



Conflicting Trends in the Practice of Caste

An evidence-based study

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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, functionalities still vary.

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 still persists. In the rural setting of Dhantala, the hierarchic order of castes is even stronger and the marginalization 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.

Keywords: Caste, Hierarchies, Rural, Western Uttar Pradesh, BSP, Economic Liberalization

INTRODUCTION

Caste divisions and hierarchies constitute one of the most pervasive and characteristic aspects of Indian society.¹ With the arrival of modern law, democracy and economic liberalization--championing legal equality in principle--the caste system was expected to wither. Yet, in reality, caste identities and divisions have become more organised and politicized since independence and the marginalisation of the overwhelming majority of Dalits has continued even as a miniscule segment of Dalits has entered the ruling stratum lately.

The extent to which traditional caste hierarchies have metamorphosed into modern "demand groups" or units competing for resources has been a matter of debate among social scientists.

While SukhdeoThorat and KanchaIlliah have argued that caste based discrimination and deprivation remains practically unchanged for the vast mass of Dalits, others like Dipankar Gupta and Oliver Mendelsohn have opined that while caste differences remain a key characteristic of contemporary Indian society, its ordering has undergone major mutations lately.²In this light, variations in the operation of the caste system over time and across regional and religious communities need to be charted closely through a number of detailed micro studies. As a small contribution, this paper reports the evidence on changing inter-caste relations in a village called Dhantala and a slum called Aradhaknagar from the periphery of Delhi. The sites were first visited by me as an M.Phil. student in 1988-89 and revisited in 2006 and 2012 for charting changes in the socio-economic profiles of both communities in the wake of economic liberalization and the rise of multi party coalitions in the country specially after 1989.

While Dhantala is a community of 2700 residents in the Meerut district of Uttar Pradesh, Aradhaknagar had 1700 odd residents living cheek by jowl in a narrow unauthorized plot in 2012. The principal castes and communities in Dhantala are upper middle castes or Gurjars and Jats (56%) and lower middle castes or Kumhars and Lodhs (11%).³ Among others, the Dalit or scheduled castes made up (25%) including Jatavs (20%) and Valmikis (5%) while muslims constitute approximately 10% of the population. On the other hand, in Aradhaknagar, Dalits including Valmikis and Jatavs and account for almost 83% of the slum population while the rest consist of ‘other backward’ or middle castes like Ahirs, Gurjars and Yadavs (10%), upper castes including Brahmins, Thakurs and Baniyas (6%) and very few Muslims (1%).⁴

METHODOLOGY

In the light of our aim to chart the extent of change in inter-caste relations in an urban and a rural community close to the capital city, a multi-method enquiry incorporating both qualitative and quantitative approaches was found relevant for the project. Thus, the study began with a detailed and comprehensive survey of the changed demographic, occupational, caste and income profile of the two communities with the help of successive surveys in 1988-89, 2006-07 and 2013-14. Demographic surveys were followed by use of qualitative research tools such as participant observation and structured and unstructured interviews as also a dialogical construction of some life histories of willing subjects.

The data gathered from diverse approaches was finally compared and analysed to present a portrait of the changing caste order in the selected field.

Castes, Sub-Castes and Surnames

Before analyzing the evidence on inter-caste relations, in Dhantala and Aradhaknagar, and changes therein since 1988, it is notable that the English term ‘caste’ actually refers to two related but different structures of ‘varna’ and ‘jati’.The former stands for a pan Indian ordering of broad social ranks viz. Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas, Sudras and the ‘Outcastes’ with reducing notional ‘purity’ and specified occupation sets for each viz. learning, ruling, trading, crafts and labor and cleaning respectively. Jati, however, refers to hundreds of endogamous sub-groups (each associated with a profession in the past) and ordered in a regional hierarchy loosely bounded in the varna order cited above. In fact, considerable jostling and competition exists between adjacent ranks and some mobility through collective advancement specially, among

middle varnas existed always, even as Brahmins and Outcastes remained outside this rise and fall of castes traditionally. A feature of the jati system to which these sub castes hold to this day centres on endogamy. While marital relations were expected to be made outside one's own gotra (and also outside the village traditionally), but always within one's subcaste or jati. Lately, youngsters have begun to cast aside caste restrictions on their matrimonial choices yet, within Dhantala as well as Aradhaknagar very few such matches have been made (generally against parents wishes) and sometimes in the face of considerable opposition from the caste and neighborhood as a whole. Thus, I came across only ten cases of inter-jati marriages in the slum and none across the varnas. In Dhantala, such restrictions are even more strictly enforced by the community and the two instances of inter-caste marriages in the village elicited violent reactions forcing the couples to leave the site for good.

