

Changing Caste Order: Glimpses from a Village and a Slum near Delhi

Paper by Dr. Devesh Vijay for the National Seminar on

India between Caste and Castelessness in the Era of Liberalization, Privatization and Globalization

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Paper Abstract

The institution of caste has persisted and, in some respects, even thrived since the introduction of democracy and an egalitarian constitution in India. While the ban on untouchability and provisions for social justice and equal rights shook the foundations of the textual as well as the practiced caste order in many parts of the country, the majority of lower and middle castes continue to face exclusions and covert as well as overt discriminations till today while caste divisions and identities have hardened and become more politicized over time.



In order to track the net impact of these conflicting trends in the practice of caste in rural and urban India, this paper offers a close up on inter-caste relations in a village called Dhantala (in Meerut district of western Uttar Pradesh) and a slum called Aradhaknagar (in east Delhi) using interviews, life sketches and oral evidence gleaned from elders' recall in group discussions conducted in both the sites in 1988-89, 2006-07 and 2012-13.

The paper shows that while the classic equation between castes and occupations has reduced within the capital's slum and dalits constitute a numerical as well as political majority here, in the wider urban space, caste discrimination and marginalisation against them is still deep and damaging. In the rural setting of Dhantala, the hierarchic order of castes is even stronger and the marginalisation of lower castes remains sharp even as a miniscule section of educated and organized dalits has benefited from increased competition between political parties for votes, from new laws and welfare schemes, the rise of dalit organizations and from increased geographical mobility spawned by economic liberalization lately.

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The Issues

Caste and castiesm remain the distinctive hallmarks of the Indian Social Formation even today.

However, debate between Thorat et.al and Dipankar et.al regarding extent of class, power and caste overlaps today and of discrimination and exclusion;

Need for comparing micro studies of caste in relation to macro data on incomes, mobility etc among castes across regions.

This paper focuses on changing inter-caste relations in a village and a slum (as instances of Bharat) over past two and a half decades

Dhantala in Meerut district and Aradhaknagar in East Delhi; first visited in 1988-89 and revisited in 2006 and 2012 for charting changes

Backdrop of liberalization, multi party coalitions, rise of BSP, 73rd amendment etc.



The Field

Dhantala had 2080 residents in 1989 and 2700 in 2012;

Aradhaknagar had 441 persons in 1988 and 1700 in 2012.

Dhantala upper middle castes or Gurjars and Jats (56%) and lower middle castes or Kumhars and Lodhs (11%). dalit (25%) including Jatavs (20%) and Valmikis (5%); muslims 10%.

Aradhaknagar, dalits including Valmikis and Jatavs 83% middle castes Ahirs, Gurjars and Yadavs (10%), upper castes (6%) and Muslims (1%).



Castes and Sub-Castes

'caste' used for 'varna' as well as 'jati'; pan Indian ordering, five 'purity' and occupation sets. Jati really sub-castes-- endogamous (specific professions also in past); regional in varna structures;

jostling in adjacent ranks spec middle varnas; collective mobility; Brahmins and Outcastes more exclusive.

Most durable feature: marriage within sub-castes and outside gotra and village; youngsters chose but even neighbors unite to oppose, at times violently.



When asked about varg/ jamaat name jati first rather than class, varna, occupation, income

middle caste in place of OBC/ Sudras; major divide between upper and lower middle caste: Jats and Gurjars (farmers/ cattle rearers) and Kumhars Lodhs (artisans).

jajmani relations between the two; dependence and hierarchy too.

hierarchic relations within dalits too: Jatavs avoid marrying Valmikis and even Chamadhs seen as inferior.

Names and Surnames

upper castes divisions such as Sharmas, Chaturvedis were endogamous groups but not occupational. have surnames

Middle castes and Dalits have had sub-divisions associated with different occupations also. Dalits do not have fixed surnames; now borrow like verma, singh. But siblings often keep different surnames.



castes referred as 'achhoot' (untouchable) in place of more respectable 'dalit' or as 'Churha' in place of Valmiki and 'Chamar' in place of Jatav etc.

also children not given names like chuha (mouse), billi (cat) etc

dhanaks, pachas amongst valmikis correspond to gotras.

