such work was carried out outside the traditional framework of caste-based reciprocity, the old jajmani-type relations.

The only 'unclean occupation' where the caste–occupation association continued to be rather strong was that of scavenging. Almost all those involved with scavenging work were from the traditional caste that did the job in the past — the Balmikis and the Mazhabis. However, among them only a small number, often women, were fully employed in this work. Further, and perhaps more importantly, the relational framework was no longer the old system of jajmani. The cleaning of drains and toilets or sweeping of houses and streets was mostly done on purely commercial and formalized basis.

In most villages a scavenger was formally employed by the residents to clean their individual streets. The scavenger received a fixed sum of money on a monthly basis from each household on the street he/she cleaned. Interestingly, we also encountered cases where instead of working in the village of his/her residence, the scavengers preferred working in the neighbouring village. This was obviously done to avoid any element of familiarity and patronage of the traditional variety being invoked by the households they served.

As mentioned earlier, a large majority of Dalits in rural Punjab would have always been employed in agriculture, mostly as labourers. Some of them also worked on long-term basis, as attached labourers (locally called *sajhi*s or *siri*s) and share-croppers with cultivators who controlled substantial holdings. The big landowners all belonged to the locally dominant castes. With the growth of capitalist agriculture after the Green Revolution, the traditional

relations of attachment were formalized into annualized cash-wage contracts. But the Dalits never liked working as attached labourers because such arrangements institutionalized their dependence on the dominant-caste cultivators, which meant loss of freedom (Brass 1990; Jodhka 1994).

In the Doaba region where Dalit mobility has been more pronounced than elsewhere in the state, very few of the local Dalits worked as attached labourers with the dominant-caste farmers. Of the 13 villages we surveyed from the region, eight had no local Dalit working as attached labourer. However, in the Malwa region, several landless Dalit men continued to work as attached labourers. Of the 26 villages studied, 21 had Dalits working as attached labourers. However, here too dislike for attached labour was quite pronounced and there was a discernible trend towards its decline. Wherever they could afford to do so, Dalits had stopped working regularly on land under the dominant-caste farmers and tried to diversify into other occupations. In the villages of Doaba, for example, we were frequently told that much of the labour work was done by migrants and that the local Dalits no longer worked on land. They only performed seasonal labour. During the rest of the year, they preferred going to the town for work or brought work home. The most common work that Dalits of Doaba did while living in the village was rope-weaving. These ropes were woven for the urban markets and sold through a middleman. Some Dalit women also stitched footballs for the sports goods industry in the neighbouring town of Jalandhar.

Entry into Houses of the Upper Castes

Apart from identification of social groups with certain occupations, the practice of untouchability also imposed restrictions on social interaction. Those belonging to the 'untouchable' caste were restricted from entering certain areas of the village and houses of the 'upper' castes. This too has changed quite significantly in rural Punjab. There were virtually no cases of overt discrimination/untouchability or any kind of restrictions on Dalits' access to common public space in the village. None of the respondents reported any kind of restrictions being imposed on Dalits on their passing through the roads and streets of the village. Dalits could also take their processions through the village streets and walk with fanfare at the time of marriages or other festive occasions.

Similarly, there were no restrictions on their wearing goggles or new clothes and shoes. They could also walk through the streets with an umbrella and ride bicycles. In fact some of them also owned motorcycles and scooters and no restrictions were imposed on their using these vehicles.

Not only were there any limitations on Dalit access to the streets in rural Punjab, a large majority of our Dalit respondents reported that they could also enter the houses of local upper castes, when required. Merely 1 per cent of the 'upper'-caste respondents felt that untouchability was actively observed with regard to Dalits entering their houses (see Table 1.1).

Table 1.1
Perceptions on Dalits' Entry into the Houses of Upper Castes

Categories	*Untouchability Not Practised*	*Practised*	*Not Overtly*	*Total*
Scheduled Castes	426 (87.5)	4 (0.8)	57 (11.7)	487 (100)
Backward Castes	91 (96.8)	2 (2.1)	1 (1.0)	94 (100)
Upper Castes	98 (96.2)	1 (1.0)	3 (2.9)	102 (100)
Total	615 (90.04)	7 (1.02)	58 (8.49)	683 (100)

Source: All tables in this chapter are based on primary studies conducted by the author.
Note: Figures in parentheses indicate percentages in all tables.

The economic prosperity infused by the success of Green Revolution technology had also changed the lifestyle of the dominant-caste big farmers. Even when most of them continued to live in the village, they had all the modern amenities in their homes. Their children went to study in the towns and women desired the luxuries of urban living. Many of these households had begun to employ the local Dalit women to help with domestic chores. Almost every village of Punjab we surveyed had at least 10 to 12 Dalit women who worked as domestic help. These women did all kinds of domestic work, from sweeping and swabbing to washing of clothes, and in some cases, even washing the kitchen utensils. As is the case with such working women in towns, they would invariably work in several houses and typically be paid a fixed sum by each household, along with some occasional 'gifts'.

However, notwithstanding these changes, the ideas of pollution and untouchability had not completely gone away. For example,

even though the upper-caste farmers or their women no longer minded Dalit women entering their houses or even the kitchens, only some Dalit women were considered fit for such jobs. Those who cleaned the cattle-shed or did scavenging jobs would rarely be considered 'suitable' for domestic help. Similarly, in some households, while they were asked to sweep and swab the house and clean the toilets, the upper-caste women did not let them enter the kitchen. There were also a few cases where the utensils used for serving them food were kept apart.

Untouchability and Drinking Water Sources

Denial to the 'common' sources of drinking water to the untouchable communities has been a textbook example of untouchability. In most places, there were strict divisions of the sources of drinking water across caste communities. While all non-Dalit castes could access 'common' water sources, the untouchables could do so only from their own wells and ponds.

Much has changed in rural Punjab with regard to access to drinking water as well. The old-style wells were no longer the primary source of drinking water anywhere in rural Punjab. In many villages taps were installed under government-funded programmes. In others, hand-pumps had replaced open wells. This change seemed to have completely transformed the attitude of the rural population towards drinking water as a potential arena of caste prejudice. Though taps and hand-pumps were still different for different communities, the restrictions had loosened up quite significantly. For example, while more than 60 per cent of the total respondents stated that the two categories of castes still had separate sources of drinking water, nearly 84 per cent agreed that there was no prohibition on Dalits taking water from the sources used by the upper castes (83.2 per cent of Dalits and 89 per cent of the backward castes respondents stated so).

However, it may be useful to add here that though Dalits could and did access water from the upper-caste sources quite regularly, the frequency of upper castes taking water from the sources used by Dalits was much lesser, though not completely absent. Only 48 per cent of the respondents stated that such a practice could be observed in their village.

Religious Places and Caste

Even more critical than water has been the restriction on the Dalit communities from entering Hindu places of worship. Brahmanical Hinduism imposed strict restrictions on Dalits participation in the Hindu religious life. Dalits were also denied access to education that could enable them to read the Hindu scriptures. Rural Punjab obviously does not fit into this framework. As mentioned earlier, followers of Sikhism constitute nearly 80 to 90 per cent of the rural population. Even those who identified themselves as Hindus in the rural Punjab invariably practised Sikh rituals and visited Sikh gurdwaras. For example, the Ad-Dharmis of the Doaba region are mostly enumerated as Hindus, while in practice a good majority of them, in 2001, worshipped the Sikh holy book *Guru Granth Sahib*.

Historically also, Sikh Dalits have actively worked as religious functionaries, the *granthi*s, in Sikh gurdwaras. Some of them have also risen to positions of power and influence and have become the head granthis and *jathedar*s at the Golden Temple and Akal Takht — two of the most important seats of the Sikh religion.

However, notwithstanding this significant difference that Sikhism has made to the practice of religion in rural Punjab, caste prejudice had not completely disappeared from the everyday religious life of its people. There was enough evidence to suggest that some members of the locally dominant castes had strong prejudice against the Dalits. While as such there were no restrictions on Dalits entering the Sikh shrines in Punjab, there were several cases where Dalits felt that they were discouraged and discriminated against by the 'upper'-caste Sikhs who controlled the village gurdwaras.

As is evident from Table 1.2, nearly 80 per cent of all respondents felt that there were no restrictions on Dalits entering religious

Table 1.2
Perceptions on Dalits' Entry into Gurdwaras of the Upper-Castes

Categories	*No Practice of Untouchability*	*Some Practice*	*Regular Practice*	*Not Overtly*	*Total*
Scheduled Castes	370 (76.0)	19 (3.9)	81 (16.7)	17 (3.5)	487 (100)
Backward Castes	78 (83.0)	3 (3.2)	7 (7.4)	6 (6.4)	94 (100)
Upper Castes	91 (89.2)	1 (1.0)	8 (7.9)	2 (2.0)	102 (100)
Total	539 (78.9)	23 (3.4)	96 (14.1)	25 (3.6)	683 (100)

places built and run by the upper castes in rural Punjab. But there were some interesting caste-wise variations in their response to the question. While 89 per cent of the upper-caste respondents claimed that Dalits could freely enter all village gurdwaras, a smaller number of Dalit respondents felt so (76 per cent). However, as is evident, a large majority of Dalit respondents too felt that they did not experience any denial while visiting the dominant caste-controlled gurdwaras.

However, a closer examination revealed that the situation was a little more complex than what is evident from the numbers presented in the Table. Discussions with individual Dalits and group interviews in different villages revealed that though they were never physically stopped from entering gurdwaras built and managed by the local upper/dominant castes, the presence and quantum of discrimination was higher.

During a group discussion with Dalits in a village of Firozepur district, we were told that the upper-caste Sikhs did not really appreciate the Dalits' participation in the daily religious activities of the local gurdwara. Through subtle and not-so-subtle messages they were told to stay away. Their children were asked to come for *langar* (food served in gurdwaras) after everyone else had finished eating. In another village in Mukatsar district, Dalits reported that they were often asked to sit in separate queues for the langar. While the gurdwara management formally invited all other villagers on special occasions and religious festivities, Dalits were not even informed about these events. A frequent complaint was related to their not being allowed to participate in the cooking and serving of langar.

In another village of the same district, those from the Mazhabi and Megh communities (the local Dalit castes) reported that they were often told to sit outside the main door of the gurdwara and were served langar only after the upper-caste Jats had finished eating. The Dalits in the village had, for this reason, stopped going to the local gurdwara. Even on special occasions, such as religious festivals, they preferred to stay at home and have their private celebrations. In another case, a few Dalit women reported that the upper-caste boys did not treat them well while serving langar. For instance, they avoided touching their plates while serving them food.

Table 1.3
Region-wise Number of Villages with Separate Dalit Gurdwaras

Region	*None*	*One*	*Two*	*Total*
Majha	1	11	–	12
Doaba	3	09	1	13
Malva	6	17	2	26
Total	10	37	3	51

Dalits almost always built separate gurdwaras to assert their autonomy and avoid the humiliation they felt while visiting the upper/dominant caste-controlled gurdwaras (see Table 1.3). For example, the Mazhabis of a village in Gurdaspur district told us:

> Many of us are devout Sikhs. We regularly visited the village gurdwara but could never sit beside the upper/dominant caste Jats. Rarely would they allow us to distribute langar or *prasad*. As soon as we could mobilize some cash, we constructed our own gurdwara.

In a village near the town of Phagwara in Kapurthala district, a Dalit respondent told us:

> There was only one gurdwara in our village. The local Jats always thought that it was their personal property because they were the ones who had financed its building. We also visited the gurdwara but they never liked it. They would not allow us to cook langar. So we built our own gurdwara in our own *basti* the moment we had the resources to do so.

In another village of Nawanshahr district, Dalit respondents told us how they felt offended and insulted when some members of the dominant castes stopped their women from cooking langar in the village gurdwara. Their first response was to completely stop going to the gurdwara. Eventually they were able to build a small gurdwara of their own.

Interestingly, the inner structure of Dalit gurdwaras also reflects their attempts to assert their religious autonomy. Apart from the Sikh holy book, the Dalit gurdwaras, particularly those built by the Ad-Dharmis and other categories of Chamars, would invariably also have a picture of Guru Ravidas, and increasingly also of B. R. Ambedkar. In one of the villages of Doaba, the Ad-Dharmi gurdwara also displayed a picture of Sant Valmiki, presumably to

encourage the local Mazhabis and Balmikis to also identify with the gurdwara and extend solidarity across Dalit communities. Those who managed these gurdwaras were often politically active with some Dalit group or political party.

Construction of separate gurdwaras by Dalits have, however, rarely been met with any kind of resistance either from the dominant castes in the village or from the religious establishment of Sikh community. However, our Dalit respondents complained that the members of the dominant and upper castes did not have any reverence for their gurdwaras. Even when the Dalit gurdwara was closer to the residence of an upper/dominant caste person, s/he would always visit the dominant caste-built gurdwara. Similarly, when an upper-caste family in the village needed to bring the Sikh holy book home for some special occasion, rarely would they take it from a Dalit gurdwara, even when it was convenient to do so.

However, this did not happen everywhere. In some villages Dalit respondents told us that though they had constructed separate gurdwaras for asserting their autonomy, many from the upper castes had recently started visiting these gurdwaras as well. Hence, they too now visited the gurdwaras of the upper castes and no longer felt any sense of discrimination or humiliation.

Untouchability in Hindu Religious Institutions

Though there are very few Hindu temples in the villages of Punjab, their relationship with Dalits was very different from that of the gurdwaras. Unlike the gurdwaras, the Hindu temples were generally exclusive places of the local upper caste. They appeared to be discriminating against the Dalits quite openly. When we asked a Dalit woman in a village near Patiala about her having ever visited the Shiv Temple located in the village, she was almost offended: 'They do not even like our going anywhere near the compound wall of their temple. Why would we be going there?'

Another Dalit respondent told us how a few Dalit children who had casually entered the temple compound were abused and chased out.

In another village of the same district, we were told about a Hindu saint called Moni Baba who performed a *yajna* every year in the month of December. This yajna was supposed to be for the general welfare of the village. At that time the Baba also organized

a *bhandara* (a kind of langar where food is served free to the devotees) for a couple of days. He obviously did it with the donations given to him by the local villagers. However, when a local Dalit from Mazhabi caste went with 10 litres of milk as donation for the bhandara, it was not accepted because of his caste background and he was asked to take it back. Moreover, we were told that caste distinctions were also observed quite openly during the bhandara. The building where the food was served was divided into two sections with a separating wall, one for the upper castes and the other for the Dalits.

However, in most parts of Punjab, Dalits had distanced themselves from brahmanical Hinduism and had either moved to Sikhism or begun to worship saints and gurus belonging to different Dalit communities.

Another related area of division between upper castes and Dalits was with regard to cremation grounds. Most of the villages have conventionally had separate cremation grounds for upper castes and Dalits. This was the case with two-thirds of our study villages as well. Even when the village had only one cremation ground used by everyone for cremating their dead, the upper caste generally disliked its use by Dalits. Interestingly, Dalits too preferred to have their own separate cremation grounds. In fact there were several cases where Dalits complained about not having a cremation ground of their own because the village land used for cremating their dead had been encroached upon by some dominant-caste landowners.

Caste in Everyday Social and Economic Life

Development and prosperity have significantly expanded the local markets in rural Punjab. A typical village in the region has a large number of shops, ranging from 20 to 50 and more, depending upon the size of the village. These rural markets were mostly free of caste prejudice, though not always. Dalits could easily enter the shops owned by the 'upper' castes and buy whatever they wanted. Some Dalits too had opened shops in the villages; however, these were either located in Dalit localities or on the main road, near the village bus shelter, where there was a certain degree of anonymity. Though their location significantly influenced their patronage, Dalit shops were visited exclusively by their own fellow castes.

Those from the dominant/upper castes also occasionally visited these shops. However, some Dalit shopkeepers complained that the upper/dominant castes visited their shops only when they had no choice. For example, one of our study villages in the Malwa region had a single flour mill (*atta chakki*), which was being run by a Dalit. Though a majority of the villagers got their wheat milled at this chakki, there were some who went to the chakki in the neighbouring village because of caste prejudice.

Caste prejudice was quite weak in the local labour market. The local Dalits were hired by everyone for manual labour in their farms and for house construction. It was only when an upper-caste person had to work as a labourer alongside a Dalit that caste mattered, particularly when working together also required closed interaction and physical touch. Interestingly, more among the upper-caste respondents (26 per cent) than Dalits (15 per cent) reported in affirmation about the presence of caste prejudice and untouchability in such a situation.

Caste prejudice and untouchability were most pronounced at the village-level festivals and feasts. This kind of discrimination took various forms. Perhaps the most obvious occasion was during the serving of food. As with the langar in dominant-caste gurdwaras, Dalits would often be asked to wait until everyone else had eaten and left. Though not so pronounced, there were also reports of separate utensils being used for Dalits during village feasts. We were told about a wedding in the house of a dominant-caste villager in Verka block of Amritsar district where Dalits were invited but served on separate tables, meant only for them. The presence of caste prejudice in such situations was also widely acknowledged (see Table 1.4). Dalits could rarely participate in village festivals on equal terms unless they themselves were the organizers of such festivities.

Table 1.4
Perception on Practice of Untouchability during Village Festivals

Categories	*Not Practised*	*Practised*	*Some Experience*	*Not Overtly*	*Total*
Scheduled Castes	238 (48.9)	91 (18.7)	108 (22.2)	50 (10.3)	487 (100)
Backward Castes	51 (54.3)	7 (7.4)	26 (27.6)	10 (10.7)	94 (100)
Upper Castes	38 (37.3)	38 (37.3)	12 (11.7)	14 (13.7)	102 (100)
Total	327 (47.87)	136 (19.91)	146 (21.37)	74 (10.83)	683 (100)

Even otherwise, though restrictions on Dalits entering the houses of upper castes had been considerably relaxed, limitations on eating together continued. In any case, Dalits and upper-caste villagers did not interact so closely that they would visit each other's houses for lunches or dinners on a regular basis.

Untouchability in Modern/Secular Institutions

Though caste prejudice is likely to be more pronounced in the private sphere and the traditional social/economic life, the so-called modern institutions are also not free from it. The modern educational systems are a good example of this.

Perhaps the most critical of these institutions are the local-level schools.

The rural schools did not seem to directly discriminate against Dalit children. In most places they were not made to sit separately and could drink water from the common source. However, not everything was fine with these institutions. As shown in Table 1.5, there were more than 20 per cent cases where caste distinctions were observed, overtly or subtly. Dalit teachers in the schools too felt that they were not completely accepted by their upper-caste colleagues. They therefore tended to interact more with other Dalit teachers.

Table 1.5
Perceptions on Upper-Caste and Dalit Students Sitting and Eating Together, Drinking Water from Common Source in Schools

Categories	*No Practice of Untouchability*	*Untouchability Practiced*	*Some Practice*	*No Response*	*Total*
Scheduled Castes	389 (79.9)	61 (12.95)	30 (6.1)	7 (1.4)	487 (100)
Backward Castes	58 (61.7)	16 (17.0)	15 (16.0)	5 (5.3)	94 (100)
Upper Castes	67 (65.7)	33 (32.4)	2 (2.0)	–	102 (100)
Total	514 (75.25)	110 (16.11)	47 (6.88)	12 (1.75)	683 (100)

More than untouchability, the problem was with the quality of education being imparted in the government-run village schools, where a large majority of Dalit children went to study. The number of teachers working in these schools was almost always lesser

than required. Even those employed did not take their work very seriously. Rarely did the rural schools have enough infrastructures, such as rooms, laboratories and furniture required for proper functioning of the school. As a consequence, the more ambitious and well-to-do parents had started sending their children to urban schools. One could also notice a mushrooming of private schools within the villages, mostly at the nursery and primary level. The private schools claimed to teach in 'English medium' and were far more expensive, where only relatively prosperous parents could send their children. This invariably meant that it was the upper castes who could afford to send their children to these schools.

The withdrawal of the influential upper castes from the government-run schools has had a further negative impact on the quality of education in these schools. Since the upper castes did not send their children to the government-run schools, there was little interest among them to demand for improvement in standards of teaching and infrastructure. In some of the villages, the government schools had begun to be called 'Dalit' or 'Harijan' schools. In a village of Amritsar district, a Dalit student of class VIII told us that out of 37 children in his class only four were from the Jat community. Rest were all Dalits or from the other 'backward castes'. In the neighbouring district of Gurdaspur, the headmistress of a government-run primary school had a similar story to tell. Of the 108 students in her school, only around 15 belonged to the landowning Jat community. The rest were mostly Dalits. This village also had an *anganwadi* (a crèche), which had around 70 young children. They all came from Dalit and backward-caste families.

Dalits in rural Punjab experienced no untouchability while accessing services of post office and local cooperatives. However, they complained about the functioning of the public distribution system and the health care centres. In a village of Patiala district, several Dalit respondents informed us that the upper-caste Rajputs had hijacked the subsidies as they had more 'yellow cards', certifying their status as 'below poverty line families', than the poor Dalits. Some of them also felt that the staff at the local health care centre mistreated them because of their caste. Even some of the upper-caste respondents told us that the health care staff treated the Dalits 'badly'.

Dalits and the Panchayats

The introduction of local-level political institutions, based on the principle of universal adult franchise and representative democracy, has had far-reaching implications for the rural power structure. Like other institutions of Indian political democracy, panchayats too have seats reserved for the Scheduled Castes, both at the level of ordinary membership and as *sarpanch*es (presidents). Given their population in Punjab countryside, some Dalits could get elected as sarpanches even on 'open' seats. Of the 51 villages surveyed, as many as 17 had a Dalit sarpanch and another six had them in the past. Of the 17 Dalit sarpanches currently in office, nearly half were women. They could become sarpanches primarily because the seats were specifically reserved for Dalit women. In the rest of the 28 villages, no Dalit had ever been a sarpanch. The number of Dalit *panch*es (ordinary members) varied from one to five in each panchayat.

This democratization of the local political institutions had made a lot of difference to the Dalits. It had given them a sense of dignity and the power to bargain. Universal adult franchise had forced the upper/dominant castes to recognize the value of Dalit votes. Their being able to get elected as sarpanches also forced the members of the upper castes to renegotiate their relationship with them. Dalits had become an important ally for everyone involved in the factional politics of the village.

However, despite these radical changes in the rural power structure, caste-related structures of domination had not completely disappeared from everyday life in the Punjabi village. Nor have the Dalits become empowered everywhere. For example, some Dalits still felt the compulsion to stand up in the presence of an elderly upper-caste person. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the data presented in Table 1.6 was the caste-wise variation in responses to this question. While 14 per cent of the Dalits and 13 per cent of the backward-caste respondents reported that such a practice existed, as many as 29.4 per cent of the upper/dominant-caste respondents answered positively to the question. Clearly, while the dominant castes would still wish that such a practice continued, the old ideology of patronage and loyalty appeared to have been largely eroded from the minds of the Dalits and 'backward' castes.

Dalits were also not treated equally in the panchayat buildings. Nearly 43 per cent of the Dalit respondents felt that the dominant

Table 1.6
Perceptions on Dalits' Compulsion to Stand up in Presence of an Upper-Caste Person

Categories	*Non-Compulsion*	*Feel Compulsion*	*Only Occasionally*	*Total*
Scheduled Castes	408 (83.8)	68 (14.0)	11 (3.30	487 (100)
Backward Castes	77 (81.9)	13 (13.8)	4 (4.3)	94 (100)
Upper Castes	72 (70.6)	30 (29.4)	–	102 (100)
Total	557 (81.55)	111 (16.25)	15 (2.19)	683 (100)

castes did not welcome their going to these buildings, which were seen as upper-caste community centres. In many villages Dalits had built separate community centres of their own. Though, to a significantly lesser degree, some discrimination was also practised in the seating arrangements during panchayat meetings. In some villages, Dalit members were reportedly made to sit separately, away from the upper-caste members. However, virtually no untouchability was practised during the election process. For example, there were no separate queues for Dalits at the voting booths in any elections.

Group discussions with Dalits and some personal interviews with Dalit sarpanches further reinforced the point that caste continued to be an important player in the rural power structure. Though Dalits could become sarpanches, power in the village still lay with the dominant castes. In most cases Dalits could contest and win elections to the village panchayats only because they had the support and patronage of some members of the locally dominant caste. Even in posts reserved for the Scheduled Castes, the dominant castes took active interest in selecting viable candidates for the contest. One of the Dalit respondents told us that in his village 'the Jats decide who amongst the Dalits should contest. Others are not allowed to contest'.

In another village of Amritsar district where the sarpanch post was reserved for Scheduled Castes, a Dalit man became the sarpanch because the local Jats did not allow any other Dalit to contest the elections. Reportedly, some influential members of the Jat community got their nomination forms rejected with connivance of the officials. They wanted him as sarpanch because they could control him. Such sarpanches obviously could do nothing for the welfare of their own communities. By the time their term got over, they became so unpopular with the members of their

own caste that even if they wished to pursue a political career they would have to depend almost solely on their patron Jats. In another village of Gurdaspur district, a Dalit woman sarpanch had been suspended because of a vicious campaign launched against her by a few Jats and Dalits who were opposed to her. They claimed that she had appropriated the panchayat money for personal gain. In place of her a Jat, an ordinary member of the panchayat, got himself appointed as sarpanch even when the seat in the village was reserved for a Scheduled Caste woman.

Dalit respondents also reported that the elected sarpanches from their communities rarely commanded the respect due to them. A group of Dalits told us that in a village in the Nawanshahr district, the village sarpanch was not even informed about the visit of the union sports minister to a sports meet in his village simply because the sarpanch was a Dalit and the event was organized by the Jats. In the village panchayat meetings also their opinions did not carry as much weight; opinions of ordinary members from the dominant caste tended to be more important than those of the Dalit sarpanch. In contrast, if the sarpanch was from the dominant community, ordinary members from Dalit communities were not even allowed to speak. The local Jats also disliked visiting the house of a Dalit sarpanch, unless it was for some very urgent need of their own. In most villages, our upper-caste respondents openly criticized and resented the reservations for Dalits.

Conclusions

Caste has often been seen as a unified system that works in more or less similar ways everywhere in India. The popular discourses, as also 'mainstream' sociological writings, tend to emphasize the underlying cultural/ideological consensus across castes on its governing normative order (Dumont 1998; Moffatt 1979). Despite many criticisms of these theories and the available empirical evidence that contradicts such claims, theories such as that of Louis Dumont continue to dominate the discourses on caste.

Whatever might have been the case in the past or elsewhere in the subcontinent, it certainly does not apply to contemporary rural Punjab. Dalits of Punjab see no virtues in the hierarchical structures of caste. Like everyone else, they all aspire for better material conditions, basic rights and a life of dignity. As elsewhere,

for a large majority of rural Dalits of Punjab, caste has only been a disabling structure. They were not only treated as untouchables and made to live in poor conditions in separate settlements but were also not allowed to own agricultural lands — the colonial state had also introduced legislations that disallowed them from even buying agricultural land.

Thanks to their political and social mobilizations and the processes of economic change, the old relations of dependency have significantly weakened over the last century or so. They also encounter much lesser untouchability in their everyday life. Their investments in symbolic resources for autonomy and a life of dignity have significantly changed the inter-caste relations in some pockets of the state. As I have suggested in the discussion earlier, these changes in the institution of caste and practice of untouchability could perhaps be captured through categories of 'dissociation', 'distancing' and 'autonomy'. These have also been used as strategies of social and cultural assertion by the Dalits in rural Punjab. With a near-complete decline of jajmani relations, the traditional association of castes with certain specific occupations does not seem to hold good for rural Punjab any longer. Some of the traditional 'unclean' occupations have become commercialized. Even when some of them were still engaged in their traditional occupations, they no longer worked in the framework of jajmani ties.

Perhaps more than the idea of pollution, the subordination of Dalits in rural Punjab was institutionalized through the prevailing structures of agrarian relations. Being landless, they had to almost completely depend on the landowning castes for employment and other economic needs. While working on land continued to be the most important source of employment for a large majority of them, they had also, and quite consciously, begun to move away from agricultural labour. Their attempts at distancing from the local agrarian economy were perhaps more because of their acute dislike of the dependency relationship with the farmer than for the nature of work itself.

However, such a distancing is possible only where alternative sources of employment become available. The opening of the village economy and its growing linkage to towns has made it possible for them to look out for other sources of employment, and many of them have been doing precisely that. However, it is not an easily

available option to all. As Lynch had observed, under conditions of change caste does not necessarily disintegrate into some other type of social group (Lynch 1969: 203).

Like all human beings, the Dalits of Punjab want to live a life of dignity and self-respect. In a caste-divided society, one way of doing this is to secede from the local village community and develop one's own autonomous cultural resources. The traditional Hindu social order prohibited them from acquiring such resources. They were not allowed entry into temples and centres of learning. The Sikh religion does not advocate discrimination against any caste or creed. However, in practice, Sikhs belonging to the landowning dominant castes have not shed all their prejudices against the Dalits. Wherever possible, therefore, the Dalits of Punjab have tried to construct their own gurdwaras and other local-level institutions in order to attain a certain degree of cultural autonomy from the dominant castes.

However, despite significant changes in the everyday life of rural Punjab, caste has neither disappeared nor has it been forgotten. These changes have also not taken place with the same intensity everywhere in the state. Even when the older form of untouchability and notions of pollution become weaker, caste-based prejudice against Dalits continues, and, in some instances, could even become stronger and manifest itself in violence against Dalits. I discuss some case studies of Dalit assertion and caste atrocities in the next chapter.

II

Atrocities and Resistance

Dalit Assertions for Citizenship

The old patterns of caste-based rural hierarchies have weakened considerably over the past four or five decades. Though the extent of change varies across different regions of India, it has happened everywhere. The experience of caste and its manifestations in everyday life are significantly different today when compared to what they used to be three or four decades back. However, even though it has undergone significant changes, the institution of caste is not dying or fading away. Perhaps the most important aspect of caste today is its role in the reproduction of economic inequalities and social exclusions. This waning of ideas of hierarchy with persisting material and symbolic inequalities has heightened the levels of friction in social relations among different caste groups. While those located on the margins of traditional hierarchies have begun to expect and demand a life of dignity and equal share in the social and political life of the nation, those who have traditionally occupied positions of dominance resist giving up their privileges and grudge the growing claims for equal participation from below. As a consequence, cases of violence and atrocities committed on Dalits by the traditionally dominant and neo-dominant castes have increased (Béteille 2000b; Mendelsohn and Vicziany 1998; Shah 2000, 2001).

As discussed in the previous chapter, many among the ex-untouchable communities have either consciously moved out of the caste-based economy, or caste-based occupations have simply been made redundant by the growth of capitalism and markets. However, in many cases, the locally dominant castes still insist on the ex-untouchables observing caste boundaries. Assertion by the historically marginalized castes is often seen as transgression of traditional culture and, at times, results in violent attacks on them. One of the 'old' strategies used by the rural dominant groups to

deal with Dalit assertion has been to socially boycott a Dalit caste-group or, sometimes, the entire population of ex-untouchables in the village. In most regions of India, the ex-untouchables have been nearly completely landless and dependent on the dominant-caste communities for their economic sustenance. Social boycott means no employment within the village. They are also prohibited from using the village commons, which have traditionally been used by the poor for collecting fodder and firewood. They may even face hardships in sending children to the local schools. If the boycott continues for a long time, it has far-reaching negative consequences for the subordinate communities. Dalits also encounter brutal violent attacks, often directed against the entire community including those who have been non-assertive. Reports of such acts of 'extravagant revenge' have been increasing since the 1980s (Gorringe 2005; Mendelsohn and Vicziany 1998).

One of the first cases of brutal violence against the Dalits was reported in 1968 when 42 Dalits were burnt to death in a place called Kilvenmani in the Thanjavur district of Tamil Nadu, simply because they had dared to organize themselves to demand higher wages. They were all locked up in a hut and set on fire. In another incident, reported in 1977, four Dalit sharecroppers were killed by the landowner in Dharampura village of Bihar because they were unwilling to give up their legal claim over the land they had been cultivating for decades. Similar incidences of brutal violence have been reported from Karamchedu (1985) and Tsunduru (1991) in Andhra Pradesh and Khairlanji (2006) in Maharashtra (see Mohanty 2007; Teltumbde 2007, 2010). Besides these 'spectacular' cases, Dalits also encounter everyday violence of various kinds. These range from physical beating of individuals to rape, murder and mental torture of various kinds. Young Dalit men have also been victims of 'honour-killings' when they have married women from the dominant-caste communities.

This chapter presents five cases of caste-related violence and Dalit assertions. Taken from the north-western states of Punjab and Haryana, these cases are based on my own fieldwork in the two states, carried out in several intervals over a period of around six years, from 2001 to 2006.

All these cases were reported in the recent past, during the first decade of the 21st century, and, in a sense, unravel the emerging story of caste in contemporary India. As the case studies show,

though caste has always been about power and domination, the rapidly-changing economies and the gradual institutionalization of democratic political processes are setting in motion a process of assertion from below — for citizenship rights and contestations of the traditional modes of power hierarchies. These contestations often lead to violence and, occasionally, to renegotiation of the older structures of power relations.

However, violence against Dalits is not always a consequence of their growing assertion. As the first case study shows, it could also be a case of 'assertion from above' as a restatement of the old power relations.

Case Study 1

The Murder of Five Dalit Men in Dulina, Haryana

In a bizarre incidence of collective violence, five Dalit men were killed in cold blood near a village called Dulina, located at a distance of about five kilometres from the town of Jhajjar in Haryana, on the evening of 15 October 2002. Jhajjar is a mere 60 kilometres from the national capital, New Delhi. Since it happened so close to the capital, the incidence was soon reported in the national media and attracted attention of a wide variety of political formations and human rights groups. Even when it appeared like an obvious case of murder of innocent Dalit men, it was constructed differently by various actors.

Given its swift and wide politicization, even the Central Government of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), was forced to make a statement on the subject in the Indian Parliament. As reported by a correspondent of *The Hindu*, the official version presented the incident as a case of spontaneous violence — a response of an 'innocent crowd' to an 'emotive' issue, by 'mistake'. Responding to a question on the subject in the Indian Parliament, I. D. Swamy, the then Union Minister of State for Home, reported that the five Dalit men were killed 'because of the mistaken impression that a cow slaughter was being committed openly'.[1] The victims had presumably bought a

[1] 'Killing of Dalits at Jhajjar Not Deliberate', *The Hindu*, 10 December 2002.

dead cow from a neighbouring village called Farroukh Nagar and decided to skin it on the roadside near the Dulina police post. This was on the evening of the Hindu festival Dussehra. A group of men returning from Jhajjar after celebrating the festival spotted them working on the dead cow and presumed that they had caught a grazing cow from the roadside and slaughtered it for its skin. Since cow is a sacred animal for the Hindus, the group of men could not bear the sight of a cow being slaughtered. Offended by the scene and moved by their religious fervour, they beat them up and handed them over to the neighbouring police post.

However, as the official version stated, the news of cow slaughter spread in the area like wildfire. A large number of angry Hindu men gathered near the police post where the five men were kept in the lock-up. The unruly mob forcibly broke open the lock-up, took the five men out and lynched them. Though by this time senior officials of police and civil administration had arrived on the scene, they felt quite helpless in front of a large and agitated crowd and decided against using any force to save the five innocent Dalits.

Besides the Central and the State governments, this official version, as constructed by the local police was subscribed to even by the then Chairperson of the National Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, Bijay Sonkar Shastri. While he criticized the police for failing to protect the victims, he too insisted that the five men had indeed been killed by an angry mob. However, coloured by his communal mindset, the 'mistaken identity' for him was not that of the cow, whether it was already dead and was being skinned by the five Dalit men, or whether it was being slaughtered by them, but of the unfortunate victims. He reportedly said that the members of the mob, which according to him included several Dalits as well, mistook the five Dalit men for being Muslims.[2] By implication, had they indeed been Muslim butchers, it would have been a different matter.

However, the local Dalits did not agree with this story and vehemently contested the official version. For them the story had been constructed in this format to save the real culprits — the local police men.

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[2] 'Jhajjar Lynching was "Mistaken Identity"', *The Times of India*, 28 November 2002.

According to them, there was no cow involved, dead or alive, and the five Dalit men were not killed because they were skinning the animal. They pointed out that of the five men killed on 15 October included a Dalit trader, a driver and cleaner accompanying the vehicle and two local Dalit labourers. The trader had come from another town in Haryana, Karnal, where the local leather industry is concentrated, to fetch a consignment of cattle skin from Jhajjar. The trader regularly came to Jhajjar to purchase treated skin. The local Dalits argued that the policemen routinely stopped such vehicles passing through the area and demanded for a bribe. Normally the traders were prepared to pay 'a reasonable amount' of bribe to the police for letting them go.

However, on 15 October, the police demanded more money than what the trader usually paid to the police. When he refused to pay the higher bribe, the police took them to the local police station and brutally assaulted them. One of these five men could not take the beating and died in the police station. Given that the other four men had witnessed the 'murder', the police were naturally alarmed. It was then that the local policemen fabricated the story of cow slaughter and mobilized the mob. The other four men were handed over to the mob and eventually all five were killed.

The Dalits also provided evidence to support their version of the story. One of the local Dalit activists, who claimed to have visited the site of the murder soon after the incident, argued that though the window rods of the room in the police post where the five men were reportedly kept had been bent apart, there was no other sign of a mob having attacked the post. Even the flowerbed outside the police post was intact. It was only later, in order to destroy all evidence, that the police themselves ransacked the whole building. Surprisingly, there was no evidence of the police having tried to save the five men from the 'frenzied mob'. Some of the local Dalits claimed that the police were not only instrumental in spreading the rumour, they even participated in mobilizing the mob. They reportedly arranged a vehicle to fetch crowds from the nearby town and sent word to the neighbouring *gaushalla*s and *gurukul*s (cow shelters and residential schools run by local Hindu organizations) about the alleged cow slaughter.

Interestingly, both the versions of the story confirmed that the local police did not do anything to save the victims even when it

was present at the site of the incident. Given that the site of the incidence was only five kilometres away from the district headquarter of Jhajjar, it would not have been difficult for additional police force to arrive to deal with the 'unruly mob'. The two stories also confirm that the five Dalit men had indeed been killed in cold blood and members of the other communities, mostly from the locally dominant and upper castes, actively participated in the killing of the Dalits.

The local unit of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) was quick to issue a statement defending the killings. The VHP was not the only organization that defended, representatives of the local gaushallas and gurukuls also issued statements that amounted to saying that the life of a cow was more valuable than that of humans. They all demanded that no police action be taken against those involved in the killings. When the police rounded up a few villagers, the upper castes, particularly those from the locally dominant caste of Jats, held several protest meetings where the emotive significance of cow was repeatedly underlined. The killings were attributed yet again to 'mistaken identity'. They continually argued that the crowd of 'Hindus' was completely innocent because they not only believed that a cow had indeed been slaughtered, but also had no clue of the fact that those whom they lynched were Dalits and not Muslim butchers (*kasai*s). Mistaken identity was good enough alibi for the murder of five innocent men.

A section of the locally dominant Jat community mobilized themselves along caste lines to save the culprits. They called meetings of the traditional institution of 'Khap' panchayats to pressurize the state government against initiating any criminal action in the case. It strangely became a question of saving the Jat pride.

Even though a large number of national-level Dalit organizations protested against the killing of five Dalits, the incident did not generate any response from the local Dalits. When I visited the town of Jhajjar, the local Dalits were not particularly enthusiastic about discussing it. They feared for their own safety in a region where the power of the dominant caste had not yet been dented.

Pressured by the national media, the state chief minister had no choice but to order an official enquiry into the incident. Though the enquiry report did not question the validity of the 'official theory', it did find the local policemen guilty of 'being casual and

allowing the situation to go out of control'.[3] Meanwhile, reportedly on the insistence of the state chief minister, a member of the state legislative assembly (MLA) from a neighbouring constituency had also been working for a 'compromise'; surprisingly not with the Dalits but the dominant Jats who had been organizing in the name of 'cow protection' and demanding the release of the 26 villagers who had been arrested after the incident. They were also insistent that no legal action be initiated against any member of the 'mob'. Since the enquiry report put the entire burden on police officers, they did not have to worry too much. Finally, a compromise deal was reached whereby the agreement was that some villagers would be framed under various charges but none under any stringent Act. This was also a way of escaping the invocation of the Prevention of Atrocities against Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes Act, where the punishment could have been much more severe. Since the case had been widely politicized, it was not easy for the state government to completely avoid any legal action.

Case Study 2

Dalit Assertion in Talhan, Punjab

In the first week of June 2003, the local and national media reported, and prominently highlighted, a case of caste-related conflict from a village called Talhan, located at a distance of around 10 kilometres from the town of Jalandhar in the Doaba sub-region of Punjab. Relations between the landowning Jats and Ad-Dharmis in the village had been quite strained for some time. However, the conflict made news only when a group of Dalits organized a protest meeting in Jalandhar against the alleged atrocities being committed by the locally dominant Jats on the members of their community in Talhan. The protestors reportedly went out of control and the police opened fire in which one person was killed. The killing of a Dalit protestor further charged the atmosphere and a curfew had to be imposed in the area for a couple of days.

