‘People Have Caste in Their Mind’: Understanding Dalits’ Experiences in a Multi-Caste Neighbourhood in Urban North India[1]

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This article is based on fieldwork conducted in in a multi-caste urban neighbourhood in Meerut city, Uttar Pradesh, India. It focuses on the experiences of Jatavs (a Scheduled Caste, or ex-Untouchable caste). In India, Scheduled Caste communities used to be segregated in separate colonies and localities. However, following the creation of Housing Development Authorities in various districts in the post-Independence period, people could buy properties regardless of their caste identity. These housing schemes provided opportunities to individuals belonging to the Scheduled Castes to live in multi-caste neighbourhoods. Yet, Scheduled Caste communities often feel unwelcome in these colonies and many argue that they feel excluded on certain occasions, especially when it comes to participating in the collective life of the neighbourhood. People belonging to the Scheduled castes, then, are forced to adopt various strategies in order to survive in such colonies. While it may appear that disparate castes live harmoniously together in urban multi-caste colonies, micro-level data shows that Scheduled Caste communities continue to feel isolated and discriminated against.
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Much like in rural areas, where Dalits remain largely segregated on the outskirts of the village,[2] in urban locales, too, most Dalits continue to reside in separate colonies.[3] In Meerut, in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh, the old walled city was divided along caste and religious lines, with Dalits relegated to the periphery. Post-Independence, particularly in the last quarter of the 20th century, several colonies were developed by housing societies[4] that were dominated by the upper castes. Some land was divided and plots were sold. While individuals belonging to the Other Backward Classes (hereafter OBC)[5] could purchase plots in these colonies, Dalits were unable to do so. However, government housing schemes introduced in the post-Independence period gave middle class Dalits the opportunity to buy property and live in multi-caste neighbourhoods. Here, I look at a multi-caste colony in Meerut town created through the town’s Housing Development Authority in the 1970s to explore the experiences of Dalits in a multi-caste neighbourhood.

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[2] On residential segregation in rural areas, see Beteille (2002 [1965]: 25) and Anandhi et al. (2002: 4397).

[3] See Vithayathil et al. (2016-17: 47).

[4] Seven or more people make a group for housing and register it at the registrar’s office (Society Registration), under Societies Registration Act 1860. This kind of group is known as a society. https://www.mca.gov.in/Ministry/actsbills/pdf/Societies_Registration_Act_1860.pdf; accessed on 6 September 2020.

[5] OBC refers to ‘other backward classes’. This is a category used by the government of India and includes educationally and socially backward castes.

Caste Identity and Urban Neighbourhoods

While there exists an extensive tradition of studying different institutions like caste, family or kinship in urban spaces, little scholarly attention has been devoted to the social construction of urban neighbourhoods in India (Donner and De Neve 2007). And yet, as Donner and De Neve (2007) argue, the neighbourhood, in articulating the knowledge and experience of the wider world, remains a fertile terrain for the study of culture and plays a crucial role in translating the 'global' into the 'local'.

The neighbourhood has been conceptualised differently by different scholars. Vatuk asserts that a '*mohalla* is commonly referred to as a moral community, a group agreed as to right and wrong and having a body of custom and a character. But what the agreed values or the mores of the mohalla really are, is uncertain' (Vatuk 1972: 150). Donner argues that 'rules and regulations governing the mental map of the city or the neighbourhood are constantly negotiated, and transform a place into a space through gendered practices. Since the neighbourhood is not an administrative unit, it only exists in the form of narratives, which are transmitted orally between generations' (Donner 2007: 155). Abraham (2018a) maintains that neighbourhoods are constituted through practices like reciprocity, friendship and worship, and are characterised by a 'proximity of living' and through sensorial intimacy entailing sight, smell and sound. On the basis of a study of Bhuj in Gujarat, Simpson contends that 'While neighbourhoods exist as political, ideal and intellectual tools to both outside observers and those who live within them, neighbourhoods are also constructed by any number of invisible lines signifying trust, co-operation, affinity and their opposites' (2007: 228). Moreover, Graezer-Bideau (2018: 274) in her study of neighbourhoods in Beijing notes that neighbourhood landmarks are embodied in the collective memory of local communities. Neighbours, then, can be considered as social and economic supporters and guardians of prevalent norms and values, and therefore, the neighbourhood may be viewed as a site where neighbours exercise control over each other's behaviour and seek legitimacy (Abraham 2018b). Abraham argues that in urban neighbourhoods, neighbours play a crucial role in everyday life because they would be the first to help at the time of a crisis (Abraham 2018a). Pardo's seminal account demonstrates that neighbours in Naples prove to be good and beneficial resources that can be relied upon (1996: 69). Thus, the neighbourhood has been defined as a 'moral community', a 'ritual boundary', a 'form of narratives', and is said to be constituted through a 'proximity of living' and sensorial intimacy.

