

Caste and Power in the Lands of Agri-Culture Revisiting Rural North-West India

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The northwestern states of Punjab and Haryana have been amongst the most prosperous pockets of the post-independent India. Their prosperity has also produced positive development outcomes. Notwithstanding their low sex ratios, and the frequent invocation of “crises” of various kinds, the two states continue to lead the country on several indicators of human development. Though over the last two decades, the economic dynamism is often seen to be located in the southern and western parts of India, the two states have not seen any major decline in their economies, absolute or relative. On the contrary, in some respect, they seem to be still doing better than the so-called well-performing states of western and southern India. For example, as per the official figures¹ of 2004-05, the proportions of population living below the officially defined poverty line in the states of Gujarat (17 percent), Maharashtra (31 percent) and Karnataka (25 percent) were significantly higher than those of Punjab (8 percent) and Haryana (14 percent).

The development and prosperity of the two states has been a direct outcome of the green revolution technology introduced in the region during the late 1960s. Its positive effects on land productivity and incomes continued to unfold for more than two decades. So significant was the increase in productivity of land and production of food grains in the region that by the early 1980s they alone contributed a majority share to the food reserves of the country. Interestingly even though the green revolution technology was introduced in several pockets of India, nowhere did it have a state-wide effect as it did in Punjab and Haryana.

As would be expected, the effects of new agrarian technology were not merely economic. It transformed the relations of production, local level social structure and power relations. Though the introduction of modern democratic institutions of representation and governance began to change power relations everywhere in the country, their effect was much quicker and sharper in states like Haryana and Punjab. As in most other parts of the country, agricultural land in the region was mostly owned by a few caste groups. It was the “big” and “rich” landowners from these caste groups who suddenly emerged as the new regional elite and challenged the dominance of the erstwhile elite from traditionally “upper castes”. Unlike most other parts of India, the Punjab-Haryana region also has a single caste dominance, the Jats (commonly pronounced as Jutts in Punjab and Jaats in the Haryana region). Even though the two states have several other caste communities also owning agricultural land, none has the numbers and economic power to compete with Jats at the regional level.

¹ Planning Commission, New Delhi. <http://planningcommission.nic.in/> downloaded April 30 2011.

As expected a large majority of Jats live in rural areas. More importantly, they also took a lot of pride in being ruralites. An anthropologist who had conducted fieldwork in a Punjab village in 1981-82 writes: ‘the Jat might be employed as a school teacher, or serve in the military but he saw his primary role as that of an agriculturist; his connection with land was what he held most dear and what identified him’ (Kaur 1986:2). Another anthropologist similarly observed that the Jats despised:

...the townsman as lacking in physical bravery. They also had an image of them as grasping, greedy and lacking in dignity (Pettigrew 1992:169).

The prosperity ushered in by the Green Revolution and growing importance of agrarian castes in the political arena gave the Jats a new confidence and visibility. Thus, over the years, the rustic-agrarian lifestyle came to be the norm in the region. In other words, this was the triumph of agrarianism, which not only gave the agrarian elite political power at the local and state level but also a sense of cultural hegemony. For example, though the land owning Jats had always been an important element of the Sikh community, it was only after the Green Revolution that the Sikh image came to be identified with the Jats (Gupta 1996; Pettigrew 1995). And, perhaps more importantly, despite its levels of urbanization and industrialization being above the national average, Punjab came to be popularly known as a land of prosperous agriculturists.

Though its social profile is quite different from that of Punjab, similar kinds of political and cultural changes took place in Haryana as well. For example, though numerically they make for less than a quarter of the total population, the post-green revolution Haryana has been popularly known as the Jat-land.

Even in the second decade of the 21st century the Jat power continues to hold. Irrespective of the political party in power, caste identity of the regional political elite has not seen any change since the late 1960s. With the exception of Zail Singh of the Congress Party, all the Punjab chief ministers have been Jats during this period. More or less the same holds true for Haryana. Since 1968, with the exception of Bhajan Lal (who too claims to represent an agrarian dominant caste), the chief ministers in Haryana have almost all been Jats², with a visible agrarian identity and social base.