The trouble started when the Ad-Dharmis of Talhan village demanded representation in the management of a religious shrine

[3] Shubhadeep Choudhury, 'Dulina Guilty may Escape Major Penalty', *The Tribune*, 10 December 2002.

of Baba Nihal Singh in the village. As the story goes, Baba Nihal Singh was a Sikh from the artisan caste of Ramgarhia who lived in a neighbouring village called Dakoha. He was no saint or *fakir* while he was alive. He made and fixed wheel-like structures (locally known as *gandh*) in newly-dug wells used for drinking water. These wheels are placed at the base of the well to stabilize the flow of water from the underground spring into the well. Villagers of the area had deep faith in the skills of Nihal Singh. 'If he puts a wheel in the well, it would never dry up and its water would always be sweet', was the popular saying.

However, one day while fixing a wheel in a newly-dug well near Talhan, Nihal Singh died. For the common villagers this was an act of sacrifice for the village and consequently he was declared a martyr (*shahid*) and became a *Baba*. Out of respect for Baba Nihal Singh and in order to preserve his memory, they decided to make a commemorative structure, a *smadh*, at the site where his body was cremated in the village land near Talhan. A burning flame was also placed close to the smadh. Harnam Singh, who used to be an aide of Nihal Singh, took care of the smadh all his life and kept the flame burning. When Harnam Singh died, another smadh was built close to the earlier structure. Over the years, the two smadhs began to attract devotees who also brought offerings, mostly in cash.

These two small structures were slowly converted into a shrine. In due course another structure came up between the smadhs where the Sikh holy book Guru Granth was placed, which began to be read as per Sikh rituals. To mark the death anniversary of Baba Nihal Singh, his devotees from Talhan and the neighbouring villages started organizing an annual fair (*mela*) at the shrine.

With the growing prosperity of the region and of Baba's devotees, offerings grew. According to available estimates, the annual offerings at the shrine in the year 2003, when the conflict occurred, was between three to five crore of rupees (30 to 50 million rupees). As the shrine grew in stature, a committee of 'powerful' individuals from Talhan and neighbouring villages took over its management. They also controlled all the money and decided on how to spend it. Elections to the 13-member committee were held every year on the evening of *Maghi* (a local festival that falls in mid-January). However, not everyone from the village could participate in these elections.

The committee that managed the shrine and dealt with the finances was largely dominated by landowning Jats. In the year 2003, Talhan village had a population of around 5,000 persons, of which only 25 per cent were Jats while nearly 65 per cent belonged to the Ad-Dharmi caste. The rest were from other 'servicing castes', such as Ramgarhias, Lohars and Jheers. Except for the Ad-Dharmis there were no other Scheduled Castes in the village. Interestingly, though some other caste communities of the villages in the area had been given representation, no Ad-Dharmi was ever chosen for the managing committee.

The Ad-Dharmis were not only numerically predominant in the village, but over the last several decades they had also experienced a considerable degree of mobility and autonomy. Though they were originally very poor like most other Scheduled Castes, their long history of mobilizations and cultural awakening had transformed them into a rather well-to-do community. The Ad-Dharmis of the Doaba sub-region of Punjab hardly resemble their counterparts elsewhere in India. Though they did not mind being identified as Scheduled Castes, some of them disliked being called Dalits. Despite being landless, a large majority of them lived in well-built *pucca* houses and there would be hardly any Ad-Dharmi whose children did not go to school. Many of them had urban jobs and nearly one person from every alternate household was working abroad, either somewhere in the West or in the Gulf. The genesis of their prosperity goes back to the establishment of cantonment by the British colonial rulers in Jalandhar, in the second half of the 19th century after they established their rule in the region (for a more detailed discussion see chapter 6).

Social mobility and growing aspirations had changed the Ad-Dharmis from a subordinate caste-group to an assertive and independent community. Their influence in local-level politics had also grown. However, power equations had not seen much change at the local level. When they asked for representation in the management committee about five years back, the traditionally dominant Jats were in no mood to accommodate them. Not receiving any positive response from the Jats, the Ad-Dharmis decided to approach the court of law in 1999 with a petition challenging the manner in which elections to the managing committee were held. While the court did not give a clear verdict, it directed that

a few Ad-Dharmi observers be allowed to be present at the time of annual elections.

However, when they went to the shrine to attend the election meeting on 14 January 2003, with the order from the court, the Jats did not turn up. The elections were finally held on the evening of 19 January 2003. But, the Jats refused to concede to the demand of the Ad-Dharmis for representation in the committee. The Ad-Dharmis claimed that instead of abiding by the court order, the Jats called the police, who chased them away and beat them up when they insisted on fair representation. The Jats also issued directives to the non-Ad-Dharmi residents of the village to 'socially boycott' the Ad-Dharmis. The Jats stopped going to the shops run by Ad-Dharmis in the village and banned the poorer Ad-Dharmis from collecting fodder from their farms. They had to either bring fodder from the town or collect it from the neighbouring villages. Those who did not have private toilets at home were disallowed to use the village fields for defecation.

Though the Ad-Dharmis of Doaba did not depend much on the local agrarian economy for employment, their 'social boycott' was quite a shock for most of them. As a retired employee of the Punjab government, who lived in Talhan and led the mobilization by Ad-Dharmis, put it: 'The social boycott as such did not matter much to us, but our ego was terribly hurt'.

Similarly, a senior Dalit leader from Jalandhar was quite surprised and upset because such a thing had not happened in Doaba for quite some time. 'What has been the use of all our struggle, education and mobility if our people have to still face the humiliation of social boycott?'

It was in this despair and anger that the senior Dalit leader decided to get involved himself with this struggle of the Scheduled Castes of Talhan village. Along with the local members of the community, he formed a Dalit Action Committee (DAC) to spearhead the movement. They gave a representation to the Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes commission and organized *dharna*s (protests) in the town. A team of the Commission came to the village on 5 February and found that the 'social boycott' was indeed in place. Though they asked the local administration to intervene immediately, nothing happened. Meanwhile, the DAC continued its protests in Jalandhar town and in the village.

Jat members of the managing committee asserted that the Ad-Dharmis' demand was unfair. The committee had taken care of the shrine and its funds well, they argued. Over the past five years or so, they claimed, a large amount of money was spent from the budget of the shrine on construction of a hospital and a telephone exchange in the village. Money had also been spent on schools and streets. Even the Ad-Dharmis were given 2.5 lakh rupees for the construction of their gurdwara/Ravi Das mandir. As regards representation, the Jat members argued that since the smadh was a Sikh gurdwara, the Ad-Dharmis could not be on its management committee because 'they were anyway not proper Sikhs' and most of them were listed as Hindus.

The Ad-Dharmis on the other hand questioned such arguments. Smadh of Baba Nihal Singh was never a proper gurdwara. Further, they argued, if clean-shaven Jats could become members of the committee, why couldn't they? They too worshipped Guru Granth and conducted their ritual life as other Sikhs did.

The DAC continued its agitation until some officers in the district administration brought the two parties together and a compromise was worked out in the first week of June. The Jats agreed to include two Ad-Dharmis in the committee provided they became 'proper Sikhs' and wore turbans. The other terms of the agreement included a public apology by all parties involved, and lifting of the social boycott. However, two days after the agreement, members of the two castes clashed again during the annual mela at the local Mazhar. It was after this conflict that violence erupted in Jalandhar, resulting in police firing in which one person was killed. After nearly two weeks of tension, the two groups were once again brought back to the negotiating table by the administration and the same compromise was made effective. When the local Jats insisted that the Ad-Dharmis could join the managing committee if they were willing to become 'proper Sikhs', the Dalits conceded. Of the two members accepted to represent the Ad-Dharmis in the committee, one eventually agreed to get baptized into an Amritdhari Sikh.

I visited Talhan again around three weeks after the conflicting parties had settled the dispute and two Dalit men had been incorporated into the managing committee. When I asked one of the newly-appointed Ad-Dharmi members of the committee about

his possible role, he sounded cynical. 'What can the two of us do in a committee that has as many as 10 Jat members?'

Though he had already attended two meetings with the Jats, he did not feel that their being on the committee was going to radically alter the local power structure. When it came to power, the question was not that of caste alone. The Jats in Talhan and elsewhere in rural Punjab were not going to easily give up their 'old' position. However, their domination or 'sardari' would no longer go unquestioned.

Case Study 3

Caste and Drainage Rights

Situated at a distance of about four kilometres from Nawanshahr, Jethumajra is a typical village in Doaba. As in the rest of Punjab, much of the agricultural land here is owned and operated by the Jats. Compared to some other parts of Punjab, such as the Malwa region, landholdings are smaller in Doaba. Jethumajra had a total of around 200 households and a population of around 1,000 in the year 2003, when fieldwork was completed in the village. The two main castes here were the landowning Jats (66 households) and the Ad-Dharmis (80 households). Rest of the households belonged to the so-called 'backward castes' and other Scheduled Castes.

Although the Ad-Dharmis were the single-largest caste community in the village, the village sarpanch had almost always been from the Jat caste. Apart from the current incumbent, the last three sarpanches had been Jats. However, the Ad-Dharmis did have a representation in the village panchayat as ordinary members. As had been the case with much of Doaba, the Dalits of Jethumajra too had dissociated themselves from their traditional caste-related occupations and had been gradually moving away from the Jat-controlled agrarian economy of the village. Most of them were employed in non-farm occupations. Some wove ropes, which were sold in the urban market, some others went out of the village to work in brick kilns and some had small businesses in the neighbouring towns.

Their diversification into various non-farm activities had also brought them some amount of prosperity and economic independence. Greater economic independence meant greater monetary surpluses, which had been used to construct pucca houses with

hand-pumps and modern toilets — an undreamt of luxury in earlier times. In the past, the Dalits lived in almost ghetto-like conditions outside the main village. There were no drainage facilities, and filthy water and other effluents would just stagnate in the gullies alongside their houses.

Over the years, the villages of Punjab and Haryana have expanded in size and their localities have also been connected to the village with motor-able pucca roads. In the mid-1990s, the Ad-Dharmis in Jethumajra were able to persuade a minister in the state government to give them a grant for building a community centre of their own. Given that most of the village common land had disappeared over the years, they decided to use this money to fill a pond close to their locality and turn it into flat land. In due course, a small community centre and a Ravidasi temple came up on this land.

This levelling of the pond left them with no place to release the drainage water from their houses. However, the village had another big pond, close to the locality where dominant-caste Jats had their houses. They again approached the local Member of Parliament (MP), who too was an Ad-Dharmi by caste, for a grant to connect their drains to the other pond. He sanctioned a sum of 40,000 rupees from his special Local Area Development Fund to construct a drain from the Dalit dwellings to the pond. Work on the construction started soon after.

The local Jats, however, did not approve of the move to connect the drains flowing from an Ad-Dharmi locality into the pond that they had always thought as their 'property'. When the Ad-Dharmis insisted on constructing despite their objection, the Jats got together and destroyed the newly-constructed drains. However, they encountered resistance from the local Dalits. The Ad-Dharmis complained to the police against the Jats and tried to re-construct the drain. This time it resulted in an open physical conflict between the two castes communities and some serious injuries. The Jats too complained against the Ad-Dharmis for indulging in violence. The local police arrested the Ad-Dharmi leader, who was kept in custody for more than a month.

However, given the new realities of democratic politics, the Dalits could mobilize support in the bureaucracy and from some Dalit legislators. A local Dalit activist told me during an interview: 'The SDM of Nawanshahr, who is a Scheduled Caste himself, gave

me his personal telephone number and told me to get in touch with him if the situation worsens in the village'.

The Dalit activists were also able to politicize the case to an extent that they managed to secure a 'stay order' from the local court. The court directed the local administration to allow the Ad-Dharmis to use the pond until the case was finally settled. To ensure that the drain was not destroyed again, the court also ordered the local administration to deploy police personnel in the village.

Case Study 4

Land and Caste, Punjab

Unlike Jethumajra and Talhan, Hassanpur (in Sangrur district) is located in the less-urbanized and less-diversified Malwa sub-region of Punjab. It has around 350 households and a population of 1,700. Jats are numerically the largest group with around 170 households. Dalits too have a substantial presence with around 125 households and a population of about 600. The Dalits of Hassanpur are mostly Ramdasi Sikhs (around 120 households).

Unlike Talhan and Jethumajra, the Dalits of Hassanpur, at the time of fieldwork in 2004, depended on the local agrarian economy and on the dominant caste Jat landowners for employment. Some of them also had small plots of land. Only a few had been able to diversify into non-farm occupations, such as leather tanning or working in the nearby brick kilns. While Dalits did not have many alternative sources of employment, the development of capitalist agriculture and growing assertiveness among them had considerably weakened the traditional ties between landowners and the labouring classes.

Like other parts of Punjab and Haryana, here too very few among the Dalits liked working with farmers as regular farm-servants on any annual contract basis. Even when they agreed to do so, not all of them lasted for a whole year. Such attached labourers were invariably indebted to the employer farmers, and when they were not able to complete the annual contract, they would 'run away' with the outstanding debt (see Jodhka 1994, 2012a). It was generally difficult for the farmer to recover such debts.

There was always a simmering tension between the local Dalits and the landowning Jats due to these conflicting class relations.

Like Talhan and Jethumajra, Hassanpur also made news in 2003 for its caste conflict. The situation reached a flashpoint when the Dalits objected to the construction of a drain by the Jats through the entrance of the Balmiki temple in the village. Although there were only five odd Balmiki families in the village, the Ramdasis supported them. The Ramdasis also had a separate gurdwara in the village. Annoyed by their protest, Gurdeep Singh, himself a Jat Sikh and the then Sarpanch of the village, called a meeting of the Jat Bhaichara (caste panchayat of the Jats) sometime in April 2003 to discuss the growing assertion among the local Dalits. The Jats decided to 'socially boycott' the local Dalits. Announcing the decision over loudspeaker from the village gurdwara, the Sarpanch declared that every non-Dalit living in the village should stop all interaction with the Dalits. Local Dalits, he directed, should not be given employment in the village and not be allowed to enter the fields for collecting fodder or for defecation.

A few weeks later, the village panchayat, dominated by Jats, decided to reclaim a plot of land (around 4 acre) which was being used by the Dalits to keep their cattle and store garbage (*arroori*) for compost. On 14 May 2003, the village panchayat auctioned the land on a seven-year lease to the local Brahmins who wanted to build a gaushala in the village for a meagre annual rent of 2,150 rupees per acre against the prevailing rate of 8,000–10,000 rupees per acre. The Ramdasis complained to the deputy commissioner-cum-collector of Sangrur against the lease. After ascertaining the facts, the collector issued an office order on 11 June 2003 cancelling the lease.

This annoyed the local Jats even more. They attacked the Dalit houses in the village injuring several of them. The Dalits complained to the police and other officials in the district headquarters at Sangrur. The district administration again got active and eventually succeeded in bringing the two parties to the negotiation table; a deal was worked out under which the Jats agreed to lift their 'social boycott' of Dalits.

While the Dalits were happy with the action taken by the administration, the Jats did not like being forced to compromise. While the 'social boycott' was formally withdrawn, in effect it continued. In June 2004, when I last visited the village, the Dalits still complained about not being able to find employment there.

The Jats preferred to employ labourers from outside. If the local Dalits came to work, they were offered lower wages: against the going rate of 70–100 rupees per day in the rest of Punjab, the local Dalits were asked to work for 50–60 rupees per day. This, they claimed, was lower than the wages they were paid two years back.

Case Study 5

Individual Crimes and Caste Violence

In a brief news item, *The Tribune*, a daily published from Chandigarh, reported that on the previous day a Dalit man named Rakesh, alias Lara, from the Balmiki caste 'was shot dead by three unidentified youths near a school' in Gohana.[4] Gohana is a small town with a population of around 50,000, located at a distance of around 70 kilometres from the national capital Delhi in the Sonepat district of Haryana. The victim 'was one of the main accused in the Baljeet Siwach murder case' but had been 'acquitted by the CBI court' for want of evidence. The news item also mentioned that the state administration had deployed 'three battalions of police' to 'avoid any untoward incident ... Hundreds of Dalits had blocked Samata Chowk in protest against the murder'.

It was exactly two years back, on the same date, i.e., 27 August 2005, Baljeet Siwach, a Jat by caste, was 'murdered' in the town of Gohana. As the newspapers and various independent inquiries reported, Baljit Siwach, who ran a photography shop in the town died during an altercation with a few Dalit men. As the story goes, a Dalit man from the Balmiki community, named Shivpal, had gone to his shop to get himself photographed. However, Shivpal and Baljeet had an argument on some issue. Soon Shivpal was joined by a fellow Balmiki, Rakesh (Lara), and some other friends. The argument turned into a serious fight in which Baljit was seriously injured and he died.

This made big news at that time and was followed by a series of events. The incident stayed on the front page of the national dailies for more than two weeks.

Though the local police soon arrested four of the seven Dalit men accused of murdering the photography shop-owner and

[4] 'Siwach Murder Accused Shot', *The Tribune*, 28 August 2007.

named in the FIR filed by the police, the local Jat community was not satisfied with the police action. They openly threatened 'revenge' against all the local Balmikis in their caste meeting 'maha panchayat'. Seeing the mobilization by the Jats, the Balmikis were understandably scared; they were also advised by the local police to be cautious and, if possible, temporarily move out of the town. Within a day or so, a large majority of them did move out, to their relatives living in neighbouring towns or to other villages of Haryana.

Another meeting of Jat Mahasabha was called on 31 August 2005 where several hundred members of the caste community met. At around 11:30 a.m., they proceeded towards the streets where the Balmikis had their houses, the 'Balmiki basti', to 'teach them a lesson'. They carried with them several barrels of petrol, kerosene and weapons. The arson and looting went on for over five hours. More than 60 pucca houses of the Balmikis were completely destroyed. The houses close to those of upper castes were carefully spared for fear that the fire could spread to the neighbouring houses. However, several of these houses were also 'ransacked and looted'. As an independent inquiry by a human rights group states:

> As we walked through the Balmiki Basti, we saw house after house with their roofs caved in, large cracks in the walls, burnt motorcycles and scooters. Television sets had been smashed, cupboards and almirahs broken into, annual stores of grains reduced to cinder, tin trunks commonly used to store everything from steel utensils and jewellery to quilts had their lids propped up by bamboo poles in order to ensure that all valuables perished in the fire.[5]

As per a survey conducted by the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights, that assessed the loss to individual households, the value of the looted and destroyed items per household in these

[5] Forum for Democratic Initiatives, 'Gohana Atrocity: Caste Terror in Haryana', 5 October 2005. http://roundtableindia.co.in/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=4720:gohana-atrocity-caste-terror-in-haryana&catid=122:atrocities&Itemid=138 (accessed on 7 December 2012).

100-odd Balmiki houses ranged from 20,000 to 700,000 rupees and more. This was besides the loss to the buildings.[6]

Though the urban Balmikis in states like Haryana and Punjab continue to experience caste-related disabilities, not all of them are poor. Even when they work as scavengers, they invariably have regular jobs with the local municipalities. Families with more than one person working on a regular job with the municipality bring home reasonably good amount of money every month. Some of these Balmiki families of Gohana were also employed in other occupations, such as in teaching, banks and insurance. Some others had small businesses, such as furniture shops and pig farms. This upward mobility of the Dalits had also generated a kind of 'envy' among the dominant castes. The inquiry by the human rights group, for example, noted:

> the presence of consumer goods like television, fridge, gas stove, occasionally washing machines, furniture such as double beds, sofas sets etc., indicate an economic upward mobility. This ... weakening of the feudal caste order has resulted in growing upper caste resentment. Neither carried away by the mob, nor left to burn, each and every television set was smashed to pieces, as though in an act of hatred and frustration. Care was taken to see that each and every piece of household item was destroyed.[7]

Interestingly, unlike what happened after the murder of the owner of the photography shop in 2005, the murder of Lara, the Dalit who was accused of killing Baljit Siwach, did not generate much of a crisis in the town. Balmiki activists called for a *bandh* in the state on 29 August, followed by several protest meetings. However, the state police claimed that it had arrested the killers of the Dalit

[6] 'Dalit Houses Burnt Down at Gohana in Haryana: A Preliminary Fact Finding Report', National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights, New Delhi, Undated.

[7] Forum for Democratic Initiatives, 'Gohana Atrocity: Caste Terror in Haryana', 5 October 2005. http://roundtableindia.co.in/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=4720:gohana-atrocity-caste-terror-in-haryana&catid=122:atrocities&Itemid=138 (accessed on 7 December 2012).

man and his killing had nothing to do with what had happened two years back. According to a senior police officer, it appeared to be a case of 'gang rivalry' over extortion money.[8]

Conclusions

Quite like in the previous chapter, the five case studies of conflicts and atrocities presented here provide a dynamic picture of caste in contemporary times. They reflect diverse patterns of caste-related violence in the region. However, they also show that even when it changes, caste does not go away.

The first case of brutal murder of five innocent Dalit men clearly reveals the anxiety of the dominant-caste communities in relation to 'the perceived other', Muslim or Dalit, and how this anxiety could bring them together to kill fellow human beings in the name of protecting the 'holy cow'. The cases of Talhan and Jethumajra villages of Punjab show the historical gains that the local Dalits in Doaba region of Punjab have made over the last century. While the economic change brought about by the success of the Green Revolution inadvertently released them from the older ties to the landed families, their history of political mobilization and economic diversification opened up new avenues of self-identification.

The processes of dissociation, distancing and autonomy discussed in the previous chapter have enabled the Dalits of Punjab to break out of the systemic aspects of caste. They are trying to get out of the patronage structure of jajmani relations. The old association of caste with occupation has nearly gone. They have also been trying to distance themselves from employment in agriculture. In order to preserve the dignity of their individual selves and of their kinship communities, the Dalits of Punjab have been investing in their own autonomous structures of social and cultural life. Once freed from old structures, they also make claims over the common resources of the village and begin to demand equal rights vis-à-vis other caste communities. However, their weak economic status, lack of ownership over agricultural land and historically evolved

[8] 'Dalit's Murder: Police Claims to Identify Accused', *The Tribune*, 30 August 2007.

patterns of settlements keep them vulnerable despite these 'radical' changes. It is in this framework that we can perhaps make sense of the Talhan case.

The other two case studies, of Hassanpur and Gohana, reinforce this fact even more sharply and serve as a reminder to the fact that even with disintegration of the jajmani system and the decline of the ideological façade of purity and pollution, the reality of caste persists. For a large majority of Dalits, even today caste means violence, landlessness and lack of relevant social networks, which together reproduce their powerlessness.

III

Caste and Democratic Politics

A Differentiated View

Nowhere is the subject of caste discussed more passionately in the modern public life of India than in the domain of democratic politics. Some go to the extent of saying that caste survives in India today because of its usefulness in electoral politics. From the lay public to psephologists of the popular media and serious academic analysts, almost everyone treats caste as an important variable influencing the working of the Indian political process. Caste communities are presented as determining electoral outcomes; they work as pressure groups and influence the governance agenda of the Indian state at the local, regional and national levels. Caste considerations also tend to structure political parties, their leaderships and programmes.

The popular social science formulations on the relationship of caste with democratic politics emerged during the 1960s and 1970s. However, they were generally drawn from the studies of landowning dominant-caste communities and their experience of participation in democratic politics. The rise of Dalit identity and the growing cases of conflicts between Dalits and the dominant-caste communities, as presented in the previous chapter, do not easily fit into such formulations. Engaging with some of these questions, the first part of this chapter provides a broad overview of the social science formulations on the subject. The second part critically examines the challenge that the rise of Dalit identity politics poses to these popular formulations. The third part of the chapter looks at the internal political dynamics of the rise of Dalit identity politics around the question of sub-classification of Scheduled Castes, by looking at the Punjab experience of dividing quotas into two categories of Scheduled Castes. I discuss this

through an empirical analysis of the rise of Balmiki[1] identity in Punjab and their mobilization around this contentious question of sub-classification.

Caste and Democracy

The Indian Constitution, and those who played a leading role in framing the parameters of democratic politics in post-Independence India, were quite clear that caste should and would have no legitimate place in 'modern' India. Notwithstanding the ambivalent attitude of the early nationalist leadership on the subject of caste, and the frequent disputes that arose on its 'real' value for social and cultural life of the Indian people during the freedom struggle, the post-Independence political leadership took a clear position against giving caste any legitimate place in the political organization of the new democratic nation (Kaviraj 1997; Mehta 2003: 58–59). Perhaps the best articulation of this 'mainstream' and 'progressive' position on caste could be seen in the well-known book of Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister, *The Discovery of India*. He wrote in 1946:

> In the context of society today, the caste system and much that goes with it are wholly incompatible, reactionary, restrictive, and barriers to progress. There can be no equality in status and opportunity within its framework, nor can there be political democracy ... Between these two conceptions conflict is inherent and only one of them can survive (Nehru 1946: 257).

The Chairman of the Drafting Committee of India's Constituent Assembly and the first Law Minister of independent India, B. R. Ambedkar, was even more emphatic on this. He argued: 'You cannot build anything on the foundations of caste. You cannot build up a nation; you cannot build up a morality. Anything you will build on the foundations of caste will crack and will never be a whole' (Ambedkar 2002: 102).

[1] 'Balmiki' is usually used in a generic way, though the Punjabi Dalits choose 'Valmiki' to make a political statement. In this book, 'Balmiki' has been used throughout.

The opening pages of the Indian Constitution, its Preamble, envisaged a nation where the values of equality, liberty and fraternity would be supreme. Drawn mostly from the historical experience and cultural traditions of the West, these ideas reflected a vision of liberal democracy and a modern society that were to ensure a dignified existence to each and every individual and endow them with certain fundamental rights vis-à-vis the state and fellow citizens. They contradicted, very fundamentally, the spirit of caste and hierarchy as principles of social organization. The Directive Principles of State Policy (Article 38) of the Indian Constitution further made it clear by explicitly stating that '[t]he State shall strive to promote the welfare of the people by securing and protecting as effectively as it may a social order in which justice, social, economic and political, shall inform all the institutions of national life' (quoted in Shah 2002: 2).

Any form of discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, gender, or place of birth was made punishable by law.

Following the practices in democratic regimes of the Western world, the Indian Constitution invested all legislative powers in certain institutions of governance to be made up of elected representatives of Indian people. Representatives to these bodies were to be chosen by strictly following the principle of universal adult franchise.

While caste was decried by the middle-class leaders of independent India, they did not simply take a moral position against this 'traditional' institution. The 'mainstream' Indian political leadership recognized the 'crippling' impact that the working of the caste system over the centuries would have had on the subordinated sections of the Indian people and the implications of this 'ancient' system on building a true democracy and individual citizenship. It was to address these concerns that the Indian Constitution instituted certain legal and institutional measures, albeit temporarily, to enable groups and communities of people, who had been historically disadvantaged in the given social system, to participate in the game of democratic politics on equal terms (Galanter 1984).

There will be little dispute on the positive effects of the Indian policies and programmes of affirmative action in enabling the historically deprived sections of Indian people to participate in the economic and political life of the nation. India has also been

exceptionally successful in being able to institutionalize a healthy system of democratic governance at different levels of its political system.

However, while these achievements are certainly commendable, it has not meant an end of caste in the social or political life of the nation. In fact, many would argue that politically caste is a much more active institution today than it ever was in the past, and it is largely thanks to the electoral processes and competitive politics. Though it may appear that the democratic and electoral experience has belied the hopes of the founders of the modern nation, the survival of caste, or its increased involvement with politics, is no reflection on the working of democracy in India or an evidence of its failure. The available literature on electoral systems and other aspects of political life clearly points towards a process that has been described by Indian political scientists as a deepening of democracy (see Palshikar 2004; Yadav 1999), and it becoming more inclusive of social groups and categories of Indian population (Jayal 2001).

How does one make sense of this apparently contradictory reality? The contemporary Indian political experience also raises questions about the manner in which the institution of 'caste' and its relationship with modernity and democracy have been imagined and theorized by sociologists and social anthropologists, an imagination that has become a part and parcel of the middle-class common sense on the subject of caste and its place in modern-day India. In other words, this 'survival' of caste clearly points to a flawed understanding of the reality of caste and that of the sociology of democratic politics. Thus, it may be worth our while to begin this chapter with a critical overview of the popular and sociological/anthropological understandings of the caste system.

The Political Sociology of Caste: The Working of Indian Democracy

Notwithstanding their personal predispositions towards a liberal view of democratic politics and faith in evolutionist notions of social change, the inevitability of the Western style of modernization, or their preoccupation with categories inherited from colonial and Orientalist writings on India, social anthropologists

recognized the tremendous resilience that the institution of caste was showing on the ground. Quite early on they had begun to report on the likely impact that caste could have on the working of 'modern' institutions, and in turn the implications of a new form of politics for the system of caste hierarchy. For example, some of them were quick to recognize the fact that instead of completely replacing the traditional ascriptive structures of caste society with an open system of social stratification based on individual choice and achievement, new modes of governance and growing use of modern technology could in some ways strengthen caste, while weakening its structural logic.

Commenting on the nature of change being experienced in caste with the rise of non-Brahmin movements in Southern Provinces, G. S. Ghurye had argued in 1932 that attack on hierarchy by such mobilizations did not necessarily mean end of caste. These mobilizations generated a new kind of collective sentiment, 'the feeling of caste solidarity' that could be 'truly described as caste patriotism' (Ghurye 1932: 192).

M. N. Srinivas developed this point further in his writings during the late 1950s. Focusing specifically on the possible consequences of modern technology and representational politics, both of which were introduced by the colonial rulers in India, he argued that far from disappearing with the process of modernization, caste was experiencing a 'horizontal consolidation'. Commenting on the impact of modern technology on caste, he wrote:

> The coming in of printing, of a regular postal service, of vernacular newspapers and books, of the telegraph, railway and bus, enabled the representatives of a caste living in different areas to meet and discuss their common problems and interests. Western education gave new political values such as liberty and equality. The educated leaders started caste journals and held caste conferences. Funds were collected to organize the caste, and to help the poorer members. Caste hostels, hospitals, co-operative societies etc., became a common feature of urban social life. In general it may be confidently said that the last hundred years have seen a great increase in caste solidarity, and the concomitant decrease of a sense of interdependence between different castes living in a region (Srinivas 1962: 74–75).

Similarly, the introduction of certain kinds of representational politics by the British helped in this process of horizontal consolidation of caste.

> The policy which the British adopted of giving a certain amount of power to local self governing bodies, and preferences and concessions to backward castes provided new opportunities to castes. In order to be able to take advantage of these opportunities, caste groups, as traditionally understood, entered into alliances with each other to form bigger entities (ibid.: 5).

However, this was not a one-way process. The caste system too was undergoing a change. The horizontal solidarity of caste, which also meant a kind of 'competition' among different castes at the politico-economic plane, eventually weakened the vertical solidarity of caste (ibid.: 74; Bailey 1963). This process further received an impetus with the introduction of democratic politics after India's Independence.

Encountered with the question of change in caste order, Louis Dumont too followed Srinivas and speculated on similar lines. Caste, he argued, did not disappear with the process of economic and political change, but its logic was altered. He described this process as change from 'structure' to 'substance'. This substantialization of caste indicated

> the transition from a fluid, structural universe in which the emphasis is on interdependence and in which there is no privileged level, no firm units, to a universe of improbable blocks, self-sufficient, essentially identical and in competition with one another, a universe in which the caste appears as a collective *individual* (in the sense we have given to this word), as a substance (Dumont 1998: 222; emphasis in original).

These attempts at theorization of changing realities of caste opened up many new possibilities for looking at the dynamic relationship of caste with the democratic political process. Thus by the 1960s, sociologists and political scientists began to talk about caste and politics in a different language. Discussions shifted from a predominantly moral or normative concern about the corruption that caste brought into the democratic political process to more

empirical processes of interaction between caste and politics. The gradual institutionalization of democratic politics changed caste equations. Power shifted from one set of caste-groups, the so-called ritually purer upper castes, to middle-level 'dominant castes'. Democratic politics also introduced a process of differentiation in the local levels of power structure. As Béteille reported in his study of a village in Tamil Nadu during the late 1960s:

> [A] vast body of new structures of power have emerged in India since Independence. Today traditional bodies such as groups of caste elders (which are functionally diffuse) have to compete increasingly with functionally specific structures of power such as parties and statutory panchayats (Béteille 1970: 246–47).

However, this differentiation did not mean that these new structures were free of caste. Caste soon entered in their working but the authority of these institutions had to be reproduced differently. Though traditional sources of power continued to be relevant, introduction of universal adult franchise also made 'numbers' of caste communities in a given local setting critical. Power could be reproduced only through mobilizations, vertically as well as horizontally. This also gave birth to a new class of political entrepreneurs. Over the years some of them have begun to work successfully without confining their political constituency to a single caste-cluster, thus undermining the logic of caste politics (Krishna 2001).

Caste Associations

While sociologists and social anthropologists talked about horizontal consolidation of castes or its substantialization into 'ethnic communities', political sociologists worked on the phenomenon and possible roles of caste associations in democratic politics. Beginning with the late 19th century, different parts of the subcontinent saw the emergence of 'caste associations'. While on the face of it caste associations appeared like a typical case of Indian tradition trying to assert itself against the modernizing tendencies unleashed by the colonial rule, they in fact represented a different kind of process. Lloyd and Susan Rudolph were among the first to study the phenomenon of caste associations in democratic India.

They looked at these as agents of modernity in a traditional society like India. They argued that caste association was

> no longer an ascriptive association in the sense in which caste taken as jati was and is. It has taken on features of the voluntary association. Membership in caste association is *not* purely ascriptive; birth in the caste is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for membership. One must also "join" through some conscious act involving various degrees of identification (Rudolph and Rudolph 1967: 33; emphasis in original).

Through his study of *The Nadars of Tamilnad*, Robert Hardgrave (1969) further reinforced their thesis by arguing that the caste association of Nadars worked like a pressure group and had played an important role in the upward social mobility of the community. M. N. Srinivas too similarly argued that caste associations came up as agents of social mobility for the caste communities at a time when the British rulers introduced enumeration of castes (Srinivas 1966).

A little later, Rajni Kothari also argued, more or less, on similar lines while writing on caste and democratic political process in India. In the Introduction to the celebrated volume *Caste in Indian Politics* (1970) that he edited, Kothari argued against the popular notion that democratic politics was helping traditional institutions such as caste to 'resuscitate and re-establish their legitimacy', which could lead to 'disintegrative tendencies' and potentially 'disrupt the democratic and secular framework of Indian polity'. In reality, however,

> the consequences of caste-politics interactions are just the reverse of what is usually stated. It is not politics that gets caste-ridden; it is caste that gets politicised. Dialectical as might sound, it is precisely because the operation of competitive politics has dawn caste out of its apolitical context and given it a new status that the 'caste system' as hitherto known has eroded and has begun to disintegrate (ibid.: 20–21).

Caste federation, he argued,

> once formed on the basis of caste identities go on to acquire non-caste functions, become more flexible in organization, even begin to accept members and leaders from castes other than those with which

> it started, stretches out to new regions, and also makes common cause with voluntary organizations, interest groups and political parties. In course of time, the federation becomes a distinctly political group (Kothari 1970: 21–22).

Speaking in a less enthusiastic language, Ghanshyam Shah also made a similar point. Though in the long run caste association did promote competitive politics and participation, they also exacerbated parochialism, he argued (Shah 1975). Notwithstanding the deviation they brought into the process of democratic politics as understood in the classical Western textbooks on democracy, caste associations did play a role in spreading the culture of democratic politics in areas that were hitherto governed exclusively by tradition. As argued by D. Arnold, Robin Jeffrey and James Manor,

> [t]he caste association was a social adapter, improvised to connect two sets of social and political forms. It helped to reconcile the values of traditional society with those of new order by continuing to use caste as the basis for social organization, but at the same time introducing new objectives — education and supra-local political power (1976: 372).

In their comparative study of caste associations in different parts of south India, they found that, interestingly, leaders of these associations did not come from

> the traditional caste authorities but from the most enterprising of the misfits — the western educated, the lawyer, the urban businessmen, the retired government servants. These men were few in number; but they looked back over their shoulders, hoping that the rest of their community supported them and would help the misfits to establish themselves more firmly in their non-traditional careers (ibid.).

Though caste associations have continued to be important actors in politics and community life of the Indian citizens, social science research interest on the subject declined during the ensuing decades. More important and interesting trends emerged in Indian politics during the 1980s and 1990s, which changed the matrix of caste–politics relation, as I have discussed later in this section. However, before we come to that, it may be useful to also point

to some other factors or processes that impacted caste–politics relations. Perhaps the most important of these was the process of development planning initiated by the Indian state during the post-Independence period. Though 'caste' was rarely treated as a relevant variable in visualization, designing or administration of various developmental schemes and programmes initiated by the State during this period, it did have far-reaching implications for social and political arrangements at the local and regional levels.

One of the most important developmental initiatives taken by the Indian state soon after Independence was the introduction of Land Reform legislations. These were designed to weaken the hold of the non-cultivating intermediaries by transferring ownership rights to the tillers of the land. Even though Land Reform legislations were invariably subverted by the locally dominant interests, they ended up weakening the hold of the traditionally powerful but numerically small groups of upper castes (Frankel and Rao 1989; Jaffrelot 2000; Moore 1966; Stern 2001). In a village of Rajasthan, for example, though the 'abolition of *jagir*s' (intermediary rights) was far from satisfactory, it made considerable difference to the overall land ownership patterns and to the local and the regional power structures. The Rajputs, traditionally upper caste and the erstwhile landlords, possessed much lesser land after the Land Reforms than they did before. Most of the village land had moved into the hands of those who were tillers of land, from Shudra caste category (Chakravarti 1975: 97–98).

Other similar initiatives of the Indian state for rural social change, such as Community Development Programme (CDP), Panchayati Raj and Green Revolution, directly helped the rich and powerful in the village, mostly belonging to the locally dominant caste-groups, to further consolidate their hold over local and regional politics.

Dalit Identity and Caste in Democratic Politics

As I have tried to show in the previous section, a large majority of those who led the freedom movement and inherited power from the colonial masters came from urban upper-caste families. The rise of middle-level castes during the 1960s also meant a change in the political landscape of India. While in some regions the Congress Party was able to accommodate the growing aspirations

of these middle-level caste-groups (see, for example, Lele 1990; Manor 1989; Weiner 1967), it could not do so everywhere (Jaffrelot 2003). It was in this context that regional politics began to acquire increasing significance. The socialist parties also played a role in making caste an issue in their struggle against the 'hegemonic' Congress Party (Vora 2004).

The general election of 1967 is believed to have been the turning point in Indian politics. For the first time during the post-Independence period, the Congress Party was defeated in as many as eight states. From then on, the flavour of regional politics changed significantly. While in some cases these agrarian castes formed their own political parties, elsewhere they emerged as powerful factions within the Congress Party, invariably around a caste identity. Over the years they were able to virtually oust the ritually upper castes from the arena of state/regional politics. Scholars working on Indian politics have documented this story quite well (see, for example, Brass 1990; Frankel and Rao 1989; Hasan 1998; Kohli 2001; Kothari 1970; Nayar 1966; Vora and Palshikar 2004).

However, by the 1980s India began to witness new trends in the domain of caste politics. The introduction of separate quotas for the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) by the then Prime Minister V. P. Singh, on recommendations of the Mandal Commission, in 1990 revived the question of 'caste and politics' and gave a new political legitimacy to caste, normalizing it as a mode of doing politics. However, this resurgence of caste in its new avatar, as Srinivas famously put it (1996), was not merely a consequence of the act of the wily politicians who, on one fine morning, decided to implement the Mandal Commission Report on reservations for 'OBCs' to consolidate their votes. It was also not simply a case of tradition reasserting itself due to the oft-quoted weaknesses of Indian modernity. Caste appeared in a very different mode during the 1990s. Some important processes that began to unfold themselves around this time, in fact, expanded the meanings of democratic politics in the country.

As mentioned earlier, all these formulations on the subject of caste and democracy are mostly based on the experience of the middle-level caste-groups. It was these caste-groups whom Srinivas had described as the 'dominant castes' (1959). Though some of them were at one time quite marginal to the local power structure, they were mostly above the line of pollution and, more

significantly, had traditionally been cultivators and landowners. When electoral politics based on the principle of universal adult franchise offered them new opportunities, they were able to politicize themselves rather easily.

Notwithstanding considerable regional differences, the first three decades after Independence saw a growing consolidation of the middle-level caste-groups at the local and regional levels of Indian politics. While those at the middle levels of the traditional caste hierarchy gained from the developmental process and democratic politics, those at the bottom continued to experience social and political exclusions. In fact, in some regions, the rise of middle-level caste-groups in state politics meant a stronger master to deal with for the Dalits at the local level.

Indian society and polity witnessed several shifts during the decades of 1980s and 1990s. These shifts have also transformed the paradigm for understanding caste–politics relationship. The growing consolidation of democratic politics at the grassroots brought about some important changes in the grammar of Indian politics. Political scientists described this as a shift from the 'politics of ideology' to the 'politics of representation' (Palshikar 2004; Yadav 1999).