Indian cities have been segregated along ethnic, linguistic, cultural and socioeconomic lines. Referring to Calcutta (now Kolkata) as a 'premature metropolis', N.K. Bose noted in an article published in 1965 that the city remained far from being a 'melting pot' (1965: 102). Unlike cities in the United States, urban spaces in India did not usher in anonymity. Berreman studied the town of Dehradun in North India where he reported that urbanites remained, for the most part, adept at the identification of a variety of strangers as particular representatives of different social categories (1972: 581). Frøystad (2007) argues that her upper caste informants in Kanpur city try to categorise the anonymous people they encounter by using markers like skin colour, height, clothing, movement, speech and language; they categorise people as '*chote*

log' (small people, people of low castes and ex untouchables) or '*gande log*' (dirty people), '*acche log*' (good people) and '*bare log*' (big people), and try to keep their distance from '*chote log*'. Continuities remain in urban areas where upper castes try to trace the social background of anonymous people that they encounter and maintain their distance in public spaces from people belonging to the so-called lower castes.

D'Souza (1977) studied the problem of segregation of Scheduled Castes[6] (hereafter, SC) in the Amritsar district of Punjab. He argued that 'growing industrialization and urbanization lead to a deterioration in the residential status of the scheduled castes in towns' (1977: 238).[7] Nandu Ram, in his study of the Jatavs of Agra in the late 1970s revealed that the Jatavs were segregated in their low-lying neighbourhoods (2013: 39). Vatuk studied neighbourhoods in Meerut city in 1972 and found that there existed no residential segregation between upper castes and low castes (referring to backward castes), although Muslims and Harijans (Dalits) remained conspicuously absent in those neighbourhoods (1972: 154).[8] Vithayathil and Singh (2012) analysed data of the 2001 Census to study residential segregation in the seven largest cities in India and argued that caste was instrumental in shaping residential segregation not only in villages but also within urban enclaves. It has also been argued that besides residential segregation, caste-based discrimination plays a significant role in renting houses in urban India. Upper caste landlords and rental agents try to mask caste-discrimination by using caste-neutral language, like suggesting that they prefer 'good people', 'vegetarians' and 'people like us' as prospective tenants (Vithayathil et al. 2016-17). Thorat, Banerjee, Mishra and Rizvi (2015) studied discrimination in the rental housing market in five metropolitan cities in the National Capital Region (NCR)[9] and argued that in most cases well educated, well-placed and well-off Dalits and Muslims were denied houses on rent, with higher caste landlords often deploying terms like 'unclean', 'pollution', 'non-vegetarianism' as excuses for not renting their house. Often, Dalits and Muslims would be forced to accept unfair terms and conditions to find a suitable accommodation, and in cases where the caste identity of Dalit tenants were revealed after renting the house, the latter were subjected to harassment and were forced to vacate (Thorat et al. 2015). Ray (2008), writing about Ahmedabad, states that the original residents in *pols* (neighbourhoods) believed that the status of a *pol* was lowered when people of low castes and low-income groups entered the neighbourhood. Gorringe, in his study of Madurai (Tamil Nadu), also found that caste-based segregation still persists, and Dalits feel that they are

[6] Scheduled Castes refer to those castes who suffer untouchability and deprivation, and are enumerated in a list under the Constitution Order (Scheduled Castes), 1950. http://socialjustice.nic.in/writereaddata/UploadFile/CONSTITUTION%20(SC)%20ORDER%201950%20dated%2010081950.pdf; accessed on 18 September 2020.

[7] D'Souza refers to an increasing degree of segregation of SCs urban population concentrated in localities of lower socio-economic status, especially at the periphery.

[8] Dalits were absent in one of the two neighbourhoods in Meerut city that Vatuk described, while the only other Dalit family was living in the outer corner of the settlement (1972: 25).