It is worth adding that among the upper castes, divisions within varnas such as Sharmas, Chaturvedis etc. amongst Brahmins or Guptas, Khandelwals etc. amongst Vaishyas and so on, specified endogamous groups earlier but not occupational categories generally. Also, amongst the higher varnas the sub-castes commonly have surnames while the outcastes rarely use titles like Jatav, Valmiki etc. along with their names. The latter have sub-divisions within jatis/ sub-castes like dhanaks, pachas, etc. amongst the valmikis. But these correspond to the gotras of the higher varnas as marital relations within them are prohibited by tradition. Dalit families rarely report surnames except those borrowed from upper castes like verma, singh, rishi etc. Members of the same family often use different surnames of this kind interestingly.

For the general portrait of caste in India, we may reiterate that 'jat' as employed by the lower castes refers neither to the broader category of varna nor to the subdivision of surnames. It is used rather to refer to a middle division of sub-castes whose spread is cross-regional and which traditionally denoted distinct occupations for their members too. It is this category which is most commonly mentioned when we talk of 'jat' amongst the poor.

RESULTS

Caste in Dhantala

The manifestations of caste are not difficult to note on arriving in Dhantala today also. Not only do different varna or jati clusters like Dalits (including Valmikis and Jatavs); Sudras or middle castes including upper middle farming castes like Gurjars and Jats and lower middle caste artisans like Kumhars and Lodhs as also muslims live in separate clusters but also have separate cremation/ burial grounds, places of worship, meeting spots and a distinct social rank in the village. On being asked to name one's economic class or 'jamaat'/ 'varg' also, residents of Dhantala often name their caste/ jati rather than occupation, wealth or income status at first.⁵

The principal jatis or sub-castes of the village can be identified readily and also ranked in the local caste hierarchy even though their respective positions may be mutually contested at times specially when fortunes change over time. Ritually the highest caste groups in Dhantala are those of Brahmins and Banias. However, with only one family each of these living here, the dominant caste for all practical purposes is that of Gurjars who make upto half of the village population and practice farming and cattle rearing besides pursuing formal sector jobs in the army, teaching and administration etc. Below the Gurjars, a number of other middle castes such as Kumhars and Gadariyas have lived as small peasants or artisans. While upper castes have

Table I: Domestic Budgets of one of the Poorest and a Relatively Well- Off Valmiki Family in Aradhaknagar
 Monthly Budget of Ramabai and Puran (Monthly Budget of Geeta and Ramesh)

Commodity	Monthly Expenses in Rupees	Family Members Income and Assets	Commodity	Monthly expenses Rupees	Family Members Income and Assets
Wheat/ Flour	160*	Seven Members Total Family Income shown as Rs.4000 per month including Rs. 3000 from son's unskilled labor & Rs 1000 monthly from mother's daily begging Among assets TV, Cycle, Jewelery sold because of a court case filed by Puran's daughter- in-law	Wheat/ Flour	300	
Rice	40*		Rice	125	Five Members
Sugar	70*		Sugar	150	
Pulses	200		Pulses	250	Total Family Income
Vegetables and Fruit	300		Vegetables	600	Rs 17,000 per month
Edible Oil	250		Cooking Oil	400	including 9,000 of
Kerosene/ Gas	275*		Kerosene & Gas	610	husband & 8000 of wife
Milk	300		Milk	600	(organised sector grade IV
Tea, Spices, Soap, Shave etc	300		Tea, Spices, Soap, Shave etc	500	employees)
Meat & Eggs	00		Meat	400	
Smoking Drink	150 + 450		Smoking Drink	00	
Clothes & Footwear	300		Cloth & Footwear	1000	
Education	60		Education	7000	
Medicines	200		Medicines	300	Among assets
Conveyance	300		Travel	1000	TV, Fridge, Bike, Cooler
Consumer Durables	00			500	
Entertainment	00		Entertainment	500	Music System
Children Pocket	300		Children Pocket Money	1000	
Electricity	200		Electricity	300	
Phone	00		Phone	500	
Religion/ Festivals	50	Religion Festivals	200		
Relatives	00	Relatives	500		
Debt Court/ Police	→	Debt Court/ Police	00		
Saving	00	Saving	500		
Total	4005		Total	17,035	

Source: Family Interviews in Aradhaknagar, May, 2009

had little dominance in village affairs, Jats have been a dominant caste in most villages around Dhantala since the pre-colonial period. But, in Dhantala, only three Jat families live and are prosperous but not the richest and dominance has remained with Gurjars since the decline of the absentee landlords—the Chaudhris of Tori—since the abolition of zamindari in 1950s. At the bottom of the caste order in Dhantala, about 70 Jatavs and 20 Valmiki families live in acute poverty by and large.