This shift was clearly reflected in the nature of social and political mobilizations that appeared during the decade of 1980s. These 'new social movements' questioned the wisdom of the developmental agenda being pursued with much enthusiasm by the post-colonial State in India. The following decade saw the beginning of liberalization policies and a gradual withdrawal of the State from the sphere of economy and eventual disenchantment with the Nehruvian framework of development and social change (see Jodhka 2001).

Coupled with changes in the geopolitics of the world, following the collapse of Soviet Union, the end of Cold War and the unleashing of new technologies of telecommunications, this period also saw the beginning of a new phase in the reach of global capital. This process of 'globalization', as it came to be known, was not confined to the economy alone. It also influenced culture and politics everywhere and opened up new possibilities for social action and networking. It was around this time that 'new' political questions, such as environment, gender and human rights, came up almost simultaneously in different parts of the world. Networking across

national boundaries gave them a different kind of legitimacy and strength. For example, the movement against the construction of a dam across the Narmada River invested considerable amount of energy in mobilizing internal public opinion and global funding agencies against the project. Similarly, the question of human rights violations is watched and commented upon by global agencies. The question of gender rights is articulated, more or less, in the same way at the global level and women's organizations working in India actively network with their counterparts in other parts of the world.

It was in this new context that the question of caste and politics began to be articulated in the language of identity politics by Dalit groups in different parts of the country. A common identity of the Scheduled Castes or ex-untouchable communities was 'a constructed, modern identity' (Kaviraj 1997: 9), which was mobilized by a new leadership which arose from within the Dalit groups and used the language of equality and democratic representation.

As discussed in the Introduction, the questions of caste oppression and untouchability were first raised from below during the freedom movement by people like Jyotiba Phule and B. R. Ambedkar. Dalit groups also launched movements for dignity and development during the first half of the 20th century (Juergensmeyer 1988; Omvedt 1994). The British colonial rulers also introduced some special provisions for the welfare of the 'depressed classes'. Following the initiatives of the colonial rulers, independent India also institutionalized some special provisions for the Scheduled Castes to enable them to participate in the democratic political process and share the benefits of development through reservations or quotas in jobs and educational institutions.

As discussed earlier, Dalit politics experienced a significant shift during the 1990s. This was made possible by the changing realities of the relational structures of caste on the one hand, and growing consolidation of a new middle class among the Dalits, which arose thanks to the policy of reservations, on the other. As they grew in numbers, they also gained confidence and articulated the caste question differently. They reinvented Ambedkar as a national icon of Dalit identity at around this time.

These new developments in the larger ideological and social environment were happening at a time when rural India was experiencing a disintegration of its traditional social and power

arrangements. The ritually 'pure' dominant castes who had gained from the institutionalization of democratic politics and rural development programmes initiated by the Government of India during the first three decades of Independence also began to experience internal differentiation. Those in the upper segments of the rural economy began to look towards cities for further mobility (Jodhka 2006), and those at the bottom began to question their subordination. Continued experience of participation in the democratic political process over three or four decades also gave those at the bottom a sense of self-worth.

As discussed earlier, even though traditionally upper castes were politically marginalized with the introduction of universal adult franchise after Independence, it did not lead to democratization of the rural society. In caste terms, the rural power revolved around the landowning dominant castes, and in class terms, it was the rich landowners and moneylenders who continued to control the rural economy. Independent studies by scholars from different regions tended to suggest that panchayats too became an arena of influence and power for the already dominant groups in rural India (Frankel and Rao 1990).

However, more recently, studies have pointed to a process of loosening of the traditional structures of power/domination. As discussed in chapter 1, the hold of dominant caste over the rural social order began to decline, particularly during the 1980s. There has been some amount de-linking the land–authority relationship (Mendelsohn 1993: 808), and the traditional association of caste with occupation was weakening with the disintegration of the jajmani (Karanth 1996; Sahay 2004). Households had also become internally differentiated, with growing number of them becoming, what Lindberg describes as, 'pluri-active' (Lindberg 2010).

These changes facilitated the rise of a new Dalit agency translating itself into increased assertion and greater participation in electoral politics. However, caste collectivities do not participate as equals, even in modern democratic politics. Historical experience shows different caste-groups participate in democratic politics with different sets of resources. While it has become quite difficult for the locally dominant groups to prohibit the traditionally marginalized caste communities from participating in the political process, it has not meant an end of social inequalities or caste and rank.

Being a Dalit, or in some cases OBC, continues to be a marker of disadvantage and social exclusion.

Notwithstanding the rise of autonomous Dalit politics and their substantial empowerment in some contexts/pockets of the country, the realities of caste in terms of power and dominance have not disappeared. Even when ideologically caste has weakened considerably and older forms of untouchability are receding, atrocities committed on Dalits by the local dominant castes have in fact increased (Béteille 2000b; Shah 2000). The fact that caste violence is almost always a one-way process where Dalits end up being at the receiving end also speaks enough about the continued inequalities of caste-groups. Thus any analysis of caste and politics should always begin with the question: whose caste and politics are we talking about?

Internal Dynamics: Dalit Identity

Unlike the dominant castes, that are resourceful and regionally concentrated, Dalits are widely dispersed and internally fragmented into various communities across regions. In fact, the identity of Dalit has emerged directly from the statist classifications, their clustering together in the category of Scheduled Castes. Much of their politics has also been incremental in nature, directed towards the State. This has the potential of creating divisions and competitiveness among different categories of the Scheduled Castes. This is precisely what is happening in some regions of the country, particularly since the late 1990s, when on the recommendations of the Ramachandra Rao Commission the Government of Andhra Pradesh decided to classify its Scheduled Caste population into four categories in 1997 and fixed a specific quota of seats against each caste category, roughly matching the proportion of their numbers in the total population. This was done in response to the powerful Dandora movement by the Madigas demanding a rationalization of the quota system. However, the State Government's directive was struck down by a single-judge bench of the High Court of Andhra Pradesh in 1998. The Andhra Pradesh Government persisted with its decision and proposed to turn it into an Act, which was duly passed by the State Assembly in the year 2000. The Act was also challenged in the High Court but this time a five-member bench found nothing unconstitutional

in sub-classification of the Scheduled Castes of Andhra Pradesh and rejected the appeal against it. However, when the case went to the Supreme Court, the Court took a negative view on the Act and stuck it down in 2005. The implications of this judgement were however not confined to the State of Andhra Pradesh alone.

Much before the question of 'quotas within quotas' for the Scheduled Castes became a controversial subject in Andhra Pradesh, the Government of Punjab had introduced a two-fold classification of its Scheduled Caste population. It was on 5 May 1975 that the State Government sent a letter to the offices of its various departments directing them to 'offer 50 per cent of all the vacancies of the quota reserved for Scheduled Castes to Balmikis and Mazhabi Sikhs, if available, as a first preference from amongst the Scheduled Caste candidates'. In a subsequent official directive, it was further clarified that the proposed classification of quotas applied 'in direct recruitments only and not in promotion cases'. Learning from the Punjab experience, the State Government of Haryana too decided in 1994 to divide its Scheduled Caste population into two blocks, A and B, limiting 50 per cent of all seats for the Chamars (block B) and offering the remaining 50 per cent to non-Chamars (block A) on preferential basis.

This arrangement worked well until 2005 when the Punjab and Haryana High Court directed the two state governments regarding the 'illegality' of the provision in response to a writ petition by Gaje Singh, a Chamar from the region. The petitioner cited the Supreme Court judgements against the sub-classification of Scheduled Castes in the case of Andhra Pradesh. The Punjab State Government quickly worked a way out of it and turned the official order of 1975 into an Act and continued with the twofold classification of the Scheduled Castes for jobs in the state government departments.

Like elsewhere, the Scheduled Castes of Punjab are divided into different communities with distinct social identities and experiences of economic development. According to the official list, Punjab has a total of 39 Scheduled Caste communities. However, a large majority of them can be clubbed into two or three clusters. The first is a cluster of Mazhabi Sikhs and Balmikis/Bhangis, which made for a total of 41.9 per cent (30.75 and 11.15 per cent respectively) of the total Scheduled Caste population in 1991. Similarly, the second caste-cluster made up of the Ad-Dharmis

(15.74 per cent) and Chamars/Ravidasis/Ramdasi Sikhs (25.85 per cent) together constituted another 41.59 per cent. The remaining 33 caste-groups were only 16.51 per cent of the total Scheduled Caste population of Punjab.[2]

For various historical reasons, those from the second cluster of Punjabi Scheduled Castes have been much more mobile and politically active than the rest. It was among the Chamars of the Doaba sub-region that the famous Ad-Dharam movement appeared during the 1920s. Not only did the movement give visibility to the community, it also emphasized upon the need to educate children and encouraged entrepreneurship among its followers, who were almost entirely made up of the local Chamars (see Juergensmeyer 1988). The Ravidasis and Ramdasis, who are also originally from the same community, have therefore done much better than the Balmikis and Mazhabi Sikhs in the field of education and in securing quality jobs under the quota system. Notwithstanding the growing appeal of the term 'Dalit' for self-description across caste communities and the continued use of the category 'Scheduled Castes' by state agencies and popular media, the internal differences among different communities continue to be as important as they would have ever been.

Quotas and the Political Process

The contemporary state of Punjab was carved out of post-Partition united Punjab in 1966 on the insistence of the Akalis. The Akalis, who claimed to represent the political aspirations of the Sikhs, had launched a movement for reorganization of the province within the framework that had been evolved by the central government on linguistic reorganization of other provinces of India. However, given the manner in which the language question had been communalized in Punjab, the demand for a separate Punjabi-speaking state, a Punjabi Suba, was ipso facto also a communal demand for a Sikh-majority state (for details see Jodhka 2006; Nayar 1966). Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister, was vehemently opposed to the Akali demand. However, the central government

[2] All these figures are based on the 1991 Census, and were personally collected by the author from the Office of the Department of Social Welfare, Government of Punjab, Chandigarh.

eventually gave in to their demand and the state was reorganized in 1966 by taking out areas where a majority of the population reported themselves as Hindi speakers. Though much smaller in size, post-1966 Punjab had nearly 60 per cent Sikh population.

Notwithstanding the Akalis' claim of representing all Sikhs, there have always been sharp political differences within the Sikh community. Caste has remained an important factor that shapes the internal power structure of the Sikh community. The Akali Dals had all been dominated by the Sikh upper castes, the Khatris and the Jats. On the other end, the Dalits among them, who constitute anywhere between 25 to 30 per cent of the total Sikh population, have remained on the margins of 'community affairs'. In fact the Dalits among Sikhs showed little enthusiasm for a separate Punjabi Suba, fearing increased domination of the upper-caste Jats in the local rural setting.

The Sikh Akali leadership, which had earlier worked from within the Congress Party, also began to pursue an autonomous political agenda during the post-Independence period. They were extremely successful with the elections of the Shiromini Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC) and aspired to rule the State of Punjab. However, the Congress continued to command allegiance of a fairly good proportion of Sikhs, particularly those from non-dominant caste-groups, the urban traders and the 'backward' and 'Dalit' caste-groups. It was to consolidate this vote bank within the Dalit communities that the State Government of Punjab, under the leadership of Chief Minister Giani Zail Singh, decided in 1975 to introduce a classification among the Scheduled Castes of Punjab for jobs reserved under the quota system. It may be relevant to mention here that irrespective of the political party in power, Punjab chief ministers have all come from the dominant landowning caste of Jats. The only exception was Zail Singh who was from a 'backward' caste-group. As mentioned earlier, of the 25 per cent jobs reserved for the Scheduled Castes, 50 per cent (or 12.5 per cent of the total) were to be offered to Mazhabi Sikhs and Balmikis on priority basis.

The Mazhabi Sikhs, with nearly 31 per cent of the Scheduled Caste population of Punjab, are the single-largest group of Dalits in the state. Compared to the Dalit caste-groups of the Chamar cluster, the Mazhabis have always been far more enthusiastic about the Sikh religion and Akali politics. This would have obviously

meant an advantage to the Akalis over the Congress Party. As a senior bureaucrat from the social welfare department of the Punjab Government said in a personal interview:

> Nearly all the Chamars and Ad Dharmis voted for the Congress Party and similarly the Mazhabis voted for the Akalis. Mazhabi Sikhs are generally proud Sikhs which made them a natural ally of the Akalis. Giani Zail Singh wanted to break this alliance and that was perhaps the political reason why the quota classification was introduced.

Similarly, the Balmikis with a substantial presence in urban Punjab could go along with the 'Hindu' Jansangh in a communally-charged politics. It is in this context that one ought to see the quota politics of the Congress Party during the 1970s. Even today the Balmikis and the Mazhabis look back at Giani Zail Singh as a messiah. As one of their recent leaflets applauds him, he was someone who

> was an exceptional human being. As the Chief Minister of Punjab he tried to understand and feel the pains and aspirations of the Balmiki-Mazhabi Samaj from the depth of his heart. Unlike other political leaders he did not merely deliver speeches and seek applause from the audience but also did something positive by allocating 50 percent of the SC quota for us in 1975.[3]

As a political strategy, the classification of communities for quota would have indeed been unpopular with the other major cluster of Dalits in Punjab. However, the proportion of Sikhs among them has been relatively small and the danger of it consolidating with the communitarian politics of Akalis was limited.

Quotas and the Balmiki–Mazhabi identity

History of active Dalit politics in Punjab is fairly old and goes back to the early years of the 20th century. It was in the 1920s that the Ad-Dharam movement was initiated by Mangoo Ram among the Chamars of the Doaba sub-region in Punjab. This Ad-Dharam

[3] As quoted in *Adhikar Yatra* (2006), a leaflet by Adi Dharam Samaj, an organization of the Punjab Balmikis.

movement has been one of the most successful Dalit mobilizations in the entire subcontinent. Not only did it succeed in mobilizing a large number of local Dalits against the caste system and for a separate religious identity (see, for example, Juergensmeyer 1988), it also succeeded in spreading the message of education among them. Today the Ad-Dharmis are perhaps the most progressive community among the Scheduled Castes of Punjab. The other sections of Chamars have also been politically quite active. The well-known Dalit leader Kanshi Ram, for example, hailed from a Sikh Ramdasi family of the Ropar district.

In contrast, the Chuhra cluster of the Dalit castes (Balmikis and Mazhabi Sikhs) has been far less mobile. In the rural setting, the Mazhabi Sikhs have been closely associated with agriculture, mostly as wage labourers or as tied servants of the big landlords. However, rarely did they own any agricultural land and only a few cultivated land as tenants in Punjab. As the official data shows, less than 5 per cent of all the Dalits are listed as cultivators, and given their status the proportion of Mazhabi Sikhs among them would be even lower.

In terms of their geographical spread, they are concentrated more in the Malwa sub-region of Punjab where the hold of big landowners has traditionally been much stronger and job opportunities outside agriculture far lesser than the more urbanized Doaba region where a large majority of Dalits are Ad-Dharmis or Chamars. Though some of the mobile Mazhabi Sikhs have also moved to urban centres where they are employed as government servants or have become a part of the urban working class, a large majority of urban Chuhras are known as Balmikis. In terms of occupation they are mostly involved with the traditional calling of their caste — scavenging. Their migrations to urban areas would have invariably been in response to the growing demand for scavengers in the municipality and middle-class localities. While employment was available rather easily, their urbanization did not necessarily bring any kind of social mobility even when some of them could earn well and had regular salaries and pensions. In fact, proportionately the number of urban Balmikis engaged in scavenging work would have only gone up with migration from the villages, where only a small proportion of them worked as scavengers. Their local identities too were that of *kammi* or *sepi*, meaning regular farm-workers, who were known for their secular

occupations, even though status was invariably determined by their position in the caste hierarchy. Writing on the history of the community in the region, Prasad makes a similar point about the urban migration of Punjabi Chuhras to Delhi during the colonial period. He writes:

> Tied to an occupation, the Chuhras found it hard to get jobs in other spheres of life, least of all things that paid more than the glorified skills of refuse removal. While the British hired certain oppressed castes into the railways and into the construction trade, the Chuhras and allied Dalits had to perforce work in the municipality as refuse removal … Over time, the link between the caste and its occupation became far more pervasive then it ever was in the past (Prashad 2000: 45).

Given all these limitations on the mobility of Balmikis and Mazhabi Sikhs historically, their achievements in education would have also been limited. The assurance of employment in the municipality as scavengers would have only discouraged the Balimiki families from pushing their children towards education. As a leader of the Balmiki community told us in an interview in Ludhiana: 'Surprisingly those who get jobs in the government sector at a relatively senior level from our community invariably come from rural areas. Among the urban Balmikis there has traditionally been no aptitude for education'.

This point was further corroborated by Ram Rattan Ravan, an important leader of the Balmiki community, in a personal interview:

> The Municipal Act has worked against our community. It blocked our development and kept us attached to the traditional occupation of scavenging. Our people started getting secure jobs without any education and therefore they did not feel the need of making any effort to get themselves or their children educated. In the city of Ludhiana where we have several colleges and a university and all possible facilities for education, only two students from the Balmiki community could qualify to be doctors in more than 30 years. This mentality of depending on the Municipality service was rampant in our community and therefore was the biggest challenge for us. Our struggle is not only against the other communities but also against our own traditions.

In contrast, the Chamars had an inherent advantage over the Chuhras because of their traditional involvement with leather work and a certain degree of autonomy. This fact was repeatedly emphasized by the Balmikis. R. L. Sabberwal, a retired officer of Punjab Government and an ideologue of the Balmiki movement, for example, said in an interview:

> The Chamars have had an advantage over us. Their involvement with leather work and shoe making naturally made them entrepreneurs and traders. They were quick to exploit the new opportunities as they came with urbanization and reservations. We have had no such tradition. Our occupation kept us backward.

However, over the years things have begun to change for the Balmikis as well. Secure employment as scavengers in the urban municipality is increasingly becoming a thing of the past. The newly-emerging scavenging contractor pays very low wages. With no education or specialized skills, the Balmiki youth does not have many options. Even those who get educated are invariably the first generation of the educated in their families. It is not easy for them to compete with the relatively more mobile Chamars and Ad-Dharmis for the government jobs in reserved quotas.

It is in this context that when the termination of the classification of quotas was ordered on 25 July by the Punjab and Haryana High Court, there was a sudden sense of anger and agitation among the Balmikis and Mazhabis of Punjab. They were quick to organize themselves and formed a group called the 'Balmiki and Mazhabi Sikh Reservation Bachao Morcha' in a meeting called on 30 July 2006 in Jalandhar. The morcha gave a call for Punjab bandh on 4 August 2006 against the High Court ruling and demanded restoration of 12.5 per cent reservation for the Balmiki and Mazhabi Sikhs in government jobs as per the 1975 notification. In addition, they also emphasized upon the need to extend their demand for a similar share of seats in admissions to educational institutions. In fact, they insisted that without a separate quota in educational institutions, job reservations made no sense. 'We simply do not have candidates for better jobs because our children find it hard to get admissions in the institutions of higher education', was the repeated argument.

According to the English daily of the region, the bandh was quite successful and life in major cities of Punjab was completely paralyzed for the day.[4] The newspaper reported:

> Members of the Valmiki community led by their leaders, held demonstrations in different localities in protest against the decision of the Punjab and Haryana High Court to cancel 12.5 per cent reservations for Valmikis and Mazhbi Sikhs in government jobs. They blamed the government for not adroitly presenting the case due to which the reservations were cancelled. They demanded the restoration of 12.5 per cent reservations not only in government jobs for them but also in educational institutions.

They urged the state government to bring legislation in the coming session of the State Assembly to make equal distribution of reservation between Balmiki/Mazhabi Sikhs and Adi Dharam Samaj to avoid any confrontation in future.

The bandh was followed by a *gherao* (encirclement) of the Members of the Legislative Assembly on 18 August. In order to consolidate and mobilize the 'community', the morcha also started a march from the town of Sangrur on 10 September 2006. This rally was to reach Amritsar in nine days covering much of Punjab.

Given that elections to the State Assembly were so near, the Balmiki–Mazhabi movement obviously made the Congress government jittery. They quickly framed a legislation to convert the '1975 directive' into an 'Act' and presented it to the State Assembly on the last day of its session on 17 September 2006. The draft bill was unanimously passed by the legislature assembly and it became an Act on 5 October 2006, after being approved by the governor.

Though passing of the Act could for the time being circumvent the High Court judgement on quota classification, it failed to satisfy the Balmiki and Mazhabi Sikhs because the Act had no provision of extending the quota to admissions to educational institutions. Leaders of the morcha attributed this to the continued domination of Chamars in Congress politics and state bureaucracy. 'Of the 105 or so IAS officers from the Scheduled Caste category in the State of Punjab only three belong to the Balmiki–Mazhabi community',

[4] 'Valmikis, Mazhbi Sikhs Observe Bandh', *The Tribune*, 5 August 2006.

pointed out Ravan. He also mentioned the fact that at the time of framing of the Act, even the Social Welfare Minister was from the Chamar/Ravidasi community. 'Though the then Chief Minister Amrinder Singh promised us on 10 October in Patiala that he will soon issue an ordinance and extend the quotas to seats in educational institutions, he did not do anything'.

Meanwhile, the legal validity of the Act of 2006 was challenged in the Punjab and Haryana High Court by one Hardip Singh on 10 October 2006. Even though it did not give a 'stay order' on the Act, the Court accepted the appeal for hearing and also issued notices to various departments of Punjab Government regarding the disputed status of all the new appointments made under the Act, leaving the Balmiki–Mazhabi struggle for quota in educational institutions in a limbo.

Part Two

Caste in the Neo-Liberal Economy

IV

Dalits in Business

Self-Employed Scheduled Castes in Urban India

The decline of traditional hierarchies is not simply a consequence of Dalit assertion for rights and autonomy. Technological changes in rural areas have also made redundant the old jajmani system and the accompanying economic relations that tied the untouchable communities to their landowning patrons. With the growing use of tractors, trolleys and harvesters, the services of many caste communities were no longer required. One of the consequences of these changing realities of rural India is that either by choice or by compulsion, Dalits are moving away from the traditional agrarian economy.

Where do they go? During the early decades after Independence, the Nehruvian idea of a planned economy generated a large number of opportunities for employment in the government sector. Given the policy of reservations for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, many of those who had the motivation and skills to move out of the village were accommodated in the state sector, mostly at the lowest level (class IV) in various departments of the state and central governments. However, in its attempt to respond to the emerging challenges of a post-Cold War world, India initiated a process of reforms in its economic policy during the early 1990s. These reforms proved to be an important turning point for the country in many different ways. Under the new regime, the State began to withdraw from its direct involvement with the economy. Private enterprise was allowed and encouraged to expand into areas of economic activity that were hitherto not open to it. Though some scholars have pointed to the fact that the growth of private capital in India began to accelerate during the early 1970s (see Kohli 2006), it was during the post-1991 period that it experienced expansion at an unprecedented rate.

This expansion was not merely in terms of growth rates and profits, India also experienced an important ideological shift during the 1990s. The socialist rhetoric that had been so central to the Nehruvian idea of planned development lost its charm. Markets and middle classes came to occupy the centre stage of India's cultural landscape.

Growing privatization of India's economy and declining avenues of employment in the state sector also meant shrinking of jobs available under the quota system for the reserved categories. The expanding role of private sector in technical and professional education could similarly contract the space given to the historically marginalized groups in India's higher education system. It was in response to the growing restiveness among a section of the Dalit intellectuals about these negative implications of the liberalization policy that, upon coming to power at the Centre in 2004, the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) proposed extension of the quota system for Schedules Castes and Scheduled Tribes to the private sector.[1]

Apart from the suggestion to extend the quota regime to the private sector, there have also been proposals to encourage and support direct participation of the historically marginalized groups in the private economy as entrepreneurs and capital holders (see Jogdand 2000; Nigam 2002; Omvedt 2000). Though the State is called upon to play an active role in the process by provision of economic support through loans and regulation of markets, the emphasis is on development of entrepreneurial culture that can enable Dalits to participate in the private sector and informal economy on equal terms. However, as this study shows, Dalits are not only poor, they also face discrimination in the labour market. What are the ways in which Dalits in the urban labour market negotiate with prejudice and discrimination? What are the experiences of those who have ventured to set up their own businesses and enterprises? The available social science literature on caste, or on labour markets, tells very little about these realities.

[1] See the National Common Minimum Programme of the UPA government. http://www.pmindia.nic.in/cmp.pdf p.10 (accessed on 16 October 2008).

As discussed in chapter 1, social anthropologists and sociologists have mostly researched on caste in relation to rural social order, kinship networks, religious life, or traditional occupations. The economists who worked on 'hard' questions of development rarely treated caste as a relevant area of inquiry. In the mainstream understanding of textbook economics, development or market was essentially secular or socially neutral and anonymous process. Similarly, the social science understanding of entrepreneurship has typically revolved around the notion of a rational individual operating in a supposedly free-market economy.

Dalits in Business

Nearly two-thirds of the 16 per cent Dalits[2] of India are either completely or nearly landless with virtually no employment or income-generating assets of their own. With changing aspirations and state support, larger numbers of Dalits are getting educated and looking for employment outside their traditional sources of livelihood.

However, the organized sector is able to provide meaningful employment only to a small number of them. Thus a larger proportion continues to work in the informal or unorganized sector of the economy as casual wage workers. Some of them have also ventured into self-employment. According to the 61st round of the National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO), 2004–05, a little more than 29 per cent of all the urban Scheduled Caste households were in the category of self-employed. Though this number was significantly higher for the OBCs (nearly 40.3 per cent) and 'other' categories of households (nearly 38.6 per cent), the number of Dalits in the category is also quite significant.[3] Similarly, though the proportion of Scheduled Castes owning private enterprises was significantly lesser than their population in urban areas (around 7 per cent against their population of around 12 per cent), their presence is not insignificant (Thorat and Sadana 2009: 14).

[2] For the purpose of this study we have used the term 'Dalit' throughout to be synonymous with Scheduled Castes.

[3] NSSO Report No. 516, 'Employment and Unemployment Situation among Social Groups in India', 2004–05 (61st round), different tables.

While the available data provide us with some broad indications of the employment patterns among different categories of workers, it leaves many questions unanswered, such as: who are these self-employed Dalits; what has been the pattern of their social and economic mobility; what kinds of barriers do they encounter in the process of setting up their enterprise and in carrying on with their businesses; how do they mobilize the initial resources for investment and what is the nature of difficulties they encounter in getting bank loans and raising money from the market; do they experience any kind of discrimination in the process of their interactions with different kinds of markets; are there only a few niche areas where Dalit entrepreneurship is concentrated, and if so for what reasons; how do they survive in the urban setting and what kinds of support are they able to mobilize in such endeavours for employment and social/economic mobility; do kinship and other social networks or their absence play any role in the successes and failures of Dalit enterprises; do the 'soft' and 'hard' skills acquired from their family background and upbringing help or hinder their mobility?

Field Sites and Data Collection

Demographically the Scheduled Castes are often treated as a single/homogenous and pan-Indian category of traditionally marginalized and excluded sections of the population. However, their development trajectories vary significantly across regions and communities within the Scheduled Castes. This is also true about Haryana and Uttar Pradesh from where we chose two towns (Panipat in Haryana and Saharanpur in Uttar Pradesh) for the field study. Fieldwork was carried out during the first half of 2008.

In terms of the Scheduled Caste population, the two states are quite similar and both have a fairly large proportion of Scheduled Castes (Haryana: 19.3 per cent and Uttar Pradesh: 21.1 per cent). Though Uttar Pradesh is a much larger state and unlike Haryana quite uneven in terms of development indicators, the Saharanpur district of western Uttar Pradesh is more like the Panipat district in neighbouring Haryana than the eastern part of Uttar Pradesh. The two towns are also similar in terms of their location/proximity to the national capital, New Delhi.

The agrarian change experienced with the success of Green Revolution in both these regions had far-reaching implications

on the social structure of the village. If on one hand it led to the fragmentation of village, on the other it loosened up the hold of dominant castes over the Dalits and provided opportunities for them to move out of the village and agrarian employment. However, notwithstanding this common trajectory, the nature of change experienced on the ground was not similar for the Scheduled Caste populations of the two states. This can be seen from the available data on the patterns of employment among Scheduled Castes across the two states. While more than 44 per cent of the urban Dalits in Uttar Pradesh were in the category of self-employed, their numbers in Haryana was lesser, at par with the national average (29.4 per cent).

Socially and politically also, the Scheduled Castes of Uttar Pradesh have been more vibrant. Some pockets of Uttar Pradesh have had a history of entrepreneurship among the Dalits. Haryana, on the other hand, has not been known for any such dynamism. The two states also present quite contrasting pictures of political mobilizations and assertions. While Uttar Pradesh has virtually become a model state where a Dalit woman was able to even come to power through caste mobilizations and successfully completed her term as Chief Minister of the state, no such trends seem to be visible as yet in the case of Haryana.

It was keeping in mind some of these similarities and differences that we decided to look at Dalit entrepreneurs in the two primarily urban settings of Haryana and Uttar Pradesh. The towns chosen for the fieldwork were not very far from the capital city, but not too close either. While Panipat is around 95 kilometres from Delhi, Saharanpur is around 130 kilometres away.

Panipat is one of the important urban centres of Haryana. In history books, the town is known for the three crucial battles that were fought here. Panipat also witnessed large-scale migration during 1947, when a large proportion of the local Muslim population left for Pakistan, and in its place the Punjabi Hindus and Sikhs, who had left their homes in western Punjab (Pakistan), settled in the town and many of its adjoining villages. Though the local Bania traders continue to be a powerful community in the town, it is the Punjabis, mostly Hindus but also some Sikhs from trading-caste backgrounds, who have emerged as the dominant community of the town in the post-Independence period.

In 1989, Panipat was separated from Karnal district and made into a separate district. The city of Panipat was made its

headquarters. According to the 2001 Census, the total population of Panipat district was a little less than a million (967,449), of which nearly 16 per cent were from the Scheduled Castes. A large majority of the Scheduled Caste population lived in rural areas (72 per cent). The total population of the city of Panipat was 268,899 in 2001, of which nearly 10 per cent were Scheduled Castes. With a population of 63,662 the Chamars were the largest community among the Scheduled Castes in the district, followed by Balmikis (39,509) and Dhanaks (12,912).

By the early 1990s, Panipat had emerged as a vibrant urban centre of the region, through its industrial development. It is home to a good number of public sector industries, including a thermal power station, a fertilizer company and an oil refinery. It is also a major centre for small- and medium-scale industries and has come to be known as a city of weavers. It is one of the largest centres for handloom and rug industries and local entrepreneurs earn a large amount in foreign currency through export of textile/yarn. The district has more than 40,000 handlooms working, providing direct employment to nearly 50,000 persons. Majority of the weavers are migrants from Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and West Bengal. There are some local weavers too who come from the neighbouring villages to work in the handloom units.

In terms of size and population, the Saharanpur district of Uttar Pradesh is much bigger than Panipat. According to the 2001 Census, the total population of Saharanpur district was nearly three million (2,896,863, with 2,149,291 rural and 747,572 urban). The city of Saharanpur is the administrative headquarters of the Saharanpur district and also of the Saharanpur division. Surrounded by fertile agricultural lands famous for plentiful yields in grains and fruits, Saharanpur is one of the most flourishing cities of Uttar Pradesh. The city has been internationally known for its wood-carving cottage industry. A variety of agro-based industrial enterprises like textiles, sugar, paper, and cigarette factories are also located here.

The population of the city of Saharanpur is also larger than that of Panipat. In 2001, the city had a total population of 452,925 persons. While the proportion of Scheduled Castes in the district was 22 per cent, only around 11 per cent lived in the urban centres of the district. Of the total population of the city, the Scheduled Castes made for a mere 9 per cent. Here too, Chamars accounted

for the largest Scheduled Caste group (546,674) and their number was higher than that of any other Scheduled Caste community (Balmikis: 46,063; Kori: 20,059).

Though unlike Panipat, out-migration of the Muslim population at the time of Partition was not very significant; a large number of Punjabi migrants from western Punjab settled in the town of Saharanpur after 1947. Their social composition was very similar to those of people settled in Panipat, mostly from the trading castes. With more than 39 per cent of the total population of Saharanpur being Muslims, it has been identified as one of the Minority Concentrated Districts by the Government of India.

In Search of Dalit Entrepreneurs: Mapping the Universe

We began our fieldwork with Haryana. We first visited Panipat in May 2008 and tried to locate people who we thought would be able to help us. These were mostly people working with the locally active Dalit groups. While it was easy to locate Dalit activists, it was not so easy to find a Dalit entrepreneur. They simply were not there in big numbers. We were a little dismayed and had to think of an alternative strategy for the fieldwork. We decided to hire a locally-educated Dalit and asked him to spend a few weeks preparing a list of Dalit commercial establishments. Since there were not too many in the area that our local researcher could have located, we asked him to extend the net to the entire district of Panipat, and if required, to the neighbouring town of Karnal. As we proceeded with the listing process, we were able to locate a total of 126 enterprises run by Dalits in Panipat and Karnal (including the town of Samalakha located in the district of Panipat).

We decided to use the same method of mapping the universe for Saharanpur as well. As expected, it was easier to locate Dalit enterprises in Saharanpur. We could identify a total of 195 Dalit entrepreneurs in the town within a month's time.

We had a total of 321 Dalit entrepreneurs enlisted for us in the two towns. As we expected, a large majority of them had rather modest set-ups, run by relatively young Dalit men, and had been in existence for rather brief periods of time. Except for seven women (around 2 per cent), the rest were all males. They mostly came from

the two sub-communities of Dalits — the Chamars (traditionally identified with leather work) and the Balmikis (traditionally identified with the occupation of scavenging). A much larger proportion of Chamars (67.3 per cent) in comparison to Balmikis (25.9 per cent) were active in the urban economy as entrepreneurs.[4] The other Dalit groups such as Khatiks (4 per cent) and Dhanaks (0.9 per cent) were also present but nominally.

When exactly did Dalits begin to get into entrepreneurship? As is evident from Table 4.1, only one of them had set up an enterprise prior to 1950 and another one in the following decade. The next 20 years did not seem to have been good for Dalit entrepreneurship. A total of three respondents reported that their enterprise had been set up during the 1961–70 decade and another five during the subsequent decade (1971–80). In other words, of the total universe of 321, only 10 (a little above 3 per cent) were relatively old enterprises.

The growth of Dalit entrepreneurship took off in both the settings only during the decade of 1980, and more vigorously after 1990s.

Table 4.1 also gives us an idea about the overall pattern of social mobility of Dalits in the region. It is only when they were able to consolidate themselves economically, which happened in most parts of north India during the 1980s, that they developed the capacity to diversify into occupations other than those they had been traditionally employed in, except of course for the jobs in the government sector under the reservation quota.

What kind of enterprises did they run? Our mapping data tends to suggest that a large majority of them entered into very

Table 4.1
The Year of Starting the Enterprise

	Starting Period							
Place	*Before 1950*	*1951–60*	*1961–70*	*1971–80*	*1981–90*	*1991–2000*	*After 2000*	*Total*
Panipat	1	1		2	7	39	76	126
Saharanpur			3	3	25	79	85	195
Total	1	1	3	5	32	118	161	321

[4] Our respondents came from six caste groups, viz., Chamars (78), Balmikis (32), Khatiks (4), Dhanaks (2), Dhobi (1), and Odh (1).

simple kinds of businesses, mostly in the localities of their domicile. Of the seven women we could locate, six had small grocery shops. However, as shown in Table 4.2, there was a fair amount of diversity in the kinds of enterprise that Dalits owned and ran in the two settings.

Table 4.2
Type of Occupation being followed by Dalit Entrepreneurs

	Universe		*Sample*	
Occupations	*Panipat/Karnal*	*Saharanpur*	*Panipat/Karnal*	*Saharanpur*
Petty Shopkeeper	67	104	18	25
Hotel	1	0	1	0
Workshop	8	11	11*	9
Dealer/Agency/ Contract	14	19	9	7
Factory	3	1	3	2
Institute	2	6	2	5
Skill-Based Service-Providers	19	45	8	6
Doctors/Medical Clinic	3	9	1	5
Independent Work	9	0	4	2
Total	126	195	57	61

*We also identified and interviewed some additional enterprises in different categories during the second phase of the fieldwork, which made the number of sample respondents for some categories more than those identified in the initial listing.

They did not employ too many people, and were generally run by the entrepreneur himself/herself alone (71 per cent). Only seven out of a total of 321 had more than 10 persons (other than the self) working with them. They also did not seem to have very active or strong links with the banking system. A large majority of them had set up their businesses from their personal savings. Only 28 (nine in Panipat and 19 in Saharanpur) of the total 321, or less than 9 per cent, reported taking bank loans or aid from a government agency to start the business.

The Fieldwork

Having mapped the universe, we moved on to a more intensive phase of fieldwork where we interviewed a purposively selected

sample from the universe of Dalit entrepreneurs that we enlisted in the first phase. We conducted a total of 57 interviews in Panipat and Karnal and another 61 in Saharanpur. Our respondents did not necessarily represent the universe in proportional terms. We selected our sample keeping in mind the diversity of the universe and tried to cover different categories of enterprises in these interviews. We also discovered some new cases during the second phase, some of whom were not listed in the first phase of the study. We continued the survey with more intensive and long interviews with some respondents who seemed to provide interesting details.

Who are the Dalit entrepreneurs?

Of the 118 respondents selected for the second phase, four were women, two each from Haryana and Uttar Pradesh. In terms of age, they were relatively young, in the age group of 20 to 40 (nearly 80 per cent of all the respondents). Only three of them were above the age of 60. A large majority of them (81.4 per cent) were married and had medium-sized families with an average of five to six members. A little less than one-fourth (23 per cent) lived in joint families and the rest reported living in nuclear families.

When asked about their religion, a large majority identified themselves as Hindus (except for eight who said they were Buddhists). However, for a good number of them, Hinduism appeared to be a mere demographic identity and not really a matter of faith or passion. There was hardly anyone who seemed excited or proud while reporting their religion as Hinduism. 'You could write Hinduism, if you must' or 'we are Dalits, but we are clubbed with Hindus' were some of the typical answers. Some of them were even vocal in expressing their annoyance at being classified as Hindus. As a Chamar respondent from Panipat put it: *Itni sadion ki beijjati ke baad bhi hum Hindu dharm ka bojh dho rahe hain* (even after having suffered so much humiliation for centuries, we are carrying the burden of being Hindus).

As expected, virtually all of them were first-generation entrepreneurs. Only one of them had inherited some kind of business set-up from his father. As is evident from Table 4.3, nearly three-fourths of them had fathers working as wage labourers or employed in traditional callings of their castes. However, a good proportion of them had their fathers in regular government jobs.

The question on father's education predictably had similar responses. As many as 68 per cent reported that their fathers were

Table 4.3
Occupation of the Respondents' Fathers

Type of Occupation	*Frequency*	*Percentage*
Labourer	46	39.0
Traditional/Caste Occupation	32	27.1
Salaried Job	37	31.4
Not Applicable	2	1.7
Factory	1	0.8
Total	118	100.0

either illiterate or had received education only up to the primary level. Involvement with the traditional occupation of the father or the families, from which our entrepreneurs came, varied significantly across caste-groups. Only Balmiki and Chamar respondents reported that their families were involved with traditional occupations, two-thirds of them were Balmikis. Of the 32 Balmiki respondents, as many as 23 (72 per cent) reported that in one way or the other their parents' families had been involved with the traditional occupation of scavenging. This proportion was much smaller for Chamars (15 out of a total of 78, or nearly 19 per cent).

Along with the enterprise they were primarily involved with, some of the respondents continued to pursue a secondary occupation (nearly 20 per cent). The secondary occupation was not necessarily their traditional occupation, or past occupation. Since most of them had rather modest businesses, it was possible, and often desirable, to have more than one economic activity for a viable sustenance. In some other cases, the entrepreneurs had simply diversified into various activities, such as running a restaurant while also being a property-dealer, or running a small grocery shop while also working as a school teacher.

Where did they come from?

A large majority of Dalits in the two states live in rural areas, much larger than their proportions in the total population.[5] Given that

[5] As against 79 per cent of the rural population nearly 88 per cent of Dalits in UP lived in rural areas, and against 71 per cent of the total rural population 78.5 per cent of Dalits in Haryana lived in rural areas according to the 2001 Census.

we worked in urban settings, most of our respondents (56 per cent) were born in urban/semi-urban areas. The proportion of those who continued to live in rural areas was small (30.5 per cent). Thus, along with the setting up of enterprise, some of them had also migrated to urban areas. Nearly 20 per cent of all our respondents reported being migrants, from neighbouring villages or from another region of the country. In some of these cases migration had helped them 'hide' their caste background. For example, a successful Dalit business family in Panipat was originally from Rajasthan and had migrated to Panipat during the 1940s primarily to set up their businesses. Only one member of the family had initially migrated to the town, but over the years several of their kin joined them and together they run half a dozen shops in the town. Some of them also run successful businesses as wholesale dealers in electronic goods. However, in the local market very few knew about their caste backgrounds and they were known by a caste name of the locally dominant community. It was only through our local contact that we were able to motivate one of them to talk to us. His other kin refused to speak with us when we told them that we were working on Dalit entrepreneurs. He too repeatedly told us about the 'story' of their being downgraded in the caste hierarchy for some local political reasons: 'We are Rajputs but got caught in a local conflict and were reduced to the status of Chamars. That is the reason why we left Rajasthan. Once we lost our caste identity, what was anyway left for us there?'

