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Discovering untouchable past: a brief survey of untouchables histories in united provinces (1900-1950)

Abstract

The modern dalit intellectuals and dalit organizations engaged in evolving historical consciousness which is different from normative academic history, and different from socio-cultural perception of history. This new history mainly practiced by dalits themselves intended to create a history which reflects the new confidence within dalits. It is argued that representation by other has been done by brahminical forces to made dalits as servants to upper caste Hindus. This paper traces the historiographical interventions with regard to construction of the past of untouchables of Uttar Pradesh.

Keyword: Untouchability, United Provinces, hegemony

Introduction

The evolution of a dalit conscious in UP first emerged in the 1920s and slowly acquired a concrete form between the 1940s and 1960s. The Chamars through a range of organizations and caste mahasabhas, were the first dalit community to launch a struggle to redefine their identities in UP in the 1910s and 1920s. This struggle was launched initially to contest the dominant colonial and Hindu narratives of their 'Untouchable' identity by emphasizing the purity of their lives and by demanding a status equal to that claimed by caste Hindus. Dalits started questioning and rejecting categories like untouchables, depressed classes, Scheduled castes and Harijans that were coined by colonial and Hindu nationalist discursive practices. This was not merely to contest dominant ascriptions to their identities but also, more importantly to question the notions of impurity and pollution attached to their community, identity and history. Familiar examples are the assertions of the Adi-Dharmis and Balmikis of Punjab, the Satnamis of Chhatisgarh, the Namasudras of Bengal, the Chamars, Pasis and Bhangis of UP, the Shilpkars of Kumaon and the Mahars and Chambhars of Maharashtra. In December 1927 the leaders of the Adi-Hindu Mahasabha in UP made a claim for a more inclusive *achhut* or 'untouched' identity to unite disparate dalit castes. Kalwars claim themselves *Kshatriya*, Dusadh claim themselves "*Dushashan Vanshi Kshatriyas*". Bhangis (sweepers) claim themselves "*Balmiki Vanshi Brahmans*". Pasis claim themselves "*Parasram Vashi Brahmans*". Although these claims are based on Vanshavalis (genealogies) prepared by Brahmans, yet their "sacred threads" and their heads in unison are forcibly broken by the high class Hindus and their claim is never likely to be accepted. With the references of this claim these castes have originated a glorious history. By emphasizing their *achhut* identity, the leaders of the Adi-Hindu Mahasabha were hoping to build a new politics that would bring together all dalit castes- Domes, Mehtars, Pasis, Lalbegis, Dhanuks, Koris and Chamars. In claiming that *achhuts* were the original inhabitants of India and descendants of the *dasas*, *asurs* and *dasyus* mentioned in Brahmanical Hindu texts, dalits were challenging, both colonial and Hindu interpretations of their identity. *Achhut* was declared as the identity of all 'Untouchables', separate from the Hindu community. Dalit identity became the foundation for the formation of a new consciousness, raising a new set of issues and mobilizing all dalit castes.

Objective

The proposed study explores the historiographical dynamics of dalit past and its multiple versions in the United Provinces. Besides examining this, the study also documents the way the dalit past was appropriated into the agenda of the present. By focusing on the United Provinces, the study explores the local histories of dalits and their impact on the mobilization and assertion of dalit community. To investigate the

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multiple forms of historical narratives on dalit past. This paper traces the way dalit identity formation facilitated by new history by dalits themselves.

Hypothesis

The communal sense among dalit was significantly facilitated by historical narratives. The historical narratives on dalit past exist in multiple forms as dalit community means different meaning to different people. It was the historical narratives which mediated and facilitated the mobilization, and assertion of dalit community.

Research work

Out of the total population of the Scheduled castes in the country, their largest concentration is in Uttar Pradesh. One hundred and one Scheduled caste communities come under the broad rubric of dalit category. The past of dalit community did not exist in the written form; rather it exists in folklore, myths and other cultural forms. One of the features of the degraded social status of scheduled-caste people has been the role of myths which explained their origin as impure of Hindu fertility. But there has been a sea change in recent years in the perception by scheduled caste people of themselves which initiated the process of counter hegemony. This has been expressed in multiple forms such as cultural practices, religion, literature, language, and history.