[9] For this study, the authors selected five metropolitan cities namely Delhi, Faridabad, Ghaziabad, Gurgaon and NOIDA (New Okhla Industrial Development Authority) in National Capital Region.

'imprisoned within cheris'[10] (2007: 63). In Madurai, Dalit migrants prefer to live in areas where they have relatives and non-Dalit landlords remain reluctant to rent rooms to them and routinely ask for recommendation letters in order to screen residents (Gorringe 2007: 49). De Neve (2007) studied Vanniyars (a lower caste) of Bhavani town in the Erode district of Tamil Nadu, and found that they seized new market opportunities which had opened up as a result of liberalization, and created wealth by running dyeing factories. However, rich and poor Vanniyars spatially consolidated themselves as communities in neighbourhoods, and they considered their neighbourhood (*ur* or home) as a safe place. Similarly, in the 1970s, Channa found that dhobis were segregated in their neighbourhoods known as *katra* in the old city of Delhi, and these *katras* acted as 'places of security' for them (2013: 183). Deshpande argues that in Pune, Dalits were overrepresented in slums and *chawl/wadas* and their representation in flats and bungalows was only 7% and 1% respectively (Deshpande 2007).

Hull (2011) states that in 1956, the Ford Foundation was invited by the Government of India to assist in a development plan for Delhi. He argued that Ford-assisted programs were not in favour of residential communities based on kin, caste or religion and preferred place-based, interactional communities (Hull 2011: 757-58). However, the data presented indicate otherwise. There are now a growing number of urban neighbourhoods where people of all castes live in proximity. Government housing schemes have provided opportunities for Dalits to purchase houses or plots in some neighbourhoods, resulting in people of different castes living together here. There is, nonetheless, little scholarship on what it means to live in a multi-caste neighbourhood, particularly one with Dalits and upper castes. To this end, the present discussion focuses on a multi-caste and comparatively new neighbourhood in Meerut city.

An Introduction to Shanti Nagar

Shanti Nagar was developed in the 1970s by the state government's Housing Development Authority called Avas Vikash Meerut, in which people of any caste or religion could purchase a house or plot. It is situated on one side of the city and is approximately 3 km away from the old (walled) city, where neighbourhoods continue to remain organized on the basis of caste or ethnicity. Shanti Nagar is a well-planned, large neighbourhood, with one segment divided numerically into sectors and the other divided alphabetically into blocks. Each sector and block has several parks and open-spaces. Most of the roads are perpendicular to each other. The colony was designed with different housing standards: The High Income Group (HIG, size 200-300 square meter), Middle Income Group (MIG, size 127-167 square meter), Low Income Group (LIG, size 57-80 square meter), and houses for Economic Weaker Section (EWS, size 25 square meter) which are known as Janta Quarters. Besides houses, Avas Vikash sells plots, although their sizes are not determined. Avas Vikash also entails a reservation scheme for the plots and houses, with 21% for SC, 2% for Scheduled Tribes and 27% for Other Backward Classes. The Housing Development Authority (Avas Vikash) advertises in newspapers and online digital platforms and offers an opportunity for registration (with registration fee) to all buyers without discrimination. After registration, properties are allotted by a transparent system

[10] Cheris are settlements of ex-untouchables situated along the periphery of villages in south India.

of lottery so that every registered applicant may be granted an equal buying opportunity, which is why individuals belonging to the SC community can purchase plots or houses in Shanti Nagar.

Sector 2 of Shanti Nagar consists of LIG houses and Janta Quarters, and adjacent to these houses there exist a few large-sized plots (approximately 50 plots, of approximately 370 square meter size). Janta Quarters are constructed around a medium-sized (approximately 400 square yard) open area, which is covered by cement-tiles. During winters, it is common to see people lounging on their cots and chairs in front of their houses, soaking in the sun. People wander in this open area; women can be seen chatting with each other and children play here. This open space is used in the way courtyards inside old houses (an *aangan*) were used; it provides more opportunities for face-to-face interaction to the neighbours. Although a few Jatavs[11] reside in HIG and MIG houses, a significant number are concentrated in LIG houses and Janta Quarters, therefore I selected sector 2 of Shanti Nagar for my fieldwork.