Education and Training

Educationally the family context of an average Dalit entrepreneur does not appear to be very different from the larger community they come from. Nearly 68 per cent of the respondents have illiterate or semi-literate fathers. Educational levels of mothers were even worse (nearly 90 per cent being illiterate). The proportion of those whose fathers were educated up to high school or above was around 20 per cent. The proportion of respondents who had mothers educated up to high school or above was less than 2 per cent.

However, our respondents appeared to be very different from their parents. There was only one Balmiki respondent who reported being completely illiterate. Nearly 30 per cent of them had gone to college or university for a degree (BA and above). Another 31 per cent had successfully completed their school up

to class 10 or 12. Interestingly, there were no significant variations across caste-groups in the level and nature of education among our respondents. Apart from general education, nearly one-fourth (24.6 per cent) of them had also been to a technical institute and had acquired some diploma or degree. Nearly half of them also reported that they had acquired the technical skills required for the business or enterprise informally, by working with someone who was already in a similar business. Around 12 per cent reported that they were in a business where they could use their inherited skills — mostly those in leather-related business. Only around 14 per cent had acquired the skills formally to run their businesses, through a university degree/diploma.

Education continued to be a positive value for our respondents in their attitude towards their children. All those who had children, boys or girls, of school-going ages were sending them to schools and were acutely aware of the role education could play in further mobility of their families.

Getting Started

A typical Dalit in business is a first-generation entrepreneur, relatively young and educated. However, not all our respondents started their working careers as entrepreneurs. More than one-third of them had been previously employed in various other occupations (wage labour: 21 per cent; traditional caste occupation: 3.4 per cent; government jobs: 12.7 per cent; one woman respondent reported that before opening a shop she was engaged in housework). They also started their businesses with quite a small amount of capital. As is evident from Table 4.4, a good number of them (nearly 41 per cent) began with an investment of 25,000 rupees or less. Another 22 per cent had invested more than 25,000 but less than 50,000 rupees. The number of those who began with more than 100,000 rupees was also not insignificant (11 per cent). However, as is evident (Table 4.4), none of them began their businesses with very large sums of money.

In most cases the source of initial investment either came from their own savings or was raised from informal sources, mostly from other members of the family/close relatives (59 per cent) or friends (around 8 per cent). Only about 18 per cent reported taking a loan from a formal institution, such as a commercial bank, at the time

Table 4.4
Initial Investment and Estimated Current Value of the Enterprise

Range (*in Rupees*)	*Initial Investment*[6]	*Current Value*
5,000	20 (16.9)	
5,000–10,000	17 (14.4)	
10,000–25,000	12 (10.2)	
25,000–50,000	26 (22.0)	14 (11.9)
50,000–1 lakh	11 (9.3)	4 (3.4)
1–5 lakh	13 (11.0)	17 (14.4)
5–50 lakh	3 (2.5)	14 (11.9)
50 + lakh		4 (3.4)
No Reply	16 (13.5)	65 (55.1)
Total	118 (100)	118 (100)

Note: Figures in parentheses indicate percentages.

of starting their businesses. The number of entrepreneurs who reported taking loans after establishing their businesses was also not very large (around 21 per cent). Interestingly, the number of those who were aware of the special financial schemes for Dalits starting independent enterprises was much larger (50 per cent); whereas the number of those who had never heard about such schemes was also equally large (50 per cent). Many of them either did not approach a bank out of some kind of cynicism or were simply refused for want of a good reference or an asset against which the loan could be approved. Their caste background played a significant role here, a point discussed in greater detail in the following section.

What motivated them to get into the business? The sources of motivation were of two kinds. First were those who simply had no employment and saw it as a source of livelihood. They somehow managed some money and invested it in a small *kirana* (grocery) shop or some other such activity. However, some others saw in their new occupation a source of dignity. It helped them move

[6] The proportion of those who did not respond to the question on initial investment was much smaller (11 per cent against 55 per cent to the question on assessment of current value of their businesses). The main reason for low response rate to the questions on growth patterns and current value was the informal nature of their enterprise.

out of the village and their traditional caste-based occupation. *Doosron ki gulami se achha hai ki apna kaam kar lein* (it is far better to have one's own business than to be a slave of others) was the typical response we received from many. Business in towns offered a better quality of life for the person working and for the family. For some of our respondents, business was also a way of proving to themselves that they too could do something meaningful, which would not only give them income and dignity but also generate employment for other members of the community.

Who helped them start the business? For nearly two-thirds of them the most important source of support came from their families, parents or extended kinship. Nearly one-fourth reportedly did not receive any funding, and were entirely self-motivated. A few of them had received support and encouragement from their friends. One's social links with the wider community and with other communities are of crucial importance in setting up a business. However, not everyone could mobilize such contacts. While a large majority of our respondents were indeed first-generation entrepreneurs, many of them had members of extended kinship in the business, though not for very long. Nearly 40 per cent of them reported that they had a close relative or friend in a similar kind of business activity.

What kind of problems did they encounter while starting their businesses? The two most frequently reported problems that a new Dalit entrepreneur faced were related to mobilization of finance and being able to find a structure/shop where the enterprise could be set up. In both aspects, the caste variable almost always played a negative role for the Dalits. A well-established Dalit businessman in Panipat found it very hard to rent-in a place to run a cooking gas agency because of his being an ex-serviceman: 'Since almost everyone knew us in the town, no one was willing to rent out a shop to us. It was only because of the goodwill of my father that finally a Punjabi gave us his two shops on rent.'

Some others reported that they were forced to locate their businesses in areas that were not good for the kind of businesses they were setting up, simply because they could not find proper accommodation either due to lack of resources or caste prejudice. A few of them also reported having experienced hostile competition and conflict in the market during the early years of their business.

Size and Growth

As mentioned earlier, the majority of Dalit enterprises were small in size, mostly run as self-proprietorships (96 per cent) and invariably as informal establishments. Only one of our respondents worked in a partnership. In nearly half the cases (47 per cent) the building from where the business was carried out was also owned by the entrepreneur. However, an equal number of them had rented-in the accommodation. Half of our respondents worked in their establishments just by themselves, without hiring anybody. Around 20 per cent of them had five or more people working with them.

Though most of the Dalit enterprises had started with meagre resources, they appeared to have grown over the years. Only around 12 per cent of them reported the current market value of their enterprise being less than 50,000 rupees. More importantly perhaps, while only 13 per cent of our respondents reported having started their businesses with more than one lakh rupees, the proportion of those who assessed the current value of their businesses being above one lakh rupees was nearly 30 per cent of the entire sample and almost two-thirds of all those who responded to the question (see Table 4.4). Being informal in nature, a majority of them maintained no books and did not file income tax returns, and thus found it hard to answer such questions.

Location and Functioning

Where were the Dalit enterprises located? Was there a concentration of such enterprises in specific types of businesses or localities?

Since a good number of Dalit enterprises were small grocery shops, they were mostly located in Dalit-dominated residential areas — in proportional terms, more than one-third (38 per cent) of the businesses were in these areas — and were invariably extensions of their living quarters. However, nearly half the respondents reported that they worked from mixed localities, with a majority of non-Dalit population — mostly the local markets. A small proportion (6 per cent) operated from completely non-Dalit areas — the main markets or industrial areas of the town — where, in some cases, they were the only Dalits amidst the upper castes.

Our fieldwork pointed out the presence of some niche areas where Dalits entrepreneurs found it easy to enter and operate. When we asked them if there are other Dalits in the same kind

of business, a majority of them (52.5 per cent) reported in the affirmative. One obvious area for the Chamars was leather-related business.

There were also some 'secular' spaces which they found easy to access. One of these was the opening of primary and middle schools. This particularly seemed to be the case in Uttar Pradesh where a large number of Dalits run schools. Even in the Samalakha town in Panipat district we came across a big private residential school being run by a Dalit. While it is possible that they initially got into it out of some political motivation to provide education to Dalit children where they do not feel discriminated against on caste lines, in most cases these schools had acquired a life of their own. While some of them continued to be predominately Dalit-run and Dalit-attended schools, many had become quite open and attractive for the other castes too and seemed to be doing quite well.

Beyond Economics: Barriers and Supports

The primary objective of this study was to understand the caste dimension of the everyday economic life in the regional urban context, as it is experienced by those who come from the bottom of the caste hierarchy and have tried to step into areas of economic activities that have been hitherto closed to them for various social and historical reasons.

Does Caste Matter?

A simple answer to this question is clearly in the affirmative. Nearly 63 per cent of the respondents reported experiencing caste-related discrimination in their personal/everyday lives. The number of respondents who had apparently faced such discrimination in businesses was lesser, though not insignificant (42.4 per cent). Those who reported being subjected to discrimination in personal life were quick to recall their experiences. A good number of them had their first major experience of caste discrimination during their education. 'My first encounter with caste was when I joined the school', reported a respondent from Panipat. Another respondent put it in sharper language: *School mein aate hi bhed-bhaav ka paath padha dia jata hai* (one of the first lessons taught in the school is practising caste discrimination [against the Dalits]).

One of them reported that unlike other children he was made to wash his own utensils and keep them away from the rest. A doctor talked about the caste divisions and prejudice which he experienced during his early days in medical college. Those who had moved from village to town recalled their life in the village where caste mattered all the time — while some remembered the practice of untouchability, others talked about the 'oppression' of the dominant caste, the Jats. Some of them also faced caste prejudice and discrimination in the localities where they were presently residing. It was difficult for a Dalit to get a house in a non-Dalit locality. Even if someone managed to buy or rent-in a house in non-Dalit areas, they were always discriminated against by their neighbours. One of them also mentioned his experience of not being allowed to sing in the temple he used to visit.

How Does Caste Matter in Business?

Caste appeared to matter in business in many different ways, directly and not so directly. While some mentioned experiencing prejudice of a general kind, others referred to more concrete problems that primarily emanated from their context of being not acceptable in the larger business community. Even when a majority of them did not feel active discrimination in business because of their caste,[7] they could not really get away from it. There was no denying the fact that caste influenced their businesses negatively. The number of respondents who reported this was much larger (57 per cent) than those who felt it had positive values (2 per cent). The locally dominant communities, who have traditionally ruled the business scene, do not like Dalits getting into business. 'They hate us'; 'non-Dalits do not like us being in the business', were some common reactions from several respondents.

The social universe of business had been so completely controlled by certain caste communities that when Dalits came into business they were invariably seen as 'odd actors'. Their caste identities were foregrounded, over and above their professional or business identities. This was articulated by several respondents in

[7] As many as 58 per cent of our respondents replied negatively to this question. However, the rest 42 per cent did feel discriminated against in business because of their caste.

different ways. One of them put it in the following words: 'While most other businesses or enterprises are known by the service they provide or goods they sell, our shops are known by our caste names, *Chamaron ki dukan or Chuhdon ki factory* [Chamar's shop or factory of the Chuhra]'.

Such identifications are not seen by the Dalits merely as a matter of violation of their dignity but also a way of harming their businesses. 'It discourages customers from coming to our shops', reported a shopkeeper in Panipat. Another entrepreneur who runs a 'dye-house', a unit for colouring threads used in carpet-weaving produced by small-scale textile units in Panipat, told us:

> Identification of my factory with my caste name tends to discourage my clients. Even when they do not have caste prejudice, they feel we may not be able to deliver because we are traditionally not the ones who have been in the business or possess enough resources to run a good business.

This point was further reinforced by the responses we received to the question on their perception on non-Dalits having any advantage over them in running businesses. A large majority of respondents (78 per cent) reported in the affirmative to the question.[8] This appeared to be rather obvious for most of them. As one of them summed it up: 'Non-Dalits have been in business much before we entered and they climb much faster because they get support from their fellow businessmen. Many of them have become millionaires while we continue to struggle.'

Some others had more cynical views on this. As a Jatav respondent from Saharanpur put it: 'While they are always referred to, and identified as businessmen, we continue to be called Chamars by fellow businessmen and everyone else'.

As mentioned earlier, some of them actively tried to conceal their caste identity and were apprehensive that disclosure of caste could affect their business negatively. As many as 48 per cent of our respondents felt so. It mattered more when it involved providing

[8] However, there were also some (18 per cent) who did not think that non-Dalits had an advantage in business simply because of their caste background.

personalized services. One of our respondents, an electrician, was asked to leave the house of an upper-caste client where he was working when they came to know about his caste. *Balmiki sunte hee samp katt jaave* (the moment they heard that we are Balmikis they were stunned as though bitten by a snake) was the response of a Dalit entrepreneur in textile business in Panipat. Similarly, a doctor in Saharanpur reported that: 'The identity of being a Dalit almost always works against us. Patients prefer going to non-Dalit doctors. Invariably it is only when they are not cured that they approach me.'

Some shopkeepers with businesses in non-Dalit areas reported that they often found it difficult to receive the outstanding amount from upper-caste customers because of their Dalit background. In the city of Saharanpur they also complained against the local Muslims. 'They too behave like the dominant/upper-caste Hindus and treat us with prejudice'.

However, despite these stories of caste prejudice and the perception of our respondents about the negative impact of their caste background on their businesses, they also recognized the realities of urban life. Even when the local residents tended to show caste preference, not many had exclusively Dalit clients. Only a small proportion of our respondents (5 per cent) said that their clients were exclusively Dalits. Other 14 per cent reported that they had predominantly Dalit clients. A large majority of them (78 per cent) either had a predominant non-Dalit or mixed clientele.

Caste appeared to matter least in procuring supplies. Only 5 per cent of all the respondents reported any kind of difficulties in getting supplies because of their being Dalits. 'As long as you can pay, no one cares who you are' was the frequent response to our questions. A large majority of our respondents procured their supplies from local traders. Only around 10 per cent were dependent on outsiders, from within the state or other states of India. However, they faced no caste-related discrimination in getting supplies or raw materials for their businesses. This was so when in almost all cases the suppliers were non-Dalits, mostly from the locally dominant business communities, the Banias, Punjabi Aroras or the Muslims. While there may be no direct caste-related bias or discrimination that our respondents mentioned, in-depth interviews with some Dalit entrepreneurs revealed that the bias here worked in an indirect manner. Dalits found it difficult to

get enough supplies on credit as suppliers were doubtful about their ability to pay back on time. They also found it hard to get guarantors.

Lack of social networks and absence of other members from the kin in the business also mattered a lot. As mentioned, only a small proportion of our respondents (21 per cent) were able to get bank loans sanctioned. As one of them reported: 'Banks ask for guarantee. We do not own expensive houses or plots of land in the city. Neither do we own any agricultural land. Our businesses are also small. Why would banks give us loans?'

Several respondents had taken money from banks or other government departments under special schemes, but the money given is too meagre to help them start or run a viable business. 'You can buy a buffalo or a cow with such loans but can't run a business'.

How did they mobilize money when required? While most of them invested their own meagre resources, in emergencies some turned to professional/private moneylenders, who charged high interest rates. Only 23 per cent of our respondents reported arranging money from such sources. The rest either did not borrow, or took from friends and family where they did not have to pay interest.

The Ways Out

How did an average Dalit entrepreneur deal with his/her marginal position in the urban economy and his/her lack of resources?

While they all talked about the difficulties they faced in mobilizing finances required for running a successful enterprise and the manners in which their caste background continued to matter even when they moved to a completely 'secular' occupation, some of them also responded to questions on how they dealt with caste prejudices and how they planned to move ahead. One of the evident responses was expectations of state support. They wanted government agencies to help them by providing cheap and easy loans and protection. However, there were also some who emphasized on the need for social networks. As one of them put it:

> Our main problem is the lack of resources. Our people are poor and also lack confidence to come to cities and try something new. Even those who have the courage, fail to go far. This is because we lack social contacts. We have to build bridges with other

> communities, dominant communities. More than the dominant business communities, we have to work with the dominant political community of the state, the Jats. Jats matter much more than anyone else. If they support and do not oppose us, we can make progress.

We were quite surprised to find that a good number of our respondents, particularly those who had been successful in business, were invariably also attracted towards electoral politics. They found it much easier to enter mainstream political space. Social and cultural spaces seemed much more difficult to penetrate. Democratic political process and the system of reserved quota of seats for Scheduled Castes seemed to invite them to politics. Success in politics in turn helped them in their businesses — providing them with some kind of shield in a social environment where they otherwise felt insecure and marginal.

They also seemed to be well aware of their move from traditional to new urban occupations and the implications it had for their caste identities and caste politics. We were quite surprised to find that nearly all our respondents (94 per cent) actively identified with Dalit movements and had been associated with them in some way or the other. Many of them were also involved with local Dalit NGOs or Dalit religious organizations (63 per cent).

These were perhaps seen as ways of dealing with their weak position in the urban market. Their being in secular occupations and with some success also made them politically more aware of their rights.

Concluding Comments

A section of popular media recently reported about the sudden rise of Dalit millionaires and presented it as a success story of the market-based neo-liberal economic policy and a possible way ahead for India's ex-untouchables.[9] However, several Dalit activists and intellectuals have expressed their dismay over such projections of Dalit mobility in neo-liberal market economy. Such a projection tends to undermine their struggles and sufferings in everyday life because of prejudice and poverty. Teltumbde, for example, argues

[9] See, for example, S. A. Iyer's article 'The Unexpected Rise of Dalit Millionaires', *The Times of India*, 1 August 2011.

that '[a]lthough, any achievement by dalits may be laudable, when it is projected over the entire community overlooking its woes, it becomes seriously problematic' (2011: 10).

Similarly, Gopal Guru sees this celebration of Dalit mobility through entrepreneurship as a kind of 'low intensity spectacle' that serves to justify the 'neo-liberal economic policy' and 'keep the below poverty line dalit out of ... sight' (2012: 43–49).

The stories presented in this chapter from two towns of northwest India tend to concur with the arguments of Teltumbde and Guru. Experiences of a large majority of Dalits trying to enter business clearly show that the path to mobility is quite difficult. They encounter several barriers, directly emanating from the order of caste. Most of our respondents had entered urban business because they had no other alternative. They could no longer sustain themselves in the rural economy and could not find employment in the formal sector of the urban economy. They enter the urban trade or business with very little capital in their kitty and virtually no social networks or collaterals that they can use to raise loans from banks.

However, notwithstanding the problems they encountered, no one really had any regrets about the choices they made in coming into the new occupation. Nearly all of them faced hardships because of lack of resources and the prevalent caste prejudice, but they all seemed proud of the fact that they were in business and were entrepreneurs. Not only were they doing well economically, but they also felt that they had a more dignified existence than before or in comparison with other Dalits. They felt proud of the fact that they had been able to come out of 'slavery'. Some of them were also in a position to help others set up an enterprise or get employment. They invariably saw themselves as role models for other members of their communities. They gave much weight to education and made sure their children, sons and daughters, went to schools. However, they did not want them to experience discrimination and caste prejudice in their schools. To overcome this they sent them to schools run by Dalits. Some of them were even willing to spend all their savings to send their children abroad, where no one would believe in the social sanctity of the caste system.

As has been repeatedly stated in this chapter, despite several positive changes, caste continued to play a role in the urban economy, and for Dalit entrepreneurs it was almost always a negative factor.

As mentioned earlier, Dalits lacked economic resources, but even when they had them they were crippled by the lack of social resources. However, while this is true across the entire spectrum of Dalits, it varied quite significantly across different caste communities. The Chamars, who have traditionally been involved with some kind of business and were producers and providers of leather, have been relatively more successful than the Balmikis. This was true in both Haryana and Uttar Pradesh.

Dalit situation in Haryana was certainly more vulnerable than in Uttar Pradesh. Apart from a longer history of entrepreneurship among a section of Dalits, Uttar Pradesh also has the distinction of a much stronger Dalit politics, to the extent that the previous Chief Minister of the state had been a Dalit woman. The proportion of Dalits in the state is also larger. However, despite this, the general pattern of responses to our questions did not differ much across the two states. Similarly, the experience of caste discrimination also seemed to be shared across caste-groups, though it was felt more by Balmikis than Chamars in both the states.

The business cartels are invariably controlled by traditionally dominant business caste-groups in the region. As has been shown by studies from elsewhere, community and kinship networks have always played a very crucial role in business (Munshi 2007; Rutten 2003). The collective prejudice, originating from tradition, not only cripples their prospects in the market but also shapes their self-image. Caste is not simply a matter of past tradition or a value system that is incompatible with contemporary market economy, but a reality, social and political, that continues to haunt the Dalit entrepreneurs.

However, the most remarkable thing that our study was able to capture was the fact that even in such adverse circumstances independent entrepreneurship is rising among the Dalits. Apart from hard work and struggle, they also seemed to be imaginatively using the available spaces within the system in order to consolidate their position in the market. To counter the prevalent discrimination in the market and in order to succeed, it appears that a Dalit entrepreneur not only has to be a good businessman but also a social and political entrepreneur.

V

'Caste-Blinding' and Corporate Hiring*

The Indian economy witnessed some important shifts during the 1990s. The Central Government initiated several policy measures that liberalized the earlier licence-quota raj and opened the Indian economy to private players and the global capital. This policy change proved to be an important turning point for the country in many different ways. The Indian economy began to grow at a much faster rate. Under the new regime, the Indian state began to reduce its active involvement in the economy. Local and global private capital was allowed and encouraged to expand into areas of economic activity that were hitherto not open to it. The policy shift also influenced the employment structures of the Indian economy. Even though employment opportunities expanded in the private sector, jobs available in the state sector began to shrink. For the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes this meant lesser jobs under the quota system, the Indian policy of reservations.

Though some Dalit intellectuals and activist groups started talking quite early about the possible negative implications of the new economic policy for them, the issue began to be debated in India when the newly elected United Progressive Alliance (UPA) Government in 2004 proposed to the private corporate sector to think of introducing quotas for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in recruitments to their sector as well. The private sector's response was unequivocally negative. Reservations, they vehemently argued, would work against 'merit' and 'efficiency', crucial for expanding the production base of the Indian

*This chapter draws from an earlier paper co-authored with Katherine Newman, published in the *Economic and Political Weekly* (see Jodhka and Newman 2007). An extended version of the paper also appeared in a book edited by Thorat and Newman (2010). The study was funded by the Princeton University.

economy and generating new jobs. More jobs, they claimed, would be good for everyone, including the Dalits. If the Indian state wanted to do something special for the historically-deprived communities, it should focus on improving their endowments by providing them with good quality education, they argued. The underlying assumption of their arguments was that caste- or community-based discrimination was no longer an issue in the Indian job market, and we should not talk about it when the Indian economy was trying to come to terms with the challenging process of globalization.[1]

How far is such a contention sustainable? Is the Indian corporate sector completely free from caste prejudice? Historically, the Indian urban and business economy has been under the exclusive control of a few traditional trading caste-communities, such as the Banias and the Marwaris. Not much research has been conducted on this subject that can tell us how much of this has changed. The available literature mostly focuses on the pre-liberalization era (see Banerjee and Night 1985; L. K. Deshpande 1979; Harris et al. 1990). More recently, some scholars have also looked at the social profiles of those working in the 'new economy', the Indian professionals in the global software industry (see Krishna and Brihmadesam 2006; Rothboeck et al. 2001; Upadhya 2007). The available evidence tends to point towards the continued dominance of the traditionally urban upper castes in India's corporate sector. A recent study of 1,000 companies found that as many as 92.6 per cent of the board members of Indian corporate houses came from two upper-caste clusters, that have traditionally been in urban employment — the Brahmins (44.6 per cent) and the Vaishyas (46 per cent) (Daljit et al. 2012). Together they would not constitute more than 10 to 20 per cent of the total population of the country.

What could explain this? Do factors like caste identity matter in the hiring process at the upper end of the emerging labour market in the private or corporate sector of the Indian economy? Or is this simply a strange coincidence? How are the notions of merit and endowment decoded in the hiring process? This chapter tries to

[1] A good collection of these responses can be found in a volume edited by S. Thorat, Aryama and P. Negi (2005).

explore these questions through an empirical study of the hiring process of 25 private companies based in Delhi and the National Capital Region (NCR). The fieldwork, completed during 2005–06, was carried out through lengthy on-site interviews with the managers and executives of the human resources development (HRD) departments of these companies.

The companies we chose for the study were of different sizes and sectors of production, ranging from manufacturing (11), service (10), media (two) and Business Processing Organizations or BPOs (two). Even though it is hard to measure the total number of persons a company employs, the number of staff directly on payrolls of these companies varied from 100 or 200 to more than 90,000. Nearly all of them outsourced some categories of work and hiring. For example, instead of directly employing drivers required for routine work of the company, they would invariably enter into a contract with an agency. The drivers would technically remain employees of the contracting agency. Similarly, personnel required for routine cleaning of the company premises came from such a contracting agency. 'We normally hire core staff only for the work where we can do value addition, rest is all outsourced', was a standard response of our interviewees. However, this was not entirely true. Some companies also outsourced the lower-end work, which was technically part of the 'core' labour of the company. The number of these outsourced employees could go up to more than 5,000 in a single company. According to our rough estimates, these 25 companies together employed more than 200,000 persons.

The primary motivation for outsourcing work was the challenge of discipline among the workforce. They often pointed to the difficult labour laws in India, which made it problematic for them to fire non-performing workers if they were on regular roles of the company. A hiring manager of a five-star hotel told us:

> I should have the right to hire and fire. But you can't do it in India. Outsourcing is the only way I can deal with labour. If I were the owner of this hotel, I would outsource every single job.

Our respondents were mostly in the age category of 30 to 50 years and a large majority of them were men (20). However, the presence of women in higher positions of authority in the Indian

corporate sector is no longer insignificant, and from these randomly selected companies five had women managing their HR Department. There was also some amount of diversity among the respondents in terms of their cultural regions of origin. Though a large majority of them were from northern India (17), some were also from the south (five), east (two) and west (one) regions. However, the level of diversity was much lesser in terms of caste and religion. Except for one respondent, who reported to be from a Scheduled Tribe background and worked with a company that had been in the public sector in the past, rest were all from upper-caste backgrounds and 23 of them reported their religion as Hinduism. The remaining two were Christians. They were all professionally qualified with degrees in personnel management or social work and/or had experience of dealing with recruitment and training.

As we expected, it was not very easy to make the hiring managers agree for the kind of interviews we conducted. It invariably took a good amount of convincing before we could fix an appointment. Many simply refused. They all wanted a formal request through a written letter and agreed to talk to us only after the higher-ups in their companies gave permission. When we had approached them we had mentioned that the purpose of the study was to explore employer perceptions of the Indian labour force, the nature and processes of hiring and their views on the challenges for India in relation to labour. We generally started the interviews by enquiring about the history of the company, its size and the relationship of the respondent with the company, such as the number of years s/he had worked in the company and his/her role. We also questioned about the size and nature of the workforce, categories of employees and their labour-search practices. We asked if they looked for specific social and cultural traits in the personalities of the people they hired and how they identified those traits. This often led to a discussion on their interest in the social backgrounds of the candidates and if caste and family mattered. Finally, we asked for their opinions on the official policy of the Government of India of providing 'reservations' to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, the oldest quota system in the world. In particular, we wanted to know their views on whether this policy instrument, which is legally required in public higher education, public employment and the legislative branches of government,

should be extended to the private sector. Most of our respondents (17) agreed to let us record the interviews on a digital recorder but some were hesitant (eight) and discussions with them were noted down in a notebook.

Patterns and Processes of Recruitment

As we proceeded with our study, it seemed quite evident that private business in India had undergone an interesting process of transformation over the past two or three decades, from family-run enterprises to professionally-managed companies. Though most (not all) of the companies we studied clearly had family ownerships, the owners did not micro-manage the hiring process and the everyday functioning of their companies. As mentioned earlier, all the hiring managers were professionally qualified and quite knowledgeable about their work.

How exactly did the companies recruit people at different levels (besides the outsourced work), particularly at the middle and higher level? Interestingly, the most popular methods of hiring were not through open advertisement of vacancies in popular newspapers and websites or selection through transparent and objective criteria, such as a written examination. The popular methods used by these companies for hiring at different levels were (*a*) campus recruitments, where the hiring managers visited the campuses of engineering colleges and management institutions and recruited the graduating students; (*b*) word of mouth: they asked their existing staff members to find candidates from their own personal networks, from among their former classmates and friends; (*c*) through recruiting agencies, who specialized in providing staff to companies. These agencies often collected bio-datas of a large number of candidates with required qualifications through various means and provided the companies with a small number of candidates who could be interviewed for specific jobs; (*d*) through the services of 'head-hunters' for some categories of high-end jobs. The head-hunters specialized in keeping bio-datas of senior and experienced professionals and negotiated between the companies and officers for a commission; (*e*) some of them also sent out open advertisements, in newspapers or on websites (their own or those that specialize in this).

Merit and Modernity

When we inquired about their recruitment practices, almost all our respondents began by underlining that the governing principle of workforce management in their company was 'merit'. Workers at all levels were recruited strictly according to merit. 'Modern' practices needed to move away from hiring of the kith and kin to a system of recruitment based on the required qualification and individual merit. That this was not the case in Indian industry previously was both clear and easily acknowledged.

Of course, India is not alone in this history. Western countries too had family-controlled businesses, inherited privileges and preferential recruitment systems (Rutten 2003). Such practices were not regarded as unfair or unfortunate; it was simply the way things worked. The rise of professions in the West, with their elaborate systems of credentialism (Collins 1979), interjected a different conceptual framework and corresponding practices. Qualification was now important and competition was building up at the gateway to the institutions that certified the most desirable would-be managers, lawyers, doctors, teachers, accountants, and so forth. Even when preferential selection played a role in the admission to reputed institutions, it had to be publically justified in terms of national, local or institutional requirements. The invention of the civil service was an important turning point, a reform intended to break the back of corruption and distribute jobs more fairly. Merit emerged as the sole legitimate basis for employment and for admission to an educational institution. Merit was not merely a personal choice; it was a moral or ideological commitment. The past, which was dominated by localism and favouritism, had to be overcome as a way to run organizations in modern times.

Many of them also presented this as an important normative shift that had come about after liberalization, and something that distinguished them from government-run companies where quotas and corruption compromised merit. A good example of this view was found in our interview with a hiring manager at Global Productions,[2] a major media company with its publishing

[2] All company names have been changed and the identifying details modified slightly to protect the privacy of the firm and that of our interview subjects.

headquarters in Delhi and bureaus in 16 Indian states. The firm was about 80 years old, had a workforce of 3,000 core employees and another 800 hired through outsourced contracts. They recruited new employees on a national level for their main news staff and locally for their auxiliary bureaus. It was a publicly listed company, though the majority of its shares belonged to an Indian family who had purchased the firm after Indian Independence.

When asked whether particular groups composed the workforce, the manager responded: 'Our workforce is quite diversified. No concentration on caste, creed and colour … talent and merit do not go with one particular caste or creed'.

When pressed about whether popular stereotypes of castes or religious groups influenced hiring, he was adamant that prejudice plays no role. 'No, things have changed', he explained:

> This was the perspective of the 1980s [before liberalization]. Today when you are casting your own future in an unknown market, the internal flexibility is very important. We don't put any kind of template on any individual … We focus completely on merit. As our main goal is standardization … We have also defined what merit is … We need people who are more exposed [to the world]. We believe power of imagination comes with exposure. Exposure makes you observe certain things and this stimulates the power of imagination. If you have to be part of global culture, your leadership should be … defined by your capability of redefining … the company. And this can be … made possible only through the power of imagination.

There was a clear reluctance to discuss caste and religion as being of any significance in the process of hiring. Some respondents consciously avoided using the word caste during the entire interview, even when we repeatedly asked questions on the subject or on the reservation policy. Even those who responded to the question of reservations did so in relation to their ideas of merit. As one of them reported:

> There should be no reservation in jobs. You can give them education but no jobs. Once they are educated let them compete. By giving reservations, people who are supposed to get jobs are not getting them. If you help them by giving jobs they take you for granted. Why should we have reservations in medicine and engineering? The quality of the service goes down.

Another manager of a manufacturing firm that processes food was very proud of their recruitment process, which was completely based on modern practices. Caste or religious background did not matter for him:

> I haven't seen any kind of correlation between the religion of the person and his work. It is basically his calibre, attitude and his commitment that is seen. I have seen people from various castes. Some come from so-called BIMARU states[3] but they are very active and committed towards their work … So I never thought about caste and creed … Stereotypes do not work any longer in the process of recruitment. No one recruits anyone on the basis of his caste or the region he comes from if he is not going to be useful for the required task.

He however acknowledged that not everyone shared his perspective and some did show bias:

> Some owners of Indian companies come from a particular caste and the people who belong to this community may have some kind of positive discrimination. For example, people from his own caste or community always help a person who is a thriving businessman or the kind of friends he has also belong to the same caste.

But, from his perspective, this was not a modern attitude and it was quickly fading. It was more likely to be found outside the corporate industry and big cities. 'Such things are not very strong today', he explained. The competitive pressures being created by the process of globalization would leave no choice for these companies but to change if they wished to survive in the emerging economy. Hence, even though caste- and kin-based preference in recruitments had not disappeared completely, it was rapidly declining. It was simply a matter of evolutionary progression. The more progressive firms, exposed to international competition and modern management, had abandoned these vestiges of discriminatory tradition, while the smaller firms that catered to local

[3] BIMARU is an acronym coined by demographer Ashish Bose to refer to India's less-developed states of Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh. The word 'Bimaru' in Hindi means someone who is perennially ill.

markets or continued to work with a traditional family orientation, who were far from the influences of large markets, were slower to accommodate. It was there, and only there, that these retrograde practices persisted.[4]

However, Family Matters

As is evident from the abovementioned discussion, our respondents almost unequivocally argued that caste, kin and community blinding was an important requirement for a company to function and progress in the emerging global economy. However, family still mattered, and that has far-reaching implications for the hiring practices in the Indian corporate sector.

How did they choose candidates when a set of applicants had nearly similar qualifications and merit? What did they look for in addition to merit? Interestingly, almost all of them said that 'merit was important but it certainly could not be enough. Every company had a culture of its own. The candidate must fit into that' — a response we received almost instantly from many respondents. The employers looked for the 'right' kind of social and cultural traits in the candidate that would enable them to fit in the culture of the company. How did they find this out? Virtually every hiring manager underlined the importance of family background of a potential employee, and almost every candidate was asked questions about the family they grew up in and the social and economic profile of their parents and siblings. What kind of questions do hiring managers ask regarding family background? For some, the concept was amorphous and would stretch to include virtually anything that was not directly related to educational credentials or work experience. For others, the idea was quite specific.

The HR manager of a multinational shoe-manufacturing company, that employed nearly 10,000 core workers and 2,000 casual workers, listed a set of qualities that they would look for in

[4] Interestingly, they were even less reluctant to talk about gender divisions in the workforce. Though women were employed, they could not be hired for all kinds of jobs. Women, some of them argued, could not be made to work on the shop floor. They were more suited for 'supervisory positions, in media centre, design department, research unit and computer department'.

a candidate, for which they asked questions about family background. They looked for 'good' background, educated parents, educated and working siblings, and urban residence.

The hiring manager of another company that employed about 20,000 people in over 60 locations throughout India, and has been in the business of manufacturing a variety of consumer goods for nearly a century, too underlined the significance of knowing the family background of potential candidates. The family background and/or the kind of setting in which a candidate was raised marked the difference between success and failure in a job applicant. 'We ask them about family background', he noted, 'depending upon the position applied [for] and the kind of task allotted with the position'. The need to prove one's worthiness through family characteristics was most important for managerial workers, he explained. For lower-level workers, the assumption is that they would not pass muster on these grounds. Instead, they wanted to know whether a potential janitor (for one of the firm's hotels) had the same standards as those that the company wanted to promote:

> Say, for example, in housekeeping, we generally avoid keeping people from slum areas because their appreciation for cleanliness will be different from ours. For him, a dusty room would also be a clean room. If he is trainable, then there is no problem of taking him in the company. But in front office we go for trained and professional people and they all belong to higher castes.

Why does family background matter so much? It seemed unnecessary for nearly all our informants to explain this; it was so important a part of the hiring system that the question seemed surprising. But when asked for more detail, respondents answered with a theory of socialization: merit is formed within the crucible of the family. The HR manager of Food Futures provided the most coherent expression of this theory:

> As personal traits are developed with the kind of interaction you have with society. Where have you been brought up, the kind of environment you had in your family, home, colony, and village. These things shape up the personal attributes of people. This determines his behaviour, and working in a group with different kind of people. We have some projects abroad, and if a person doesn't behave properly with them, there is a loss for the company.

> Here family comes in between. Whether the person behaves well and expresses himself in a professional way, for a longer term and not for a short term. This is beneficial.

What one sees on the surface — credentials, expressed attitudes — is shaped in the bosom of the family. For the hiring manager who could not delve more deeply into the character of the applicant than surface characteristics, the successes of the rest of the job applicant's family stood in as proof that the individual before him was reliable, motivated and worthy. If the answers did not come back in a desirable form, the surface impressions might be misleading. Doubt was cast on the qualities of the individual.

Jatin, the hiring manager of a major manufacturing firm that employed over 2,800 people to produce some of the finest jewellery in India, echoed this sentiment when explaining what he learnt from answers to questions about family background:

> We also ask a lot of questions related to family background. Questions like how many family members are in there, how many are educated, etc. The basic assumption behind these questions is that a good person comes from a good and educated family. If parents have good education, the children also have good education. Some questions about their schooling … and the locality where they [grew up].

As these managers saw it, background characteristics of this kind were the source of 'soft skills' that were an asset for a firm. A person who could adroitly manage in the organizational context of a firm hierarchy, in India and abroad, was going to contribute to the bottom line and a person who had trouble in these interactions would detract. But the surface evidence of soft skills was difficult to judge in an interview and, managers seemed to believe, if the judgement of the hiring manager had been faulty at the outset, by the time it mattered it would be too late. Hence, they searched for corroborating information to shore up their estimation of an applicant's personal qualities and found it in the 'data' on family background. Given their own upbringing in the Indian culture, they obviously looked for certain subjective and social qualities in the candidates that would make them culturally compatible to work with their fellow workers.

Given the context, this was closely linked to their notions of caste, community and place of residence, about which they had strong opinions. In some cases, this almost directly translated into nearly complete elimination of candidates coming from reserved categories, the Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribes and the first-generation educated, with rural parents. Even if they were meritorious, they were unlikely to be able to speak 'good' English. Though no one admitted that they asked the candidates about their caste background, many hiring managers openly admitted their ways of 'placing' and guessing the interviewee's caste. 'It is not tough to figure out their caste and social background. One gets to know about it the moment they open their mouth, the way they speak in English language', reported Mr Jain who worked for a leading watch-manufacturing company. Several of them told us about their experience of campus hiring where they were invariably given two separate lists of candidates, first of those admitted to the course through open competition, and second of those who came in through the reserved quotas for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

The family-related questions not only eliminated the ones coming from rural backgrounds and other 'disabilities', they also helped the managers to avoid hiring those from very privileged backgrounds because they were unlikely to work hard and with commitment.

A car-manufacturing firm, half foreign-owned, employed 3,800 workers in one plant alone. It was in the process of building another and hence had been recruiting new workers. What did they look for in a new employee? 'First is the qualification and relevant background', the HR manager explained. 'If the person frequently changes jobs, he is not preferred'. But this was not sufficient. One must be willing to work hard and that was a quality, which this manager believed was absent from those at the top of the social structure:

> We judge and prefer a person who is humble, not aggressive, and open to all … We see the family background. People who come from high profile families/communities are not preferred as they have an inner pride within them that makes them arrogant. People from middle class are preferred.

Stereotypes and Preferences

Though the hiring managers underlined merit as the sole criteria in the selection process, the standards for judging the soft skills of the candidates invariably drew from their cultural prejudices about communities and regions the candidates came from. Not only did they have strong ideas about the qualities that different regions inculcated in their residents, but they also expressed apprehensions about the workers forming unions based on caste, community and regional backgrounds.

The Kilim Chemical Company, a family-owned business founded in early 1960s, supplied caustic soda to the aluminium-manufacturing industry. They had their manufacturing units in remote regions of India where the raw materials were extracted and refined. The company had over 1,000 core workers on payroll, and in addition employed thousands of seasonal workers who were involved in salt manufacture, an essential element of caustic soda production. The HR manager, a trained economist, working with the company for the past two years, told us about how the company was able to manage its human relations. 'We have extremely good industrial relations', he explained. 'We have never had workers going on strike'. The firm is 'widely recognized for [its] generosity … there are people who have been working here for 20 years, 25 years and 50 years'. As is typical of many family firms, a paternalistic relationship developed between the owners and the community surrounding the manufacturing plants.