However, notwithstanding the continued political dominance of a single agrarian caste in the region, no one seems to be celebrating agriculture or the rural life any longer. The only mode in which agriculture has been talked about in the region over the last two decades has been that of “crisis”. From Sikh militancy in Punjab during the 1980s and early 1990s to the reports of farmers committing suicides, depleting water tables and frequent reports of honour killings from

² The only other non-Jat Chief-minister of Haryana during this period was Mr. Banarsi Das Gupta for year and a half during 1975-77 and again for month and a half during 1990.

Haryana, the region seems to be perpetually in a state crisis. Economists and popular commentators have offered rather simple and straight forward explanations, either in terms a general neglect of agriculture by the Indian state in the post-economic liberalization context, or simply a result of elite manipulation and/or incompetence of the political leadership (for a summary of this literature see Jodhka 2006).

While there is no doubt about the fact that neo-liberal economic policy and the process of globalization have played a role in marginalizing agriculture, the source and nature of “crises” is not simply economic. They also reflect and suggest a process of change. Though the broader national and global economic contexts are important, the process of change should also be seen by locating it in the regional and local contexts.

What exactly is happening to the rural society in different regions of the country? How are the old relations of caste, class and gender being renegotiated in the rapidly changing social, cultural and economic contexts? How have these changes affected local level power relations? How do the changing nature of caste relations and other aspects of local level social structure, in context of the growing integration of village in the wider networks of market and cultural universe, influence the *value* of agriculture?

This paper is based on my fieldworks in Punjab and Haryana carried over the last ten years of so. I did an extensive survey of 51 villages of Punjab during 2000 and 2001. I revisited six of these villages during 2003-04. I also undertook an intensive field survey of two villages of the Karnal/ Panipat district of Haryana. I had first studied these villages during 1988-89 while doing fieldwork for my Ph.D. research. I discuss below the changing nature of caste and rural power in the rural northwest India based primarily on my field studies. In the final section I will try to draw some broad inferences on the possible nature of caste-power connection at the regional level.

Caste in the northwest: Social and Historical Context

The “mainstream” sociological writings, as also the popular discourses, tend to look at caste in unitary terms, a pan Indian reality, without any significant variations in its structure or ideology across different regions of the Subcontinent. The text book view of caste suggests an underlying cultural/ideological consensus across castes on its governing normative order. This is perhaps best reflected in the writings of scholars like Louis Dumont (1971) and Michael Moffatt (1979). Despite many criticisms of these theories and available empirical evidence from the field that contradicted such claims, theories such as that of Dumont continue to dominate the discourses on caste (Gupta 2000:3). Such views on caste tend to look at it almost purely in cultural terms, a system of values and ideas that is peculiarly Indian. Its association with Hinduism, where it supposedly had the sanction from some scriptural sources, further reinforces such a stance. The

fact that caste differences exist among non-Hindu Indians is invariably seen only as an evidence of their Hindu ancestry.

Though caste, in a sense, is a pan Indian reality, its actual frames of reference are regional in character, which ought to be looked at historically. As is widely known, there are different sets of caste groups in different regions. Even ‘the preoccupation with purity and pollution was not equally marked in every part of the country’ (Beteille 2000:172). The specific historical trajectory, the patterns of politico-economic changes experienced during the colonial³ and post-independence period and the composition of different ethnic communities determine the actual working of caste relations in a given region. Overlooking these obvious facts about caste also makes it appear like an unchanging reality.

The institution of caste and practice of untouchability have perhaps always been a part of everyday life in the rural north-west India. However, the region has had its own specificities. For various historical reasons, the caste hierarchies and Brahmanical ideology in the region have been relatively less rigid when compared with some other parts of India. Until 1947, the united Punjab had a the majority Muslim population. Along with the Islam, the religious philosophy of Sikhism, majority religion in the present day Punjab, also decries caste. Caste appears to have survived and was reproduced in the region as a part of the agrarian social formation. A good amount of literature exists that points to the specificities of the practice of caste in the region.

When they established their rule in the province some of the British colonial rulers appear to have been surprised at the absence of rigid caste hierarchy in the region. Some of the Western observers went to the extent of saying that the Punjab was a “notable exception” to the caste system in India (O’Malley in Nayar 1966: 20). Commenting on the status of “low castes” in the province, a colonial government report, for example, observed in 1920s:

It would be misleading to attach too great importance to the existence of caste in the Punjab....Not only is it the case that the Brahman has no practical pre-eminence among Hindus, but as between “caste” and “non-caste” Hindus the distinction is not so strongly marked as to create the political problem found elsewhere in India.⁴

Social differentiation in Punjab, some of them felt, resembled more with Europe than with the mainland India. As another observer wrote:

3. Some recent scholarship has begun to recognize this more explicitly. See Roger (2004); Caton (2004).

4. Great Britain Indian Statutory Commission, Memorandum Submitted by the Government of Punjab(1930) as in Nayar (1966:20).