The palpability of caste in Dhantala's social order, however, does not imply that caste relations here have not changed here over time. If we compare the nature of caste discrimination that prevailed in the village in early twentieth century with that evident now, some reduction in manifest prejudices and exploitation is evident. At the beginning of the century, for example, Dalits faced exploitation at the hands of the Tori zamindars as well as locally dominant Gurjar landlords. As Dhantala never had a significant presence of the 'savarnas' (except for one family each of the Brahmins and Banias) and the muslim zamindars also lost control after the introduction of land ceilings, the Gurjars had become dominant in Dhantala numerically as well as economically after independence. So much so that Dalits and even other middle castes faced considerable harassment from them till recent times.

'Gurjargardi'

This experience of harassment and exploitation also received a specific name in Dhantala and adjoining villages viz. 'gurjargardi'. It refers to a variety of harassments inflicted by dominant gurjars on other castes including 'begaar' or forced labor extracted with violence at times, untouchability rules including restrictions on use of village wells, temples and schools by Dalits, sexual harassment of lower caste women, general exclusion from village meetings and voting till around 1970 (when Congress became more dependent on Dalit votes against regional parties relying more on middle caste support), insulting ways of calling and naming workers and expecting demeaning deference including standing aside on being crossed by higher caste adults and never sitting before them even in own homes. Besides these oppressions inflicted by dominant castes on Dalits in most villages, the peculiar practice of 'gurjargardi', in Dhantala also included, till about nineteen eighty, seizure of cattle and crop from lower caste homes, violent, uncouth and insulting treatment towards Dalits generally and bans imposed on wearing of new clothes or riding horses etc even in Dalit weddings and celebrations.

It would be wrong to assume that all Gurjars have been similarly oppressive in Dhantala. I came across old Gurjar landowners like Khem Singh and Devraj Singh who showed considerable sensitivity towards laborers and even joined the BahujanSamaj Party in a broad minded way right from 1990s. But other big landowners (like old pradhans Bhagmal and Ramfal) came close to the descriptions of 'gurjargardi' coming in Dhantala till the eighties.

In economic terms also, the overlap between low caste status and extreme poverty was near total till recent times. Thus almost all Dalits were also landless in Dhantala, all sweepers were Valmikis and every cobbler was a Jatav. It may also be remembered that in the pre-BSP era, Dalits could not use surnames like Singh and Verma while their first names were also commonly distorted and spelt with ridicule by other villagers.⁶ The practice also extended to Dalit parents themselves giving such demeaning names like chuha (mouse), billi (cat) etc to their children while the castes as a whole were referred as 'achhoot' (untouchable) in place of the more dignified 'Dalit' or as 'Churha' in place of Valmiki and 'Chamar' in place of Jatav etc.

Dalits' Daily Experiences

The bitter oppression, poverty and humiliation faced by Dalits in Dhantala till the eighties can be further gauged from personal narratives of the elders in the field. Thus, 52 year old Bhopal also called 'Bhaloo' (bear) recalled that he was a good student and always scored well in Mathematics in school. However, some of his upper caste teachers resented this and even spoilt his marks so that he could not finish school even though many Gurjar students who used to take his help easily cleared their tests. Another instance of grave exploitation faced by a Dalit in Dhantala is of 93 year old Parma who was badly beaten in his twenties by the village pradhan's sons for his refusal to do 'begaar' during an illness. Similarly, Ravinder recalled that once he had put on a suit on the occasion of a wedding. However, Gurjars forced him to part with the new clothes forcibly.

Another grave episode still narrated by villagers in hushed tones is that of SoniGurjar who eyed a Dalit peasant's beautiful wife--Jabatri and lured her out of Dhantala and kept her in Delhi around 1950. Ironically Jatavs could not protest but Gurjars themselves fought over possessing her and many were injured in the conflict. A casual remark by a rich Gurjar farmer also reflects the humiliation constantly faced by Dalit in Dhantala till recent times. Thus the landlord asserted that Jatavs are doing well in education only because many have the blood of Gurjars in their veins since many Jatav women visit landowners' homes and fields for work.