> [The owner] has a bungalow in [the township where the plant is located]. He goes there every two–three months and visits and then goes around the place. So everybody knows who he is. He is a *Mai-Baap* [the patron] but in terms of welfare.

Though described as a shy man, the owner nonetheless had a habit of turning up at village weddings to make contributions to the bride's father. In this respect, the firm was a kind of family, with obligations that stretched beyond the work world to the private sphere of kinship and households. Given this kind of integration, it was perhaps not surprising that the professional management could rattle off images of local ethnic groups that were strikingly categorical.

'Are there any kind of stereotypes about labour?' we inquired. 'I understand what you're talking about', the HR manager replied.

> Now it is a little impolite thing to say it on a tape recorder. There is a great deal [of stereotyping] about Uttar Pradesh people. There is a constant mimicking of Bihari labourers. Lazy guys, come in drop in without work, you know, but we have no choice, we have to work with those kinds of people, rather than people from Gujarat and Maharashtra …
>
> I can manage with these people, but in casual [conversation] we say he is so laid back. We have to adjust. The work I expect to be done in three minutes would probably take an hour and a half, but it will get done.

Another respondent, a middle-level officer in the HR department in a private airline, that employed nearly 8,400 workers including those on regular- and contract-hiring agreements, was even more explicit about the stereotypes that were used in judging candidates. Almost all the lower-end work is outsourced to other companies. For hiring the middle- and higher-level positions, the pilots, the air-hosts and -hostesses and the senior-level ground staff, the airline encourages potential candidates to apply through its website.

When asked about the kind of workers they employed with respect to background, region or religion, the HR manager was completely open about the fact that they selected on the basis of appearance, fluency in English and cultural sophistication. 'This is a service-providing industry', Mr Jagdish explained, 'we need good people, people who have some style and looks'.

> A stylish guy, who also communicates well, speaks good English, who is very much educated, well-grown and who comes from a particular 'class' is preferred. So we do not recruit anyone and everyone. We have identified some regions and communities from where we get our people. Say in north India, Punjabi culture is very much open; their faces have a glow.
>
> But that is not the same case with Haryana culture, Uttar Pradesh or Bihari culture. They are not good for us. Their cultures, their way of speaking and dealing with others would not work in our company or this industry. They don't have that openness.

> A majority of airhostesses come from Punjabi families, as they are open. They can speak or communicate well. Some of them are from the Northeast.

He went on to explain that they preferred to recruit 'sardar' (Sikh) girls, who were also well-spoken. But they were not interested in just any sardar. Instead, they specifically looked for 'those who come from good families … Sardar girls won't speak well if they come from Himachal Pradesh. They may not be cultured.'

Physical appearance was integral to his image of the right kind of employee for his airlines, candidates with 'glow in their face'. 'Frankly speaking, people from urban areas are preferred more than those coming from a rural area in this company, because that rural mentality does not suit our company and us'. He also told us that girls whose fathers were in the military were a particularly good bet for jobs in the airline industry. 'People who come from this particular culture … have a tendency to come together and work for the company'.

Our interview with the HR manager of a security company, a woman, clearly reveals how views about the appropriateness of particular regions as a source of employment also carried stereotypes about caste.

> If we go down to the south, say Chennai, Bangalore … that part of the country has a different attitude and they work much better. Basically it is the culture of the area. The feedback from the customer is that the service in those regions is much better.

> If I go to Noida area (in Uttar Pradesh), the social system is not balanced. If I go to Gurgaon, it is most horrifying because of the concentration of Jats there. They are very arrogant. In India, this is the community which is most unsophisticated. The roughest community is the Haryanvi community. They don't understand logic; their blood starts boiling fast. In terms of discipline, commitment and confinement to rule, I find it is least in these people.

India Motors, an automobile-manufacturer, is a multinational firm with major manufacturing units in India. Two production firms in the NCR have been in operation for more than two decades. Nearly 4,500 workers are listed on the India Motors payroll, but the actual workforce is nearly double that number,

since contract employees are brought on as temporary workers. The senior HR manager, Mr Vincor, who had been with the firm for 15 years, explained that the workforce that mans the plants is drawn from nearby areas and hence is dominated by people coming from communities living in the area:

> The social profile of labour varies significantly in the two plants. Workforce in the first plant is dominated by the labour from nearby villages, which means they are mostly from Haryana. Since they were recruited from available labour locally, they are not very educated. In fact we trained most of them.

Caste, some believed, played a role in unionization and politicization of the rural labour force. As Mr Vincor explained, even the unions are structured by caste:

> Nearly 450 workers [in the first plant] belong to the local dominant caste of Jats and another 250 to 300 come from another dominant caste of Ahirs. Around 100 to 150 would be from different backward castes. Our workers are also organized on caste lines. Trade Union elections are mostly on caste lines …
>
> Jat group is arrogant. They do not listen to anyone. Ahirs are tame. Brahmans are more learned and they speak well and Scheduled Castes are not vocal.

These are obviously not merely prejudices. They also reflect their experience of working with their employees. The social organization of caste provided a platform for collective grievances, and the firm had been on the receiving end of labour actions that could be more easily organized given the caste lines in the workforce. 'At times they are very aggressive', Vincor complained. 'We have seen a lot of bad phase, strikes and lock outs'.

The firm tried to temper the power of ethnic- or caste-based organizing in two ways. First, the firm's owner maintained a paternalistic relationship that he hoped would cut through these solidarities that engendered their loyalty to the firm. As part of its civic relations, India Motors built hospitals, schools, dug tube-wells, ran eye camps and health camps. Second, they tried to avoid recruiting workers from a single region.

> We have clear instructions that if we recruit 50 people, not more than 10 to 12 should be the local Jats. The rest should be from diverse backgrounds. We need diversity in our workforce. We need loyal and obedient workforce. People who will listen to us and work religiously.

In their second plant, India Motors made sure that the workforce was ethnically diverse. No single group dominated, and labour relations were more professional and less personal. Mr Vincor regarded the second plant as more modern, closer to the rest of the world economy, in part because of its more impersonal labour practices. The language of globalization, which equated patrimonial bureaucracy and ethnic- or caste-based hiring with the past — and formal mechanisms for hiring rather than personal networks — meritocratic principles (albeit in the context of 'family background'), and national rather than local recruitment, represents a self-conscious effort to align India with international business culture, rather than traditional, customary and ancient local practices.

However, this 'modern' principle rarely translated into non-prejudiced attitude towards applicants. Ethnic, regional and caste identities could also be a source of judging the soft skills of the candidates suitable for a particular job. Fitness Health Corporation employed about 4,000 people in northern India, while another 1,800 — ranging from 'ward boys, to nurses, cleaners, and receptionists' — were contract workers. Fitness was a new industry of private health-providers that catered to relatively wealthy families. They were particular about the people they hired because they were serving an elite clientele.

> The majority of our employees are local, mostly north Indians. We have people who have migrated from Noida and Ghaziabad. However, most of our nurses are females coming from south India, especially from Kerala (Malayali-Christian girls) … they are better in knowledge than other girls and this is because they are doing the job from generation to generation and the knowledge is passed on from one … to another.

> Higher caste people are reluctant to send their daughters in this nursing profession. They think that this is not a good profession, looking after the patients, cleaning them and other things. The

> nurses [we hire] are mostly Christians, must be converted (from low-caste [Hindus]) or born Christians. They generally don't belong to Scheduled Castes.

Though the woman HR manager underlined the point that they 'had no prejudices about Scheduled Castes and Muslims'. 'This was a mind-set issue', she did not hesitate to add that Scheduled Castes are unlikely to possess the kind of skills they were looking for.

The question of 'mind-set' was not merely a random or casual expression used by a single hiring manager. The global language of 'psychologically fit' appeared to be becoming increasingly popular with the HR departments in Indian companies. Several of them showed us their elaborate questionnaires with multiple-choice questions through which they carried out personality assessments of the shortlisted candidates.

Reservations or Affirmative Action

The final set of questions in our interview-guide were about their opinions on the reservation policy and what they thought about the merits of it being introduced in the private sector. As is evident from the aforementioned discussion, they were uniformly opposed to it being introduced in the private sector; and even being there in the public sector. They invoked the idea of modernity and merit as being critical for India's economic development. The future of the Indian economy, they argued, lay in increasing productivity and this, in turn, required that only the best were hired for a given task. Interference in the name of social engineering would ultimately defeat the purpose of national growth, and the loss of international investment that would accompany quota regulations would strip the whole country of the capital flow it desperately needed.

However, it was not only that they criticized the proposal of introducing quotas in the private sector or the reservation policy per se; their responses also reflected their views on caste and the existing social structure of opportunities in India. They invariably denied the possibility of any kind of discrimination being present in India's labour markets. It might have been an issue in the past, but not any longer. 'I haven't come across anywhere where a Scheduled Caste has been denied a job because he is a Scheduled Caste', the director of a waste-management company explained.

When we asked him about the possibility of introducing reservations for such categories in private sector employment, he told us very firmly:

> Nobody can do it in the private sector. Private sector is more concerned about its profit and production. If someone is an asset to them, he or she is accepted … If a Scheduled Caste person comes to me and he is brilliant, I will certainly employ him. Since it is a private company, my company, I have no obligation to hire him. No one can force me to do so.

Confidence in the basic fairness of the employment system also found echoes in our interview with Mr Palin, the manager of a large retail firm started 15 years ago to supply the growing Indian market for household products. 'If a person is capable enough, he or she doesn't need reservations. There are enough jobs in the market; one can easily achieve what he wants.'

Virtually every interview we conducted included a statement to the same effect. Yet, managers were aware that inequality was persistent, that low-caste individuals had less opportunity than others in the labour market. Few would argue that this state of affairs came about just because talent was differentially distributed. Instead, they suggested that a human capital problem created by an educational system that disadvantaged Dalits and OBCs was producing a talent deficit in this population. The hiring manager for Global Productions insisted that unequal education was the root of the problem. When asked why the Dalits were virtually never employed in top private sector jobs, she responded:

> I haven't thought [about] it that way. I don't think that it is true [that discrimination is at work]. I think it could be a lot to do the way our society is developed. There could be a possibility that because Dalits are economically weaker, so they haven't gone to best schools and colleges. That could be a reason. But if you have a level and a degree, no one can stop you.

Hence, the explanation for poverty and disadvantage in the lower castes shifted away from their traditional disadvantage and enforced exclusion to the institutions that certified talent and to individual endowments. Almost everyone underlined the view that

quality education, not affirmative action, was the key to uplifting the low castes.

A senior industrialist, an office bearer of the Associated Chambers of Commerce and Industry of India (ASSOCHAM), also highlighted this point during an informal interaction on the subject of a possible role of private corporate sector in dealing with caste-based disabilities in the Indian society. 'Frankly, corporations have no solution to the problem', he explained.

> We cannot progress in this regard [equal hiring] unless there is integrated schooling in India. In countries like USA, where you have integrated schooling, the young people grow up together. For 15 to 20 years of their life, they have been together in the school despite the difference of colour … Industries have little role to play. One should not have more expectation from industry.

Hence, investment in education and encouraging integration to break down barriers that divide Indians by caste will pay off in levelling the playing field. Then, and only then, could business be expected to show equal hiring rates, because it would be choosing from among equally qualified applicants.

Reservation policy was also seen to be out of tune with modern values related to work. 'Reservation policy destroys the incentive to be productive', argued one of our respondents. 'In a corporate environment', he explained, 'it is disastrous because people use it as a trick'.

> People take advantage and do not do any work … This guy, like he says, because I am a Scheduled Caste I will get away with anything that is not acceptable, and it happens. That's number one.
>
> Second, if we have a reserved post and we do not select a Scheduled Caste candidate for want of required qualification and skill, we would be confronted with their complaints and 'grievances'. This would become a serious distraction from the work we are required to focus on. This is bound to have a negative effect on the company. How can we compete in the global market? Production would suffer.

'Reservations' for them had nothing to with the social agenda of creating a level playing field in a society marked by prejudice and disadvantage, but a trick being played by wily politicians to

garner votes. For further proof of the damage reservations would do to competitiveness in a firm, employers pointed to government organizations in their own fields. As the HR manager of the private hospital told us:

> If there [were] reservations in this company, nurses and ward boys won't work and pay less attention to patients. See what is happening in government departments. Incapable people are pushed in and ultimately we all lose. These people do not work hard. They enter with low [grades]. Our job is very technical and incompetent people cannot be relied upon to [do] such work. There is no place for poor education and technical skills in our institution. Our company will resist any kind of caste-based reservation.

According to these employers, not only did the reservation policy let the Scheduled Caste beneficiary off the hook, it had the potential to spread a watered-down work ethic to others. 'Somewhere it affects the people who work hard. It de-motivates them,' as one of them underlined. Another HR manager argued that competent Dalits failed to realize their potential because of the quota system:

> They have already accepted that they are smaller [less capable] than the high-caste people … They have a low confidence level. I had one person from Scheduled Caste background; he is a scared fellow. Doesn't even speak with me. They are so much oppressed that he doesn't even question me.

Finally, we also encountered the popular middle-class argument against reservations, that it had become a monopoly of small elite, the creamy layer, among the Dalits. The HR manager of Best Steel Company, who had worked in both the private and public sector, was of the firm opinion that reservation policy was a disaster because it had become the preserve of one class of Dalits:

> It is high time we should get out of [the quota system]. We must stop this. No one should avail of such a facility. It has become a privilege for them. Father was taking it; then his son; and now his great grandson. It then becomes institutionalized. Government should stop it. Only the urban Dalits take the benefit of it and [the] rural class is kept deprived.

The reservation policy was a complete 'no-go' from the corporate perspective. In the 25 interviews we conducted, there was not a single supporter of the idea. At most, hiring managers were willing to support policies of educational investment, and scholarships to reward deserving students, as a means to encourage meritorious behaviour and the future benefits that are presumed to go with high achievement.

Concluding Comments

Perhaps the most obvious and glaring evidence of the presence and significance of caste in the hiring practices of India's private corporate sector is in its 'absence'. The corporate sector works with the assumption that caste is simply an irrelevant subject. The presence of caste in any form is a threat to its efficiency and productivity and consequently to its ability to compete in the emerging global markets. While 'caste-blinding' appears to be an aspect of modern work practice, a kind of ideological commitment for the hiring manager, it is also shaped by their own upper-caste upbringing, with strong prejudice against those who are educated through the quota system, the Schedules Castes and the Scheduled Tribes.

'Caste-blinding' does not mean absence of caste or caste-related biases. Caste was seen, as many of them told us, on the shop floor of the company, in the canteens where the workers from 'upper' castes often avoided sitting with those from the 'low' caste, and in their associational life inside and outside the company. The ideas of caste were also present in the process of hiring, when they enquired about the family background of the candidates. Their strong opinions on reservation policy also reflected their active position against any policy that would help level the playing fields. Even when they advocated the need for extra efforts in providing education to the historically disadvantaged, their focus on soft skills made it impossible for the first-generation educated to be on the list of those likely to be found suitable, particularly for the valued/high-end jobs.

The language of merit appeared to be hiding many aspects of the recruitment process. Though on the surface merit alone mattered; in reality, many appeared more concerned about hiring only those who possessed the required soft skills, which, as we have seen, are culturally acquired while growing up, or through socialization, in

a particular kind of family and social context — which is urban, invariably upper caste, and requires educated parents. Their narrative of modernity presented merit in opposition to caste, where 'merit' implied those 'without caste', the 'general' category and from the 'upper' castes, and 'caste' indicated the 'reserved' category, the Scheduled Castes. In this binary, merit could only be an attribute of those 'without caste' because it is only in the 'general category' that individual distinction (merit) can be recognized. The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes had to always carry the burden of their community and thus no available scale could judge their merit, and hence their exclusion. Consequently, according to the people we met, the government sector was incapable of competing in the global economy because it accepted the reservation policy and thus its principle of hiring was not based on merit. Caste-blinding, the unwillingness to recognize its continued significance and its role in shaping opportunity-structures appeared to be working more as a strategy of exclusion and a regime of discrimination rather than as a principle of fair treatment to all.

Part Three

Mobility and Mobilizations

VI

Social Mobility and Quest for Autonomy

Global Contours of Ravidasi Identity

The mainstream theories of social change, popular all over the world until sometime back, anticipated a gradual weakening and eventual disappearance of institutions like caste. This was to happen along with the process of economic growth, urbanization and spread of modern values across regions and countries of the South, the less-developed Third World. The nationalist leadership of India and a majority of its middle-class elite also expected this to happen, almost inevitably, as a process of evolutionary change. With the introduction of modern education, democratic system of governance and the unfolding of the developmental process initiated by the Indian state after its independence from the colonial rule, the closed system of caste hierarchy was to give way to a modern civil society, based on individual merit and associational identities.

However, the experience of the last six decades and more shows that the trajectory of change in relation to caste has been much more complex and diverse than expected. As is evident from the discussions in previous chapters, caste was able to adapt rather easily to the modern democratic politics. It also survives in urban labour markets and business. Even when old institutions such as the jajmani system disintegrate and the idea of pollution loses its ideological hold, caste prejudice and inequalities tend to persist. Caste-based prejudice plays an active role in reproduction of social and economic inequalities. It often manifests itself in discriminatory behaviour by those in positions of power and influence against those located at the lower end of the traditional caste hierarchy, particularly the ex-untouchable communities.

It is in response to this continued experience of prejudice and discrimination that the modern-day Dalit movements emerged.

Using the idiom of religion or some 'lost tradition', several Dalit groups in different parts of India have tried to mobilize themselves into autonomous communities. This process has been particularly successful among those caste communities that have seen some of their members moving up and/or out of the traditional hierarchy. Such dynamics or dialectics of prejudice and mobility is clearly evident in the identity formation of the Punjabi Ravidasis in contemporary Punjab and beyond. Over the years, the Punjabi Ravidasis have emerged as a strong religious and caste community with its networks spread across different parts of India and abroad. The social and economic mobility of a section of them, including their migration to the West, has played a critical role in the construction and consolidation of this identity.

Drawing from my qualitative fieldwork completed during 2008–09, in and around the city of Jalandhar, this chapter provides a brief account of the formation of the Ravidasi community identity and its possible social and developmental implications for members of the community, and the manner in which it alters the organization of caste in the emerging regional, national and global contexts. Notwithstanding its distinctive demographic history and social diversity,[1] Punjab provides a textbook case for the study of contemporary Dalit politics and identity formation. Beginning in the early 20th century, the region has witnessed some interesting processes of mobility and mobilizations among sections of its ex-untouchable communities.

Religion and Caste Mobilizations in Punjab

The beginning of modern-day Dalit politics in Punjab can be located in the changing socio-economic and political scenario of the region after the establishment of colonial rule during the second half of the 19th century. Though the British colonial rule came to Punjab relatively late, the spread of its influence

[1] The religious demography of Punjab has always been very different from that of the country as a whole. A majority of the population in contemporary Punjab (nearly 60 per cent) identifies itself with Sikhism, a religion that theologically decries caste. Prior to the partition of the subcontinent in 1947, more than half the population of Punjab comprised Muslims, which similarly decries caste.

was rather fast. The British set up a network of canals and canal colonies that helped in the growth of agriculture in the region. Establishment of colonial rule also accelerated the growth of urban centres. Jalandhar was one such town that experienced significant growth after it was chosen for the setting up of a military cantonment for recruitment of soldiers from the region. The colonial army provided new opportunities of employment to the children of Punjabi peasants and also opened up avenues of social mobility for a section of local Dalits, particularly the Chamars who worked with leather.

The cantonment raised the demand for leather goods, particularly boots and shoes required for the soldiers of the British army. As was in most other places in the subcontinent, the leather trade in the region was controlled by urban Muslim traders. However, at the local or village level, the 'untouchable' Chamars supplied the raw animal skins. Some of them were quick to exploit the new opportunities being offered to them by the increased demand for leather and the new avenues that opened with the establishment of colonial rule. These new opportunities enabled some of them to move out of the village, to the neighbouring towns and beyond. Some even ventured to other parts of the subcontinent, to the United States, Canada and England.

Arrival of colonial rule also provided a context and condition for many other social changes in the region. Perhaps the most important of these, in the present context, were the competitive social reforms initiated by the newly emergent elite among the different religious communities of Punjab, particularly the Hindus and Sikhs. They opened up new spaces for the local Dalits, eventually enabling them to mobilize for independent identities of their own.

Establishment of British colonial rule in Punjab after they defeated the Sikh armies in 1849 also encouraged the Christian missionaries to initiate their activities in the region. The missionaries arrived with the intention of spreading the message of the Church and to convert the locals to Christianity. The first to find the appeal of the Church attractive were the members of untouchable castes. The first conversion is reported to have taken place in 1873, when a man named Ditt was baptized in Sialkot. 'To the surprise of the missionaries, Ditt was followed by hundreds of thousands of others from lower castes, and in Punjab Christianity became a *de facto* movement' (Juergensmeyer 1988: 181). By 1890

there were 10,171 Christians living in 525 villages of Punjab, by 1911 their number had gone up to 163,994 and by 1921 to over 300,000 (see Grewal 1994: 130 and Webster 1999: 96). Most of them came from a particular untouchable caste, the Chuhras (scavengers), and mainly hailed from rural areas.

According to Juergensmeyer, the Christian missionaries had not really intentionally targeted the low castes for conversions: 'It was the untouchables who had originally sought out Christianity' (1988: 184). The latter obviously saw a potential for social mobility in this.

> Originally, the missionaries of the Punjab had only attempted to convert the upper castes, since they regarded others as beyond the reach of the methods they preferred — intellectual argument and moral suasion. The enthusiasm of the first convert, Ditt, and the subsequent lower caste requests for conversion not only baffled the missionaries but embarrassed them: they saw no sensible or moral reason for keeping the lower castes out, yet feared that allowing them in would sully the church's reputation (ibid.).

The fears of the missionaries were not unfounded. When a newspaper article in *The Tribune* of 19 October 1892 reported that the rate of conversions would soon turn Punjab into a Christian region, 'a tremor of fear ran through the upper caste Hindu and Sikh elite' (as reported in ibid.: 181). There was a virtual competition among the religious communities, Christians, Hindus and Sikhs, to win the untouchables over to their side. It was around this time that the Hindu reformist organization, the Arya Samaj, made its entry into Punjab.

The colonial rule also introduced a new grammar of communities in Punjab and elsewhere in India. For its administrative convenience, the colonial rulers deployed new categories of social aggregation and classification. The British rulers generally thought of their populace in terms of religious communities and looked at them accordingly in the process of governance. They 'encouraged the members of each community to present their case in communitarian terms' (Grewal 1989). As is well known to students of Indian history, the Colonial Census and classifications of population into categories that made sense to the alien rulers played a critical role in converting the fuzzy boundaries of difference into

well-defined communities (Breckenridge and van der Veer 1993; Cohn 1996; Dirks 2001). The introduction of Census thus made 'religious communities' sensitive about numbers, which were already being 'equated with strength, particularly for employment under the government' (Grewal 1994: 131).

While the Muslim population remained stable at around 51 per cent during 1881–1911 and the Sikh and Christian populations went up, the Hindu population showed a decline from about 41 per cent in 1881 to around 36 per cent in 1911 (Jones 1976: 324). The conversions to Christianity were mostly from the 'low' castes; most of whom had been earlier recorded as Hindus by colonial enumerators. The upper-caste Punjabi Hindus, who had always been the dominant group in the local-level bureaucracy in earlier regimes, were already feeling marginalized by the Bengali clerks brought by the British from Calcutta for administrative work. They would have obviously viewed the decline in Hindu population with much concern. The passing of the Land Alienation Act in 1901, that stopped the transfer of agricultural land from agricultural castes, mostly Sikhs and Muslims, to non-agricultural castes, mostly Hindus, had also been seen by the Hindu elite as an act of discrimination against them.

Swami Dayanand launched Arya Samaj in 1875 in Bombay. To spread his message of reform, he visited Lahore in 1877. He stayed in Punjab for nearly 18 months during his first visit and set up branches of the Samaj in almost all the big towns of the province (Sharma 1985: 40). The reformism of Arya Samaj appeared to provide an answer to the crisis of upper-caste Hindu elite of the region. It offered 'a progressive ideology based on traditional values', which, they thought, could help counter the growing spread of Christianity in Punjab (Juergensmeyer 1988: 38).

Unlike the other Hindu reform movements, Arya Samaj not only attacked other religions who had been converting Hindus into their fold but also severely criticized many of the existing practices of Hindus, including the practice of untouchability. The Swami advocated going back to the ancient Vedic religion wherein untouchables were presumably a part of the Hindu fold. He attacked Brahmanical hegemony in religious affairs and emphasized the need to spread modern education among the Hindus. He promoted the inclusion of lower castes into Hindu society through a process of religious purification, *Shuddhi*. Since

untouchability was presumed to emanate from ritual impurity, it could be removed through a religious ritual to render untouchables touchable (Pimpley and Sharma 1985).

At the concrete level, the Shuddhi movement was to involve (*a*) conversion to Hinduism of those belonging to foreign religions; (*b*) re-conversion of those who had been converted to a foreign religion; and (*c*) initiate steps to raise the status of the low castes within Hinduism (ibid.: 54).

The first Shuddhi ritual was performed nearly five years after the death of Swami Dayanand in 1888, when 70 untouchables belonging to the caste of Odes were 'purified' by Shuddhi. During 1901–10, about 60 to 70 thousand untouchables underwent Shuddhi (ibid.: 96). The movement gained further momentum in the following years and more untouchables were 'purified' and brought into the Hindu fold. At the ground level it made little difference to the social and economic position of the Dalits. A majority of those who went through the Shuddhi ceremony

> still suffered from poverty and the stigma of untouchability. Their educational levels were very low. Occupationally they were engaged in agricultural labour force or were in low prestige occupations. Their geographical segregation suggested minimum level of social interaction with other castes. Probably, even after their *Shuddhi*, they did not gain anything except for a symbolic right of reading the Vedas and putting on the sacred thread (ibid.: 98).

Further, despite their criticism of the Brahmanical orthodoxy within Hinduism, the strategy of Arya Samaj for elevating the status of the untouchables was worked out within the framework of purity and impurity. Though they condemned the practice of untouchability, they did not reject the concept of varna. The very notion of Shuddhi involved affirmation to the idea of ritual purity as being the criterion for status enhancement. However, the movement helped the Punjabi Hindu elite in consolidating their position in the region. They succeeded, in large measure, in retaining the untouchable castes in the Hindu fold, thereby increasing their political strength (Pimpley and Sharma 1985).

The Arya Samaj initially attacked the so-called foreign religions, i.e., Islam and Christianity. However, as its influence spread over time, it also began to criticize Sikhism. Sikhism had been a popular

and inclusive religious tradition. Ever since the days of Sikh Gurus, many of the low castes in the region had been a part of the religion.

The reports of low-caste Sikhs being taken into Hinduism through Shuddhi were viewed with much concern by the members of the newly emergent Sikh middle classes. Since numbers had begun to matter and communities in the region had become very sensitive about their size, the Sikh leadership was understandably keen to keep the low castes within their fold.

The assertion of Hindutva identity by the Arya Samaj had already sparked off a debate on the question of Sikh identity. Sikhs began to assert that theirs was a separate religion and they should not be clubbed with the Hindus (Oberoi 1994). The practice of untouchability or discrimination against the low castes among Sikhs was attributed to the continued influence of Hinduism on the community. Thus the struggle against caste and untouchability was implicated in the movement for a separate religious identity for the Sikhs. The Singh Sabha movement, launched during the 1920s to liberate the Sikh gurdwaras from the Hindu Mahants, also became a movement for de-Hinduization of the Sikh religion. One of the main demands of the movement was 'unquestioned entrance to Sikh places of worship' for all (Juergensmeyer 1988: 28). Some members of the Sikh Khalsa Diwan tried to create their own 'depressed class movements' to encourage Scheduled Caste support. I. P. Singh in his study of a village in Amritsar district reported that the decline of Brahmins in the village began in 1922–26, i.e., around the time these reform movements were launched. It was after these movements that a low-caste Sikh was appointed a *granthi* at the local gurdwara in his study village, who began to give equal treatment to members of all castes in the village (I. P. Singh 1977: 81–82).

The Ad-Dharm Movement

It was in this context that the Ad-Dharm (literally meaning ancient religion or faith) movement emerged in Punjab. Though the idea had already begun to take shape during the early 1920s, it took off only with the arrival of Mangoo Ram on scene. Mangoo Ram was the son of an enterprising Chamar of Maguwal village in the Hoshiarpur district of Doaba sub-region of Punjab. As was the case with Dalits in rural Punjab during the early 19th century, his

family had to bear the stigma of untouchability and social exclusion. However, his father was very enterprising and had been able to make some money through leather trade.

Like some others of his caste community, Mangoo Ram acquired secular education at a school being run by Arya Samaj. Migration to the West had already begun to be seen in the Doaba sub-region of Punjab as a desirable source of social and cultural mobility. His father mobilized some money and sent him to the United States of America for better paying work. While in California, Mangoo Ram was influenced by the left-wing ideas of his contemporaries from Punjab and got involved in the Gaddar movement. He came back to Punjab in 1925 with a motivation to work with his own people. On returning home, he set up a school for lower-caste children with the help of Arya Samaj, but very soon distanced himself from the Samaj and joined hands with some other members of his own community who were trying to initiate an autonomous identity movement among the local Dalits (for details see Juergensmeyer 1988).

The leadership of the Ad-Dharm movement saw their struggles as a religious movement. They advocated that the 'untouchables' were a separate *qaum*, a distinct religious community similar to the Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs, and should be treated as such by the rulers. Invoking the then popular 'racial-origin' theories of caste, they argued that Ad-Dharm had always been the religion of the Dalits and that the qaum had existed from time immemorial (ibid.: 45). Despite stiff opposition from the local Hindu leadership, the colonial rulers conceded their claim and the Census of 1931 listed the Ad-Dharmis as a separate religious community.

By getting themselves recognized as a separate religious community, the Ad-Dharmi leadership was successful in formally breaking away from Hinduism. This shift from *zaat* to qaum meant that in terms of social status they were no longer positioned in the system of caste hierarchy and had acquired a status parallel to the Hindus, like other religious communities, the Sikhs or Muslims. Mangoo Ram also hoped to bring other untouchable communities into the fold of Ad-Dharm and emerge as a viable community at the regional level.

A total of 418,789 persons reported themselves as Ad-Dharmis in the 1931 Punjab Census, almost equal to the Christian populace of the province. They accounted for about 1.5 per cent of the total

population of Punjab, and around a 10th of the total low-caste population of the province. Nearly 80 per cent of the low castes of Jalandhar and Hoshiarpur districts reported themselves as Ad-Dharmis (ibid.: 77).

However, this formal recognition of a separate religion by the colonial state could not take them very far. Even the separate identity in census enumerations turned out to be a one-time affair. The movement for a separate religious identity could not maintain its momentum for very long and began to dissipate soon after its grand success in 1931. According to popular understanding, the causes for the decline of Ad-Dharm movement lay in its success. Its leaders joined mainstream politics. Mangoo Ram himself, along with some of his close comrades, became a member of the Punjab Legislative Assembly. The caste issue was gradually taken over by the emerging pan-Indian movement of Dalits, and finally they merged. The Ad-Dharm Mandal began to see itself as a social and religious organization, and in 1946 decided to change its name to Ravi Das Mandal, 'entrusting the political work to All India Scheduled Castes Federation in conformity with rest of India' (see Juergensmeyer 1988: 153).

A closer understanding of the Ad-Dharm case would require a critical look at the evolution of the Indian state, and the manner in which it dealt with caste and religion. The beginning of the decline of Ad-Dharm movement can perhaps be located in the famous Poona Pact of 1932 between Mahatma Gandhi and B. R. Ambedkar and the formation of the Scheduled List under the Government of India Act 1935. The clubbing of Scheduled Castes with Hindus left no choice for the Ad-Dharm movement in Punjab but to accept the nationalist and official mode of classification. If they wanted to claim a separate religious identity, they had to forgo the benefits of 'reservations'. Given the possibility of social mobility that the reservation policy offered, they decided not to insist any longer for a distinctive religious identity. Some of its leaders were soon accommodated in the emerging power structure as candidates from the 'reserved category'. As a senior Dalit activist explained to us:

> Ad-Dharm lost its meaning after we got eight seats reserved for us when the elections were first held in the province. Our candidates won seven of the eight seats. Mangoo Ram too was elected to the Assembly during the next election in 1945–46.

This was obviously a pragmatic choice and compromise. An activist articulated this quite emphatically:

> In 1931 we were recognised as a separate religion by the Colonial Census, but by the Act of 1935 we became one of the Scheduled Castes, one among others in the same category. Communal Award had recognized our autonomy, which had to be surrendered by B. R. Ambedkar under the Poona Pact. Under the Poona Pact we were given reservations but only if we accepted to be part of the Hindu religion … However, even though we legally became a part of Hinduism, it did not stop discrimination against us. Even now it continues, though it is less pronounced and more subtle.

Over the year, the idea of Ad-Dharm as a political and religious movement gradually disappeared. Though most of our Dalit respondents remembered the Ad-Dharm movement with a sense of pride and some of them also felt bad about its decline, we did not observe any kind of strong feeling for the movement or resentment among the Ad-Dharmis at being clubbed with the Hindu religion. Neither could we locate any writings by its erstwhile leaders expressing distress/anger at its decline or attributing it to conspiracies. The Ad-Dharm movement and its leaders were perhaps also swayed by mainstream or dominant politics of the time, i.e., the freedom movement and its hegemonic influence. As one of our respondents, who is currently president of the Ravi Das Trust, said to us:

> [A]t one time Ad-Dharm movement was very popular in Punjab. However, slowly, with the growing influence of Congress politics, its leaders started leaving. Master Balwanta Singh was the first to leave Ad-Dharm Mandal. He joined the Congress Party. Similarly some other leaders also left the movement to become part of the mainstream national politics. Eventually even Mangoo Ram joined the Congress Party. The movement was over.

Those with more radical views on the Dalit question were swayed by B. R. Ambedkar and joined the Republican Party of India (RPI) and the Schedule Caste Federation, both set up by B. R. Ambedkar. Some of them eventually turned to Buddhism for spiritual autonomy and religious identity.

Equally important for its decline is perhaps the fact that even though Ad-Dharm articulated itself as a religious identity and demanded official recognition as a religious movement, it was essentially a political movement. Even though it wanted to be recognized as a separate religious community from the colonial state, its leadership did not invest much in the repertoire required to build a viable religious community. As a prominent member of the community told us during an interview: 'It had no holy book or scripture of its own, it had no rituals of its own, it had no pilgrimage places, or sacred symbols … How could it have survived as a religion?'

From Ad-Dharm to Ravidasi

Even though the identity of Ad-Dharmi simply became a designation of a Hindu caste-group for official classification, the Chamars of Doaba did not really go back to Hinduism. They began to develop their autonomous religious resources under the identity of Ravidasis by actively identifying saints and babas in their own community.

Much of the subaltern religiosity in Punjab had always been syncretic in nature, consisting of *dera*s (a religious centre) and dargahs of sants, babas and fakirs. The religious landscape of those living on the margins of the Punjabi society in the early 20th century was made up of these shrines of 'little traditions'. Among them were also the deras of Ravidasi babas and gurus, who were themselves from untouchable families but had gained some amount of respectability within their caste community and in the wider society. Their followers and admirers believed that they possessed spiritual prowess. The local Chamars were obviously the most enthusiastic followers of these Ravidasi gurus. Leadership of the Ad-Dharm movement had also treated these Ravidasi deras as critical resources of the community and had often used them to organize meetings and mobilizations of support from the larger community of Chamars.

More importantly perhaps, the decline of Ad-Dharm as a political movement for recognition of separate religious identity did not necessarily mean a re-assimilation of Chamars into mainstream Hinduism. Given that caste differences and caste-based discrimination remained alive even after independence from colonial rule and the grant of formal citizenship status to all, the Chamars of

Doaba were not keen to set the clock back. They continued to invest in building their autonomous religious resources.

After it changed its name from Ad-Dharm to Ravi Das Mandal in 1946, some of the erstwhile activists of the Ad-Dharm movement shifted their focus to social and religious matters. They had realized that in order to consolidate themselves as a separate qaum, they needed a religious system of their own, which was different from that of the Hindus and Sikhs. However, in order to do so, they chose an exclusionary caste-based religious identity. This, in a sense, kept them trapped in the idiom of caste. Even though during its early days the Ad-Dharm movement had aspired to bring all the 'ex-untouchable' communities together into the new faith, their appeal had remained confined to mostly the Chamars of Doaba. After its listing as one of the Scheduled Castes in the Scheduled List, it became obvious and official that Ad-Dharmis were a section of the Chamars. Guru Ravi Das appeared to be an obvious choice for a religious symbol of the Ad-Dharmis. Though he was born in Uttar Pradesh, he belonged to the Chamar caste. The fact that his writings were included in the Sikh Holy book, *Adi Granth*, which had been compiled in Punjab and written in the local language, made Ravi Das even more effective and acceptable.[2]

Guru Ravi Das

As the popular belief goes, Ravi Das was born sometime in 1450 CE in the north Indian town of Banaras in present-day Uttar Pradesh in an 'untouchable' caste, the Chamars, and died in 1520 (Omvedt 2008: 7). Like many of his contemporaries, he travelled extensively and had religious dialogues with saint poets in different parts of north India. Over time, he acquired the status of a saint. However,

[2] Some of the local Dalit leaders also believe that it were the Hindu nationalists who suggested Ravi Das as a possible religious symbol to the Chamars. 'In order to make sure that untouchables did not convert to Sikhism, Islam or Christianity, the Arya Samajis propagated the symbol of Ravi Das among Chamars, Valmiki among the Chuhras and Kabir among the Meghs. That's how they made sure that Dalits stayed within the Hindu fold', as told by a Ravidasi activist in Jalandhar. While this may be true, the image of Ravi Das as a Chamar had already been made available to the people of Punjab by the Sikh gurus.

his claims to religious authority were frequently challenged by the local Brahmins who complained against his 'sacrilegious behaviour' to the local rulers. His followers believe that every time the king summoned Ravi Das, he managed to convince the political authorities about his genuine 'spiritual powers' through various miraculous acts. He is believed to have visited Punjab and met Guru Nanak, founder of the Sikh faith, at least thrice. He also gave most of his writings to Guru Nanak, which eventually became part of the Sikh holy book, *Guru Granth* (this discussion is based on Sat Pal Jassi's book [2001]).

Though historians of Indian religions tend to club Ravi Das with the Bhakti movement, a pan-Indian devotional cult, his ideas appear to be quite radical. He built his own utopia, a vision of an alternative society, articulated in his hymn 'Begumpura', a city without sorrows, 'where there will be no distress, no tax, no restriction from going and coming, no fear' (translation mine). It is worth presenting the English translation of the poem:

> The regal realm with the sorrowless name:
> they call it Begumpura, a place with no pain,
> No taxes or cares, nor own property there,
> no wrongdoing, worry, terror or torture.
> Oh my brother, I have come to take it as my own,
> my distant home, where everything is right.
> That imperial kingdom is rich and secure,
> where none are third or second- all are one;
> Its food and drink are famous, and those who live there
> dwell in satisfaction and in wealth.
> They do this or that, they walk where they wish,
> they stroll through fabled places unchallenged.
> Oh, says Ravidas, a tanner now set free,
> those who walk beside me are my friends.
> (quoted in Hawley and Juergensmeyer 1988: 32)

Writing on the social milieu in which he was born, his biographer Sat Pal Jassi writes:

> Since the advent of Vedic Age, caste system and untouchability have been prevalent in India. In passage of time, the socio-religious inhibitions became more strict and cruel. The untouchables were given an ignoble place. They were debarred from acquiring knowledge,

> own property and worship of God … These conditions prevailed in India for more than 3000 years (Jassi 2001: 24).

It was in this 'degenerated environment' that Ravi Das was born. What did he preach and propagate? Jassi continues:

> He was protagonist of equality, oneness of God, human rights and universal brotherhood … He was a suave socio-religious reformer, a thinker, a theosophist, a humanist, a poet, a traveller, a pacifist and above all a towering spiritual figure … He was a pioneer of socialistic thought and strengthened noble values (ibid.: 25).

Ravi Das's utopia was also significantly different from some of the later writings on 'a desirable India' produced by people such as Mahatma Gandhi. As Gail Omvedt rightly comments, Ravi Das

> was the first to formulate an Indian version of utopia in his song "Begumpura". Begumpura, the 'city without sorrow', is a caste-less, classless society; a modern society, one without a mention of temples; an urban society as contrasted with Gandhi's village utopia of *Ram Rajya* (2008: 7).

Though born in a Dalit family, Ravi Das became a part of the larger movement of protest against Brahmanical control over the social and religious life of people and was accepted as a leader across the entire region. His identification with Guru Nanak, who was from an upper caste, clearly proves this point. As mentioned, Guru Nanak added 40 of his hymns and one couplet into his collection of important writings of the time, which were eventually compiled into the Adi Granth by the fifth Sikh Guru.