Nowhere else in Hindu India does caste sit so lightly or approach so nearly to the social classes of Europe.⁵

Though Brahmins as a caste community did exist in Punjab and continues to be there even today, they were ritually important only for the upper caste Hindus, who numerically constituted a small proportion of the total population of the state. Even among the Hindus of Punjab, Brahmins did not enjoy a superior status. Questioning the popular four-fold classification, Denzil Ibbetson in his census report on *Punjab Castes* argued that the varna model of hierarchy did not operate in Punjab at all and there were instances where Brahmins were “looked upon as outcasts by those who under the fourfold classification would be classed as Sudras” (Ibbetson 1916: 2).

Similarly, writing on the social life in colonial Punjab, Prakash Tandon, an upper caste Khatri Hindu, comments in his celebrated autobiographical *Punjabi Century* that the Brahmins of Punjab lived a ‘frugal life’ and it was rare to find ‘an affluent Brahmin’ in the region (Tandon 1961: 77). Most Brahmins in his native village were treated as members of the menial castes. Like other menials, they too were mostly dependent upon the food they collected from their *jajmans*. Giving a vivid description of their social status, he writes:

With us brahmins were an underprivileged class and exercised little or no influence on the community. Perhaps Muslims had so discouraged temples and external worship that the brahmins had no place left from where to exercise their authority.

Our brahmins did not as a rule even have the role of teachers, because until the British opened regular schools, teaching was done by Muslim mullahs in the mosques or by Sikh granthis... in the Gurudwaras. Our brahmins were rarely erudite; in fact many of them were barely literate, possessing only a perfunctory knowledge of rituals and knowing just the necessary mantras by heart. (Tandon 1961: 76)

Similarly Saberwal, an anthropologist who studied a small town of Punjab during the late 1960s writes:

...even if the Brahmins were able to carve a ceremonial place at Ranjit Singh’s court for themselves, there is no evidence that they acquired much land or that they were able to enforce the social circumstances that they would have required for maintaining high levels of ritual purity; and therefore the lowest castes in Punjab had to carry only a light burden of ritual impurities, much lighter, physically and socially, than the burden elsewhere in India. (Saberwal 1976:7).

However, not everyone who has studied Punjab agrees with such a position. Paul Hershman, who did his fieldwork in a village near Jalandhar, for example underlines the distance that

5. Anderson in *ibid*: 20.

existed between so called “upper castes”, such as Jats, Khatri and Aroras on one hand and the untouchable castes. Further, social relation in the village community and the political economy of agriculture in the region were closely structured around caste. While ideological stranglehold of Brahmanism and rigidities of caste hierarchy were certainly much weaker here, different groups of servicing castes were tied to the landowning cultivators within the framework of *jajmani* system, also known locally as *sepidari* system (see Sharma 1996; Kesinger 1974).

I. P. Singh (1975; 1977), who did his field-work in a village near Amritsar during the late 1950s provides a fairly good idea about the nature of caste relations in a Sikh village. The Sikhs living in the village were divided into two groups, the Sardars (the upper castes) and the Mazhabis (the lower-caste scavengers). The first group included the Jats, Kambohs, Tarkhans, Kumhars, Sunars and Nais. Though the agriculturist Jats considered themselves higher than the other groups in this category, Singh found no feeling of caste-based avoidance or prejudice among them. They visited each other’s house, inter-dined, and attended marriage functions and celebrated most of the festivals together. In terms of the village settlement also, no demarcation existed in the houses of these groups. However, the Mazhabis, who constituted nearly half of the village population, were treated differently. They lived on one side of the village. They had a separate well while all the other castes used a common well. In the village feasts, where everyone was invited, the Mazhabis sat separately. Since many of them worked as labourers in the fields of the Jat landowners, the latter visited the houses of the Mazhabis but they did so as a patronizing gesture. There were also occasions where untouchability was either not practised or its extent had been declining.