Manifestations of Caste in Dhantala and Aradhaknagar

In Dhantala jati clusters, separate cremation, worship, meeting spots and rank and cognition.

few inter caste or inter sub-caste marriages; youngsters challenge but opposition from neighbors too. ten cases of inter-jati marriages in the slum; none across varnas; Dhantala only two couples, they had to leave.

different deities, festivals and shrines of different castes and even sub-castes.

decline of absentee landlords of Tori since abolition zamindari; Ritually Brahmins and Banias on top but not much say as only one family each.

dominant caste Gurjars making half of the village; farming and cattle rearing besides jobs in army, teaching etc;



Jats dominant in villages around only three in Dhantala and not the richest

Lower middle castes Kumhars and Gadariyas artisans; a Kumhar girl picked up by Gurjar boys for defiant replies

At the bottom socially and economically 70 Jatavs and 20 Valmiki families; also landless laborers and sweepers

'gurjargardi'--including 'begaar', restrictions on wells, temples and schools, sexual harassment, village meetings and voting till 1970; insulting calling, demeaning deference standing aside on being crossed never sitting even in own homes; seizure of cattle and crop, bans on new clothes horses even in weddings.

Yet, old Gurjar like Khem Singh and Devraj Singh showed sensitivity joined the Bahujan Samaj Party



Daily Insults

personal narratives: 52 year old Bhopal also called 'Bhaloo' scored well in Mathematics; upper caste teacher spoilt his marks could not finish school though Gurjar who take his help cleared.

Parma beaten in twenties by pradhan's sons for refusal to 'begaar' during illness. Baliram recalled suit on wedding Gurjars forced him to part with it.

Jat women sitting on their door bare headed;. Valmiki man passed, one covered head; "Oh! he is only a 'churha' (Valmiki sweeper)

poorer dalits invited to non dalit weddings but stood and ate in a separate corner except elites. on other hand in dalit functions like Ambedkar Jayanti, middle castes participate and honoured.

absence of any inter caste panchayat called to address complaints of dalits against a Gurjar. Although informal caste panchayats are;

2010, Ravinder Jatav complaint Kumhar boys cow disappeared. could not proceed lack of support from even leading members of own caste.



The Silver Lines

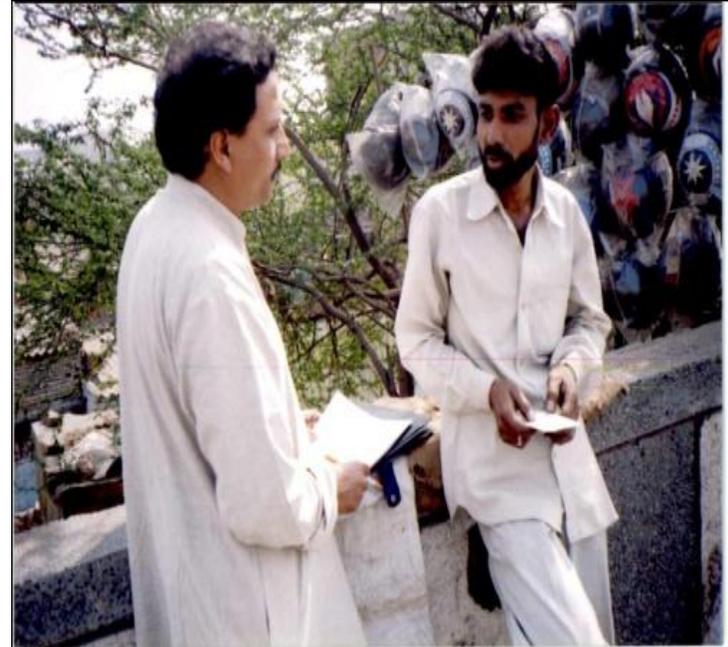
early decades surplus land; grant mashuri (secure) tenancies to a couple of dalit if had bullocks.

Parma grew up a laborer but member of nyaya panchayat of five villages before the 73rd amendment. because of disagreement among Gurjar but also Parma's honest singing bhajans.

Over time decline in overt discrimination and exploitation but covert exclusion still rampant.

bans on entry in schools and temples and water sources have declined though use own separate temple, well and utensils commonly.

local elite (three middle farmers some professionals and organised employees besides politicians and middlemen) include a small segment of educated dalit.



A Dalit Intelligentsia

200 dalit workers (85 families), in 2012, 22 were salaried employees or professionals like lawyers and teachers and one magistrate also (recently appointed at Saharanpur).

About a dozen dalit families do not labor nor send their women. dedicated study helped by small scholarships and reservations.

dalit elite visited by middle and upper caste clients and Brahmin priests now.

dalit intelligentsia (including two women) risen from poor backgrounds through hard education; providing hope and base for mobilization.

Valmikis benefitted financially from grade IV jobs in public sector.

hierarchy, however, appearing as upwardly mobile dalits associate more with upper castes in their professions.