The Ravidasis today

As described earlier, the message of Ravi Das had been integrated into the Sikh holy book and was routinely read and sung at Sikh gurdwaras as part of the *gurbani* (religious singing). A few Ravidasi saints had also acquired a following of their own, but they viewed themselves as part of the larger Sikh faith, a sub-sect within the religious tradition founded by Nanak. Over a period of time, some of them also set up their deras from where they spread the message of Ravi Das and *Guru Granth*. When some members of the local Chamar community experienced prosperity during the early years

of the 20th century, Ravidasi deras began to emerge as important community centres for Chamars of the region.

Over time some of these deras kept growing in size and influence and emerged as powerful symbols of Dalit identity. Perhaps the most important of all Guru Ravi Das deras in Punjab today is the one located in village Ballan, around 10 kilometres from the town of Jalandhar. It is locally known as Dera Sachkhand Ballan. Though the Dera was set up by Sant Pipal Dass sometime during the early 20th century,[3] it is identified more with his son Sant Sarwan Dass.

As per the popular myth narrated to us by various respondents during the fieldwork, which we also found in published leaflets, the history of the dera goes like this:

> Sant Sarwan Dass was born in a village called Gill Patti in Bhatinda district of Punjab. He lost his mother when he was five years old. To help his son overcome the loss, his father, Pipal Dass, decided to travel with him. After visiting a few places, they came to village Ballan. The elder brother of Sarwan Dass had earlier lived in the same village. On the outskirts of village Ballan, they found a Pipal tree that was completely dry and dead. However, when Pipal Dass watered the tree, life returned to it and its leaves turned green. This, for him, was an indication of the place being spiritually blessed. The tree also made the child Sarwan Dass happy. The father and son decided to build a hut close to the tree and began to live there.
>
> After the death of his father in 1928, Sant Sarwan Dass expanded his activities. He opened a school and started teaching Gurumukhi and the message of the *Guru Granth* to young children. He also persuaded his followers to send their children to the school. "Parents who did not educate their children were their enemies", he used to tell to his followers.

Impressed with the work that Sant Sarwan Dass was doing in the village, a local landlord gifted him one *kanal* (about one-fifth of an acre) of land close to the hut, where the Dera building was

[3] Mark Juergensmeyer in his pioneer work on the Ad-Dharm movement mentions that '[w]hen he [Sant Hiran Das] established his Ravi Das Sabha, in 1907, in village Hakim … several other *Deras* including that of Sant Pipal Das, were founded soon afterward' (1988: 87).

eventually constructed. Sarwan Dass remained head of the Dera from 11 October 1928 until his death in June 1972. He was succeeded by Sant Hari Dass and Sant Garib Dass. The Dera is currently headed by Sant Niranjan Dass.

Over the years a strong community of Ravidasis has emerged around the Ballan Dera. Even though many other smaller Ravidasi deras and temples have also been built in the region, this Dera has emerged as the most important religious centre for the Ravidasi community.

The Dera and the disciples

What makes the Dera Ballan popular with common Ravidasis? Though its primary identity is religious, the Dera appears to be playing an active role in consolidating the caste community. A survey conducted by a scholar showed that the visitors to the Dera were all from the Chamars/Ad-Dharmi caste (Charlene 2008). The Dera also gave them a sense of identity and its opulence and grandeur made them feel proud. They looked at it as a symbol of prosperity and dignity. Even when they themselves were not rich, the Dera enabled them to forget their poverty and marginality.

Our interviews with a cross-section of Ravidasis seemed to confirm this. Dalit empowerment, autonomy and development were some of the common points underlined by the disciples. While these ideals appeared to be purely secular, for the Ravidasi Dalits they were a part and parcel of the religious movement. Shankar (pseudo name) put it quite sharply:

> I am a Chamar by caste. Earlier we were treated as untouchables. Things have changed. Earlier we were not even allowed to worship God. Guru Ravidas's message was that even Chamars have the right to worship God … Guru Ravidas's worshipper can be from any community. I am from Ravidasi community. I do not believe in caste … Earlier we used to worship Guru Ravidas in a hidden way. But now we do in a respectable way.

The fact that the Dera had not confined its activities to religion and had started its own schools and hospitals as charitable institutions was an evidence of Brahmanism being challenged by the Ravidasi movement. As Shankar put it:

> Schools and hospitals are being opened by the Dera. I think that it has posed a serious challenge to Brahmanism. They [the upper

> castes] had barred us from getting educated, and today we have reached a stage where we can teach and provide education to our community.

Another respondent, Raju (pseudo name), was even more articulate on the point of caste discrimination and the role that deras had played in Dalit empowerment, giving them a sense of dignity and autonomy:

> We need the dera to make people aware about Guru Ravidas. When we go to other mandirs and gurdwaras, there is a psychological discrimination, if not physical. But here, because it is our community that manages everything, there is no discrimination at all. In fact, we feel a sense of pride that we are in our place of worship. We would not have needed a separate mandir or gurdwara had there been no discrimination. But Hindu society is divided on caste lines. Guru Ravidas fought against it and for our dignity. So we worship Guru Ravidas.

Interestingly, it was not only the Hindu temples that prohibited Dalits from entering, but the other deras in Punjab too discriminated against them. Another respondent pointed to the fact that:

> Earlier there was discrimination. That is why our people have opened our own deras. We do not discriminate. We respect all religions and communities. The other deras do not respect us. It is only in our own dera that we feel welcomed. The dera at Beas, for example, is the biggest dera in Punjab but they do not respect Dalits.

As we have seen in chapters 1 and 2, even though the writings of Ravi Das are part of the *Guru Granth*, the dominant caste Sikhs in rural areas discriminate against the local Dalits and do not show reverence to their religious places. 'Even when we keep *Guru Granth* in our temples in the villages, no Jat will ever enter our temples', reported another respondent in Ballan. Underlining the need for a separate autonomous religion and dera for Dalits, he argued:

> Every religion needs a guru. The Dera has given our community a guru. The Dera never gets involved with politics. However, when we need to fight for our rights, it unites the community. Our gurus have worked hard to keep the community united. They have stopped members of our community from going to other deras. They have opened schools and hospitals.

References to caste and discrimination and the need for an autonomous religious system for the Dalit community were common in many other interviews as well. Equally prevalent was the reference to the emphasis that Ravidasi gurus gave to education. Not only did the disciples point to the schools opened by the Dera, but many of them also invoked their personal example of having been able to study only because of the financial help from the Dera gurus or because of their own persistence and motivation.

The local Dalits also looked at the Dera and its gurus as symbols of Dalit identity and associated them with larger Dalit politics. As one of them told us very proudly,

> Ballan is a religious centre with a focus on preaching universalistic values and spirituality. However, not only does it foreground Ravi Das's message of building a casteless society, it also identifies itself with local Dalit issues and Dalit politics. Sant Sarwan Dass ji was actively in touch with Mangoo Ram during the Ad-Dharm movement and Mangoo Ram too visited the dera to communicate his message to Dalit masses of the region. During one of his visits to Delhi, he also met B. R. Ambedkar, who showed great respect to Sant Sarwan Dass ji. In one of his letters to Ambedkar, Sant Sarwan Dass described him as a great son of the community.

Dera Ballan has continued to be an important centre of Dalit political activity in Punjab. Leaders, writers and intellectuals of the community often meet there and discuss the emerging political and cultural challenges before the community of Ravidasis. Kanshi Ram, another leader of the Dalits of north India, who belonged to Punjab and was born in a Ravidasi family, was a frequent visitor to the Dera. He did so not only to pay his respect to the Dera Chief, but also to discuss strategies with other leaders of the community to make Dalit politics more effective.

The diaspora effect

An important and interesting phase in the history of Ravidasi movement in Punjab began during the 1990s, with the growing involvement of the Ravidasi diaspora in religious life of the local community.

Along with other Punjabis, a large number of Chamars of the Doaba region had migrated to Western countries during 1950s and 1960s. Though there are no exact figures available but

quoting the Indian consular office, Juergenmeyer claims that in the United Kingdom the 'percentage of Scheduled Castes within the total Punjabi community was as high as 10 percent. The rest were largely Jat Sikhs' (1988: 246). The total number of Punjabis in United Kingdom is roughly half a million.[4]

In the alien context, with no systemic justification for caste ideology, the Punjabi Dalits did not expect to be reminded of their 'low' status in the caste hierarchy. While they did not face any such problem at the work place and in the urban public sphere in the United Kingdom, they often experienced caste prejudice when they tried to be part of the local Punjabi community in the diaspora. Juergensmeyer sums this up quite well:

> The Chamars, who came to Britain expecting to find life different, take offence at the upper caste Sikhs' attitude towards them. They earn as much as the Jat Sikhs, sometimes more, and occasionally find themselves placed by the British in command over them — a Chamar foreman superintending a Jat Sikh work crew — much to the displeasure of the latter … The Scheduled Castes can afford to act more bravely in Britain since they have now entered a new context for competing with the Jat Sikhs. In the Punjab the cards were stacked against them, but in Britain they have a fresh start, and the ideology of Ad Dharm has prepared them to take advantage of it (ibid.: 247–48).

The migrant Dalits felt this bias in the gurdwaras, which were mostly controlled by the Jats and other upper-caste Sikhs. Given their numbers and position in the local economy, Dalits did not find it difficult to assert for equal status and dignity. They began to set up their own autonomous associations in the name of Guru Ravi Das. The first two came up in Britain, in the towns of Birmingham and Wolverhampton, in 1956 (ibid.: 248). While initially, in the first 20–25 years of their migration, they simply built their own community organizations and separate gurdwaras wherever they could, over the years they also began to influence the 'homeland'. The growing availability of new communication channels, such as the internet and satellite television during the

[4] http://indiandiaspora.nic.in/diasporpdf/chapter10.pdf (accessed on 10 April 2009).

early 1990s, made it easier for them to renew an active relationship with Punjab and the Ravidasi community at home.

By the early 1990s, diaspora Dalits had also experienced considerable economic mobility, which made it easier for them to travel back home more frequently. When they came, they also brought money for the religious deras. This new money and diasporic energy played a very important role in the further growth of the movement. This was summed up well by a Dalit businessman who has been involved in mobilizing the Ravidasi sants into a pan-Indian association:

> It is the brethren from the West who first understood the value of our deras and the need to strengthen them. They gave huge donations when they came to pay a visit. The number of visitors from abroad and the frequency of their visits also increased during the 1990s. They invited the local sants to their countries. All this gave a boost to the Ravidasi movement.

Going beyond their immediate spheres of influence also provides a context to the current Ravidasi gurus to mobilize the community at a global level. Travelling abroad, to the countries of Europe and North America where Punjabi Ravidasis are settled, has almost become a regular affair for the religious leaders of different deras. Apart from collecting money for their activities in India, these visits also give a sense of connectivity to Ravidasi diaspora as being a community different from the Sikhs.

Over the last 15 years or so, the Dera at Ballan has expanded significantly. A new building was inaugurated in the year 2007, where nearly 20 thousand people could be accommodated to listen to the teachings of Guru Ravi Das. It has a langar hall where two thousand people can eat together. Among other things, this hall has the facility for live telecast and recording videos. In collaboration with the Jalandhar channel of Doordarshan (an Indian television channel run by the Government of India), it telecasts a programme called *Amrit Bani* every Friday and Saturday mornings.

Apart from this expansion of the Ravidasi Dera at Ballan, the local Ravidasis have also built a large number of new deras, gurdwaras and temples where they worship Ravi Das, with or without the Sikh holy book. This is particularly the case in the Doaba region where Ad-Dharmis and Chamars have been numerically predominant among the Dalits. We were told that there are some

six or seven major sants who could be considered as leaders of the community, and more than 250 deras/gurdwaras in the name of Guru Ravidas in the State of Punjab. Some of these deras have become quite affluent and influential. However, they are all patronized exclusively by the local Chamars and Ad-Dharmis.

Mobilizing Religion for Community and Development

As is evident from the aforementioned discussion, apart from providing religious symbols to the local community, some of the deras have also been actively involved in shaping the community and setting up institutions that provide them visibility and dignity. Some of these institutions directly engage with developmental work. They have opened schools and a variety of hospitals in the region, which provide quality education and health services. A senior functionary of the Dera saw a direct link between their religious work and development of the community.

> A large majority in our community is still illiterate. They are yet to understand the language of development. The social development of the community that you see today is mostly a result of the religious movement. People easily get mobilized in the name of religion. Religions appeal to everyone, poor and rich. It is only in the name of religion that they are willing to donate. You ask them to donate for social work in a secular language you will get nothing.
>
> The dera plays a very critical role in the development of people here. It has the capacity to unite people on any issue. It has become a common place where people can come and discuss their grief, pain and happiness. It has given the Dalit community of Punjab an identity in India and abroad. Now people all over the world know who Ravidasis are and who Guru Ravidas was.

The importance of religion in mobilizing money was underlined by the principal of one of the schools being run by the Ravidasis. As he said:

> It is only the deras and gurus who can get money for running a school or a hospital. If some lay person from the community was to open a school, no one will give any donations. This is because people feel that he is doing it for profit. But, when Baba ji starts a

> project, people know that it is not for business. Baba ji does not work with a profit motive.

Some of the schools being run by the Dera are doing very well. However, these schools are not exclusivist. They are open to all. But still they are used by the Chamar community more than the others. As a senior Dalit activist in Phagwara told us:

> Though in principle these institutions are open to all, not everyone likes to come to our schools because of its identification with Dalits. Given that the government-run schools, where most of our children go to study, do not teach anything, the schools run by the dera are very useful. They provide quality education and the teachers there are sympathetic to our children. The poorer kids are also not charged any fee and are given scholarships and other incentives to study. Even if you do not agree with the sants on their ideology, you cannot ignore their contribution to the community.

Apart from supporting several schools, Dera Ballan has also opened several hospitals; some with high-end specialties.

Concluding Comments

Writing on the Punjabi Dalits nearly four decades ago, Mark Juergensmeyer characterized their social and economic position by using the phrase 'Cultures of Deprivation' (1988). Though he did not see similarities between the situation of Punjabi Dalits and the slum-dwelling Mexican poor, the invocation of Oscar Lewis's *The Culture of Poverty* (1966) seems quite obvious. Unlike the situation of the poor in the Mexican slum, Dalits were not simply poor. Their poverty was often reinforced by institutionalized prejudice, the caste system, and the symbolic order of Hinduism, which in turn also underlined their poverty. It is this peculiar reality that makes it crucial for Dalits to pursue not simply a path out of economic poverty but also struggle for cultural autonomy, to seek a symbolic system that gives them a sense of self-esteem and dignity.

As discussed earlier, a section of Dalits in the Doaba region of Punjab began to experience social and economic mobility during the early 20th century, when a new 'secular economy' was put in place by the British rule. However, as the 'mobile Dalits' identified

the nature of their deprivations, they soon realized their need for the cultural resources that would give them dignity. Given the religious essence of the ideological power of caste, they could imagine alternatives only in religious modes. The Ad-Dharm movement was the first outcome of this imagination.

Though its main demand during the early phase was for recognition and enumeration of Ad-Dharmis as a separate religion, it did not have the right idiom to be able to make claims to this space. When it came to actually working out a religious system, the Ad-Dharmis invariably went back to their caste identity or the available religious resources — Ravi Das and *Guru Granth* being the most attractive and easily available. They even took to Sikh rituals and ceremonies. Assertion of autonomy through Sikh religious text would have also been easier for them in a region that had come to be hegemonized by Sikhism by the middle of the 20th century.

However, the continued experience of caste in the Punjabi culture and on the ground, in the agrarian economy of rural Punjab, underlined their desire for a separate identity, the kind that Ad-Dharm had promised them. Though short-lived, the Ad-Dharm movement was successful in instilling a sense of autonomy and autonomous community among the Chamar Dalits of Doaba.

Growing urbanization, migration and the impact of the Green Revolution during the post-Independence period only reinforced this process. The new capitalist agriculture nearly destroyed the old structures of dependency and patronage. Not only did Dalits start dissociating themselves from the traditional caste occupations, they also distanced themselves from the local agrarian economy. Even when they continued to live in the village, they acquired a sense of autonomy from the so-called village community. Though, in the absence of any radical land reforms, they did not feel economically empowered, they were able to get away from the local power more easily. This recently acquired political agency and the newly emergent political and economic elite among them helped the Dalits to further consolidate their identity. Their quest for a separate religious identity began to be articulated through the Ravidasi deras. Identification with these deras and building of separate Ravidasi gurdwaras, in almost every village of Doaba, acquired the shape of a social movement. Migrations to urban

centres in India and abroad and the growing prosperity among a section of them provided the resources to sustain this movement.

Apart from the religious heads of deras and gurus, who all came from within the caste community, leadership to this movement has mostly been provided by mobile Dalits, who were the first to get out of the traditional system of caste hierarchy and into urban occupations, the successful businessmen and professionals.

Over the years the Ravidasis have emerged as a strong religious community, a quam. Though its centre continues to be in the Doaba region of Punjab, its spread is much wider, to other parts of Punjab, neighbouring Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, and even as far off as Maharashtra. This strength of the community is reinforced by the increasingly active involvement of the Ravidasi diaspora.

This transformation of an ex-untouchable caste into a strong religious community clearly has several social and developmental effects for members of the community and the Punjabi society at large. As shown earlier through interviews with a cross-section of respondents, one of the most frequently referred to contributions of the dera for the followers was the motivation it provided for education and the sense of dignity it gave to the community of ex-untouchable Chamars. The religious idiom also seems to be playing a very important role in 'horizontal consolidation', to use M. N. Srinivas's term (1962), of the Chamars. In a democratic polity like that of India, where communities have become important actors in electoral politics, a marginalized group of Dalits only stands to gain through such a process. While on the one hand their consolidation into a strong community enables them to open their own institutions for a better quality of life (schools and hospitals), on the other, such a process of mobilization strengthens their bargaining capacity vis-à-vis the state and other sections of civil society.

VII

Battling for Dignity

Dalit Activists of Delhi

In the year 1991 India celebrated the birth centenary of B. R. Ambedkar, the Chairman of the Drafting Committee of India's Constituent Assembly, which drafted the Constitution for the 'new nation'. He was also the first Law Minister of independent India. Since the centenary year, Ambedkar's birthday has become a day of national importance, celebrated across the country and abroad by those who identify with him, particularly members of the ex-untouchable communities. While some other important leaders of India's nationalist movement — Nehru, Patel or even Gandhi — appear to be losing their political appeal, Ambedkar has continued to grow in stature and signifi cance. Apart from his contribution to the making of the Indian Constitution, he is seen as a scholar, a political visionary, and above all, a leader of the ex-untouchable communities of India. Though he was born in a Hindu Mahar family of Maharashtra, and converted to Buddhism in 1956, an increasing number of ex-untouchable caste communities across regions and religions of India recognize him as a member of their own 'ethnic' or kin group. Ambedkar's life, his persona and political ideology have become a source of inspiration for a large number of mobile Dalits. They see in him and his writings a refl ection and articulation of their own experiences and aspirations.

The rise of Ambedkar as a contemporary icon also marked the emergence and consolidation of a new identity among the ex-untouchable communities of India. Notwithstanding its contestations by individuals and groups, the category 'Dalit' was being accepted as a useful way of political self-identification among diverse ex-untouchable groups during the 1990s. The word 'Dalit' has its origin in the political movements of ex-untouchable castes in the western state of Maharashtra. It refers to 'those who have

been broken down by those above them in a deliberate and active way. There is in the word itself an inherent denial of pollution, karma and justified caste hierarchy' (Zelliot 2001: 267). Over the years it has also come to symbolize the struggles of ex-untouchable communities for transformation of what they see as an oppressive social order and for a life of dignity. The growing acceptance of 'Dalit' as a category of self-identification, across regions and communities, also indicates 'a move from ascribed affinity to political identity' (Gorringe 2005: 100).

This arrival of Dalits at the national level was made possible by the process of social and economic mobility unleashed through the introduction of a modern secular educational system and a secular economic order by the British colonial rulers. The establishment of a democratic state system during the post-Independence period accelerated this process. The system of quotas, or reservations, for the Scheduled Castes produced a new urban 'elite', or a 'middle class', from within the community. This emergent segment within the ex-untouchables found it hard to forget the past deprivations and difficulties faced by their communities. Despite being in secular occupations, the upwardly mobile Dalits experienced resistance to their 'assimilation' in the mainstream 'middle class'. Their own experiences of 'isolation' and discrimination took them back to their communities, and the realization that it is only through collective mobilizations, along with other members of their communities, that they could aspire to achieve a life of dignity.

It is this trajectory of mobility and mobilization that this study tries to explore and understand. Our questionnaire and interview guide were framed around questions of articulation and imagination of Dalit identity by Dalit middle-class urban activists working in and around the city of Delhi; their personal experiences of caste and discrimination; the growing class distance between them and the communities of their origin; the processes of negotiation with their modern settings of work and the burden of caste; the nature and forms of their activism; their visions of alternative society; and the challenges they confront at different levels in their work as Dalit activists.[1] We also asked them about their understanding

[1] While participation in the electoral process and the experience with the state power and party politics is of critical significance for the Dalits,

of the working of the caste system and what kept it alive: How did they reconcile their 'communitarian' activism around the notion of 'Dalit' identity with the modern ideas of civil society and development which are premised on the notion of universalism? How did they engage with struggles by other marginalized groups and what were their perspectives on questions of identity and representation. The third set of questions related to their visions of change and their perceptions of the issues confronting the Dalit movement.

The Context

As per the Census of 2011, the total Scheduled Caste population in India was 201.4 million, making for 16.6 per cent of the total population of the country. The proportion of Scheduled Castes in Delhi is quite close to the national average (16.75 per cent, in 2011). Given the nature of the state, and quite like the rest of its population, a large majority of the Scheduled Castes of Delhi are urban residents, with only around 8 per cent living in rural areas. Dalit population is also internally diverse, made up of a large number of communities with their individual caste identity. Every Indian state has its own list of Scheduled Caste communities. A total of 1,231 communities are currently listed as Scheduled Castes in the entire country (Thorat 2009).

Like other aspects of the Indian social life, the nature of caste-based inequalities has experienced many changes over the years. It was during the British colonial rule that the 'untouchable' communities began to first attract the attention of the state for welfare measures. The Simon Commission of 1935 clubbed all the untouchable castes, listed in the 1931 Census of India, into an administrative category, initially as 'depressed classes' and later

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this chapter does not deal with the subject. None of the respondents was an active 'politician' who represented a political party or actively engaged with electoral politics. Though this was a deliberate choice, it is not always easy to draw any clear lines of distinction between 'social' and 'political' activism. Given the significance and complexity of the subject, Dalit party politics would require a different kind of study with appropriate focus. Nicolas Jaoul is right when he argues that the two 'have coexisted historically and relied on each other to create the Dalit movement' (2007: 192).

in the Government of India Act of 1935 as 'Scheduled Caste'. The government thereafter published a list of Scheduled Castes under the Government of India (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1936. After Independence, the Indian state continued to use the category of 'Scheduled Caste' for administrative purpose. Over the years the Government of India has not only expanded the list of communities, but also broadened the scope of state action by evolving policies and programmes for the welfare and empowerment of the Scheduled Castes.

Apart from state policies for development, the ex-untouchable communities have also been undertaking their own initiatives for change. These include protest movements of different kinds; community-level initiatives by Dalits organizations, such as setting up of schools and colleges; and individual- and community-level initiatives for Dalit empowerment through identity-based mobilizations (Gellner 2009: 1).[2]

Dalit Initiatives, Activism and Networks

Referring to the recent works of Arturo Escobar and Alberto Melucci, Eva-Maria Hardtmann points to the changing focus of the students of social movements over the last decade or so. Social movement studies, she rightly argues, tend to increasingly emphasise on 'how networks may be embedded in everyday life. This was in contrast to the earlier movement theories mainly occupied with the visible aspects of the movements that were easily recognized, such as public meetings, demonstrations, etc.' (Hardtmann 2009: 28).

It is in this framework that the present study tries to approach contemporary Dalit activism in the city of Delhi, where visible or conventional signs of protest or demonstrations are not frequently present, but individual activists consistently pursue or struggle

[2] Even though we use the category of 'activists' and 'NGOs', we would not like to locate our Dalit activists in the framework of 'civil society', or the 'third sector', independent from state and market. Unlike activists of the development-centric NGOs, Dalit activists do not see themselves as being outside the domain of 'politics' and do not necessarily see their activities as being a reflection of civil society action. (For a useful discussion on NGO activism, see Gellner 2009.)

against caste-based discrimination, as part of their everyday life and through networks of individuals, institutions and organizations. They work with a clear political goal of bringing about social and cultural change.

Historically speaking, we could perhaps identify three different streams through which the present-day Dalit activism has evolved, outside and independent of Dalit party politics. Following Jaoul (2007), we could identify the first stream emanating from the Dalit Panthers movements of Maharashtra during the early 1970s. Influenced by the Black Panthers of the United States and 'wishing to give a political expression to their anger against caste and class injustices', educated Dalit youth formed the organization in Bombay in 1972 (ibid.: 199). They criticized the existing political leadership that represented the Scheduled Castes in the mainstream or Dalit political parties. The Panthers gave them a new hope of pursuing a Dalit political agenda outside the political party framework. Though organizationally the Panthers movement had declined or disappeared by the early 1990s, individual Dalits continued to network with each other in pursuit of an Ambedkarite political mission. Over the years some of them have also formed their own organizations, working outside the party political system.

The second stream of Dalit activism was shaped by Kanshi Ram during the 1980s, with his initial mobilization of the Scheduled Caste employees in government jobs through Backward and Minority Castes Employees Federation (BAMCEF). The system of job reservation in government departments meant a growing number of urban employees with an explicit Scheduled Caste identity in their offices. While they moved out of the traditional caste-based economy and rural social order, they continued to experience prejudice from their fellow employees, which often manifested itself in subtle, and not so subtle, experiences of discrimination. BAMCEF was formed in response to these newer forms of caste experiences of the Scheduled Caste government employees.

Given the legal bar on government employees against joining active politics, BAMCEF projected itself as a non-political association of a section of employees. However, it did not confine itself to raising issues related to the workplace but started mobilizing Dalit employees around ideological lines, and embarked upon building an Ambedkarite consciousness among these mobile Dalits. Kanshi Ram also set up several socio-cultural organizations. He attacked

the 'untouchable' leadership in mainstream political parties and called them *chamcha*s (dependent sycophants, literally spoons) of the upper-caste leaders. He called upon the upwardly mobile Dalit officers who had benefited from reservation to 'pay back to their community'. He also propagated Ambedkar's idea that 'political power was the key to all social progress'. Thus, unlike the Panthers, Kanshi Ram was clearly moving towards building an autonomous Dalit political platform (Jaoul 2007: 195). This eventually resulted in the formation of a political party in 1984, the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP). Over the years, the BSP has emerged as a major player in the state politics of Uttar Pradesh, the largest state of India. Its presence has also begun to matter in several other states and at the national-level politics.

The third stream of contemporary Dalit activism originated during the 1990s and acquired prominence at the turn of the century, after the United Nations World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance in Durban, South Africa (known in India as the Durban Conference) in 2001. While autonomous Dalit movements using the language of rights had begun to emerge in India during the 1990s, in response to growing incidences of organized violence against Dalits,[3] the Durban Conference provided a platform to build Dalit rights networks across India and the world. Around the same time, recognition of caste discrimination as an important issue of concern within the Christian Church provided an important source of transnational support to Dalit networks and Dalit NGOs (see Mosse 2009).

In the last 20 years, since the 1990s, a large number of local-level networks and organizations have emerged, set up mostly by Dalits themselves. They raise the question of caste discrimination and also undertake programmes for Dalit empowerment.

Dalit Activists of Delhi

Being the capital, city of Delhi provides an effective and useful location for political activism. Dalit activists too see the city as an important place for their work. For many of the national-level Dalit

[3] Incidences of violence grew particularly in the southern states of Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu (Gorringe 2009; Mosse 2009).

organizations that came up over the last 20 years, Delhi was an obvious choice. Being the capital, it also has a large number of government offices and other government-funded institutions, such as universities and foundations, which are mandated to employ members of Scheduled Castes as per the reservation policy. Thus, when we started looking around for potential respondents for our study, it was not very difficult to prepare a list and proceed with the survey questionnaire and qualitative interviews.

Age and gender

A total of 81 respondents filled our questionnaire. They were all engaged with caste-based activism in one way or the other. Most of our respondents (81.5 per cent) were men in the age group 31 to 50 (62 per cent). The number of respondents aged over 50 years was also not insignificant (around 25 per cent). A large majority of them were married (79 per cent) and lived in Delhi with their families.

Region, religion and communities

As one would expect, a large majority of Dalit activists in Delhi are from the northern states of India (70.4 per cent), with a significant number hailing from Uttar Pradesh. Interestingly, of the remaining, a large majority are from the western states of India (17.3 per cent), mostly from Maharashtra, and the least from the central (1.2 per cent) and eastern (3.7 per cent) regions of India. This is also a reflection of the history and presence of Dalit movements in different regions of India. Given the past of Dalit activism and mobility in states such as Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra, a great number of them have migrated to the city and continue to identify themselves with anti-caste movements.

Our sample of Dalit activists is also representative of a wide range of Dalit caste communities of northern India. While the largest number of them identified themselves as Chamars or Jatavs (39.5 per cent), the proportion of Balmikis and related castes was also quite significant (28.4 per cent). They all responded to the question on their caste community without any hesitation. Even though respondents were provided with the option of keeping their caste name confidential, no one chose that option.

The pattern of responses on religious identity was quite different. Even though caste is tied to Hinduism, only a small proportion (13.6 per cent) chose to identify themselves as Hindus. Most of them identified themselves as either Buddhists (48 per cent) or atheists (31 per cent). A small proportion was from the Dalit Christian communities (7.4 per cent).

Education and occupations

As one would expect, the urban Dalit activists were all educated, with a majority of them being 'well-educated'. None of them reported to be 'uneducated' or 'illiterate' and only one of them was educated up to the 10th standard. As many as two-thirds of them held postgraduate or professional degrees, while one-fourth had PhD degrees.

The urban Dalit activists were all employed in secular occupations. Though a good number of them (around 20 per cent) were full-time activists, a large majority had full-time jobs, mostly a regular salaried one with a government department or a private organization. While it did not surprise us, it may still be worthwhile to report that none of them claimed to be engaged in their traditional caste occupation.

What has been the nature of inter-generational mobility in 'education' and 'occupation' among the urban Dalit activists? As is evident from Table 7.1, there was a significant generational difference between the respondents and their parents. While only

Table 7.1
Level of Education of Respondents and their Parents

Level of Education	*Self*	*Father*	*Mother*
No education	Nil	25 (30.9)	55 (67.9)
Up to 10th	1 (1.2)	33 (40.7)	21 (25.9)
12th to BA	26 (32.1)	13 (16.0)	2 (2.5)
Postgraduate	24 (29.6)	6 (7.4)	2 (2.55)
Professional	10 (12.3)	2 (2.5)	1 (1.2)
PhD	20 (24.7)	2 (2.5)	Nil
Total	81 (100)	81 (100)	81 (100)

Source: All tables in this chapter are based on primary studies conducted by the author.

Note: Figures in parentheses indicate percentages in all tables.

one of the respondents was educated 'up to 10th standard', a much larger percentage of fathers (71.6 per cent) and mothers (93.8 per cent) fell within this category. A large proportion of parents (25 per cent fathers and 55 per cent mothers) were not formally educated.

While in education, the fathers of urban activists of Delhi seemed far behind their sons, occupationally the difference was relatively lesser. While there were some cases where both parents of the respondent were employed in the traditional caste occupations or as agricultural labourers in the village (see Table 7.2), a majority of the fathers were also engaged in regular salaried jobs.

Table 7.2
Occupation of Respondents and their Parents

Occupation	*Self*	*Father*	*Mother*
Salaried Job	45 (55.6)	41 (50.6)	6 (7.4)
Professional	6 (7.4)	3 (3.7)	1 (1.2)
Caste Occupation	Nil	8 (9.9)	5 (6.2)
Business	6 (7.4)	3 (3.7)	Nil
Activist	16 (19.8)	Nil	Nil
Student	8 (9.9)	Nil	Nil
Farming	Nil	8 (9.9)	2 (2.5)
Agricultural Labourer	Nil	11 (13.6)	4 (4.9)
Other Labourer	Nil	7 (8.6)	4 (4.9)
Mostly Housewife	NA	NA	59 (72.8)
Total	81 (100)	81 (100)	81 (100)

Reading the two tables together helps us understand the pattern of mobility among the Dalit communities at large. A close look at Table 7.2 would suggest that as many as 60 per cent of the Dalit activists in Delhi are members of the 'second generation' in non-traditional occupations. However, the level of their fathers' education ('no education' or 'up to 10th standard') would also indicate that they would have been employed in an organized sector job, at the lower level, an unskilled class-IV job. Nevertheless, such a job enabled them to send their children to schools and helped them move ahead. This is further substantiated by the fact that a majority of our respondents were born in urban or semi-urban areas (52 per cent). In contrast, more than 70 per cent of them reported their fathers having been born in a village (see Table 7.3).

Table 7.3
Place of Birth of Respondent Activists and their Fathers

Place of Birth	*Self*	*Father*
Rural	39 (48.1)	57 (70.4)
Urban	33 (40.7)	16 (19.8)
Semi-urban	9 (11.1)	8 (9.9)
Total	81 (100)	81 (100)

Perceptions of social class and mobility

How do the Dalit activists of Delhi view their social and economic position beyond their caste identity? Sociologically speaking, they could all be seen as belonging to what would broadly be described as the 'middle class'. The self-perception of our respondents about their class positions fits this description. As shown in Table 7.4, nearly 95 per cent of them placed themselves in the category, with a majority choosing the identity of 'middle-middle class', and some as 'upper-middle class' or 'lower-middle class'. While none of them identified themselves as 'rich', a small number of them do see themselves as being 'poor'.

Table 7.4
Perceptions of Social Class

Social Class	*No. of Activists*
Poor	4 (4.9)
Lower-Middle Class	32 (39.5)
Middle-Middle Class	33 (40.7)
Upper-Middle Class	12 (14.8)
Rich	0 (0)
Total	81 (100)

Their perception of being members of some section of the middle class also points to their experience of social mobility. As is evident from Table 7.5, except for a small section, they see themselves as being socially and economically mobile. Interestingly, their perceptions on 'social mobility' are stronger than on 'economic mobility'. Even when they believed that they were not significantly rich, a large proportion of them felt that socially they and their families had moved ahead.

Table 7.5
Perceptions of Social and Economic Mobility

Extent of Mobility	*Economic Mobility*	*Social Mobility*
Significant	29 (35.8)	36 (44.4)
Moderate	41 (50.6)	35 (43.2)
Hardly Any	11 (13.6)	10 (12.3)
Total	81 (100)	81 (100)

Political articulations and self-identity

The so-called 'untouchable' communities of the subcontinent have been described in a variety of ways and through different names. It was only during the British colonial period that they were clubbed under a pan-Indian classificatory group. Over the years, social reformers and political leaders also coined categories for them that suited their brand of politics. However, as mentioned earlier, over the last three decades or so a new political consciousness has been spreading within the ex-untouchable communities across different regions of India with a near-universal acceptance of Ambedkar as a symbol of common identity that articulates their aspirations. Dalit activists of Delhi overwhelmingly confirmed this. In response to the question — 'Who best articulates Dalit interests: (*a*) Ambedkar, (*b*) Gandhi, (*c*) Nehru, (*d*) Communists, or (*e*) the RSS' — nearly 94 per cent identified with Ambedkar and underlined that he alone represented their aspirations. Only one respondent identified with Gandhi while the other four (5 per cent) with communists (some of these respondents also added 'along with Ambedkar').

Similarly, in response to another question on 'preferred category of self-description', no one chose the popular Gandhian notion of 'Harijan' for self-description. Interestingly, even when a majority of them preferred the category of Dalit, it was not as popular with them as the icon of Ambedkar. Many respondents were reluctant to choose 'Dalit' as the preferred category of self-description (see Table 7.6).

Those who chose 'Dalit' found it politically useful as a catch-all term that includes everyone and unites different caste communities under one banner; or that it had emerged from within the movement; or it was coined by Ambedkar himself. In contrast, categories like Harijan were given by upper castes. Thus, the term

Table 7.6
Preferred Category of Self-Description

Category	*Respondents*	*Percentage*
Dalit	42	51.9
Buddhist/Religion	16	19.8
Caste	3	3.7
Scheduled Caste	12	14.8
Harijan	Nil	Nil
Ambedkarite	3	3.7
Others	5	6.2
Total	81	100.0

'Dalit' expresses agency, 'a mode of mobilization for politics'. Some others pointed to its potential appeal among other marginalized communities such as tribals and minorities. It also had a comparative dimension and was beginning to be understood internationally.

When we pursued this question with our respondents during the longer qualitative interviews, several of them narrated their reasons for identifying or not identifying with the category of Dalit. Those who identified with it had many reasons for doing so. Some of them told us that it gave them a new sense of self-worth and they no longer felt defensive or ashamed of their caste identity. A professional activist working with a Dalit rights organization put it quite vividly:

> My father used to be an agricultural labourer in his native village in Himachal Pradesh. Later on he moved to Delhi. He was able to find a lower level job in Delhi University but he did not reveal his caste. He pretended to be a Rajput. He did not take the benefit of the reservation policy. Though he sent all his five children to study, he did not make use of the quotas. When we went to our native village, other kids would ask us about our caste and when I told them that I was a Rajput, they would laugh and make fun of us.
>
> It was only in class 11 that I got to know that we were Scheduled Castes. In college I worked with a leftist organization and did not feel particularly bad about being a Scheduled Caste. I compelled my father to avail of the benefits meant for the Scheduled Castes. Then he got Scheduled Caste certificates made for us and we used it for our admissions. Though I had read Marx and Lenin, it was only when I read Ambedkar that I began to understand the meaning of being a Dalit.

Another respondent, a student activist at University of Delhi, also came from a family that tried to hide its caste identity upon moving to Delhi.

> At home, caste would often be a subject of conversation. Many of my relatives used to hide their caste. I, too, avoided talking about it because I felt ashamed of being an 'untouchable'. During my post-graduation I started reading Ambedkar and began to attend BAMCEF programmes. The idea of Dalit identity made me curious. A friend of mine took me to the 14th April celebrations. I really liked it. I felt that I should also contribute to this work. If we are doing well then there is no reason to hide our identity. Everyone should know that given an opportunity Dalits can perform equally well. Now I want people to know me as I am. I make it a point to greet people with 'Jai Bhim'. I want our people to feel proud of being a Dalit … Dalit identity … is not a source of inferiority.

Others counted practical benefits of the term because, he added, 'it unifies various sub-castes and allows us to talk about our common situation. Thus, use of the term is significant. It is also an expression of assertion as we are openly claiming our identity.' Another respondent extended this by arguing that 'it allows all sub-castes to be within one umbrella. It allows us to connect with the Scheduled Tribe community and even members of different religious groups who were earlier classified as lower caste.' This is despite her personal experience of discrimination by fellow Scheduled Caste students, who ranked above her in the caste hierarchy, during her college days when she was an office bearer of a Dalit organization.

Another respondent from a caste community traditionally associated with scavenging work found the idea of Dalit identity empowering as it provided an alternative language to talk about caste. It helped them come out of the disabilities inflicted by the system on untouchables. A senior activist working with a national organization focusing on the scavenger communities best articulated this point:

> When I started working with my people, the only aim we had was to take them out of the municipality job (scavenging work). Families for generations, in my community, were engaged in such jobs. The question that bothered me was: Why should only a particular

> community be involved with this kind of work? A secure municipal job with a guarantee of regular work discouraged them from taking education seriously.
>
> I was very happy when the national literacy drive was launched. During that time we met some Dalit activists working in Andhra Pradesh. Someone told me about a cycle *yatra* going from Chittoor to Hyderabad to celebrate Dr Ambedkar's anniversary. I participated in the yatra. It was a very good experience. Before this I had no idea about the caste system. I was only interested in getting my community to leave this scavenging work. I did not have the vocabulary to articulate it in terms of untouchability. It was during the yatra that I understood how this was part of a system. I realized my work was a part of a wider struggle for Dalits. It was not confined to the humiliating job of scavenging. Now when I tell a government official that hiring only from one community for scavenging jobs is akin to practising untouchability, banned by the Constitution, they get scared. Earlier I used to abuse my own people for focusing solely on scavenging and sweeping. Now I understand that they have been systematically pushed into these jobs … The identity of being Dalit gives us the courage to fight politically and recognize that it is discrimination by others. Earlier I blamed our own people and believed that others behaved with us in a certain manner because of our job of cleaning toilets.

Echoing a similar sentiment, another respondent from a similar caste background argued that words like 'Dalit' or 'untouchable' express

> the pain we have undergone … Dalit is understood by people at all levels, nationally and internationally. It does not convey homogeneity of the group, because it is divided, but it conveys that they have a common experience of discrimination and suffering. It provides a framework for building solidarity.