Virtually all agricultural land in Punjab-Haryana region has been under the direct control of the traditionally cultivating castes, particularly the Jats. The exclusion of Dalits from agrarian economy continues even today. For example, though the proportion of Scheduled Castes population is highest in Punjab, the agricultural land owned by them is virtually negligible. They constituted nearly 29 per cent of the total population of Punjab in 2001, (much higher than the all India average of around 16 per cent) and only around 5 per cent of them were reported to be working as cultivators. Though the proportions of SC population is lower in Haryana (19.3 percent in 2001), their relationship to land is not very different from their counterparts in Punjab. Only 8 percent of them were listed as cultivators in the state in 2001 (http://censusindia.gov.in/Tables_Published/SCST/dh_sc_haryana.pdf, May 9 2011). The all-India average of cultivators among the Scheduled Castes as a whole was above 25 per cent. In the neighboring Himachal Pradesh as many as 67.7 per cent of them were listed as cultivators. Even in Uttar Pradesh 42.6 per cent of Dalits were cultivators⁶.

⁶ *Journal of Indian School of Political Economy* (special issue on Scheduled Castes edited by Andre Beteille). Vol. XII (3&4) 2000. Statistical supplement page 615.

Notwithstanding these specificities, the institution of caste not only existed everywhere in the region, but it also shaped or structured social, economic and political relations in the two states, particularly in the rural contexts. The colonial policies, such as the Land Alienation Act of 1901, would have played its role in reinforcing caste differences; particularly the economic exclusion of Dalits, its origin surely goes back in history⁷.

Caste in Contemporary Rural Punjab

Green revolution and other associated changes over the last three or four decades have significantly transformed the nature of caste relations in rural Punjab. On the basis of an extensive survey carried out in 2001 covering 51 villages selected from three sub-regions of Punjab, viz. Majha, Malwa, and Doaba I conceptualized this change through the categories of dissociation, distancing and autonomy (see Jodhka 2002).

Dissociation: the Jajmani system, or its local variant the Balutedari system, provided a framework for organizing economic life in a village of the region. Different caste groups were typically required to pursue certain occupation deemed to be the calling of their caste. Though not everyone would have ever been employed in the “callings” of their castes, every caste group was identified with a specific occupation. It was in this kind of a framework that the involvement of Dalits with “unclean occupations” was viewed as the primary reason for their “pollution”. Dealing with dead cattle, scavenging and other occupations that were considered polluting in the Hindu culture were left to be done by the Dalits. Many radical changes have taken place in rural Punjab with regard to the involvement of Dalits with such occupations.

First of all, large majorities of Dalits have consciously *dissociated* themselves from their traditional occupations. Only a small number of them (from less than 5 to a maximum of 10 percent) would still be involved in such occupations. There were also caste-wise variations. The Chamars (including Ad Dharmis and Ramdasis) had almost completely moved away from their traditional occupation of dealing with dead cattle. They have even begun to *distance* themselves from agriculture and seek such employment that would not involve any relation with the locally dominant caste. This was also clearly evident in the two villages of Haryana in 2008-09. Many households had stopped keeping cattle because “no-one picked-up the dead cattle” and “the scavengers no longer came to clean the cattle-shed”.

Who then did the work that was traditionally done by the Dalits, viz. scavenging or picking-up the dead cattle? And what implications do these changes have for the village economy and the traditional structure of jajmani relations? Interestingly, some of these occupations were no longer identified with any specific caste group in rural Punjab. For example, picking up of dead

⁷ Under the Land Alienation Act in 1901, for example, Dalits and artisan castes were clubbed along with money-lending and urban trading castes, and were disallowed to purchase land from the “agricultural castes”.

cattle has become a completely commercialized enterprise. The village *panchayat* generally gave the work on contract to an individual contractor, who could even be from another villages or a nearby town. They would typically employ a few workers (not necessarily local Dalits) who work on the dead cattle in the village carcass. Birds and dogs eat up much of the meat. The skin and the bones have a lucrative market. Most of those involved in this “business” were quite well off and were often seen with envy even by the upper castes.

There has also been some degree of commercialization of other Dalit or *jajmani* occupations. Barbers, carpenters, blacksmiths, all now have shops. Along with commercialization, a process of *dissociation of caste and occupation* was also underway. There were many among Dalits who work as barbers. They, however, did not work the way barbers use to in the traditional structure of *jajmani* relations. Most of them have set-up small outlets, often near the village bus stop. Some Dalits have also taken-up the job of carpenters, particularly in villages where the traditional carpenters have left for the towns.