Another telling instance of the contempt shown to Dalits by middle caste women also is that of two Jat women who were sitting on their door bare headed. An old Valmiki man passed by their door. On spotting him, one of the women covered her head with a dupatta but the other did not. On being asked why she did not abide by the village custom of keeping a veil in other men's presence, the second woman replied, "Oh! he is only a 'churha' (Valmiki sweeper) after all", implying that the sweeper was not a 'man' really, one who has to be feared and respected.

Intra-Varna Hierarchies

While Dalits have been the worst sufferers of caste hierarchies and discrimination, the relative social proximity between middle / Sudra/ OBC castes like Gurjars and Kumhars (farmers/ cattle rearers and artisans) does not free them from mutual intra-varna divisions, exclusions and discriminations.

A glimpse of the exploitative nature of jajmani relations between upper and lower middle castes may be gleaned from the reported case of a Kumhar girl who was picked up by Gurjar boys from her house and raped because of her defiant replies to her father's jajman/ employer.⁷

It may be added that hierarchic relations are not absent within Dalit castes too. Thus it was noted in several conversations that the Jatavs of Dhantala not only avoid marrying into Valmikis or even closely related Chamars but also describe Dalit subcastes as inferior to them in ritual status. In some of the weddings that I attended, it was seen that the lowest caste of Valmikis sat and ate in a separate cluster even when hosts were JatavDalits.⁸

Some Relief

Some silver lines in the gloomy history of the traditional caste order in Dhantala need to be also examined at this point. An important relief available to the residents, in early twentieth century,

was the availability of surplus land which encouraged the local zamindar to grant mashuri (secure) tenancies to a couple of Dalit families of the village, if they had sufficient manpower or bullocks for managing large fields. In most surrounding villages, Dalits were otherwise confined to hard labor and even beggar for the zamindar as well as the dominant peasant communities. Another positive instance in the history of Dhantala's Dalits is that of 94 year old Parma who grew up as a laborer but became a member of the village panchayat and even the nyayapanchayat of surrounding five villages at the age of sixty much before the 73rd Constitutional amendment reserving seats for Dalits in elected panchayats in 1993. This acceptance of a Jatav as a village panch at a time when reservations for Dalits had not been implemented, came about largely because of disagreement among Gurjar contenders but also because of Parma's reputation as an honest, austere person with a talent for singing bhajans in village gatherings.

The local elite in Dhantala (comprising of middle farmers, and some professionals and organised sector employees besides a handful of politicians and middlemen) today include a small segment of educated Dalit as well. Thus among 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 thus do not labor for others nor send their women for menial work. They have moved out of extreme poverty through dedicated studies helped by small scholarships and reservations in government colleges and employment. While the small number of Valmikis have benefitted more from jobs for sweepers and scavengers in the public sector, Jatavs from Dhantala have invested labor in education. A sense of hierarchy, however, has appeared among many of these upwardly mobile Dalits who associate more with upper castes in their respective professions even as their less fortunate brethren look upto them for help and inspiration.

The Urban Setting

As clusters of migrants from diverse castes and regions, urban slums could be viewed as better incubators of class solidarities than caste loyalties in modern India. Yet, the present study of Aradhaknagar from the fringe of East Delhi suggests that even amidst their social flux, caste or 'jati' remains a significant identity in daily conversations as well as local political alignments.

Thus, the standard reply to my question about the groups living inside and around Aradhaknagar, frequently brought forth the names of local castes only. This is not to say that the poor do not recognize or talk of other macro groupings like class and occupational categories or sex and age divisions in society. But when asked even with diverse wordings ('varg', 'samudaye', 'jamaat' etc) about known groups, they frequently repeat the names of various castes or 'jatis' residing in the area first.

The various 'jats/ jatis' recognized in Aradhaknagar are Valmikis and Jatavs among the scheduled castes, Gurjars and Ahirs among middle castes (or 'backward classes') and a few banias and Brahmins besides some muslims. Each of these communities is a well defined group to which an individual belongs by birth. Traditionally, as mentioned above, the jatis were also supposed to represent certain closed occupational groups. But this is not visible in the urban context to a major extent now. For example, interdining and socializing is not limited to one's specific jati. Similarly, professions are freely changed in the slum. Thus Rajender is a tailor though his Jatav caste was traditionally associated with leather work; similarly, Lakshmi is a teacher though Valmiki by caste. Among other workers there are Jatav caterers, Valmiki businessmen and Kumhar labor contractors and so on. Thus the interchange of professions is visible across varnas also though more common

between the sub castes within the last two varnas viz. shudras and Dalits. A notable exception to this exchange of occupations between various sub castes is the fact that the upper castes rarely take to professions prescribed for the lower castes. There are no Brahmin sweepers or Kshatriya cobblers or Dalit priests. But some Valmikis have become masons and petty contractors while one gadariya (a lower middle caste) has taken up the job of a sweeper.