In order to understand the experiences of those belonging to the SC community in urban neighbourhoods, I decided to focus on the Jatavs. The traditional caste-based occupation of the Jatavs is leatherwork: removing the skin of dead animals, tanning animal hides and manufacturing leather goods and articles. Leatherwork is typically considered polluting and the Jatavs were by association considered unclean and untouchables. However, Rawat (2012) has argued that the Chamars[12] constituted an important and skilled cultivating caste in rural north India. Not only were they central to land and agriculture, they were also involved in several other occupations, with leatherwork being just one of them (Rawat 2012: 84). Echoing D. Shyam Babu's observation that the congruence between caste and occupation has diminished substantially (2016: 242-43), in Shanti Nagar only a few of the Jatavs are involved in manufacturing shoes, while the rest are employed in public sector or caste-neutral professions like shop-keeping, tailoring, electrical maintenance, and so on. During my fieldwork, I was often told "*Anya jati ke log abhi bhi jaati ko maan main rakhte hain*" (People of other caste still have caste in their mind) or "*logon ke maan main jaati hae*" (People have caste in their mind). What happens when Dalits who used to live in separate neighbourhoods begin to live in proximity with upper caste individuals? Moreover, how does a multi-caste neighbourhood shape their lived experiences? How do they live in a multi-caste neighbourhood?

In Meerut, as elsewhere, people tend to choose their place of residence according to their economic status and purchasing power. In Dalit neighbourhoods, if someone secures a government job, he would attempt to reduce his interaction with his neighbours and would eventually try to move to a better neighbourhood. When I was conducting fieldwork in Bali Nagar (a predominantly Dalit neighbourhood), some well-wishers advised me to finish my work by 7 pm in order to avoid the drunken vagrants roaming the streets. A few people left Bali Nagar just to shield their children from such encounters with wayward intoxicated men wandering the locality, and many others were planning on moving to other neighbourhoods. Hira Lal, a resident of Bali Nagar and a teacher at Inter College, plays with his two children on

[11] Jatavs are ex-untouchables, and one of SCs in Uttar Pradesh, also addressed as Dalits.
[12] Chamar is a caste and Jatav is a sub-caste of Chamar.

the roof of his house but does not allow them to wander the streets. Manveer Singh is a tailor who lives in Sharda Nagar (a Dalit neighbourhood). His son, a bank officer, has rented a house in another colony and lives separately. After securing employment, Jatavs like to avail civic facilities and aim to change their lifestyle; they usually move to better neighbourhoods, which are typically multi-caste. Jatavs tend to select a neighbourhood according to their class, as residence is considered a formidable marker of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1996 [1979]: 105).

Experiencing the Neighbourhood

Several Jatavs confided in me that the existence of casteism, although not explicit, can often be gleaned from their interactions with other people. Discussions with the Jatavs about their experience of buying property in Shanti Nagar indicated the presence of a strong resistance to Dalits moving into the neighbourhood. Jagdeep, who is in his 50s and works in the property sector, says that although he feels he has good relations with his neighbours (including all castes) he believes that they harbour rigid caste prejudices. According to him, when Jatavs start living at a new place, upper castes try to scare them off; if they manage not to get scared then people eventually change their behaviour. Jagdeep went on to recount an incident involving an upper caste Punjabi client who wished to sell his house in Shanti Nagar. A group of neighbours, upon realising that the prospective buyer happened to belong to the Dalit community, coerced the property dealer against going ahead with the transaction. This culminated in a dilemma over how to say no to the Dalit customer, for if the seller would have revealed that his apprehensions originated due to the buyer's caste, he could have been held criminally liable under the SC/ST Act. Finally, Jagdeep managed to salvage the situation by telling the buyer that his client was unable to furnish the original papers of the property in question and succeeded in dissuading him from wanting to buy the house. The fact that it was a deal worth Rs. 1.5 Crore reflected that, for the upper caste, maintenance of boundary of 'group of upper caste neighbours' stood ahead of financial or monetary gain, and it seems that the Dalits economic achievements are not enough to remove the stigma attached with them.

That Jatavs routinely face instances of caste-based discrimination in Shanti Nagar can be illustrated through the dispute surrounding a park in Sector 2 of the neighbourhood. Kaushal Dev, a resident of Shanti Nagar, informed me that his nephew, an ex-MLA with the BSP[13] once met him along with a senior leader of the party who promised to contribute Rs.1 lakh for the maintenance of the park. This news swiftly spread among the upper castes, and it led to the rumour that the Jatavs planned on erecting a statue of Dr Ambedkar[14] in the arena. The next day, upper caste residents invited an ex-MLA of an opposition party and got a stone installed

[13]BSP refers to the Bahujan Samaj Party.