The only “unclean occupations” where a degree of continuity existed was that of scavenging. Though a large majority of those involved with scavenging work continued to be the Balmikis and Mazhabis (earlier known as Chuhras), the castes with which it was traditionally identified, only a few families from these castes actually worked as scavengers.

Even in scavenging, the traditional structure of *jajmani* relations has almost completely changed. The cleaning of drains and toilets or sweeping of the houses was mostly done on commercial basis. In most villages a scavenger is employed for an individual street. Each household in the street paid a fixed sum to the scavenger on a monthly basis (the current going rate was Rs.10 per household). Interestingly, in some cases, rather than in their own village the scavengers preferred working in the neighboring village. This was obviously done to avoid any element of familiarity and patronage of the traditional variety being invoked by the households they served.

Distancing: A large majority of Dalits in Punjab and Haryana were traditionally employed in agriculture, mostly as labourers. Some of them also worked on long-term basis with the landowning Jats. Though the traditional variety of attached labour, such as *sajhis* and *sisis* have given way to more formalized relations, working on long-term basis with farmers still leads to relations of dependency and unfreedom. When I did my fieldwork in Haryana during 1988-89 attached labourers were mostly local Dalits. They obviously did not like getting into such arrangements.

In the Doaba region where Dalit mobility has been more pronounced than elsewhere in the state, very few of them worked as attached labourers. Of the 13 villages studied from Doaba, none of the Dalits worked as attached labourer in as many as 8 villages. However, Malwa still had many who were working as attached labourers. Of the 26 villages studied, 21 had Dalits working as

attached labourers (ranging from 5 to 50 in each village). In Haryana villages also the number of labourers working as annual farm servants had significantly declined.

On the whole the process of occupational diversification was quite pronounced everywhere. As and when they could afford to do so, Dalits stopped working regularly on land under the dominant caste farmers. 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 did not want to work on land. They only performed seasonal labour and during rest of the year preferred going to work in the town or bringing work home. The most popular work that Dalits of Doaba did while living in the village was rope-making. These ropes were woven for the urban markets and were sold through a middleman who also supplied them with the raw materials required for the ropes. In Haryana villages also many Dalits went out to work, invariably more than the local OBCs.

Autonomy: Viewed from below, the most pronounced feature of caste has been discrimination and the most obvious evidence of this is the settlement pattern in the village. Almost everywhere in Punjab and Haryana, Dalits have lived outside or in the periphery of the village. Along with their social segregation and economic deprivation, they also experienced discrimination and humiliation in everyday life of the village, during festivals and village feasts. This kind of discrimination took various forms. Dalits, for example, could not participate on equal terms in celebrations of local festivals unless they organized these celebrations on their own in their Gurudwaras or *dharamshalas* (community centres). Perhaps the most obvious occasion when Dalits are discriminated against in village festivities is during the serving of food. Dalits would often be asked to wait until everyone else had eaten and left. Though not so pronounced, there were also reports of using separate utensils for the Dalits during festivals or village feasts. A Dalit from village of Verka block of Amritsar, told us that though they were invited by the upper caste Jats for weddings in their families, they were served food and snacks on separate tables.

Even otherwise Dalits and upper castes rarely ate together. Though prohibition on Dalits entering the houses of upper castes has been considerably relaxed, restrictions on eating together continued. As such also, Dalits and upper castes did not interact so closely that they would visit each other's houses for lunches or dinners on a regular basis.

During a group discussion with Dalits in a village of Ferozepur district we were told that through subtle and not so subtle messages, they were told to stay away. Their children were asked to come for the langar (the food served in Gurudwara) 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 Gurudwara management formally invited all the others, Dalits were not even informed about the special programmes and festivities. A frequent complaint was about not being allowed to participate in the cooking and serving of the langar.

The visible division between the upper castes and Dalits was with regard to the cremation grounds. Though there were some villages that had only one cremation ground where every one cremated their dead, the upper caste generally did not like Dalits using the village (upper caste) cremation ground. Interestingly, Dalits too preferred having their separate cremation grounds. In fact there were several cases where Dalits complained that they have to use the common cremation ground for cremating their dead because the dominant landowners had encroached upon the land where they had their cremation ground and had turned it into fields.