Many Hierarchies

The idea that the caste hierarchy functions as a regional system with a particular dominant caste enjoying both material and political supremacy and influence over a hierarchy of castes beneath, is not applicable to the urban environment of the slum where migration and the organised sector has created considerable fluidity at the base as well as the top of the social pyramid. Most of the slum dwellers, of course, belong to the lowest rung of the caste hierarchy which tends to combine low economic, social and ritual status. But at the other end of society, there is no single 'dominant caste' which combines material resources, juridical authority, political power and ritual standing in its hands.

As far as the slum is concerned, the Valmikis form the largest group comprising more than fifty per cent of its population. They also have the maximum number of families with regular jobs in the public sector that bring much higher and secure earnings than those of unorganized vendors, laborers etc that form a higher proportion among other castes in the slum. Yet, the ritual status of the Valmikis has been the lowest in the Varna system and even Jatavs look down upon their traditional occupation of cleaning latrines and lifting garbage. Secondly, a majority of Valmikis of Aradhaknagar also are working as low paid cleaners and sweepers in the unorganized sector of shops, dhabas etc. and their earnings or security is no different from unorganized workers of other castes.

Social Mobility

Apart from the social standing of different castes in the studied communities today, mobility trends have also departed clearly from the pattern charted out by scholars like M.N. Srinivas half a century ago. Thus, social mobility in Aradhaknagar is more along individual or family lines rather than collective rise or fall of whole castes. But the biggest dent has been made by the challenge thrown by lower castes to the very notion of purity and pollution on which the traditional hierarchy was based. It is thus common to see Dalit slum dwellers rejecting the varna ideology and attempting upward mobility through economic gains and political assertion rather than emulation of upper caste customs and rituals. A new fervour seen in celebration of ValmikiJayanti in Aradhaknagar and of AmbedkarJayanti in Dhantala reflects this Dalit confidence. Fortunately, upper and middle castes in both locations also participate in such Dalit festivals and celebrations to some extent.

DISCUSSION

Land Distribution and Other Reforms

The large part of the previous century had passed without any notable improvement in Dalits' condition, in Dhantala, despite the 'equality before law' claimed to have been instituted on top of a castiest feudal set up in 1950s. A number of our respondents recalled that as late as the seventies, most Dalits in Dhantala were landless, surviving on one meal a day and 'jhootan' or left overs from higher castes' meals. The distribution of three acre plots to 120 landless men in 1984 (90% of these being Dalits) after a valiant agitation at the Meerut collectorate was a crucial step in limiting extreme poverty and caste as well as feudal exploitation in the village. It was also in the last two decades of the century that Dalits took to education in bigger numbers, asserted their voting power more freely and drew benefits from affirmative action programs designed for them. As noted by Susan Wadley in her revisits to Karimpur too, relative prosperity has arrived only in the last decades of the twentieth century even though a number of new facilities like electric power, tubewells and tractors etc had surfaced earlier in the region while country's independence ushered equal voting rights, the abolition of zamindari and land ceilings etc.⁹

In other words, the limited reforms of the early twentieth century had to acquire a critical mass to bring about recognizable social change and combine with the spread of the 'green' and 'white' revolutions, along with the political shifts of the eighties and the nineties before caste hierarchies could loosen noticeably. The changing political environment including the decline of one party dominance and increased competition among political parties for votes propelling greater state spending on welfare measures like cheaper rations, old age pensions, meals for school children, loan waivers and minimum wages etc. has been useful in this regard.

In the same period, growing urbanisation, increased migration and some rise in real wages in the wake of accelerated economic growth have also enhanced options before poor Dalits and thereby mitigated caste oppression in Dhantala too.

Improvements and their Limits

A striking indicator of some material improvement among Dalits , in recent decades, is rising ownership of cell phones, two wheelers, televisions and electric pumps etc across castes in Dhantala and Aradhaknagar. While the spread of these durables is more marked among the middle castes, the eighty five Dalit families of the village also had, between them, 168 mobiles, 30 two wheelers, two cars, two submersibles and 74 TV sets in 2011. Some Dalit men and women from Dhantala have also left laboring and acquired salaried jobs as sweepers and peons and in odd instances as junior officers, policemen etc. Besides this, bans on Dalits' entry in Dhantala's schools and temples and common water sources etc have also declined though the middle castes still prefer that Jatavs and specially Valmikis use their own separate temple, well and utensils. Exceptional Dalit families who have acquired power and wealth in professions or in government service also attract middle and upper caste visitors now and even Brahmin priests to their functions. The 'baithak' at Gautamrishi advocate's home is particularly famous for inter caste participation despite the fact that the advocate is a Jatav. Similar improvements can be cited in Dalits' attire, meals, education, and political participation in Dhantala. Most of these

shifts are small scale and confined to a few upwardly mobile families only. Yet, they are unprecedented and significant in the history of caste in Dhantala.