Dalit communities such as the Chamars, Jatav, Mochi, Satnami, Raidas, Valmiki, and many others have their imagination of history. They do different profession and have strong community identifications. Among the Chamars, Jatav, kuril, Jaiswar, Jatav, Dhanuk, Valmiki, Pasi, Mochi, Satnami and many others have their own sense of superiority. So, there are a few Scheduled castes from whom the other scheduled-caste communities accept neither food nor water¹. Among all the sections of the Chamar of the United Provinces, two great sub-castes predominate. These are the *Jatiya* and the *Jaiswar*. Now in present time they are field labourer, a cultivator, a dealer in hides, and a maker of shoes, some of the cultivating sections of this sub-caste do not make leather, and do not allow their women to practice midwifery, some of the shoemaking sections do not mend shoes. *Jatiya* which includes more than twenty percent of the total Chamar population is found almost entirely in the north and west of the Provinces, in the Meerut, Agra, Moradabad and Badaun Districts. *Jaiswar* are found chiefly in the Allahabad, Benares, Gorakhpur, and Fyzabad Divisions, being most numerous in the Jaunpur, Azamgarh, Mirzapur, and Fyzabad Districts. These two sub-castes make up nearly two-fifths of the whole Chamar population.

New Dalit History

For many lower castes, the view of the past embodied in their myths and popular stories. However, these stories are sanskritised versions of dalit imaginations of their past which narrate the causes for degraded position in Hindu community. Most caste-origin myths of the lower castes involve a mishap, an act of greed, or an accident, usually in connection with actions aimed at defending sacred honour which caused the downfall from a higher status.

For example, some *Chamars*, an untouchable caste of northern India, tell the story of four Brahman brothers who were one day walking by the side of a river and saw a cow stuck in the mud. They tried various things to get her out and then, as one of the brothers was tugging at the tail of the cow, she died. Because he was touching the cow at the moment of her death he became implicated in the death, and from then on, the descendants of this Brahman became the Chamars who are relegated to a very low position. The myth explains to Sanskritisation tendencies among the Chamars by the way of positioning them in Brahman varna.²

Another myths about their origin Chamars tell the story of Chamu and Bamu.³ Another legend tells how five Brahman brothers were passing along together. They saw a carcass of a cow lying on the way. Four of them turned aside; but the fifth removed the dead body. His brethren excommunicated him, and since then it has been the business of his descendants to remove the carcasses of cattle.

Another tradition makes them out to be the descendants of Nona or Lona Chamarin, who is a defined which much dreaded in the eastern part of the Province. Chamars are major untouchable community found in almost all the states of northern India. In the detailed lists we find the Chamars of the Province classified into sixteen main sub-castes. Aharwar (principally found in the Allahabad Division), Chamar (chiefly in Meerut); Chamkatiyas (mostly in Bareilly); Dhusiyas (in Meerut and Benares); Dohars (in Agra, Rohilkhand, Allahabad, Lucknow); Gole (in Etawah); Jaiswaras (strongest in Benares, Allahabad, Gorakhpur and Faizabad); Jatwas (in Meerut, Agra and Rohilkhand); Koris (in Faizabad, and Gorakhpur); Korchamars (in Lucknow); Kurils (in Lucknow and Allahabad); Nigoti (a small sub-caste chiefly in Mainpuri); Patthargotis (in Agra); Purabiyas (in Lucknow and Faizabad); Raedasis (tolerably evenly distributed throughout the province), and Sakarwars (in Agra and Allahabad).

Some of these sub-castes are of local origin, some are occupational, and some take their name from their eponymous founder. Thus the Aharwar are connected with the old town of Ahar, in the Bulandshahr District, or with the Ahar tribe; the Chamkatiyas take their name from their trade of cutting hides (*cham katna*). These sub-castes claim to have produced the saints Rae Das and Lona Chamarin. The Jatua or Jatiya have, it is said, and some unexplained connection with the tribes of Jats. The Jaiswaras trace their origin to the old town of Jais, in the sense that they are agriculturists and grow various crops (*jins*). The koli or kori, a term usually applied to the Hindu weaver, as contrasted with the Julaha or Muhammadan weaver, are connected by some with the kols; by others with the Sanskrit *Kaulika*, in the sense of "ancestral" or a "weaver." They say themselves that they take their name from their custom of wearing unbleached (*kora*) clothes.