The source of drinking water has been another area where the upper castes used to be very touchy. Traditionally Dalits and upper castes had different sources of drinking water even in rural Punjab. While all the upper castes (including the backward castes) could take water from the village wells, Dalits could never do so. They had to depend exclusively on their own wells. Much has changed with regard to the access to drinking water. Wells are no longer the primary source of drinking water anywhere in rural Punjab. While in some villages taps have been installed under government-funded programmes, at others hand- pumps have replaced wells. This change seems to have completely transformed the attitude of the rural population towards drinking water as a potential arena of caste prejudice. Though the sources of drinking water were as such separate for Dalits and the upper castes, there were much lesser restrictions on the access of Dalits to the taps and hand pumps used or owned by upper castes. 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.

Dalits have worked out their own ways and strategies of resisting this kind of discrimination. The most popular strategy of resistance has been to construct separate places of worship for themselves. Of the 51 villages studied, Dalits had separate Gurudwaras in as many as 41 villages. In fact there were some villages where they had more than one Gurudwara. In most cases separate Gurudwaras were built in order to assert *autonomy* and avoid the humiliation that they encountered in the dominant caste Gurudwaras. A Dalit of a village near Phagwara in Kapurthala district told us:

There used to be only one Gurudwara in the village. The local Jats always thought that it was their Gurudwara because they were the ones who had financed its building. We used to visit the Gurudwara but they never liked it. They would not let us cook *langar*. So when we could mobilize some resources, we decided to build our own Gurudwara in our own basti.

Construction of separate Gurudwaras by Dalits is no longer met with resistance either from the dominant castes in the village or from the religious establishment of the Sikh community. However, though the upper castes did not mind Dalits constructing their own Gurudwaras, some

Dalits reported that the Jats and other upper caste Sikhs did not have for their Gurudwaras the kind of reverence they had for their own. Even when the Dalit Gurudwara was closer, the Jats would prefer visiting their own Gurudwaras. Or when an upper caste family in the village needed to bring Guru Granth home, rarely would they take it from the Dalit Gurudwara, even when it was convenient to do so. There were some villages where the upper caste individuals had started visiting Dalit Gurudwaras, particularly during special occasions.

As with Gurudwaras, rural Dalits of Punjab have also been building separate community centers of their own, sometimes with a grant from the Department of Social Welfare, sometimes with their own money. Having their own Gurudwaras and community centres gave them a sense of *autonomy* and reduced their dependence on the locally dominant caste.

Caste and Local Power

How do these processes of change translate into the local level institutional politics and voting patterns? My revisit after a gap of 20 years to two villages of Haryana could provide some indications to the emerging patterns and trends.

Twenty years ago, the dominance in the two villages was clearly located in caste and land. The big landowners (the *chaudharies*) were also the most powerful individuals in these two villages of the Karnal district of Haryana and they were all members of the dominant caste. With the introduction of competitive politics, operationally the power of dominant individuals had to be institutionally reproduced through electoral politics. However, the new Constitution of the Indian republic granted universal adult franchise. Though initially it made little difference, over the years it became a source of a new sense of identity for those on the margins of rural Haryana, Dalits and the landless OBCs. 'Every individual began to matter and everyone had a single vote', was the way one of my Dalit respondents articulated the change in the local politics 20 years back.

However, on the ground the local democratic politics worked through factional alliances. Factions were always vertical in nature, with some members of all castes being loyal to the leader, who was always a substantial landowner from a dominant caste. Even after the introduction of a representative system of electing local leaders came into force the big landowners, the *chaudharies*, of the village continued to enjoy influence in the local setting. However, they had to be constantly aware of the need to keep partners in the faction together.

There have been some interesting changes in this over the last 20 years.

Coupled with changes in the agrarian political economy and caste system, the democratic electoral system has radically transformed the authority structure of the village. "*Chaudhar* is a thing of past", was a statement made by several of the big landowners. Another respondent from

a BC community articulated the general feeling of the landless castes towards the changing power structure in following words:

No one cares for anyone simply because he thinks he is a *chaudhary*. *Chaudharies*, if they are, they must be in their homes. We do not care.