A major gain secured by Dhantala's Dalits in the eighties was, of course, the distribution of village's surplus land among the landless after agitation. Along with this, the expansion of government schemes like cheaper rations for the poor, reservations for Dalits in government employment, anti discrimination legislation like the SC-ST Act went a long way in reducing 'begaar', abject poverty and daily humiliation of Dalits. In 2012, a Dalit woman became village pradhan for the first time and though dominant Gurjar factions still wielded actual power and the election was a result of rotational reservation for Dalit woman. Still, the appointment of Prakash as the first Dalit woman pradhan lifted the self-confidence and pride of Dalits of the village in general. It is also notable that a middle caste Gadariya has taken the job of the village sweeper in 2011 (during the drive for village sweepers launched by the Mayawati government after 2007).

A more significant Dalit assertion in the region is the zealous investment made in education by several Dalit families and remarkable struggles of many poor first generation literates to obtain good grades and compete for competitive exams making use of reserved seats or even without these many a time.

Dalit Intelligentsia

While the alliance between landownership and political dominance has denuded in Dhantala in the late twentieth century, new elites have continued to appear with bases in commerce, education and services also. In the the peculiar caste composition of Dhantala in which the dominant Gurjars were slow to enter higher education and businesses, Jatav Dalits with more interest in education fared better. This clearly helped in weakening the caste-class hierarchy faster in western Uttar Pradesh than in regions such as Bihar or even the eastern districts of U.P. .

Though the entry of some Jatav men into modern professions such as law and teaching as well as state's clerical or official jobs and the hides and meat trade can be cited from the village of Dhantala, its scale is still too small to be of much value in ordinary Dalits' lives. State policies like reservations for Dalits in jobs and educational institutes provided crucial support in this process as the brighter boys' higher education became affordable for some Dalit families now. Yet, it needs remembering that the number of Dalits with even a toehold in modern professions and businesses is extremely small and did not cross a dozen in a population of 180 Dalit men in Dhantala even in 2011. Yet, this miniscule Dalit intelligentsia serves a major purpose by providing both hope and leadership as also a base for further organisation and mobilisation of the community. In Dhantala, particularly almost all educated and employed Dalits (including two women) have risen from poor backgrounds through hard earned educational degrees.

In this miniscule Dalit intelligentsia of Dhantala, the names of Kuleshwar Dayal (double M.A.; teacher-counselor in high school), Gautamrishi (L.L.B; established lawyer of District court, Meerut); Chandrabhan (junior officer in cane department); Manoj Kumar (Ph.D in political science from Chaudhry Charan Singh University, Meerut); Ramavtar (ACJM or judicial magistrate in a district court); Shiv Kumar (librarian in Meerut College); Dayanand (manager in a Meerut bank); Kusum Rani (Ph.D and teacher in high school in Delhi) and Kiranpal (retired clerk from state irrigation department) and Satbeer Kumar the man behind a flourishing milk cooperative as also Sant Ram and Shiv Ganesh who supply animal hides to city dealers are particularly noteworthy.

Among these also Gautamrishi (advocate) and Chandrabhan (section officer in state's sugarcane department) are particularly influential in village affairs today and are consulted and visited by higher castes too. Both contested the post of village pradhan when it was declared reserved for a scheduled caste woman (through mother--Mukundi Devi and wife—Prakashi respectively) in 2010. In the said contest, Prakashi won by narrow margin. But both sides received support from rival factions within the dominant Gurjar community namely, the families of Tekram and Ramfal (that had fought for the same office for decades in Dhantala).

The election of a Dalit woman as the village pradhan may not have brought a major transformation in the living conditions of Dalit women or men in Dhantala. Yet, along with the recent chief ministership of Ms. Mayawati, it is an index of the shift in elite dynamics in the region where a small segment from Dalit castes finds room in the higher rungs of the social pyramid now.