In some places *Jatav* referred to as *Jatua*, it is felt that they were originally Jats, the dominant caste in western Uttar Pradesh and Haryana, *Jatava* as a

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caste distinct from the *Chamars*. In Swami Atma Ram's Gyan Samudra, it is mentioned that according to Lomash Ramayana, which is found in Nepal, the Jatavs trace their ancestry to a gotra of Lord Shiva. Besides, in Jatav jivan (1924) and Yaduvansh ka Itihas (1924) the Jatav are mentioned as a separate jati of the Kshatriya race.⁴

Chamar *Kuril* largely settled around Jabalpur of Madhya Pradesh for about three generations, the Kuril migrated from Kanpur in Uttar Pradesh. They are one of the many subgroups of the larger Chamar cluster and are also known as Pradesi Chamar.⁵ W. Briggs (1920) recounted a story about the origin of the Chamar and the Kuril. Once in a family, the youngest of four brothers was made to remove a carcass by the other three and after the task was completed, the youngest brother was not accepted on equal footing by the remaining three brothers despite their promise to do so. After that the youngest brother, engaged in occupations like skinning dead cattle, making leather wear, etc, is considered the progenitor of the Chamars. Once when he could not remove a dead buffalo, all by himself, Lord Shiva asked him to collect a pile of refuse (Kura) and urinate over it, when this was done, a strong man arose from the heap who could remove the carcass and came to be called Kuril, his descendants are the present day Kuril.

The Jhusiya, and also perhaps the Dhusiyas, have traditions connecting them with the old town of Jhusi, near Allahabad. There are again the Azamgarhiya of Azamgarh; the Jatlot of Rohilkhand, who like the Jatiya say they are kinsfolk of the Jats; To these Mr. Sherring adds: - In Benares the Rangua (*rang*, "colour") who are dyers; the katua or "cutters," (*katna*) of leather; and the Tantua, who manufacture strips of strings of leather known as tant. According to the same authority some of these sub-castes are differentiated by function. Thus, many of the Jaiswara are servants; the Dhusiya or Jhusiya, who trace their origin to Sayyidpur, in Ghazipur, are shoe-makers and harness makers; the kori, weavers, grooms, and field labourers; the kuril, workers in leather; and the Jatua or Jatiya, labourers.

The Dusadh of Uttar Pradesh claim descent from Dushasan. Another account refers to their descent from Bhimsen. They are distributed in the districts of Varanasi, Mirzapur, Ghazipur, Ballia, Gorakhpur and Azamgarh. The Dusadh in Uttar Pradesh are divided into seven subgroups, namely Bhasiya, Dharhi, Gondar (Gundar), Kanaujiya, Madhesiya, Magahiya and Rajar. Dusadh is used as a surname.⁶

Dhanuk a low tribe who work as watchmen, musicians at weddings, and their women as midwives.⁷ They are most numerous in the Agra division, but are found all over the Province except in the Benares, Gorakhpur, and Faizabad divisions, and in the hills. The Dhanuks were recorded in the following important sub-castes:- Dhakara, Dusadh, kaithiya, kathariya, kori, and Rawat. The complete lists show three hundred and twenty sections of the usual, mixed type, some the names of well known tribes, others of local derivation. A full list received

from Etawah names twenty sub-divisions - Laungbarsa, Hazari, kathariha, Lakariha, Bhuseli, Garuhaiya, Hathichighar, Garpetha, Atariha, Pichhauriha, Jashar, Jalaliya, kachhwaha, Jugeli, Ruriha, Kharahia, Tachele, Dunhan, Bagheli. Sir H.M. Elliot gives the seven sub-divisions as follows:- Laungbasta, Mathuriya, kathariya, Jaiswar, Magahi, Dojwar, Chhilatiya. In the east of the Province another list gives Jaiswar, Dhanuk, Magahi, Dojwar and Chhilatiya.

Dharkar a sub-caste of the Eastern Doms. They are also known as Bentbansi, because they work in cane (bent), which some corrupt into Benbansi or of the race of Raja Vena. Their sections in Mirzapur are quite distinct from those recorded by Mr. Risley in Bihar.