In other words there has been a clear decline in power of the ‘individual’ and the ‘individual family’ in local politics. ‘Power’ had become much more fluid and no more seemed to be determined, or solely shaped by caste and land. Though Jats were the big landowners in village-II the sarpanch was from the caste of smaller landowners, Rors, who was a small farmer with around 6 acres of land. Village-I had an even more interesting trajectory. Here the big landowners were almost all Punjabi Aroras (Partition migrants from Western Punjab). A Punjabi landowning family commanded a lot of authority in the village. The patriarch of the family was also the sarpanch of the village for nearly 20 years. Upon his death, his eldest son became the sarpanch. However, over the last 10 years or so, the sarpanch was neither from this family nor from any other family of the big Punjabi landowners. Sarpanches now generally come from other castes, Gujjars or Brahmins, mostly small and middle size landowners, but ambitious and willing to work for a career in politics.

What has brought this change about? What is the nature of the new power structure of the village? What are its effects on the regional or state-level politics?

Perhaps the most important factor that has brought this change about is the general disintegration of the “village community”. As I have discussed for the Punjab villages above (also see Jodhka 2002), in the Haryana villages too one could observe the processes of dissociation, distancing and autonomy. With the exception of a small number of those from the scavenging community, Dalit families of the village were no longer engaged in traditional caste occupations. They went out of the village for work, and many of them had regular employment. Their dependence on local landowners for credit also declined. They have also moved away or distanced from the agrarian economy of the village and they rarely, if ever participated in the ritual life of the village, or the other caste groups on any occasion. In other words, they no longer saw themselves as being a part of the social order of the caste system. This has also given them a sense of independence and political agency.

The other “poor” communities of the village, the so-called BCs, too have alternative sources of employment outside agriculture and many of them indeed go out of the village for work. However, smaller number of the have regular government employment.

Do the local poor feel politically empowered? The answer is both ‘yes’ and ‘no’. As I have discussed above, the disintegration of traditional hierarchical structure has given them a sense of

citizenship and they are quite aware of their political rights. They interact and participate in the larger world of caste and community politics at the regional level, which, given a set of political resources, they can use in times of crisis. However, they are also acutely aware of their vulnerabilities that come with poverty and marginality. When I asked a respondent from the Jimmar community as to why they do not contest elections and become sarpanches, his answer was very candid:

...We are poor people. We know our votes are more than any other caste community of the village. However, we also know our place (*aukat*). I want to live in this village. If I were to take your words seriously, I may even have to leave the village.

Some other respondents also pointed to the money one has to spend to contest an election for the position of sarpanch,

“... at least a few lakhs...., who is going to fund it”.

Who has inherited power from the traditional patriarchs?

The village politics today is integrated much more with the regional politics and the bureaucratic structure and is shaped by a large number of factors. A new class of “political entrepreneurs”, who are not necessarily rich but are invariably from upper or dominant caste groups, seem to be the main actors in the emerging political scenario. They are required to have skills of coordinating on the one hand with the outside world of politics and development bureaucracy and on the other with the local population. They have to try to link themselves organically with different caste communities and convince them about their abilities to represent them. Given their sense of pride and arrogance, the old *chaudharies* find it difficult to do such things.

While some villagers complained about the local sarpanches being implicated in corruption cases and one sarpanch was suspended on some charges of corruption in the month of April 2008, they do have to be much more accountable and performance oriented than before. Development programmes indeed have better chances of being implemented in the emerging atmosphere of competitive politics at the village level.

Concluding Comments

How do these processes of change at micro level in Punjab and Haryana manifest themselves at other levels, in the regional, state and national politics?

As I mentioned in the first section of this paper, on the face of it, nothing seems to have changed at the regional/state level politics. The locally dominant castes continue to dominate regional

politics in both the states, irrespective of the party in power. However, a closer look suggests something very different. We can identify three sets of processes that seem to be changing the social grammar of politics in the region. First and foremost is the sudden rise in caste related conflicts at the local/village level. Second, and a related process, is the rise of new subaltern caste/religious identities, most visible among the Ravi Dasis in the Doaba region of Punjab but also among other communities, such as the Valmikis. The third important trend clearly visible at the village level was a shifting class base of the local political and the changing mode of reproduction of caste power in electoral domain through newer means, particularly money and “service delivery”.

The disintegration of jajmani relations and decline of tradition hierarchy through the process of dissociation, distancing and autonomy creates a new space for Dalit agency and assertion of identity, directly leading to the development of ‘political capacity’ to use James Manor’s expression. Evidence of this could be seen in the states of Punjab and Haryana, which have been experiencing a series of caste related conflicts, mostly among rural Dalits and landowning Jats, particularly over the decade.