[14] During BSP's regime, a number of statues of Ambedkar were erected. Nicolas Jaoul (2006) argues that the rapid proliferation of Ambedkar statues since the 1990s reflects the Dalits' increasing consciousness of their constitutional rights. Erecting a statue of Ambedkar created some hope for dignity, pride and positive changes in their lives through the enforcement of laws. He also argues that there was a common slogan among Dalits 'the government land is our land'. This discourse about statues and land created tension in rural areas between poor peasants and dominant castes/classes (Jaoul 2006).

on the wall of the park, thereby giving it a name. This was done to ensure that no statue be put in the park, and served to intensify tensions between the Jatavs and the upper castes who resided around the park. Further conversations with people in the neighbourhood revealed that the park was partitioned between the upper castes and the SCs, with the northern half reserved for the former and the southern half reserved for the latter. In an attempt to establish more noticeably this division, upper caste residents put soil on the northern portion so as to raise the ground level. Additionally, two different gardeners were employed for these two sections of the park.

A Nai Thakur (a backward caste) with the assistance of the Jatavs organized a Sunder Kand Path[15] in that park. Subsequently, the Bhajan Mandali[16] put statues of Gods in the northern portion of the park, but upper caste people objected and insisted on having those statues removed. Earlier, people who resided around that park used to burn Holi[17] at two different places: Dalits did so at the crossroads adjoining to the southwest corner of the park, the upper castes in the northern section of the park. However, in 2016 few well-intentioned individuals from both sides came together and proposed that the two communities celebrate the festival collectively. Thereupon, a common Holi was placed at the centre, with the heap of the pieces of wood (Holi) occupying equal spaces along both sections of the park.

Interestingly, there is a street light on a pole at the western edge of sector 2 in Shanti Nagar. This pole is situated at the mid of a row of houses, there are some houses of Dalits on one side of the pole and some houses of upper caste on other side. Often, Dalit families complain that the street light in the middle is tilted by the upper castes towards their side.

Vinay Kumar, a resident of Shanti Nagar, is a teacher at Inter College in his 40s. Kumar recalled an incident involving a particularly raucous cocktail party with a hired disc jockey (DJ) hosted by a Kayasth family on their roof. The blaring music, unsurprisingly, perturbed the neighbours and caused Kumar to remark to another neighbour who also belonged to the Kayasth community, 'What type of party has your neighbour arranged on his roof? It caused problems to all'. The man promptly replied, 'Yes, it was just like a Chamar's party!' (*Usne party bilkul Chamaron ki tarah ki*). Upon saying this to Kumar, who happened to belong to the Chamar caste himself, immediately clarified that his use of the caste-based slur was unintentional.

Dev Kumar, a resident in his 40s who works in a private company, shared a similar incident where he overheard someone inquire about his caste from his neighbour. The neighbour answered that he was a Jatav, with an expression of disgust on his face — illustrating the repugnance with which people continue to look down upon the community.

In urban neighbourhoods, the economic condition of Dalits may have changed but the stigma and prejudice against them persist. While most Dalits try to maintain good relations with other residents, they continue to be adversely affected by instances of casteism and prejudice at the hands of their upper caste neighbours. This ultimately serves to restrict their participation

[15] Sunder Kand is a chapter in Ramayana, which people of Hindu religion read in a ceremonial way known as Path (reading).

[16] This is a group of professionals who sing devotional songs (Bhakti Sangeet) and read Sunder Kand.

[17] These are heaps of pieces of wood, which are burnt ceremonially before playing with colours on the festival of Holi in or around March.

in the everyday collective life of the neighbourhood. Jeffrey, Jeffrey and Jeffrey (2004) studied Chamars and Muslims of rural Bijnor in Uttar Pradesh and argued that Chamars believe that education provides inner confidence and courage and helps them to get rid of former feelings of inferiority. Meanwhile, Ciotti, in studying the Chamars of Banaras, Uttar Pradesh, posits that education only partially works towards acquiring social respectability (Ciotti 2006: 913). Vithayathil, Singh and Pradhan (2016-17) argue that it is not easy to displace instances of caste-based prejudice and discrimination through advances in education, health and income. Additionally, Prasad contends that non-Dalits, irrespective of their education, profession and position in the varna/caste hierarchy, react towards Dalits in an identical manner, the reason behind which remains a shared hatred for the latter (2006:180-181). All this to suggest that education only cannot guarantee social respectability or an outright erasure of deep-rooted stigma for Dalits.