Valmiki - Some sections of a cluster of communities like the Bhanghi, Mehtar, Lalbegi and other castes who were associated with scavenging in the Past, who are now united as one community, claim a common descent from the legendary saint Balmiki. They are widely distributed in Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Punjab, Delhi, and Chandigarh. Their community council (panchayat) maintains social control. The Balmikis are Hindus and their sacred specialists are the Brahmans. On occasions, their own community members also conduct different ritual observances connected with birth marriage and death. Balmiki Jayanti is an important festival for them.

The Bhangis link themselves to the Brahmin and claim that they belonged to the Balmiki, the composer of the epic Ramayana. Bhangis claim that the Mughals wanted to convert the Bhangis into Muslims, but when they protested they were declared outcastes and forced to do dirty jobs like sweeping and cleaning, which they still continue to do. Later, with the rise of the Dalit movement in UP the intellectuals among them tried to establish Balmiki as a Shudra and as a result the Bhangis too were Shudras. The Ahirwar-is found chiefly in Bundelkhand, where in some districts, as in Jhansi and in Hamirpur, he comprises about ninety percent of the Chamar population. In some places, he does not make leather, nor does his wife practise midwifery. Many Aharwars are cultivators, and some are petty contractors.⁸

Some untouchable caste linked with genealogy with warier caste. The Gihar caste, an untouchable community links itself with Maharana Pratap Singh and Prithviraj Chauhan in caste history.⁹ Hiralal Gihar wrote his caste history called '*Bharatiya Adivasi Gihar Itihas*'. According to him in the Battle of Haldighati the soldiers belonging to the Sisodiya Kshatriya caste, were actually Gihars. The soliders who fought along with Prithviraj Chauhan against Muhammed Ghori in the battle of Tarain (1192) to were Gihars.

Pasi caste traces their origin to the sage bhrigu. Russell and Hiralal (1916) are of the opinion that the Pasi held a part of Oudh before it was conquered by the Rajputs. The Brahmanical legend about the origin of the community says that one day a man was going to kill a number of cows. Parasurama was at that time practicing austerities in the jungle; on

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hearing the cries of the sacred animals he rushed to their assistance, but the cow killer was aided by his friends. So Parasurama made five men out of Kusha grass and brought them to life by letting drops of his perspiration fall upon them. Hence arose the name Pasi, from Hindi pasina, sweat. Pasi is also derived from the Sanskrit word, pasika, meaning one who uses a noose.¹⁰

The Pasis have also been Sanskritizing their ritual order. Some panchayats have taken some initiative in this process. A few of them took to the teachings of Baba Jagjivan Das of the Satnami sect. In order to this, an organization named after their caste hero Udadevi, called the Virangana Udadevi Samarak Samiti was formed, which is active as a forum for reflecting the new identity of the Pasi caste. Lalbegi, their oral traditions recall that they were earlier Balmiki, but after taking initiation from Saint Kabir, have become Lalbegis. They claim that their original homeland was Rajasthan. The word Lalbegi is derived from Lalbeg, 'the eponymous ancestor of the tribe'. Their surnames are Begi and Balmiki. They are found in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh, Delhi, Meghalaya and Mizoram. They celebrate Balmiki Jayanti and Ramdeo Puja with gaiety. They also celebrate other festivals like Ramnavami, Mahavir Jayanti, Manasa Puja, Sitla puja Sivaratri and Holi.¹¹ A Dravidian tribe found in scanty numbers only in the hilly parts of Mirzapur south. The Mirzapur Agariyas confined themselves almost entirely to mining and smelting iron. The Mirzapur Agariyas say that some five or six generations ago they emigrated from Riwa, hearing that they could carry on their business in peace in British territory. Their first settlement was in the village of khairahi in Pargana Dudhi. Aheriya a tribe of hunters, fowlers, and thieves found in the Central Duab. Sir. The Aheriyas say that the son of the solar hero, whose name they have forgotten, was devoted to hunting, and for the purpose of sport took up his abode on the famous hill of Chitrakut, in the Banda District. Here he became known as Aheriya, or "sportsman," and was the ancestor of the present tribe. They emigrated to Ajudhya, and, after the destruction of that city, spread all over the country. They say that they came to Aligarh from Cawnpur some seven hundred years ago. They still keep up this tradition of their origin by periodical pilgrimages to Chitrakut and Ajudhya.¹²