The Marginalised Mass of Dalits

Despite these improvements in the social and political position of Dalits in Dhantala in recent decades and a marked rise in their political organization, the fact of caste divisions, hierarchies and discrimination cannot be ignored even today. While the rise of the Ambedkarites and the BSP and pro Dalit laws have brought down instances of overt harassment yet, covert discrimination and exclusion against Dalits remain strong. Thus the chances for upward mobility for ordinary Dalits remain poor despite the existence of numerous welfare schemes because of rampant corruption and the silent operation of networks and nepotism in the administration and business favoring dominant castes overwhelmingly. Untouchability is not overtly practiced but in several middle caste weddings and other gatherings in the village, it was visible that poorer Dalits though invited occasionally, stood and ate in a separate corner often. On the other hand, in Dalit functions like the AmbedkarJayanti (celebrated on the 14th of April with a morning 'pheri' or procession in the village and an evening speech and songs session), many from middle castes also participate and are honoured by Dalits.

Another sign of continuing hierarchy experienced by Dalits in Dhantala is the absence of any inter caste panchayat called to address complaints of Dalits against a Gurjar. Although informal caste panchayats are called to solve disputes within a caste and some cross caste cases have also been initiated by Gurjars against others in Dhantala yet, the reverse has been rare. In one such exceptional case, in 2010, RavinderJatav had raised a complaint against some Kumhar boys who had been ridiculing him for having spent all his money in purchasing a cow which later disappeared mysteriously from his compound. Ravinder did not have a proof against the three Kumhar boys' alleged theft but his strong doubts were quickly dismissed and the Jatav laborer could not proceed against suspects because of lack of support from even leading members of his own caste.

Besides present discrimination and hierarchy against Dalits in Dhantala, the long term consequences of deprivation, drudgery and malnourishment is also evident especially in gross differences in income levels, inherited assets and even physique across castes. While a small elite exists today which is Dalit by caste and fights elections and also gets consulted by upper castes now, the vast mass of Dalits in Dhantala remain extremely poor.

Caste and Mobility within Aradhaknagar

But within Aradhaknagar, where Dalits form nearly 85% of the population, the relation between the principal castes is different. Apart from numerical strength, the pradhan's post in Aradhaknagar has been claimed successfully by a Valmiki for two decades now. Although within Dalit sub castes, Jatavs feel outnumbered and marginalised relative to the Valmikis (the dominant Valmiki group has prevented Jatavs from putting up Ambedkar's posters in the slum at times) yet, both cooperated clearly in rejecting the first Brahmin pradhan of the slum in the early nineties and the upper castes are not able to humiliate Dalits within Aradhaknagar as reported so often from outside the slum.

As far as economic mobility is concerned, the experiences of Dalits are different within and outside Aradhaknagar. While our fieldwork shows that caste restrictions on Dalits' choice of vocations, residence and movement have declined but not disappeared around Aradhaknagar. Within the slum, the ritually lowest--Valmikis enjoy a better economic and numerical as well as political standing than other castes including the savarnas. Firstly, the upper castes form only seven per cent of the populace. Secondly, among the relatively better off residents of Aradhaknagar, Valmikis constitute a major section as grade IV organised sector jobs are held almost entirely by them though Jatavs, who form the second major Dalit caste in Aradhaknagar, remain largely in low paid unorganized sector professions. Some Valmiki families, in fact, have more than one member in grade IV public sector employment and a couple of these have accumulated capital for investments in petty money lending and some unauthorized properties too. It is also notable that among 208 organised sector employees in Aradhaknagar, in 2006, 183 were Dalits and only 22 were upper and middle castes combined.

Further, out of the thirty three families of Aradhaknagar which had a per capita monthly income of Rs.2500 or more, (out of 206 in all) as many as 29 were Dalit and only three were upper caste. It is also noteworthy that the slum is not divided into caste zones/ streets as in villages and 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. Above all, the association between Dalit sub castes and their traditional occupations (like Jatav--cobblers, Chamadh--hide cleaners etc) has eroded though their overlaps at the extremes of the caste hierarchy remains, as noted before.

Differences among Dalits

At this point, it would be relevant to examine the divisions and hierarchies within the Dalits in Aradhaknagar more closely. Firstly, it is notable that there is an element of playful ridicule sometimes ranging on acrimony between castes as well as sub--castes in Aradhaknagar as in most other multi-caste communities. Secondly, it is not just the bigger varnas but also the sub castes like Jatavs and Valmikis which act as endogamous groups though about half a dozen inter-caste marriages have been reported in Aradhaknagar over the past two decades. Secondly, the Dalit sub-castes also vote differently generally (while Jatavs have often voted for the BSP and non-Congress formations, Valmikis in Aradhaknagar have remained remarkably loyal to the Congress party through successive elections). Lastly, the two Dalit sub-castes also show a contested sense of status