Pressures behind Improvements

equality before law and affirmative program in 1950s

yet dalits remained landless had one meal and 'jhootan' or left overs.

Faster change from 1980s; distribution of three acre plots to 120 landless men in 1984 (90% of these being dalits) after a valiant agitation at collectorate

crucial schemes like cheaper rations for the poor, reservations for dalits in government employment, anti discrimination legislation like the SC-ST Act

rise of the Bahujan Samaj Party. Ambedkarite identity and ideology among educated for radical affirmative action (including land redistribution in villages); increased competition for votes between parties

education in bigger numbers, asserted their voting power more freely and drew from affirmative action. spending on welfare like cheaper rations, old age pensions, meals for school children, loan waivers and minimum wages etc. useful.

reforms had to acquire a critical mass with 'green' and 'white' revolutions; urbanisation, migration and rise in real wages since 1990s mitigated caste oppression too.



Improvements and their Limits

recent decades ownership of cell phones, two wheelers, televisions and electric pumps etc across castes. between dalits: 168 mobiles, 30 two wheelers, two cars, two submersibles and 74 TV sets in 2012.

dalit woman became village pradhan though Gurjar factions wielded power; middle caste Gadariya village sweeper in 2011

Yet majority of dalits acutely poor

Besides present discrimination, long term consequences of deprivation, drudgery and malnourishment in gross differences in income levels, inherited assets and even physique.

Ambedkarites and the BSP and pro dalit laws have brought down instances of overt harassments yet, covert discriminations rampant

chances for upward mobility for ordinary poor low despite schemes because of corruption and silent operation of networks and nepotism

life sketch of Mangte Ram reflects the stagnation faced by the mass of dalits.



Mante Ram Valmiki

Born 1923, father a landless cattle rearer and mother sweepress and mid-wife. not allowed in school spent childhood collecting grass or grazing animals with three siblings.

1940, married at age seventeen; in 1948 job of a milkman in Meerut salary of seventy per month. dismissed following a clash with a co-worker over an eve teasing.

returned and reverted to pig rearing while wife took mother in law's work of sweepress and mid-wife.

Family of seven; purchased a few buffaloes with a loan from a dairy. died in quick succession; debt, left Dhantala working as a laborer in a factory at Gyani border Delhi. factory shut down following raids by police. return to the old occupation of pig and cattle rearing again. tried manufacturing liquor from fermented molasses in village, fear of police;

in 1973, job of village chowkidar, salary just Rs. fifty per month. had to report all criminal activity from Dhantala and Naya Gaon.

clashes with Gujjar cattle theft. new daroga abusive; gave up this job too, in 1985, even though salary risen to Rs. hundred per month

In 1984 received three acres. Readying took a few years. Took a loan for tractor lost the land also.

sweepers' jobs were available; Three of Mangte Ram's sons migrated in the period to join the Municipal Corporation of Delhi, as sweepers.

2007 Srinivas died with a live wire in Aradhaknagar, in Delhi. left behind his widow and three children.



Mangte Ram and Rajkali were forced to shift to Aradhaknagar in order to support the survivors of their deceased son. tried to raise pigs again but suffered a loss of fifty thousand when most died, possibly poisoned by a jealous neighbor.

aged Mangte is surviving on his daughter in laws earnings (from the job of a sweepress in a local school).

The only reason he withstands isolation and humiliation in Aradhaknagar is his love for his grandson Tushaar.

The Urban Setting

urban slums with migrants from diverse castes and regions could be incubators of class.

Yet, Aradhaknagar shows 'jati' remains a stronger identity in daily conversations as well as politics.

Poor do talk of other macro groupings like class and occupational categories or sex and age divisions in society.



Segregation also not visible in the slum. interdining and socializing not limited to jati. professions are changed. Rajender is a tailor though Jatav Lakshmi is a teacher though Valmiki etc; interchange of professions visible across varnas also exception that upper castes rarely take to professions of lower castes. no Brahmin sweepers or Kshatriya cobblers or dalit priests.