Kanjar also known as Gehar Kanjar, they claim descent from the legendary hero, Mana. Some of them claim descent from Kush. Besides, they associate themselves with the Shishodiya dynasty to which Maharana Pratap belonged. They are believed to have immigrated from Rajasthan to various parts of the country to escape conversion to Islam. On their migration, they were rendered homeless, so they took refuge in the jungles and consequently resorted to hunting and looting.¹³

Bansphor a subcaste of Doms. Those in Mirzapur represent themselves to be immigrants from place called Bisurpur or Birsupur in the Native state of Panna, which, according to some, is identical with Birsinhpur, a place north-west of the town of Riwa. In

Gorakhpur they call themselves Gharbani, or "settled" Doms, in contradistinction to the Magahiya, or vagrant branch of the tribe. Their immigration from the west is said in Mirzapur to have commenced some four generations ago and still continues. They profess to undertake occasional pilgrimages to their old settlement to worship a local Mahadeva. In Gorakhpur they have a story that they are the descendants of one supach Bhagat, who was a votary of Ramchandra. He had two wives, Man devi and Pan Devi, the first of whom was the ancestress of the Bansphors. They freely, like other Doms, admit outsiders into the caste, and this is generally the result of an intrigue with one of their women.¹⁴

The Dabgars of Uttar Pradesh are makers of jars from the skin of animals. They trace their origin from a Rajput clan who used to shields of leather used in battlefields. Others believe that they are an offshoot of the Chamars as they work with leather. Kori or Koli they claim to have originated from a Brahman king. According to Crooke (1896), the name Kori has been derived from the Kol caste , and they are assumed to be an offshoot of the Kol . According to some, the word Kori is derived from the word Kora, meaning coarse cloth and refers to their occupation of weaving coarse cloth. They are distributed throughout Uttar Pradesh. Today, the Koris use the myth of Jhalkaribai for the glorification of their community. They also celebrate Jhalkaribai Jayanti each year to enhance their self- respect and elevate the status of their caste. It is a matter of great pride that she was a Dalit Virangana born in the Kori caste.

In late nineteenth century, ethnographers have written about the origin and development of the Doms but the ethnological affinities of the Dom have remained enigmatic. H.H.Elliot considers them to be 'one of the original tribes of India.' The Dom are spread over Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal, Orissa, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh. The Dom in Uttar Pradesh is also known as Dome, Domra, Domahra, Dumna and Dombo. The Doms are believed to be descendants of one Raja Ben or Vena, from whom one of the Dom subgroups, the Benbasi, has got its name. They are largely distributed in the districts of Varanasi, Jaunpur, Mirzapur, Azamgarh, Ghazipur, Ballia, Deoria, Gorakhpur, Allahabad, Pratapgarh, Faizabad and Basti. The Dom in Uttar Pradesh are divided into a number of hierarchically arranged subgroups, such as the Odiya, Mandini, Mirgan or Mirgain, Mohra, Onimia, Maghiya, Bansphor, Litta, Dharkar, Damra and Jallad Harchandi or Harchariya. The last of these subgroups relates to the Pauranic Raja, Harischandra. They categorize themselves in terms of their occupational affiliation, for instance the Dom who work on burning bhats are differentiated from those who work as sweepers, Bansphore and Jallad. In spite of several divergent historical and cultural memories, dalits emerged as class mainly due to new cultural identity. The emergence of new cultural and historical consciousness can be captured from Chamar as they represent numerically large untouchable community.

Conclusion

One of the features of the degraded social status of scheduled-caste people has been the role of myths which explained their lowly origin, and even rationalized it. But there has been a sea change in recent years in the perception by scheduled-caste people of themselves; a new sense of self-respect. Part of this was due to the sanskritization of those sections of these communities which abstained from drinking liquor, eating non-vegetarian food (especially beef and pork)- in fact vegetarianism of all kinds. This also involved giving up names which were considered derogatory and assuming names which were considered respectable, e.g. the Chuhras called themselves Balmiki, Lalbegi; the Chandals became Namasudras; the Julaha called themselves kabirpanthis; the Mala and Madiga named themselves Adi Andhra; the Pallan and Parayan claimed to be Adi Dravida, the Holeyas in Karnataka are now Adi Karnataka; the Chamar and Chuhra, after conversion to Sikhism, called themselves Ramdasia. A new strand in the self-perception of the scheduled castes are the Neo-Buddhists who stress their identity as members belonging to an order that stands outside the varna system.

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Foot Notes

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