In recent times, perhaps the first major case of caste conflict and Dalit assertion was reported from the Doaba region of Punjab. In the first week of June 2003 in a village called Talhan, located at a distance of around ten kilometres from the town of Jalandhar, an ongoing conflict between the landowning Jats and the Dalit Ad-dharmis reached a flash point. The tension was so sharp that the local administration had to intervene and had to seal off the village for a couple of days.

Relations between the two communities in the village had been quite strained for some time over the issue of the Dalits’ demand for participation in the management of a local shrine. As mentioned above, different caste communities generally have their separate Gurudwaras. In Talhan Dalits also have a Gurudwara of their own. The disputed shrine did not really belong to any particular caste. It was built in memory of a Sikh artisan who died while fixing wheel in a newly dug well. Since he died while working for the village, he was declared a martyr (*shahid*) and the villagers erected a small structure (*smadh*) in his memory, at the place where he was cremated. Over the years, the *smadh* began to attract devotees. With devotees came money. It was gradually turned into a proper religious shrine and the Sikh holy book was also placed close to the *smadh*. The locally dominant Jats who controlled the village *panchayat* appointed a committee to look after this shrine.

Though this committee had members from different caste groups, never was a Dalit made member of this committee, even though they make up for nearly two-thirds of the total population of the village. Given their numbers no one could be elected *sarpanch* of the village without their support. However, when they demanded representation in management of the

shrine, the Jats refused. The Ad Dharmis approached the local administration and even the court of law. It was during one of the demonstrations by them in the town of Jalandhar that violence broke out and the police opened fire in which one Dalit was killed.

The agitation continued for nearly six months and eventually the Ad dharmis were accommodated in the managing committee. Though it did not significantly alter the power equation either at the local level or in the region, the story of Talhan became an inspiring case for the Dalits elsewhere in Punjab. In the past seven or eight years there have been more than a dozen cases where the local level tensions have come out in the open and have been reported in the local newspapers. The issues of contention vary from village to village. They range from demanding a share in the agricultural lands owned and leased out by the village *panchayat*; drainage rights; or simply contesting elections for *panchayat* position against the Jats.

However, notwithstanding the divergent nature of issues, all these stories have a common theme of thread. *Everywhere Dalits are making new claims. They are asking for equal rights and a legitimate share in the resources that belong commonly to the village but had so far been in the exclusive control of the locally dominant caste.* Perhaps the most interesting feature of these conflicts is that though the issues are all local in nature, the language and politics they deploy in their struggle is “imported” from outside the village. Similarly, these conflicts do not remain local. The regional and national media reports them almost instantly. They tend to also mobilize the regional and national political elite and parties. The courts and civil society organizations also get involved and their views have begun to matter, with local administration and also with the local upper caste elite.

However, this emergence of Dalit agency or ‘political capacity’ is not simply a matter of political mobilizations or an outcome of the disintegrating hierarchies. It also depends greatly on the abilities of a community to consolidate and mobilize its social networks and economic resources. As Manor rightly points out:

The old caste hierarchies were rooted in materiality. They did not just exist in people’s minds – at the level of ideas, beliefs and imaginings. Those things were important, but there was a great deal more to this than mere ‘false consciousness’. Caste and caste hierarchies had – and still have – tangible substance (Manor 2010:12).

It is in this context that one should understand the process of community identity formation among Dalits. Apart from giving them a sense of dignity, communitarian identities also bring together all the available social and cultural resources of its members. A good case study of this would be the Ravi Dasi religious identity in Punjab and how over the years they have quite successfully developed their own social, cultural and economic resources. Economic mobility experienced by a few Chamar families of the community during the 1920s and 1930s and the

resources available with the diasporic members of community settled in England and Canada are all brought together in conflicts like the one experience in Talhan (see Jodhka 2004; 2009; 2010).

Disintegration of traditional hierarchies or Jajmani relations also do not mean end of inequalities. The cultural inequalities have always also been economic inequalities. With exception of a few individuals or specific sections of the communities, Dalits and landless OBCs continue to be among the most poor in contemporary India. It was through their economic might that the traditional rural rich was able to reproduce itself as the ruling political elite at the regional level. However, its power has begun to be contested. If it cannot deliver through good governance, it will have to constantly work through populist state policies (coupled with electoral corruptions!), and this is what we have been increasingly seeing in the region over the last decade and more.

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