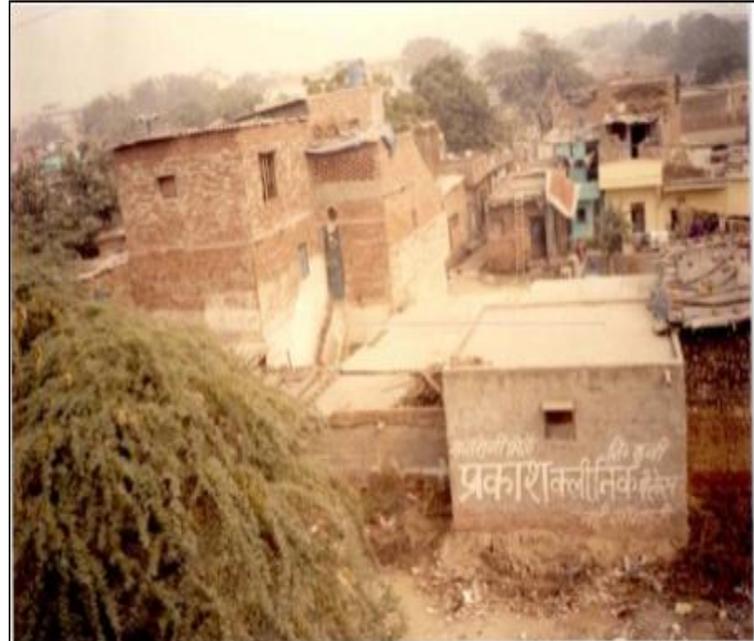
lower caste and muslim domestic workers who were not allowed in upper caste kitchens only two decades back are beginning to find employment as cooks in more households now.

Exclusions in the City

Yet, in city as a whole slum dwellers mostly dalits.

Kanhaiya taunted and rejected at an interview for a peon's job when told he is a Valmiki. Jaggu was insulted at the local police station as a 'chamaar' and denied any help when he went there to report loss of his money and ration card.

Arun a twenty year old Valmiki was keen to join college but could not. still spent a lot of time around local college in hope of making friends among well educated even pick up conversational English as well as Urdu poetry. his friendships ended as soon as others learnt a Valmiki.



Within Aradhaknagar

within Aradhaknagar dalits form 85% of population; pradhan's post claimed by a Valmiki for two decades.

Valmikis form fifty per cent of population; also have maximum families with regular jobs in public sector bring higher and secure earnings

Yet, ritual status lowest and even Jatavs look down.

among 208 organised sector employees, 183 Valmikis. thirty three families had a per capita monthly income of Rs.2500 or more (out of 206); 29 were dalit and only three were upper caste.

families with more than one member in grade IV public sector employment; have petty money lending and some properties.

upper castes are not able to humiliate dalits within Aradhaknagar.

Yet not a 'dominant caste' which combines resources and ritual standing.

Some Valmikis better off relatively in the slum but majority working as low paid cleaners and sweepers.



Social Mobility and Obstacles

mobility patterns different from Srinivas model. more along individual or family lines rather than collective rise of sub-castes.

Above all notion of purity and pollution and varna ideology questioned;

political assertion rather than emulation. Valmiki Jayanti and Ambedkar Jayanti reflects dalit assertion against Brahminical ideology.

upper and middle castes have allied with the Bahujan Samaj Party just as many dalits loyal to the Congress and the BJP;

major clash along varna divide precluded.



Differences among Dalits

playful ridicule between castes as well as sub—castes

not just varnas but also sub-castes act as endogamous groups though half a dozen inter-caste marriages reported in Aradhaknagar over two decades.

dalit sub-castes also vote differently generally (Jatavs for BSP and non-Congress, Valmikis loyal to the Congress).

Dalit sub-castes also retain status contest in city.

Valmikis outnumber Jatavs and have greater say in local politics; ritually Jatavs retain superiority.

Yet Jatavs feel marginalised politically (last year prevented from putting up Ambedkar's posters in last election).



Conclusion

change as well as continuity in the structure and practice of caste; neither unchanged hierarchies nor horizontal “discrete castes” seems valid.

graded purities of caste based on rituals and professions has disappeared within Aradhaknagar and weakened in Dhantala. Yet, in Dhantala and in the city outside Aradhaknagar, caste prejudices and dalits’ marginalisation remains stark.



Moffat right in pointing caste divisions, hierarchies ‘replicated’ within varnas including dalit sub-castes. Jatavs and Valmikis do not vote together even for Bahujan Samaj Party in late 1990s and early 2000s.

rise of Ambedkarite ideology which opposes the Brahmanical view of castes and hierarchy. ‘sanskritisation’ and dominant caste’ not applicable to the practice of ‘jati’ now.

But overlap between caste status and poverty is strong in the city; barring a few entrepreneurs and public sector employees, dalits remain extremely poor.

legacy of past marginalisation as well as continuing covert exclusions and discrimination weigh down in a cosmopolis like Delhi.

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