Caste Prejudices and the Idiom of Cleanliness

During interactions between Dalits and upper-caste neighbours, issues of cleanliness, discrimination in the distribution of Sindara[18] and other eatables on different occasions,[19] extending invitations and consuming eatables in the homes of Dalits emerged as important issues.

The notion of cleanliness remains crucial in a multi-caste neighbourhood. Ramesh Kumar and Jatin Kumar are two neighbours belonging to the Jatav caste, who reside in sector 2 of Shanti Nagar. The former runs a shoe shop in a market nearby and also makes and repairs shoes, the latter is employed in the public sector. Jatin observes that people of the neighbourhood refrain from inviting Ramesh to their homes because of the 'polluting' nature of his work. They instead invite him to ceremonies hosted in banquet halls.

The urban village of Sharda Nagar is situated right opposite Shanti Nagar and is predominantly inhabited by the Jatav community. The relation between the Jatavs of Sharda Nagar and the upper caste residents of Shanti Nagar remains strained; however, Kavita, a woman in her 40s who lives in Sharda Nagar, sometimes talks with a Jat (a backward caste) opposite her house. She recalls that the Jat woman once said to her *'Tumhare bacche gande rehte hain, tum log bhi gande rehte ho. Islye hum tumse duri rakhte hain. Tum apne bacchon ki dekhbhal sahi dhang se nahi kerte ho. Tumhari mahilain acche rangon ka chunaav nahi kerti, wo chamkile rang pehanti hain'* (Your children keep themselves dirty, you also keep yourselves dirty, that is why we keep our distance from you. You do not look after your children well. Your women do not select good colours; they wear bright colours). Clearly, this woman attempted to couch her disdain for a particular caste in terms of 'cleanliness' and 'colours'.

Another incident highlights the ways in which people resist everyday instances of prejudice. Ram Kumar, a bank clerk, related a story about how an upper caste woman who lived

[18] Sindara is a big packet of eatables which is sent by the bride's family to her in-laws in the month of Sawan (a month in Hindu calendar).

[19] On Diwali, people distribute eatables (mostly sweet items) among their neighbours after visiting a shrine or after conducting a religious ceremony like Hawan, Path, Jagran, and so on.

in the neighbourhood had dropped in to see his wife at their home. On her insistence, his wife had taken her to their kitchen, where the neighbour expressed her surprise at how 'clean' and 'tidy' it was. On the other hand, Ram Kumar's wife was clearly upset when she visited her neighbour's house next and she did not hesitate to comment that the kitchen was very dirty.

Another incident touching upon the notion of 'cleanliness' was shared with me by Rahul Kumar, who lives in Janta Quarters. He mentioned how he always noticed his neighbour, Rajeev Sharma (a Brahmin), carry a glass in his pocket in order to drink water at other people's homes. On the occasion of his son's wedding ceremony, owing to the shortage of space in Janta Quarters, Sharma asked Kumar to store the cooked food in his house;[20] Kumar happily allowed him to do so. Kumar amusingly pointed out that a man who would otherwise refrain from using the utensils of the so-called lower caste ended up temporarily retiring his ideas about 'cleanliness' during his time of need. Upon closer examination the practice of purity and pollution remains, then, more flexible than what might initially appear.

The trope of cleanliness emerged as a recurring theme. Several Jatav men blamed Jatav women for not keeping themselves and their children clean, due to which they claimed they encountered difficulties in adjusting in multi-caste neighbourhoods. Yashveer Singh, a retired clerk, spoke to me one afternoon in his house about the ineptitude of Jatav women in looking after their children, as he often encounters the latter with their noses running and wearing soiled clothes. Another retired resident, K.P. Singh, told me about his upper caste neighbours whose houses remained particularly dirty, so much so that it was difficult for him to stay there for more than a few minutes. He voiced his doubts about their upper caste identity and asserted that given his own neat and clean lifestyle, it is he who belongs to the upper caste!