However, as is evident from the survey data, not everyone liked to identify with the category of Dalit. Broadly speaking, there were two sets of objections. First, from those who felt that like 'untouchables', 'Dalit' too was a 'negative' term; one of the respondents argued that 'Ambedkar had himself denounced it when he embraced Buddhism. Being a Buddhist gives us an alternative identity and dignity with a sense of culture and history.' In this sense being a Buddhist is seen as a 'complete identity'. Another

argument was that, 'being a Buddhist also means a clear breakaway from "Hinduism", while "Dalit" or "Scheduled Caste" still denotes the image of a Hindu. Unlike the term "Dalit", Buddhism is a positive identity.'

The second set of objections came from those who see Dalit as a sectarian category, representing only some communities, invariably the more mobile ones among the Scheduled Castes or ex-untouchables, such as the Mahars, Chamars and Jatavs. Some of these respondents opted for the Constitutional category, the 'Scheduled Caste,' as the best way to describe their communities: 'This was not only a secular and Constitutional category but also a developmental category'. Its acceptance by the Indian government was 'a result of efforts of people like Ambedkar'. Another set of respondents who did not like being identified as Dalits were generally from the scavenger communities, who pointed to the 'hegemonic' nature of the category that does not represent the distinctive nature of deprivation and discrimination they experience. Thus, one of them insisted on using 'Bhangi' as part of his name and declaring the caste identity of his community upfront.

Notwithstanding differences of opinion on the category of Dalit, there is wide acceptance of the term among the activists and a large majority of them preferred it over their caste names or being called Harijans. Even those who preferred other categories acknowledged its value and usefulness in building a broader political alliance and a new community. 'It is only through a united block that we can confront the growing instances of atrocities against us', said the respondent who uses his caste, Bhangi, as his family name/surname.

Becoming an Activist, Becoming a Dalit

The survey data shows that those who see themselves as Dalit activists (in Delhi) have been involved in this work for quite some time, between 5 to 25 years, or even more. Only around 16 per cent of them reported being active for less than five years; on the other side, as many as 56 per cent had been involved for more than 10 years. The proportion that had been active for more than 20 years was also quite significant (23.5 per cent).

Our respondents were also involved in a large variety of social and political spheres. Though a good number worked with a

single organization (37 per cent), a majority of them were active or associated with multiple organizations. Some of them worked with more than five organizations (around 14 per cent). This should perhaps be seen in relation to the nature of their activism. While the questionnaire gave them several options regarding this, such as education, development, health, identity and caste politics, a majority of them did not find these labels useful in representing their work. A large proportion (68 per cent) preferred to identify themselves as being active in multiple fields. The only other categories that made sense to some of them were 'Dalit rights' (16 per cent) and 'Dalit literature' (10 per cent). The individuals we interviewed for detailed qualitative input similarly worked in diverse fields broadly related to the Dalit question. Some of them had their own organizations, an individual-centric enterprise, and worked with specific communities of Dalits; some others were associated with large organizations and worked with a team, such as a professional NGO. The focus of these organizations ranged from campaigning for Dalit civil rights; lobbying with the local and national governments to allocate adequate funds for the Scheduled Castes; undertaking fact-finding tours wherever an atrocity occurred; and preparing reports for advocacy work. Some of them worked in an open-ended manner, helping individual Dalits in their problems with the local administrative system or with other aspects of city life. One organization focused on arranging and organizing inexpensive marriages for brides and grooms from the community, given that weddings invariably led to indebtedness, often resulting in long-term dependency on creditors.

However, a majority of our respondents were not tied to any organization. While they coordinated with them, they had their own independent employment and took interest in a variety of things, from writing fiction to participating in protest meetings.

Where did they come from?

As discussed, activists from Delhi are usually second-generation mobile Dalits. Though their fathers were mostly poorly educated, they had invariably moved away from the traditional caste-based agrarian/rural economic order. Even when they continued to live and work in the village, they had been exposed to the larger world, and had often been introduced to the persona of Ambedkar and the role he played in the making of the Indian Constitution. They

grew up in an era when India had already become a Constitutional democracy. Though most of our respondents grew up knowing the reality of caste, none of them ever reported accepting it as a 'normal' or 'natural' reality. Further, even though several of our respondents denied directly experiencing untouchability or even caste discrimination in their childhood, they always felt the discomfort of living with a low-caste identity and often questioned their parents about its 'rationale'.

Perhaps the most important and critical role in the life of our respondents in relation to their encounter with the reality of caste was played by the father (not both parents or just mother). Many of them reported that it was their father who socialized them about the injustice of caste and was the first to tell them about the ways the institution works. At the symbolic level, the imagery of 'Ambedkar' and 'Kanshi Ram' accompanies the father. In many cases Ambedkar occupies quite a central place in this narrative of growing up and gaining knowledge about the caste system. It is perhaps best summarized in the following words of one of our respondents: 'My father retired as a mid-division clerk. He knew that Ambedkar had said children should be educated, so he made sure we all received education even though it was economically difficult for him.'

Another respondent, a freelance researcher, similarly reported:

> While I was growing up, my father was my role model. Though he lived in a village yet he got educated and became a clerk with PWD [Public Works Department] … I was also active in Dalit movement. My family expected me to become an IAS [Indian Administrative Services] officer. I tried … Meanwhile, I was attracted to Kanshi Ram's political ideas and started giving priority to work for Dalit self-assertion.

Another respondent, a 26-year-old research student, who grew up in a Dalit hamlet in Andhra Pradesh and whose father mostly worked as a marginal farmer and a labourer, told a similar story:

> My father … was a marginal farmer but he used to attend meetings and there he got to hear of Ambedkar. Since my village was part of a Scheduled Caste constituency, most of the people were aware of Dalit politics. My father had seen Ambedkar's statue in Hyderabad and was curious about it. He went to Hyderabad again

> in the late 1970s to work as a labourer and there he attended 14th April celebrations. He thought if he had a son he would want him to be like Ambedkar. He connected with Ambedkar because of the Constitution. Seeing Ambedkar in a blue suit, red tie and holding the Constitution, he felt inspired … People there told him that Ambedkar thought education would be the source of salvation for Dalits. Thus, he worked very hard to get his children educated.

Another respondent, a woman who teaches in a college in Delhi, recalled her introduction to caste as a child through her father:

> My father was an attached agricultural labourer. Once his landowner/employer came to our house and asked for my mother, using very abusive language. I did not like it. I replied to him in the same language. He got very angry. I did not know he was our employer. My mother asked me to shut up. When my father came, he sat down at his employer's feet. Seeing my father like this, I felt very bad. After he left, my father told me about the caste system. He said, god made these relations and it has been in existence since time immemorial. Therefore, we had to follow tradition. Then I realized that we were different from others. However, my father did not say it was right. Though my father was illiterate, he understood that this was wrong. He said he did not know why such a social order persisted … He would often tell me that I must study and tell him why such a system prevailed. He wanted me to study and become a *madam* (a schoolteacher). He would not allow me to work in the kitchen. Though he himself was very superstitious, he never wanted me to be like him. He never told me about the perceived value of those superstitions. Rather, he encouraged me to interrogate those traditions (*tum hi padh ke batana ki kyun hota hai ye sabh*).

Some of our respondents were also born into activist-families. Their fathers, and in some cases even grandfathers, had been actively involved with some kind of Dalit activism. One of our respondents, a medical doctor, was born in such a family and sounded very proud of his ancestry.

> My involvement with Dalit activism happened through my father. He started writing on Dalit issues at the age of 16, in 1943. A lot of scholars and activists working for the cause used to visit our home. As a child I got to know them and interact with them and this was my education on Dalit issues. The environment of the house was such that one became conscious of being a Dalit from an early age.

Several other respondents similarly gave credit to their fathers for not only sending them to school and college for education, but also encouraging them to read literature on Dalit issues and writings of Dalit authors.

Interestingly, even though Dalit demographics clearly show that education and literacy levels among them are quite low, reading and writing seemed to be an important activity in the lives of our respondents. Some were inspired by their education to write about caste and their own experience of it. Eight (nearly 10 per cent) of our survey respondents reported literature as the main domain of their activism. They saw literary work as being embedded in Dalit activism, or vice-versa. 'Activism can take many forms. My activism has been through my writing. I am trying, through my writings and reflections, to take my ideas to the society so that they give our society a certain direction,' reported a Dalit woman, writer and activist. Similarly, another respondent, who teaches in a university in Delhi, reported:

> In 1992, I had just finished my graduation. I started reading some autobiographical pieces by Dalits. Reading them, I realized I have also experienced discrimination of the kind described in these books at various points in my life. Thus, I was initiated into Dalit *sahitya* (literature).
>
> I am now actively attached to Dalit sahitya, which is itself a movement and thus I am an activist too. Dalit sahitya does not work without activism. It is associated with the masses. However, there are challenges. Writing requires patience and depth. While for the activists, there is a sense of immediacy for expression of anger … Craftsmanship is also important in literature. Literature should not become mere reporting or journalism. Literature requires reflection from the author. Different Dalit autobiographies are diverse in this sense. Most of them are an amalgamation of incidents but not of reflection.

Another important point that seems to be emerging from our interviews is that many of our respondents became activists when they recognized the discriminatory aspect of caste in their schools and colleges. It was in these institutions that they came in contact with non-Dalits, away from the comfort zone of their homes and protection of their parents. A senior activist, Christian by faith, currently working with an international organization reported:

> I grew up in a Dalit settlement in the village. We did not go to the main village or to the Hindu temple. We did not play with

> the children from other castes. We were very constrained there and hardly interacted with the larger world. But coming to college opened my eyes. Before that I never claimed ex-untouchable or Dalit status but called myself a Christian. Here I realized how important it is to demonstrate one's identity to show to the world that I am not ashamed of my origin because I belong to this group. Thus, I asserted my Dalit identity. At the same time Karamchedu and Chunduru massacres took place and there was agitation all over Andhra Pradesh.[4] I participated in it and this enhanced my understanding of caste. As a Christian you can have your own spiritual life but the fact that society looks at you differently also matters. It made me question my identity: Who am I and how it affects those around me? This brought me into activism.

References to violence as the source of their initial motivation to become activists were quite common. Apart from incidents like Karamchedu and Chunduru, several of them remembered the anti-reservation mobilizations in the wake of the implementation of Mandal Commission Report in 1990 by the V. P. Singh government. Even though the Report was about OBC quotas, these mobilizations often targeted the Dalits. One of them was the founder of an organization formed to counter the activities of Youth for Equality, a right-wing anti-reservation organization that has been active in Delhi and other cities in recent years.

Some of them also referred to personal experiences of violence and how they converted their anger into activism. A senior activist and founder of a leading Dalit rights organization narrated his personal experience:

> The goons of land mafia once attacked us because my father was working to stop their land-grabbing activities … They blocked our

[4] Karamchedu is a big and prosperous village in Prakasam district in coastal Andhra Pradesh. On 22 July 1985, a strong mob of 3,000 people from the locally dominant caste, the Kammas, had assaulted the members of a Dalit community, Madigas, *en masse* and killed six men and raped three girls.

On 6 August 1991, eight Dalits were hacked to death in broad daylight, with over 400 dominant-caste members chasing them along the bund of an irrigation canal in Chunduru village of Guntur District, Andhra Pradesh.

> way and used petrol bombs to blast the car in which I was traveling with my parents and brother. My mother was killed in the incident. My father also sustained injuries. I was 21 years old then … I wanted to avenge my mother's killing. My father helped us digest that hatred and use it for positive work, and geared me towards social work and eventually to work against caste discrimination …
>
> Earlier I thought we were all Christians … Caste did not seem to be a big issue. When I first realized I was a Dalit, I went into depression for three months. It took me two years to accept the fact that people look at me as a 'low'-caste person … However, when I discovered I was a Dalit I could no longer look upon those people as objects of pity or charity. I was no longer fighting for the rights of others but I was the 'other'.

Another respondent, who also came from a relatively rich background, realized the need to work on the caste question through her activism. A woman respondent working with a prominent Dalit rights organization in Delhi told us about her personal discovery of caste through her professional work:

> During childhood, I never realized that I was a Dalit. I belonged to an upper-middle class Christian family. No one in the family ever spoke to me about caste. We are Madigas from Andhra Pradesh but my grandparents had moved to Maharashtra. After doing masters in social work I started working with a Bangalore-based NGO. It was during my work with rural communities that I realized the importance of caste … Even while I worked with CRY, which focuses on child rights, caste was salient as Dalit children faced discrimination in the classroom and were more susceptible to malnutrition and lack of health care.

Some others acquired their political consciousness and inspiration from BAMCEF and the movement initiated by Kanshi Ram. They were encouraged by their families to work with the organization. Some reported having acquired their motivation to join activism from their activist colleagues in the university. Mobility, both horizontal and vertical, can be a source of escaping from caste but it can also enhance understanding of caste and the disabilities it could inflict onto a group of people. Some of our respondents reported that they started working for the upliftment of their community when they saw the contrast between the rural Dalit

communities and the rapidly changing outside world. A leader of a prominent Dalit organization that works with scavenging communities told us:

> After spending six years in a hostel … when I came back to my community in the village and saw them engaged in scavenging work, I felt something should be done to enable them to get out of it … We gathered some people and started thinking of ways to change things. Our people do not think of the need for education. Once they turn 15, they want to get a job in the municipality. The imagination for a different life was absent …
>
> … in the world outside everyone is educated, thinking, and with aspirations, while nothing had changed in my community. However, even though a Dalit-consciousness was missing, our people would dress up well once they finished their day's work. Looking at them no one could make out that they were scavengers — cleaning toilets and sweeping streets. My elder brother keeps two pens in his pocket though he cannot write anything except signing his own name … I felt this showed that they wanted to come out of the life they were living provided they are made aware and given options for getting out of it … This is what we do in the organization here.

Giving back to the community

We asked our respondents, what keeps them going? Having achieved middle-class status, why don't they try to merge with the mainstream and forget their caste identity? They seemed very clear about these questions and had ready answers. Though their responses varied, the core issues they identified seemed common. For most of them it was important to be active and political because the system of caste distinctions had not yet completely disappeared from the society. Even if, individually, they could escape from the burden of caste, they needed to 'keep the fight going' for other members of their community. This has been very well articulated by a scholar from a leading university of the city:

> I am often reduced to being a Scheduled Caste even in my professional life. It does not matter what my professional interests are. People think I am best suitable for speaking on Dalit issues simply because I come from a Dalit background. I am reduced to a narrow professional identity because of my caste.

Another scholar, a writer, similarly pointed to the close relationship that he thinks exists between individual and community in the context of caste in the Indian society.

> I am not just an individual, but also member of a community. The two cannot be separated in the Indian society. If someone insults a Dalit person, it is not just one person being insulted but the entire community because the insult or violation is often based on caste identity of the person. If someone does well, it is not because of the individual alone, it is also a contribution of the community … Being a part of the community I must work for its uplift and for my own good.
>
> People have a certain image of Dalits. They often tell me — as if they are giving a compliment — that I do not look like a Dalit. They think they are being nice to me but I feel extremely hurt by such comments. This is not a comment on me but on my community. How will a poor person look good? In a village, any poor person will look bad. Even in rural areas, a Brahmin will not look so clean and will not be able to maintain himself well. It is a question of economic status. Earlier they would not let us wear good clothes, eat good food or get educated and would blame us for being dirty and having unkempt hair. Give us an opportunity and we will prove our worth. I feel so bad because I am being cut off from my community … It is a conspiracy of drawing a wedge between individuals like me and the Dalit community.

Another respondent put it in more concrete words and argued that her achievements were a part of the ongoing struggle. She worries for her children:

> I am doing well now but in my past I have suffered a lot and I need to remember that and fight against the system, which makes such discrimination possible. It is not like my son will not have to face this discrimination. He will face it too, though the form of that discrimination might change. We continue to live in a caste society.

Many others articulated their social and political work clearly in terms of paying back to the community. A college teacher expressed this in the following words:

> I am here not because I am educated but because my forefathers have struggled for it. It is not an individual effort of my parents.

> My grandfather used to work as a bonded labourer for a few *anna*s [a former currency unit equal to 1/16 of a Rupee]. A social and political movement is behind my getting here. A community has invested in me. Struggle done by people like Ambedkar and Phule has made it possible for me to be here in Delhi. My wellbeing is dependent upon the wellbeing of the community. It is my organic responsibility to pay back to the community.

For most of our respondents, activism was a source of great satisfaction. Through activism they could relate to their community and help others get justice. The following response well echoed this sentiment:

> A large number of people from my community are still suffering. I need to help them in raising their consciousness, or when there is a fight between the oppressed and the oppressor I have to stand with the oppressed. When I know people from my community are suffering so much because of our common identity I have to do something about it. I cannot shut my eyes to oppression.

Activism also helped bridge the 'class distance' between these mobile and middle-class Dalit activists and the deprived communities they come from. Several respondents used the term 'role model' to describe their position in their communities. Even when they were distanced in class terms, the wider community tended to look at their mobility as its own achievement. A respondent said, 'people see our achievements positively. We inspire them. It helps them realize that Dalits can also achieve successes.'

A senior activist with an international organization told us that

> many of my professional colleagues hide their caste identity. I always put myself across as a Dalit Christian. People ask me why I do not just call myself a Christian … When I go to my native place people recognize me as a Dalit activist. They consider me a success story. Most of my friends are still working as agricultural labourers. They want to know how much salary I get and whether I own a car and a house. They are curious. But more than distance this leads to identification. I try to relate with them as one of their own.

Another activist and college teacher in a women's college similarly felt less distanced from those who still live in the village as she herself had grown up there:

> I do not feel I am any different from them. They also treat me like one of their own and that gives me satisfaction. When I went to the village driving my car, they teased me and reminded me how I used to race with them on a bicycle. I am a role model for my family and community. Looking at my success, they are now interested in sending their girls to school. I do not face any problems interacting with my people.

Mobile Dalits also become a resource, a kind of social capital, for other members of the community, as it emerges from this response:

> People from my community connect with me. They take me as a role model. They believe that I will be able to give them guidance. I assist youngsters from my community coming to the city for education, job interviews, etc. They live at our place when they are in Delhi. They feel there are people from their own community in the city who will support them.

Another respondent, a woman writer, told us that even when there was a distance, mobile Dalits were looked upon positively by most members of their communities:

> I think there is an obvious difference in 'thinking' between me and my family or the community. People think I am *kitaabi* (bookish) and distant from their everyday realities. However, in our family there is a tradition of supporting relatives in their education and providing them with professional guidance. Youngsters in my community consider me a role model, particularly women of the community. My brother's wife got inspired after interacting with me and is now actively engaged in Dalit issues.

However, not everyone could relate to the community in this manner; some felt distanced. Growing differentiations within caste communities also made it difficult for them to relate to everyone equally. Some, who were the second- and third-generation educated middle class, even when active, had a different language and experience of caste. Yet, on the whole our interviews did not reflect a serious problem of class distance or alienation from the larger community. Activism certainly helped them connect with their communities, and the communities too seemed to connect rather easily with them because of their activist identities.

This is very close to the findings of Jules Naudet's work on Dalit social mobility. He too reported that mobile Dalits work to 'pay back to society', and they experience social mobility 'with relative ease' because 'they remain attached to their caste-based identity' and 'draw from caste-based cultural repertoires and pre-constructed discourses to define and to justify the position they occupy in Indian society' (Naudet 2008: 418).

Discourses of discrimination, prejudice and humiliation

We also asked questions on their personal experiences of discrimination and untouchability, during childhood and in adult life, their memories relating to their own experiences and of their close circle of friends/relatives. Though not everyone had personally experienced untouchability, almost all of them narrated their experiences of encountering discrimination and prejudice — even when not directly asked about it. In fact, this subject kept surfacing in different ways during most of the interviews. Being a Dalit activist is premised on the presence of ideas like discrimination and deprivation. However, what we were looking for was an understanding of the specific nature of discriminations that they had personally experienced, given their location of work in the metropolitan city of Delhi.

Our respondents talked about several forms of discriminatory situations that they had personally encountered, subtle, not so subtle and obvious. We can classify these into three broad categories. First could perhaps be described as the classical experience of *denial and untouchability* that they personally encountered. While recounting this they invariably referred to the village, but not always. Several of them had experienced some form of 'denial' and 'untouchability' in the urban context as well. The second set of experiences they recounted could be described as *devaluation and humiliation*. Almost all of these happened in the urban middle-class setting where a 'normally' expected treatment is denied to a person because of his/her caste background. The third set of experiences could be defined as *institutional and cultural bias*, which mostly related to their experiences during their education and/or in the institutions/organizations they are currently working with.

The respondents narrated several instances when they had encountered *the first kind* of discriminatory situation. The

following story told to us by a university teacher is a classic case of untouchability:

> I never liked going to the village because of the significant presence of caste. I once attended a wedding. We were part of the groom's procession …We were walking and dancing. After sometime, I got very tired and thirsty. I went to a house and asked for water from the woman in the house … First she brought water because we were ahead of the procession but then she looked at the procession and enquired whether we were with the wedding procession. On hearing 'yes', she simply refused to give us water. She knew it was a wedding procession of Dalits.

In one case, one of our respondents went with his family to a village in Rajasthan in 2007 to visit a relative. He entered a shop and enquired from the shopkeeper about the location of the house. The shopkeeper asked if he also belonged to the same caste. On hearing 'yes', the shopkeeper told him to immediately move out of the shop, and it was only when he was out that he was given directions.

Another respondent, a senior teacher in a leading university of Delhi, mentioned that while he was growing up, Dalits could not greet an upper-caste person with 'Namaste'. In the villages and towns of Uttar Pradesh, they had to greet the upper-caste men by saying *paye-lage* ('I touch your feet').

Such cases were not confined to rural settings. 'Open denial' is common in urban centres as well. This is particularly the case when a Dalit wants to rent a house. An activist with a Dalit rights organization narrated two such stories:

> A friend of mine rented a small house in Palam area in Delhi. After a few days she put up a picture of Ambedkar in her house. When her Jat landlord noticed it, he asked her about her caste. When she told him that she was a Balmiki, the house-owner was shocked. Since then, the house-owner and other members of his family began to behave rudely with her and eventually my friend had to shift to a new house.
>
> In another case, a Dalit woman was staying with her family for one-and-a-half years in a rented house in Mukherjee Nagar. She had not informed the landlord that they were Chamars. When the landlord got to know of it he shut water supply to the house and

> asked her to vacate immediately. They were also beaten up by the landlord and the case was reported to the police. The case is still pending in court.

One of our respondents argued that the experience of direct denial could sometimes be sharper in an urban setting. In the village, he argued, 'we are separated from the main village and normally we do not mix with other castes. The experience of discrimination is thus not so stark.' In contrast, the denial could be much starker in the city. He gave his own example of visiting the office of a civil servant to collect data while he was a student at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) in Mumbai. The civil servant was nice to his colleagues and gave them all the data they required. He was nice to him as well till the moment he heard his name, which revealed his 'caste'. The officer refused to entertain him and referred him to a lower-level officer. As our respondent claimed, the officer refused to even look at him. Similarly, another respondent mentioned that when she was studying Sanskrit in a leading university of Delhi, fellow students would avoid sitting next to her in class.

Another respondent narrated his experience of living in the city of Jaipur for two years, where he had to constantly hide his caste identity because otherwise it was impossible to get a house on rent. Even in a city like Delhi, children have to bear the brunt of caste. This respondent, a lawyer with a Dalit rights organization, told us: 'My neighbours do not allow my daughter to enter their home because of our caste. My daughter is one-and-a-half years old but they close the door if she tries to enter their home.'

However, in most cases, our respondents recounted stories of discrimination that fit more in the *second category*. Perhaps the most illuminating experience was narrated to us by a senior academician and a leading Dalit rights activist:

> I grew up in urban Maharashtra, mostly small towns. My father was a middle-level police officer, a *thanedar*. A thanedar is a very powerful person in a small town. However, despite being thanedar *ki beti* ('daughter of a police officer'), everyone in school would identify me by my caste, because everyone in the town knew which caste my father belonged to. Even when he was transferred to another town, our caste would invariably reach there before us.

> Social relationships and friendships were always determined by caste. We often found it hard to interact with officers of comparable rank. We could interact only with other Scheduled Castes in the town. There was a constant feeling of isolation. I could rarely visit homes of upper-caste girls. Even though I was good in studies and active in sports and other extracurricular activities, I had very few friends.
>
> Once, an upper-caste family in one of the towns where my father served invited my mother and me for dinner. My father's surname did not reveal his Dalit identity. Because of our middle-class status they assumed we were upper caste. However, after we reached there they somehow got to know of our caste. Their attitude towards us changed suddenly. They tried to make us sit separately from others. We felt very uncomfortable. My mother and I left without eating.

A Christian Dalit activist narrated a similar story:

> When I was studying in class 10, I had a Brahmin friend. He would often come to my home to study and occasionally ate with us. Once I went to his home. His mother asked me about my caste. I told her that I was a Christian, but she insisted on knowing my caste. When I told her, she asked me to sit at a distance from her son and removed the plate she had set to serve me food. She served me on a leaf and asked me to clear it after the meal. When I returned home I asked my father about it. He told me never to visit the friend again. Though my friend later came to my home and apologized, I could no longer accept him.

Caste endogamy is another important axis of caste that continues to be widely prevalent among the urban-educated Indians. One of our activist respondents narrated a story of his romantic involvement with a non-Dalit girl from a Sikh family. Even though he became a Sikh and followed Sikhism for three years, he could not marry the girl because her parents would not accept him.

Several other respondents also told us about their encounters with this kind of discriminatory behaviour from fellow students, mostly in educational institutions.

The third set of stories closely resembled and often overlapped with the second set, but they should be treated separately. Institutional and cultural biases have much wider and lasting implications. For example, a teacher discriminating against a Dalit student is not

simply a matter of personal experience of the concerned student. Such attitude of the holder of an institutional position in a secular institution tends to reveal a deeper structural bias. Dalit activists of Delhi narrated several stories, some of these have already been presented, which point to the prevalence of discrimination in the city. The most frequently narrated experience in this context was discrimination faced in schools. An articulate Dalit writer not only related his experience, but also told us about the broader implications of corporal punishment on the education of Dalits.

> Teachers used to give very harsh corporal punishment to Scheduled Caste students. I was beaten up so badly on the first day of school that I did not want to return to the school at all. This leads to high dropout rates among Scheduled Caste community students. As a child I did not make this connection then. I felt if the teacher, the guru, is hitting me it must be okay. Later, when I started reading Dalit sahitya I understood this is an example of systematic discrimination.

This did not stop till school.

> When I was a student in Delhi University during early 1990s, there was a teacher who liked me a lot because I was a good student. He would often discuss with me … but the moment he got to know my caste he stopped talking to me.

Another respondent who grew up in Karnataka narrated his experience of discrimination in school and living in a hostel:

> My first memory of discrimination is of school. The other children used to call me *'totti'*, which means dustbin. I asked my mother why everyone laughs at me and calls me a *totti*. To console me, my mother would tell me that they did so because we have a big *totti* near our house.
>
> In the hostel, too, I was identified by my caste. Other students addressed me using my caste name. They would make a joke of it and laugh. At that time I did not fully realize its implications. Often I would also join them and laugh about it. Only later did I realize that they were insulting me. It was very painful and humiliating.

Another activist respondent spoke about the institutional bias against Dalits in the police force. He narrated the incident of 1984

anti-Sikh riots, where the police and popular media assumed, without any evidence, that the Bhangis were responsible for anti-Sikh violence.

> We used to live in Trilokpuri in 1984 and there had been anti-Sikh riots in the area. For no reason, police started arresting Bhangis and accused them of inciting violence. While Sikhs were victims of communal violence, Bhangis became victims of state repression. My father mostly stayed at home during those days, but he, too, was arrested for no reason. We were easy prey. The police stormed our area and picked up people for all kinds of reasons. I even overheard a policeman telling his colleague, 'we will pick up people from 32/33 blocks if we have to'. Bhangis in Trilokpuri occupy these blocks. Police treats them as a 'criminal caste'.

He also spoke about discrimination in his current workplace, where for the last six months he is being told that his performance has not been satisfactory. 'No one had any problem with me for the past 20 years that I have been working there. Now when I am due for promotion, they are trying to create a negative image of me.' Some other respondents also similarly narrated their stories of being stereotyped, and felt that their colleagues hated them because they had availed the benefit of reservation. Though on the face of it they criticized the 'reservation' policy, in reality they found it hard to accept a Dalit colleague, particularly if he happens to be in a senior position, or otherwise in a position of authority.

Caste and beyond

What is caste? What keeps it going? How could one break away from this system? We asked our respondents about these obvious but important questions. As expected, no one said anything positive about caste. The terms through which they made sense of caste and that kept appearing in the discussions were 'discrimination', 'inequality', 'prejudice', 'hierarchy', 'graded inequality', 'endogamy', 'untouchability', 'exclusion', 'restrictions' 'separation', 'segregation', 'humiliation', 'indignity', 'mental slavery', 'Hinduism', and 'power'. They were all invoked in a negative sense. Interestingly, no one referred to *karma* and we hardly heard anything about its 'ritual' significance while discussing caste with our respondents.

Notions about caste

Our respondents mostly looked at caste as a peculiarly Indian reality, and more specifically, a part of Hindu religion. Even though they worked with the notion of Dalit being a 'communitarian' identity, most of them accepted the presence of internal differences within Dalits on caste lines and admitted that untouchability and caste divisions exist even among Dalits. As one of the respondents said:

> Caste … is a division of people … primarily based on principles of inequality and discrimination. It is based on the belief that people are not born equal, which means they can be legitimately treated unequal. Discrimination is thus an inherent part of caste system. So long as caste remains it will be impossible to overcome discriminatory practices. Caste divides people and makes it convenient for them to make divisions permanent … At the bottom there are numerous castes. Within the Dalit community also there are many divisions into sub-castes and not a single identity, which shows that Dalits have internalized the caste identity. The degree of discrimination varies between Dalits.

Another respondent, a woman lawyer, also underlined the negative elements of caste:

> Caste … plays a negative role by dividing people. It separates them into compartments. It has no positive role and should not be there. It survives because upper-caste people benefit from it. Even some Dalits perpetuate the system. It is based on hierarchy and divides people into superior and inferior … It is very hard for people to get out of their caste status.

Though they agreed that caste represented past 'tradition' and 'culture', many of them also pointed to 'power' and 'dominance' as being the core elements of caste. 'Caste is also about prejudice … everywhere. In the village, upper castes exhibit their arrogance openly … It benefits the dominant communities and that is why it survives.'

How can we get out of the caste system? What are the roles and responsibilities of the State in the reservation system? What has changed in caste and what remains? What is their vision of an alternative society?

During the course of long interviews, almost all respondents referred to the ideological nature of caste, the 'mentality', and the legitimacy it gets from Hinduism. Hardly anyone liked being identified as 'Hindu'. Though a large majority of them would have been born in 'Hindu' families, only a small proportion, less than 14 per cent, identified themselves as Hindus in religious terms (see earlier, in this chapter).

While getting out of Hinduism was perhaps seen as an imperative to get out of the caste system, no one saw it as being sufficient. Many of them also pointed to the *materiality of caste*. 'Caste', they argued, 'had always had strong political and economic connotations' and that 'it is about unfair and unequal distribution of productive resources'. Some of them even disagreed with Ambedkar's decision to convert out of Hinduism. 'Religious conversions do not end caste', asserted a Dalit writer. Many others pointed to the crucial significance of, and need for, 'education', 'economic empowerment' and 'citizenship rights', if Dalits had to move ahead.

How can that be achieved? Given that our respondents identified themselves as activists, they were engaged in community mobilization and awareness-raising through activities tailored to local cultures and practices in order to eliminate the caste system. However, they all pointed to the crucial role of the State in ending caste-based disabilities. Notwithstanding their personal political inclinations, they all viewed the potential role of the State in positive terms. They invoked the idea of 'Indian Constitution' and its close affinity to Ambedkar. Unlike the left-wing working-class struggles, 'Dalits should not fight the State, but use it for their development', argued a college lecturer. Another activist, an engineer working with the Delhi government, elaborated this point further:

> Underprivileged sections of society, such as Dalits, need support from the State. It is a constitutional responsibility of a democratic state. Instead of blaming the State we need to focus on getting maximum benefits from it. Here the role of social activists becomes critical. They have to raise awareness … There are many State schemes, which can be used for the benefit of the community. Social activists should facilitate this so that corruption can be contained, and the middle men, who are mostly from upper-caste communities, are not allowed to benefit to the disadvantage of Dalits.

The State was also important, underlined another activist, because the society in India was divided on caste lines and Dalits could not expect anything from the society. 'Society does not give any space to Dalits, ideologically or materially. Our only hope is the State and the democratic political processes,' argued several of them.

They also talked about the significance of political power for Dalits. They invoked Ambedkar and Kanshi Ram and the idea of political power being the 'master-key'. Even those who were very critical of the current political dispensation and/or the Dalit politicians in mainstream electoral politics agreed that it was only because of the 'politics of votes' that cases of atrocities against Dalits get raised in the Indian Parliament. It was only through political pressure that they could get pro-Dalit policies implemented.

Though many of them criticized the process of economic liberalization and the presumed withdrawal of State from the economic sphere, they did not view it as being synonymous with globalization, or its inevitable outcome. Many of them see globalization as a different and positive process for Dalits.

> Globalization offers an opportunity to widen our movement, forge alliances with similar kind of movements across national borders. Discrimination is not unique to India. It gives us a broader vision. The process of globalization also makes it mandatory for the Indian Government to honour international Human Rights obligations. We can demand bringing 'non-discrimination' into the fundamental principles of governance, as practised in some other democratic countries.

Role of reservations

The most important policy measure for the development of Dalits in India has been the system of quotas or reservations. Many of them attributed their social and economic mobility directly to reservations. 'Today I am here because of reservations'. 'Whatever we have achieved is because of reservations', were the typical opening lines of their response to the questions on the subject. A senior activist elaborated this point in the following words:

> Reservations have played a critical role in giving Dalits access to education and employment and getting them elected to legislature …Voluntary inclusion does not happen as we can see in the case of

> Muslims. Without reservations people would not be able to enter the realms of education and employment. Reservations should continue as long as caste-based discrimination continues. People are living parallel lives. I studied in a classroom where one teacher taught five subjects. There was no blackboard in the school and just one classroom. The dominant castes did not allow us to enter the main village. I stayed in a social welfare hostel struggling all through. Thus, there is no point talking of equality or merit as the race does not begin on equal footing. Our community children who do not get access to nutritional food, books or tuitions cannot be expected to compete on equal terms. It is not that they are not meritorious but the field is not levelled. To begin with there has to be equality of opportunity.

Several respondents pointed to the presence of active prejudice against Dalits in the job market. Even if a Dalit was well educated, s/he may not get a job because of the widespread bias.

> Any job that requires appearing for an interview and is not 'reserved', is not given to a Dalit candidate. In the first meeting itself they will ask your caste. When they are unable to place you by looking at your name, they will ask you directly, 'Who are you …?' Or else they will keep asking this question in roundabout manner over and over again.

Apart from being a sole source of Dalit social and economic mobility and a shield against caste-based prejudice and discrimination, our activist respondents also looked at reservations as 'a right'. 'I see reservations as representation. The people who have been victims of discrimination for so long need to be given special provisions,' argued one of our respondents. Reservations have also helped in producing 'leaders' who are working for the community and taking the agenda of Dalit rights ahead. Underlining this point, another activist argued: 'Reservations have played a great role in Dalit empowerment and political consolidation. However, they are not for poverty alleviation but for creating worthy individuals who can negotiate with the power structure on behalf of the community they represent.'

While the general attitude towards reservations was universally positive, some raised the question of internal disparity across communities. Most of them were from communities traditionally engaged in scavenging work. 'Reservation benefits only those who

are educated. Very few people in our community are educated. Benefits of reservations have gone more to other communities,' a respondent argued. However, another respondent from the same community was more cautious. 'No one has stopped us from taking benefit of reservation. Our community also needs to reform itself. It needs to prepare itself for the social and economic mobility that the reservation policy offers.' Another respondent who found the proposal of caste-based sub-classification of quotas appealing was not very sure about its political implications and the intentions of those who wish to implement it.

The danger to reservation system came from the process of privatization. Some of them underlined the loss that Dalit communities had experienced because of near-complete privatization/informalization of class-IV jobs. 'It was at the secure class-IV job that the mobility process began for most of us'. Connecting it with his personal story of social and economic mobility, one of our respondents said:

> Privatization is a big danger for Dalits. Majority of Dalits are in class-IV employment. Here privatization has led to contract-based employment where wages have been drastically reduced. My father was a government employee, a sweeper in the municipality. He earned Rs 4500 per month. Today, three generations down, those who are being recruited in the same job begin with Rs 1800 per month. Same is the case with employment in security agencies. My father had a permanent job. He was given a good sum of money on his retirement. With this money my parents were able to give me education. However, today it has become impossible. Private sector does not give permanent jobs. Economic growth and liberalization may have increased jobs, but our jobs have shrunk. Had it not happened, jobs for us in the government sector would have increased many-fold … Reservations should be mandatory for the private sector too.

Some activists also blamed the state sector for not hiring against the existing unfilled vacancies in different departments. Others argued for extension of reservations to other sectors, such as bank credit or the contracts given by government departments for supplies. They were all very insistent that reservation remained an important part of the state policy for development of Dalit communities, and should not only be continued but also strengthened.

Milestones and challenges

How do the Dalit activists of Delhi look at their work in terms of achievements and challenges?

They all seemed quite involved in their work. They also appeared to be very proud of their activism, and saw it as socially valuable and personally important for them. Even when they complained about discrimination they experienced in the past and in their current jobs, they also recalled their milestones and achievements. Most of them recognized that the caste system has undergone many changes and there have been some positive developments. A senior activist, who worked with an organization engaged in abolition of the traditional form of scavenging, underlined this point quite sharply:

> There have been changes in the caste system. We are able to question the system today. Earlier our main struggle was confined to getting better buckets and good brooms for our work. Now we fight against scavenging. Sense of dignity is also growing. Even the elderly in the community are talking about caste. We no longer feel embarrassed about our caste background/identity. Most people seem happy to keep their caste titles. Now people want to fight and come out of the caste order. Others have also understood that no one will take discrimination forever. However, in the villages, there is still a lot of struggle as the dominant castes do not want to lose power.

Notwithstanding this recognition of positive changes, none of our respondents suggested that they were anywhere near their goals. Caste, for most of them, continued to exist and determine life chances of Dalits negatively. Many pointed to the increased atrocities and violence against Dalits in different parts of India. While they agreed that in most cases it was also a result of growing assertion among Dalits, the conflict seemed to be sharpening caste identities and most importantly, the victims of violence were always from Dalit communities. Many of them also pointed to the challenges faced by Dalits because of the quality of education available in state-run schools and the contents of education. Some also talked about the growing influence of corporate media, which has no sympathies for Dalit-related issues.

Challenges also come from within. Many of our respondents, across communities, admitted that internal division among Dalits

is a serious challenge for their movements. A respondent who publicly identified himself as Bhangi put it quite sharply:

> Internal differences between the Dalit communities should be overcome if the movement has to go forward. Bhangis are not part of the category Dalit. Even Dalits (read Chamars) consider us to be Bhangis and thus lower than them. A Chamar officer once said to me, your people don't study … The Chamars avoid close social relations with Bhangis. They deplore casteism but keep *roti–beti* [eating together and arranging marriages, literally, giving daughters in marriage] relations within their own community. Thus there is casteism among Dalits too. Dalit is not a unified or homogeneous category. They say that we are all Dalits, but where is the evidence? I have heard that some Chamars keep separate utensils for Bhangis. How can I then agree to be a part of Dalits? I feel isolated … The distance between Chamars and Bhangis is almost the same as that between Brahmins and Chamars.

Along with underlining the inter-caste differences, a women activist pointed to another set of internal challenges — the question of gender and patriarchy that Dalit movements needed to address. As she argued:

> Issues of Dalit women and sub-castes have to be taken up more seriously. The question of Dalit patriarchy needs to be addressed. There are internal differences among Dalits across regions and on political party lines … Dalits should also connect with the other groups suffering from marginalization, minorities, women or those fighting against displacement.

While they all seemed to be comfortable about the 'sectarian' nature of Dalit activism, and were clear about their affiliation to an identity movement, there were many who felt uncomfortable with the emerging discourse of Dalitism. Some of them no longer wanted to identify with the category Dalit because the movement had moved ahead. As a college lecturer put it:

> I think the term Dalit should now be transcended. It was okay when I made a transition from Chamar to Dalit. Today I am not interested in being a Dalit because now it is not simply a question of dignity but also of power and contestation.

Another activist was worried about the absence of a larger or holistic vision in contemporary Dalit movements:

> We seem to be focusing only on the Dalit question. We are no longer talking about the caste question? … There seems to be no debate on caste in the Indian society today. I think we are afraid to talk about it because somewhere it has affected all of us individually. Non-Dalits feel very uncomfortable with any open discussion about caste. Only Dalits seem to be talking about it. There is a need to cross the hedge between Dalits and non-Dalits. There is a need to engage with the reality of caste — we need to draw our strength from it and not hide in weakness … We need to be clearer in our vision. There is a need for articulation of vision in terms of free human-hood. It should not be limited to 'freedom from' but should include a discourse on 'freedom to'. Only that would enable us to annihilate caste.