and hierarchy between them. While Valmikis, outnumber the Jatavs and have a greater say in local politics, ritually speaking Jatavs retain a sense of superiority over Valmikis and, barring two exceptions, have declined the sanitary professions associated with the latter despite their higher pay and security in the formal sector. In the context of status disputes between sub--castes, the response of other castes in the neighborhood is critical. As a result, between Valmikis and Jatavs (as also between Jats and Gurjars) the traditional caste ranking that positions the first above the second persists even as the supporting religious beliefs and rituals have eroded with the rise of the cash economy and political power as the principal ladders of upward mobility and social rank now.

CONCLUSIONS

We started this survey by noting the contrasts in scholarly assessments of dilution of caste hierarchies and prejudices in contemporary India. The limited evidence gathered by us on from one village and one slum on said transitions cannot offer a definitive view on the subject but does offer some points for further research and enquiry. It is in this light that we shall now outline elements of change and continuity as well as similarities and sharp differences in the mutating caste order within the urban and rural communities tracked in our research since 1988 with special reference to the challenges and opportunities being faced by Dalits in both locations.

The most general conclusion which emerges from our study is that neither a notion of unchanged hierarchies nor of a novel horizontal ordering of “discrete castes” seems applicable to the changing order of castes and sub-castes in Dhantala and Aradhaknagar. Scriptural notions of graded purities of different caste groupings and varnas based on their ritualstanding in the Brahmanical world view has surely waned in the fluid community of migrants in Aradhaknagar and has weakened to some extent in Dhantala too. Similarly, the equation between castes and traditional occupations has also eased in both the communities. Yet, in Dhantala and in the city outside Aradhaknagar, caste prejudices and Dalits’ marginalisation remains stark and are reflected in multiple incidents reported by our subjects.

As far as differences in the condition of Dalits in Aradhaknagar and Dhantala are concerned, it is notable that Dalits’ own numerical strength within the slum has helped them in having greater command over community affairs in Aradhaknagar while access to the capital city’s job market and resources (including a larger number of grade IV public sector jobs which are valued and chased now by some non-Dalits also) has helped them in raising their living standards to some extent. On the other hand, poverty levels are higher among Dhantala’s lower castes and the dominance of landed Gurjars in village politics also persists despite reservation of seats in local elected bodies for Dalits and women.

Factors which have helped in improving the plight of Dalits in both the locations studied by us include: the introduction of adult franchise and increased competition among political parties for Dalit votes specially since 1990s; the growth of migration and rise of real wages since the liberalization of the economy in the same decade; the expansion of the welfare net and introduction of land reforms after independence and, above all, the rise of education and self awareness and political assertion among recent generations of Dalits.

On the other hand, obstacles in the path of Dalits’ upward mobility are no less significant and include: inherited extreme poverty and lack of resources in most Dalit families; continuing prejudices and discriminatory practices specially, at the covert level, and exclusion from better jobs and businesses outside the small segment opened by reservations in public sector

employment; and rampant corruption in the working of welfare programs launched for the poor and Dalits by the state since independence.

A lot more needs to be done in the millennia old struggle against caste barriers and prejudices in this light. Better monitoring of the architecture of welfare delivery for Dalits specially in rural India and further erosion of caste barriers through faster economic development and increased employment opportunities along with quality control on education imparted in government schools in villages and next to slums are particularly notable for policy makers today.

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¹ For a lucid review of caste in India see Beteille (1989).

² Refer Thorat and Newman (2010); Jaffrelot (2003). Mendelsohn(1986) and Gupta (2004).

³ The term middle castes has been used here to refer to so called 'other backward castes' or shudras including upper middle peasant castes such as Jats and Gurjars and lower middle peasant castes like kumhars, dhimars etc.

⁴ The extremely low count of muslims in Aradhaknagar can be understood with reference to sharper segregation of urban communities according to broad caste and class divisions. The studied slum thus has a major muslim ghetto called old SeemaPuri on the other side of the road almost.

⁵ Interestingly, the Hindi term 'varg' and the Urdu equivalent 'jamaat' also denote educational grades or categories of pupils as does the English term class.

⁶ For an early work on churning among Dalits of Agra region see: Lynch (1969).

⁷ This incident was reported to me by two Gurjars themselves but denied by some other elders possibly because of the embarrassment it causes to the collective memory of both the castes concerned.

⁸ For a detailed discussion of internal hierarchy among Dalits see: Moffat (1979).

⁹Wiser and Wiser (1994).