Interestingly, not everyone talked about annihilation of caste. In fact, the emphasis of a majority of our respondents seemed to be more on constructing a community, a distinctive identity, where difference is recognized and respected and does not imply hierarchy and dominance.

Concluding Comments

The term 'activism' has often been invoked in relation to the idea of 'civil society' and the so-called NGOs. The term 'civil society', as John Harriss rightly points out, has a modernist connotation. It is 'a sphere of associational life' or a

> space of association, independent of market, and between the family and kinship groups on the one hand and state on the other. It also connotes a set of values that may be summed up as those of … tolerance and respect for others as citizens with equal rights and responsibilities (Harris 2005: 3; also see Chatterjee 2001: 172).

However, the contemporary revival of the term civil society also has its own historicity. The rediscovery of 'civil society' as NGOs in the late 1980s, as David Gellner points out, coincided with the rise of neo-liberalism and the retreat of welfare state in many advanced capitalist societies (Gellner 2009: 2), a trend that soon caught up with developing countries like India as well.

Interestingly, the very idea of Dalit activism questions this mainstream conception of civil society and the contextual meaning of its revival. While many of our respondent activists worked with NGOs

and invoked the notion of civil society, they were clearly 'sectarian' about their politics, in the sense of working for the upliftment of 'their' communities. While their work is indeed geared towards the universal ideals of citizenship and equality, their politics is grounded on caste and kinship, and not on 'associational principles'. Their politics is premised on a communitarian identity and a discourse of dignity for their communities. As is evident from this discussion, while many of them work with their own community for its development, they all look up to the State and the electoral political process, not only for protection from atrocities, but also for implementation of job quotas and special welfare schemes. Thus the idea of Dalit activism potentially raises questions about the 'relevance' of the idea of civil society in an unequal society, divided on caste lines, where asking for representation, in a sense, has to be a sectarian agenda.

However, the invocation of caste and communitarian identity by the Dalits is not a traditional project for reviving primordial values of 'belonging' to the community, or attachment with past traditions. They have very little to gain from tradition. As a communitarian identity, 'Dalit' is a mobilized collectivity — a modern category that is a product of the political dynamics unleashed by constitutional democracy. Dalit activists have a different worldview and conception of Indian society. Our survey and the detailed interviews provide a window to this worldview and the nature of contemporary Dalit movement.

Notwithstanding their self-identification with a 'sectarian' identity, our respondents seemed to be pursuing a 'modernist' project. They were all mobile and, technically speaking, had already moved out of caste. None of them lived in the village any longer and many of them had grown up in urban and semi-urban environments. However, they often referred to the village as the site of caste-based social order. No one invoked a positive image of the Indian village. The village was almost always equated with discrimination and violence. In other words, it is the relational dimension of village life, and not the lack of development, that they seemed to be referring to.

As is evident from our survey, most Dalit activists of Delhi are men. Predominance of men could perhaps explain why questions of gender and patriarchy, primarily internal to family life, do not figure much in their discourse on caste and in their everyday

politics. However, more important point in this context is the fact that Dalit movement has so far been mostly preoccupied with what is happening in the outside world, interactions in public sphere, economy, employment, state and electoral politics. These are also areas where men dominate. Not only were respondents predominantly men, they also invoked the imagery of their 'fathers' as their role models. Fathers were the first to go out, confront the wider world of caste relations, and develop critical understanding of caste-based discrimination.

Notwithstanding their internal differences of community and political strategies, responses provided by our respondents during long interviews have many things in common. They all mutually shared an understanding on critical subjects like caste, state, democratic politics, and modernity.

A large majority of Dalit activists did not work with a single organization or identify with a specific area of work. What does this mean? One way of looking at this could be that Dalit activism is still not professionalized in the manner in which the so-called mainstream civil society organizations or NGO activism is. They tend to work with several organizations and devote their energies to whatever they find important. In other words, it appears that they perhaps identify more with the larger issues of dignity and development of their communities. For them the agenda is that of social transformation of the caste order. Their work and worldview is essentially political and not simply professional.

Conclusions

The Futures of Caste

In his celebrated book *Caste, Class and Race*, published in the middle of 20th century, the well-known American sociologist, Oliver C. Cox (1948), developed a very influential critique of the then popular 'caste school of race studies'. Starting with Charles Sumner, scholars like William Thomas and W. L. Warner had argued that 'race' in the United States was a kind of caste system where relations between Whites and Blacks were systematically ordered and maintained like the hierarchical structure of caste. Quite like the caste system, the status of individuals in a group was further determined by a system of hierarchy within each colour–caste (see Thomas 1904; Warner 1936).

Cox completely disagreed with this way of conceptualizing race. Caste, he argued, could not and should not be used to describe 'racial' differences or inequalities in the American society because the nature and the origin of the two realities were fundamentally different. While caste is an ancient Indian cultural invention of the Hindus, 'race' is a more recent social construct that was reproduced through racial 'prejudice' and 'discrimination' as a dynamic of the capitalist market economy. So effective and influential was his criticism of the 'caste school of race' that it rapidly declined soon after the publication of his book.

Interestingly, however, his critique was based on an understanding of caste that viewed it as being a peculiarly Indian and Hindu social system; to imagine it to exist elsewhere made no sense. Invoking the classical Orientalist notion of caste, Cox had argued:

> Where in the world outside of Brahmanic India do caste systems exist? And the answer must be briefly: Practically nowhere. The caste system is an Indian *cultural* invention, and the fact that it did not diffuse may be due to the comparative isolation and sedentariness of the Hindus, besides the probable difficulty of reorganizing other societies under the peculiar aegis of godlike priests (Cox 1948: 538; emphasis in original).

His objection to the use of the term 'caste' to describe race relations in the United States also had political reasons. The system of caste hierarchy, he thought, produced legitimacy for itself, and worked almost on its own; however, race was not such a 'natural form of social organization' or a type of society (as he understood it).

The idea of a 'type of society' obscures the actual pathological racial antagonism, leaving some diffused impression that it is socially right, even as the caste system in India is right (ibid.: 544).

In the next chapter of his book, Cox discusses this 'pathological racial antagonism' and provides a fascinating account of the phenomenon of racial lynching of the Blacks in Southern USA. Surprisingly, however, his account of such racial violence sounds strikingly similar to what we in India today know as 'caste atrocity'. Quite like the caste atrocities in India, the function of the targeted lynching of the Blacks, as he argues, was reassertion of White domination. It is worth quoting some text from his discussion of the phenomenon. Lynching, he argues,

> is a special form of mobbing — mobbing directed against a whole people or political class. We may distinguish lynching from race rioting by the fact that the lynching mob is unopposed … actuated by a belief that it has a constituted right to punish some more or less identified individual or individuals of the other race or nationality …
>
> … lynching is not a spontaneous act … There seems to be a recognizable lynching cycle … A growing belief among whites in the community that Negros are getting out of hand — in wealth, in racial independence, in attitudes of self-assertion …
>
> … lynchings function to maintain white dominance … the sociopsychological matrix of the power relationship between the races (ibid.: 549–51).

If Oliver Cox were to study the contemporary Indian society or read the literature on caste atrocities and chapters of this book, his conclusions about caste and its comparability with race would perhaps have been very different.

However, as we have seen in the opening chapter of this book, Oliver Cox is not the only one who has approached caste from the perspective of Indian exceptionalism. The dominant view of caste has been to look at it as a unique cultural reality, a part and parcel of the Indian/Hindu tradition. The large number of

empirical studies by sociologists and social anthropologists, from the 1950s through the 1970s, also did not approach caste from the perspective of discrimination. Even though there were exceptions and some scholars did talk about caste in the framework of power and domination, it was the Orientalist view of caste that largely prevailed. Caste was primarily viewed in the context of tradition and cultural specificity of India, almost until the 1990s (for a detailed discussion of this, see Jodhka 2012b).

One of the obvious implications of this identification of caste with culture and tradition was that the considerations of caste could not become part of the hard questions of economic redistribution, privilege and poverty, or the mainstream development discourse. The discussions and diagnoses of the questions of economic inequality during the early decades after Independence were deliberated almost exclusively through purely economic categories, such as incomes, assets and productivity. Even when empirical studies of village society showed a close link between caste and the prevailing agrarian social structure, caste was rarely represented or conceptualized as a material reality, shaping the economics of inequality and exploitation in the countryside. This had larger developmental effects and implications. One good example of this 'caste-blindness' is the Indian discourse of Land Reforms during the 1950s and 1960s, when caste was rarely included as an aspect of the prevailing economic disparities that needed to be reformed through direct legal action.

This selective view of caste was not accidental. As indicated, the dominant mode of thinking about caste has almost always looked at it from an evolutionary frame, the underlying assumption being that caste would disappear 'automatically' with the dawn of modernity. The near-universal acceptance of this view is evident from the fact that notwithstanding their ideological and political positions, on the 'left' or the 'right', theories of social change that acquired prominence in the late 19th- and early 20th-century Western Europe and their translations and applications to the Indian context, have amazingly common attitudes towards the subject of caste. Caste has no future. The process of modernization will weaken caste and eventually replace it with 'modern' structures based on individual achievement. Social inequality, or stratification, will be structured around the 'open' category of class that the modern societies of West have.

For the modernization theory that had its origin in the structural–functional frameworks of conceptualizing human society, and acquired prominence in the social sciences during the post-World War II period, caste was a textbook case of traditional institution. As a structure of social relations, its functional utility was confined to pre-modern times. The evolutionary process of structural differentiation that accompanied the growth of urban and industrial society in the West, transformed the traditional community (*gemeinschaft*) into an associational society (*gesellschaft*).[1] The new *social order* was based on relationships established out of individual choice. The same should/would happen in India.

As the proponents of such theories of human society would argue, the idea of individual identity is of very little relevance in the traditional communitarian mode of social organization. It is the collective identity of the group that matters. Personal identities, in such contexts, do not develop into individuals thinking for themselves or their self-interest. Collective identity of the group over-determines the personal selves of its members. The idea of individual identity, or individualism, emerges only in modern times, with the growth and complexities of urban life organized around industrial and developed market economies. Individual autonomy grows because it becomes a functional pre-requisite for modern societies, if they have to work well. As Durkheim (1893) would argue, modern societies based on the idea of organic solidarity, encourage and promote the ideas of individual choice because they require individual specializations and division of labour. Individuals are encouraged to focus on cultivating what is unique about them. Rewards, thus, get distributed on the basis of individual merit. Consequently, unlike the 'closed' systems of social organization that characterize traditional societies, modern societies are open. They allow individual mobility based on ideas of merit and the propensity to work hard.

[1] Though these terms were popularized by Ferdinand Tonnies (1887), they have been reproduced by several other sociologists, such as Emile Durkheim, Talcott Parsons and many others, through a variety of categories to explain the structural process of social transformations experienced by the modern world, particularly the Western world.

Interestingly, the Marxist notion of social change, seen from the perspective of caste, is also not very different from the discussed functionalist mode of thinking about human societies. Given that caste is often identified with Hindu religion and is popularly believed to have emerged out the ritual order of Hinduism, as a value system or ideological system, it belongs to (*a*) the superstructure of the social formation, and (*b*) the pre-capitalist mode of production. Thus, in the Marxist common sense, caste-based divisions flourished in pre-capitalist agrarian social formations, in the 'idyllic village communities of India'. Even though caste was based on the idea of inequality, it helped in the reproduction of the social equilibrium of such 'communities'. However, caste was not the foundational feature of the pre-modern Indian society, or the determining factor, but an effect of the historically produced economic and social order, the agrarian social structure.

At another level, Marx himself viewed caste as a part of the conservative social and cultural framework within which the 'village communities' were circumscribed. Caste played a role in keeping India static and self-contained. As he wrote:

> [T]hese idyllic village-communities, inoffensive though they may appear … restrained the human mind within the smallest possible compass, making it the unresisting tool of superstition, enslaving it beneath traditional rules, depriving it of all grandeur and historical energies … We must not forget that these little communities were contaminated by distinctions of caste and by slavery, that they subjugated man to external circumstances instead of elevating man the sovereign of circumstances, that they transformed a self-developing social state into never changing natural destiny (Marx 1853).

However, the traditional social organization of India, Marx thought, was fast disintegrating under the influence of the British colonial rule because of (*a*) its growing integration with the British capitalist market and (*b*) through the introduction of new technology into Indian society, particularly after the introduction of railways.

> These small stereotype forms of social organism have been to the greater part dissolved, and are disappearing, not so much through the brutal interference of the British tax-gatherer and the British soldier, as to the working of English steam and English free trade. Those family-communities were based on domestic industry, in

> that peculiar combination of hand-weaving, hands-spinning and hand-tilling agriculture, which gave them self-supporting power. English interference having placed the spinner in Lancashire and the weaver in Bengal, or sweeping away both Hindoo spinner and weaver, dissolved these small semi-barbarian, semi-civilized communities, by blowing up their economical basis, and thus produced the greatest, and to speak the truth, the only social revolution ever heard of in Asia (ibid.).

He further writes in a similar language while talking about the possible revolutionary change that the modern industry was to bring in the Indian society and *dissolve* the system of caste relations. 'Modern industry, resulting from the railway system, will dissolve the hereditary divisions of labor, upon which rest the Indian castes, those decisive impediments to Indian progress and Indian power'.[2]

The later Marxists, both theorists and practitioners, have contested several notions of Marx about the Indian society for their being based on his limited understanding of the region. The resources he could access on India, living in Europe in the 19th century, limited his knowledge of the country. Interestingly, however, though Marxist scholars disagree on his understanding of India's past, hardly anyone has ever contested his formulation about the possible futures of caste, the consequence that the development of industrial capitalism would have for such institutions. Caste, almost everyone would agree, is deemed to disappear with the spread of bourgeois social and cultural order.

What is true about Marxism is perhaps doubly true about the so-called modernization theory.

More interestingly, perhaps, despite its wide-ranging criticisms and near-complete debunking by the social science academics during the 1970s, the idea of evolutionary modernization continues to be influential in many different ways even today. It has almost become a part of the common sense view on social change among the Indian middle classes and elsewhere. Similarly, even though the old theories of social evolutionism are no longer accepted uncritically, their hold over the popular notions of history continues to be significant.

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[2] http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1853/07/22.htm (accessed on 12 February 2013).

Changing Caste

As mentioned earlier, the institution of caste has seen many radical changes over the past four or five decades. These changes have come about thanks to a variety of efforts: (*a*) from 'below', through the social movements of those who have been at the receiving end of the 'traditional hierarchies' (see chapters 2, 3, 4, and 7); (*b*) from 'above', thanks to the constitutional provisions and other state policies for empowerment and development of those on the margins of the traditional social order of caste hierarchy (see chapters 2 and 3); and (*c*) from the 'side', as a consequence of the general processes of social and economic change, such as the agrarian transformation ushered in by the success of Green Revolution in some parts of the country or the development of industry and urbanization (see chapters 1, 3, 4, and 5).

Some of these changes in the traditional system of social hierarchies, structured around caste, have indeed been quite significant or even 'radical'. As shown in chapter 1, the textbook view of the traditional caste system that described it primarily in terms of ritual and occupational hierarchies, i.e., a closed system of stratification, no longer exists in rural Punjab. Those located at the lower end of the caste hierarchy have, to an extent, successfully worked out strategies to reduce their dependence on the locally dominant and powerful caste groups. This account of changing caste relations in rural Punjab is nothing unique. Scholars are also observing similar patterns in other parts of India as well. James Manor, who has closely observed the Indian society and the social relations of caste for nearly five decades, has recently argued that among the most important changes to occur in India since Independence,

> two things stand out: the emergence of a democracy with deep roots in society; and the decline in the power of caste hierarchies across most of rural India. The latter change is not as widely recognized as it should be, but abundant evidence from diverse regions plainly indicates that it has been occurring — unevenly, but widely enough to be a national trend (Manor 2012: 14).

Manor is only echoing what many other scholars conducting field studies have been reporting from their regions for some time now. Historically, the process of disintegration of jajmani ties in

rural Punjab had begun during the colonial period (Bhattacharya 1985). However, the colonial policies also reinforced some of the traditional dependency relations in the agrarian settings of India (Alavi 1990; Bhaduri 1984; Bharadwaj 1974). Independence from the colonial rule was an important turning point for the economy and its social organization. State investments in rural development and agricultural growth provided positive impetus to the process of change on the ground. Social anthropologists studying rural social and economic life began to report about declining traditional hierarchies and old structures of dependency sometime in the early 1970s (see Béteille 1996; Breman 1974; Thorner 1982). This process of change also had its impact on the local-level caste relations. By the early 1980s, these changes became quite visible and started to reflect even in the democratic or electoral political processes.

For example, on the basis of his fieldwork in Rajasthan villages in the 1980s, Oliver Mendelsohn (1993) reported that the idea of the 'dominant caste', as proposed by M. N. Srinivas in the 1950s after his fieldwork in a south Indian village (1959), no longer made sense in rural Rajasthan. The 'low caste and even untouchable villagers were now less beholden to their economic and ritual superiors than was suggested in older accounts' (Mendelsohn 1993: 808). Interestingly, he also argued that 'land and authority had been de-linked in village India and this amounted to an historic, if non-revolutionary transformation' (ibid.: 807). By the turn of the century, Srinivas himself argued in a paper (2003), which he described as 'An Obituary on Caste as a System', that the 'systemic' features of caste were soon disappearing from the rural society in different parts of the country. We can notice similar claims emerging from the writings of many other scholars who have been closely observing the dynamics of caste in contemporary India (Béteille 1997; Charsley and Karanth 1998; Gupta 2000, 2004; Kapoor et al. 2010; Karanth 1996; Krishna 2001; Vaddiraju 1999).

Declining Hierarchy, Persisting Inequality and the Reproduction of Caste Today

Perhaps the most surprising and interesting thing that the reality of caste presents in contemporary India is the fact that precisely at a time when all sociological evidence points to its decline, it

is becoming more visible and complex. Not only has the academic and popular interest in the subject of caste seen manifold increase, but the caste question also presents itself in newer and more complicated forms. In the popular middle-class imagination, the explanation of this growing visibility or the increasing public presence of caste lies in its politicization, its mobilization by the wily politicians and a general 'perversion' of the electoral political process in India. As this popular common sense about the status of caste today would suggest, this is further aided by the state policy of providing reservations. Then, the convenient argument following from this is that, had there been no system of quotas for the Scheduled Castes and mobilization of the others' 'backwardness' for more quotas, caste would have been forgotten by now, particularly when the social organization of India's agrarian economy is clearly witnessing a process of modernization and change.

The empirical studies presented in various chapters of this book do not support the underlying assumptions of such formulations. The processes of capitalist development and rapid mechanization in the northwest region, for example, have made the traditional framework of social organization of agricultural production completely redundant. However, there is absolutely no evidence to show that this process of change in any way enables the dissolution of caste-based differences and identities in rural areas. On the contrary, as we have seen in the discussions in chapters 1, 2 and 3, the economic inequalities across caste groups, in some sense, witnessed a further escalation. Socially and politically also the experience of caste differences becomes more intense as those at the lower end begin to feel a change in their self-image. As the decline of their dependence on agrarian economy and the dominant castes enables them to formally participate in the democratic political process as equal citizens, their entitlements over the local resources remain circumscribed by caste and the 'position' they have occupied in the old system of hierarchy, as the dominant groups view it. Those at the lower end do not accept it any longer and they make claims over 'common' resources of the village, which had hitherto been under the exclusive control of the dominant caste communities. These assertions are not easily entertained by the dominant groups, and often result in social boycotts of the Dalits by the dominant castes and occasionally also in violence.

This is not simply a matter of perception. Resistance and caste-related atrocities manifest a clear trend. A broad range of scholars concede to the fact that while the traditional ideological façade of caste or even its institutional hold has weakened, including the decline of untouchability, the violence committed on Dalits appears to be increasing, particularly over the past two or three decades (Béteille 2000b; Gorringe 2005, 2012; Mohanty 2007; Shah 2000; Teltumbde 2010). After a survey of literature on the subject, political scientist Manoranjan Mohanty concluded that: 'The cumulative picture that emerged from this body of data suggests that the intensity of violence against the dalits has increased even though in some years there may have been a decline in the number of reported atrocities' (Mohanty 2007: 4).

At another level, these growing strains in caste relations, even when they manifest themselves in bloody violence, also result in renegotiations of power relations (see Pandian 2013). The language of citizenship is no longer alien to the rural hinterlands of India. Regular participation in electoral democracy has provided the Dalits a new language of bargain, and they are quickly learning to use this language to their advantage, even when power relations do not change radically.

The experience of mobility of those located at the lower end of the traditional caste hierarchy, viz., their moving out of village and agrarian economy, is also not an easy process. As I show in chapter 4, those who move out of the rural/agrarian economy, into urban entrepreneurship, find it very hard to make headway beyond the margins of the emerging urban economy. In the urban market, caste matters in many different ways for the Dalits trying to establish themselves in business. Urban markets have never been as open as they are made out to be in the textbooks of economics and sociology. In the Indian context, caste and kinship (sometimes religion-based) communities actively try to preserve their 'monopolies' in a given trade. Even when it becomes virtually impossible to do so, kinship networks play a very critical role in urban business economy. Apart from working as gatekeepers, these networks also matter when mobilizing capital, through banks and otherwise, the most critical requirement for businesses anywhere in the world. Given their past economic background, those from the historically deprived communities also do not own collaterals, such as agricultural lands or urban properties. The lack of 'social

capital' and economic resources is further compounded by the presence of active 'prejudice' that manifests itself in many different ways in their everyday business life and aids in the reproduction of both, social/economic inequalities and caste identity among the Dalits, a sense of being different and unequal (also see Hoff and Pandey 2004; Iyer et al. 2013).

We see this script repeated in chapter 5 based on interviews with hiring managers in big private companies in Delhi. Even when they actively deny any consideration of caste and community in the process of recruitment, the respondents clearly show a preference for candidates with specific social and cultural skills. Given that the applicants they interview for these relatively high-end jobs are mostly screened, internally or by the hiring agencies, and they are all educated and qualified to be called for the interview, the interviews are meant to judge more than their technical skills and the quality of formal education. They look for 'suitability' of the candidate, the social and cultural aspects of their personality. Who is a suitable candidate and how do they judge the merits of those who are selected for the upper-end jobs in the private sector?

Almost every hiring manager interviewed agreed that one of the most important questions they ask the prospective candidates is about their 'family background'. Family background, for them, was important to see the suitability of a candidate to the culture of the company. An equally important factor for hiring at the senior level is the linguistic skills of the candidate, their ability to speak and communicate in English fluently. In other words, the critical qualification was 'soft skills', the nature and quality of 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu 1986) acquired through one's caste and class habitus, that even according to the hiring managers was largely a determinant of one's social background and place of residence (rural–urban). Thus, as Satish Deshpande points out, this process normalizes the advantage of the traditionally upper castes as being naturally modern. For them caste

> represents a ladder that can now be safely kicked away. Having encashed its traditional caste-capital and converted it into modern forms of capital like property, higher educational credentials and strongholds in lucrative professions, this section believes itself to be 'caste-less' today (S. Deshpande 2013: 32).

The question about family background may appear innocuous to the candidates whose social background is similar to those interviewing them. However, for the first generation of educated candidates from the less-privileged background, such questions serve to make them feel uncomfortable and awkward. The findings of another study, also part of the same research programme reported that it was only the students from ex-untouchable communities who were made to carry the burden of their caste background even when they were well-educated and looking for jobs in the urban sector (Deshpande and Newman 2007). The prospective employers would invariably ask the students with the Scheduled Caste tag about their views on the caste system and relevance of the reservation policy. Those from the upper castes were never asked such questions. 'When private sector employers raise pointed questions about the legitimacy of reservations, students are placed on the defensive'. The candidates hated being asked such questions. They felt as if 'they were being asked to defend their own biographies' (A. Deshpande 2011: 182–212).

Almost every hiring manager we interviewed admitted to the fact that the response to the question about family background also gave them an idea about their 'social origin'. Caste background of the candidates was not difficult to guess, most of them admitted. Some of these respondents told us in a matter-of-fact manner that when they visited the educational institutes for 'campus recruitments' some colleges even provided them two separate lists, one listing all the graduating candidates from the 'general' category and the second listing those from the 'reserved' categories.

When we followed up with questions on 'quotas' and their opinions on reservations for the Scheduled Castes in government jobs and educational institutions, nearly every one of them had a negative view on the subject. They all wanted 'merit' to be the sole criteria of judging candidates for recruitment, even when they all admitted that qualities other than merit tended to matter more in the selection process. The attitude also emanated from the fact that corporate houses in India are almost exclusively owned and managed by those from the upper-caste background. A recent study based on a sample of 1,000 companies reported that as many as 92.6 per cent of the board members of the Indian corporate houses

were from the upper castes (44.6 per cent Brahmins and 46 per cent from various Vaishya castes). In contrast, the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes together made for only 3.5 per cent. Even the proportion of OBCs, who make for nearly half of India's total population, was quite negligible (3.8 per cent) (Daljit et al. 2012). At the upper end of the corporate management, 'caste diversity is non-existent'. The study also concludes that this was not the outcome of any kind of random process working on the basis of merit.

> [I]t is a small and closed world. In the corporate world, social networking plays an important role. Still, Indian corporate boards belong to the "old boys club" based on caste affiliation rather than on other considerations (like merit or experience). It is difficult to fathom the argument that lack of merit is the cause for under representation. Caste is an important factor in networking. The small world of corporate India has interaction only within their caste kinship (ibid.: 42).

Caste matters even more in India's vast informal economy. Based on her study of a south Indian town, Barbara Harriss-White concludes:

> Caste … provides networks necessary for contracts, for subcontracting and for labour recruitment within the informal economy … liberalisation makes these caste-based relationships more important because it places a new premium on the advancement of interests … caste is ultimately connected with all the other organizations of civil society that comprehensively regulate economic and social life (2003: 178–79).

The limited volume of empirical literature we have on social mobility in India reinforces the point that caste indeed works to block those located at the lower end of the caste hierarchy (Kumar et al. 2002; Thorat and Attewell 2007; Thorat and Newman 2010; Vaid and Heath 2010). Even when the cultural or ideological hold of caste disappears, the real possibility of vertical, social and economic mobility remains rather limited. Much of the mobility appears to be merely horizontal, from traditional caste occupations or agricultural labour in the village to insecure jobs at the lower end of India's vast informal economy. In the dynamic of change, 'the upper castes' are no longer 'cushioned from the forces of

downward mobility', but more importantly, it is hard for those located at the lower end of the 'traditional' hierarchy to move up (Vaid 2012: 420). In other words, the social mobility scenario in India presents a case of 'continuity rather than change' (Kumar et al. 2002: 4096).

The last two studies presented in the book (chapters 7 and 8) tell us stories of the caste experience of those individuals and communities who have, in some sense, 'moved out of caste'.

Quite like the Neo-Buddhists of Maharashtra, who under the leadership of B. R. Ambedkar 'seceded' from Hinduism, the Ravidasis of Punjab also proudly assert their distinctive religious identity. They are neither Hindus nor Sikhs, they would claim. However, even when they wish to identify themselves as a religious group, they, in a sense, remain trapped in the framework of caste. Not only are all those who call themselves Ravidasis from a single caste community, listed as a Scheduled Caste in Punjab, the other communities do not see them any differently either. Given that identities are always formed and reproduced inter-subjectively, gains from the investments made in building a distinctive identity remain limited. Given the marginal economic and social status of the large majority of its members, giving up on the state provisions of reservations would make little sense. However, as was the case with the Dalits who had set up their business, even if small in size and ambition, the Ravidasis too feel very proud of the new resources they have been able to generate on their own, or in collaboration with their kin in the diaspora, for the welfare of their community, and the others.

Similar to the Ravidasis of Punjab, the Dalit activists of Delhi (chapter 7) also battle with multiple identities, but feel strongly committed to their 'communities', to the cause of fighting against the prejudice and 'annihilating' caste. To many, this is a way of 'paying back' to those who enabled them to move up and out of the system of caste hierarchy. Even though they have moved far from the social and cultural context of their communities, they still identify quite proudly with their 'origins' and advocate protecting 'rights' of Dalit individuals and communities through invoking the global language of civic citizenship, even while their campaigners target the local state. However, while doing so, they also articulate their own experiences of being treated differently, of discrimination and denial. These experiences also make them feel very strongly

about the 'humiliation' of caste. Even when some of them would like to forget their caste origin and be part of the urban middle-class social setting, they find it hard to swim in the difficult waters of caste-prejudiced social spaces. In many ways, urban India remains segregated on caste lines. Even the macro-level data on distribution of population in urban India suggests that Scheduled Castes tend to be concentrated in certain parts of the city (Dupont 2004; Vithayathil and Singh 2012: 64). Analyzing the 2001 Census on residential patterns across caste and socio-economic categories for the cities of Mumbai, Delhi, Kolkata, Chennai, Bengaluru, Ahmedabad, and Hyderabad, Vithayathil and Singh find a rather depressing scenario.

> At the start of the 21st century, we find that caste still remains a real axis of urban residential segregation in India's seven largest metro cites. In each of these cities, our analysis finds residential segregation by caste to be sizably larger than the level of segregation by socio-economic status. Caste has historically shaped the organisation of residential space, especially at the village level, and it appears to continue to do so in contemporary urban India (2012: 64).

Social Change and Reproduction of Caste

How do we reconcile these two sets of realities: change and persistence? What could explain the persistence of caste-related violence, where the victims are almost always from the caste communities who have historically been at the receiving end of the social order of caste? How do we account for experiences of urban Dalits who insist on articulating their everyday experience as that of humiliation, denial and discrimination and not simply a matter of cultural difference or social diversity?

The stories presented in this book try to explore the divergent realities of caste today. While they indeed tell us about the change, they also talk about the survival of caste and its reproduction in everyday life in many different complex ways. The empirical studies presented in this volume and a large amount of emerging literature on the subject clearly shows that caste continues to be a critical source of qualitative inequality. In other words, the caste question today is not exhausted by either economics of *gini*-coefficient or analysis of electoral politics.

As we have seen, there is plenty of evidence to show that the 'old' structure of caste-based hierarchies and economies of dependency have significantly weakened over the years. As a part and parcel of this process, the ideological hold of caste has also loosened. Whatever might have been the case in the past, there would be very few among the ex-untouchables today who would regard themselves as impure or justify their low status on grounds of their misconduct in some past life, a 'fact of nature' (Charsley and Karanth 1998). Today they 'all aspire to more comfortable material circumstances; all demand more dignity' (Deliège 1999: 1999).

However, despite this 'secularization' of caste or its desacralization (Sheth 1999), it continues to structure social inequality. The available evidence on poverty and productive assets indeed shows significant correlation between caste and economic privileges/deprivations. Those located at the lower end of the traditional caste hierarchy tend to be significantly over-represented among the poor and the marginal, and the positive correlation at the other end is equally strong. Those at the upper end of the caste hierarchy are far less likely to be present among the economically depressed categories. However, the category of class, as conceptualized in the Marxian or Weberian tradition, still does not capture the emerging realities of caste today.

As I have argued through different chapters in this book, the hypothesis or assumption that economic development would inevitably convert caste-based inequalities across groups or communities into class-based differences among individuals, was fundamentally wrong. The Orientalist and Dumontian theorization of caste that views it as a religious and purely ideological institution of the Hindus is even more erroneous. The ideological or even institutional decline of caste did not produce any kind of levelling effect by itself. Even as the old ideologies and traditional structures disintegrate, the social and cultural prejudice associated with caste-based inequalities survives. The material disparities inherited from the past aid in the reproduction of inequalities through widespread social prejudice and other social mechanisms, such as the differentials of social and cultural capital (see Bourdieu 1986). Differences produce prejudice and stereotypes more actively when social interaction intensifies and competition in economic and political field becomes possible. With growing participation of Dalits and OBC communities, competition in the domain of

democratic politics has indeed become a reality for the erstwhile dominant groups. They had taken their power for granted and feel extremely resentful about the change and democratization. With support of the state policy of reservation, the Scheduled Castes and OBCs have also entered the administrative systems and are aspiring for increased participation in the urban economy.

This book argues for a perspective that would open up the caste question and reframe it in a language that does not reduce it to a religious phenomenon or a peculiar fact of Hindu mind, an idea derived from its classic religious texts. Even though the idea of varna draws its sanction from *Manusmriti*, the reality of caste is far more complex and widespread, across different religious communities of the subcontinent and beyond. As Max Weber (1946) would argue, caste is a good example of an ideal type of social inequality, *status*, an aspect of power found across societies and histories. Caste is thus comparable with the wide range of similar structures of social inequality.

As Weber argues, status is an aspect of social inequality, but it is different from class. The Weberian notion of status would also help us conceptualize caste in a comparative framework that does not limit it to being a tradition, uniquely specific to any religion or region of the world. While caste as a conceptual category is indeed different from class, its reproduction does not imply a 'hangover' of a past tradition. It articulates and reproduces itself in many complex ways in the bourgeois capitalist markets and in the emerging economies and cultures of neo-liberal globalization.

Sociology of Prejudice and Discrimination

As indicated at the beginning of this chapter, we could perhaps also gain from some of the writings on racial discrimination produced by sociologists and economists in the context of the race question in American society.

As pointed out by Taylor and Pettigrew (2010), prejudice has two interrelated dimensions: affective and cognitive. It can exist only in a group-relational context marked by inequalities. The 'target group', against which there is a feeling of negative emotion or antipathy, is identified through ascriptive or social criterion. The negative feeling does not remain at an emotional level; it translates itself cognitively at a social or group level within the cultural context of the 'dominant group' through production of stereotypes.

Thus, there is always a political component in prejudice. William Wilson, for example, underlines the point that 'racist beliefs and practices are only those that contribute to upholding of racial domination, and are tied to belief in subordinate group's inferiority' (1973: 301). The underlying assumption of this argument would be that even if racial prejudice against the dominant groups may exist among the subordinate groups, it would not qualify to be racism because it does not contribute to the upholding of racial dominance of the dominant group (Wilson 1973).

The scholars working on racial prejudice in American society have also argued that over the years, the nature of prejudice has undergone some significant changes. Though open and overt prejudice has declined, subtle and 'symbolic' prejudice survives (Pager and Shepherd 2008; Quillian 2006).

Theorizing Discrimination

Discrimination is rather easy to define. In simple language it refers to unequal treatment of individuals or groups/communities on the basis of their race, ethnicity or caste. Unlike prejudice, which could simply be an attitude in someone's head, discrimination is about concrete behaviour, enacted in a relational context. More importantly, discrimination also produces, what Charles Tilly (1998) describes, 'disparate impact' and social inequality. Quillian identifies two approaches to discrimination. First, a broad approach, which assumes that all group-based inequalities 'must be the result of current or past discriminatory practices'. The second, the 'narrowest definition … restricts discrimination only to acts that are intended to harm the target group' (Quillian 2006: 300).

Students of race relations have also tried to find explanations for discrimination. Even though developed in relation to the micro-economics of labour market imperfections, some writings by American economists have been quite influential in advancing our understanding of discrimination. Among the first in this category was Gary Becker's *The Economics of Discrimination* (1957). For him, employers prefer hiring on the basis of workers' racial or ethnic origins because they have 'a taste for discrimination'. However, such discrimination was unlikely to be sustainable in the long run because of its 'costs' to the employers. Given their 'taste for discrimination', they would invariably end up hiring less competent workers, leaving out the genuinely good candidates. This

in turn would result in market imperfection and such employers were unlikely to survive in the long run because their biased hiring decisions would have negative effects on their profits.

Amending Becker's argument, Kenneth Arrow (1973), another economist focusing on discrimination in labour markets, argued that discrimination could actually survive in the long run and it may not be simply because of the 'taste' factor. Employers tend to also prefer hiring workers of a particular race or community because they wish to avoid economic uncertainties. They did so because of lack of proper information or difficulty in acquiring correct information about an applicant's relevant efficiency traits, skill, reliability, trainability, etc. In absence of proper information, they invariably resort to ascriptive identities of applicants, such as sex, race or ethnic origin. This in turn produces, what he describes as, 'statistical discrimination' (ibid.). Thus, unlike Becker's model, this model would suggest that discrimination may survive in the long run because competitive markets are always 'plagued by information problem' (Kohler-Hausmann 2012: 49).

The obvious problem with such 'models' is that they are based on the presumption of individual choice and 'imperfect economic behaviour'. Even when 'statistical discrimination' could survive in the long run, it is seen as being so due to information imperfections. Such explanations fall short of identifying 'human agency' in the process of discrimination and avoids attributing moral/political responsibilities for such action.

Sociologists working on discrimination focus more on its social outcomes, in terms of its impact on the reproduction of certain kinds of social inequalities and in generating long-term stable patterns of social stratification. They focus on the process through which social and cultural meanings about certain groups are constructed and deployed to the disadvantage of the already disadvantaged groups, such as in the labour markets.

Discrimination is also not simply about a one-time decision of an employer. It operates as a process and shapes, quite fundamentally, modern organizations and institutions. One of the important areas of research for sociologists has thus been the role of social networks, such as in hiring practices and residential settlements, in reproduction of social inequalities of certain kind. Similarly, organizational dynamics tend to operate through 'cognitive biases and stereotypes of actors' (Pager and Shepherd 2008: 194). Tilly,

for example, would argue that 'durable inequalities' arise because 'people who control access to value-producing resources' choose to deal with pressing organizational problems 'by means of categorical distinctions' (Tilly 1998: 8).

Even when actors may not directly wish to 'manufacture inequality as such', they work hard to secure and monopolize access to knowledge and valued resources by distinguishing between insiders and outsiders, ensuring solidarity and loyalty (ibid.: 11; also see Pager and Shepherd 2008: 104).

Though the modes of operation may be complex, the consequences are quite similar to what we know of as obvious and open instances of discrimination. Thus, it is not that divisions of caste or race can survive only in pre-modern agrarian systems or rural hinterlands. Discrimination could be part of the most advanced and modern social organizations. As we have seen in chapters 5 and 6, networks play a critical role in the urban economy at various levels, from setting up and running a petty business in a small town to finding employment in the metropolitan corporate sector.

As is evident from different chapters, caste and race seem very similar kinds of social processes. Not only does caste reproduce in contemporary India through 'prejudice' and 'discrimination', the phenomenon of caste atrocities today is hardly any different from Black lynching that was common until around the middle of the last century in the United States, in terms of its function, namely, to produce the socio-psychological matrix of power relations. It is in this context that I propose to initiate a conceptualization of caste within the framework of prejudice and discrimination as a sociological process, which enables and sustains reproduction of caste in contemporary times. Such a framework of discrimination has to be comparative in nature that approaches caste as a category of 'status' and 'power', quite like 'race', or in some other contexts, ethnicity. A comparative understanding of caste in the framework of status, power and discrimination would thus enable us to comprehend complex processes of the reproduction of caste and not be trapped in, what is sometimes described as, the Indian exceptionalism.

At a more practical level, such a perspective on caste would underline the critical need for interventions, if we wish to create a level playing field in India and to deal with the question of

social inequality by finding ways to block its reproduction. These interventions could be from above, in the form of state policies of affirmative action, some of which is already in place in India. They could also be from below, as social movements for change. To assume and expect that caste inequalities would disappear on their own with the decline of traditional social orders, such as the idea of ritual hierarchy or the Hindu jajmani system, under the pressure of capitalist development and neo-liberal economic reforms, will be quite misleading. Individualization of labour markets only makes structures like caste 'invisible' (see Rehbein 2013). It does not make it irrelevant, particularly where it matters, namely, the distribution of the valued goods in society.

This, however, is no way to suggest that the social and economic change experienced in India over the last century or so has only been superficial. On the contrary, as is evident from the studies presented in this volume, the change has been quite significant, and in some cases even radical. However, despite the success and spread of democracy and disintegration of old hierarchies, opportunity structure and social values have not become significantly 'open'. Caste continues to be an important, even critical, variable in the manner in which inequalities are structured and reproduced. The pervasive and persistent inequalities have also not become individualized or purely economic in nature. They continue to be social and cultural in nature. The old local-level systems of hierarchy have indeed disintegrated but a new hierarchy of networks based on the institutions of caste and kinship appears to be thriving. These hierarchies work through 'monopolies' over social and cultural capital and enable the reproduction of caste. Prejudice and discrimination become significant and more active when old hierarchies disintegrate and social groups begin to compete for scarce resources in the domains of economy, politics and culture/social status. The neo-liberal capitalism thus does not destroy caste. On the contrary it indirectly helps reproduce it by encouraging network-based economic formations. Even as the old ideology of hierarchy gives way to the idea of citizenship and the latter becomes a part of the aspiration of all those on the margins of the Indian society and caste, the process of its institutionalization has still a long way to go, both as a value and as a practice.

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