Exclusion from the Collective Life of the Neighbourhood

Several people told me that they wanted to get involved with the collective life of the neighbourhood, but they felt that on some occasions they were consciously excluded. Darshan Lal told me about an upper caste neighbour who invited most of the children to the birthday celebrations of his son but excluded the children of SCs even though they all played together in the park. Similarly, Vishnu Chand, a resident of the Janta Quarter who retired from Uttar Pradesh Roadways, noticed that during the Navratri,[21] when young girls (kanya) are invited to people's homes and given food, only girls belonging to Khateek (a Scheduled Caste in Uttar Pradesh) and other lower caste communities would come to his home. Girls belonging to the lower castes would not go to the houses of upper caste residents either. One day, as we talked in their home, Vishnu Chand's wife Meena said that when a Mahila Sangeet[22] is organised in someone's house, neighbours go to each other's homes irrespective of caste. Another resident,

[20] Traditionally, during wedding ceremonies, the place where cooked food is stored is known as 'Paras' and is treated as a sacred space. A senior family member or relative looks after this place, no other person is allowed to enter this area.

[21] Navratri is a period of nine days during which Hindus worship Devi (Goddess).

[22] On different occasions, women in the neighbourhood assemble in the house of a woman and sing songs known as 'Mahila Sangeet'.

Dev Kumar, told me that his wife regarded it an affront when she was not invited to a Mahila Sangeet hosted by upper caste women in their neighbourhood despite it being the norm to extend invitation to all neighbours irrespective of their caste. The woman who organised a Mahila Sangeet at her home distributed some snacks or eatables and Vishnu Chand's wife, Meena, revealed that she had noticed that upper caste women did not consume food in the homes of SC residents; instead they kept the eatables in their hands. They would insist on eating the food in their own homes, but Jatav women talked amongst themselves about how the food would really be given to the cows to eat. Interestingly, whenever Meena would serve beverages (especially purchased from the market, like cold drink) in disposable glasses, she would notice that the upper caste women would drink it without hesitation. Therefore, to underscore their resentment, SC women would also not eat anything in the home of an upper caste person. It can be argued that this is their way of resisting the casteism inflicted on them.

In Meerut and western Uttar Pradesh, there is a custom among Hindus of sending a big packet of eatables called Sindara to the home of their married daughter in the month of Sawan (in the Hindu calendar). These eatables are generally distributed among neighbours. While Meena is given Sindara eatables by her neighbours and she also sends food gifts to them, she admits she does not know whether upper caste women consume the eatables sent from her house. Dev Kumar told me he has observed that when upper caste neighbours distribute prasad[23] after returning from a pilgrimage, they skip the houses of the SC residents. This, he said, is true also when it comes to the distribution of eatables during different festivals.

In her study of Meerut in the early 1970s, Sylvia Vatuk (1972: 155) described how even backward caste people did not participate in any social gatherings held in the homes of upper caste people except as ritual servants; upper caste neighbours also did not participate in social gatherings held in the homes of backward caste people. During my fieldwork, I observed that the situation has changed not only for backward castes but also for Dalits. For instance, women routinely go to each other's homes to participate in social gatherings irrespective of caste. However, as described in the foregoing sections, tensions and cleavages between the two communities continue to linger.

Strategies Employed in a Multi-caste Neighbourhood

There are several occasions when Dalits feel they are excluded from participating in the collective and social life of multi-caste neighbourhoods. They strive to live peacefully in such neighbourhoods and to that end adopt various tactics and strategies.

Dalits maintain formal relations with their upper caste neighbours, lest they come to know about their 'disabilities'. For example, Jatin Kumar thinks that he has good relations with his neighbours including those belonging to the upper castes. They visit each other's homes, but he tells me that he tries not to visit their homes too frequently, for doing so may reveal his 'disabilities' and affect his relationship with his upper caste neighbours.

[23] These are sweets or fruits which are offered to deities during worship/devotional singing or reading, and after they are offered to deities these eatables are considered as Prasad. When people visit a shrine, they purchase some eatables from there, which are also known as Prasad.

Cleanliness, as previously mentioned, remains a crucial issue in multi-caste neighbourhoods. Besides keeping themselves clean, Jatavs are also conscious about *displaying* cleanliness; it is not uncommon for a resident belonging to the lower caste to instruct his wife to hang a wet sari in front of their house to dry, regardless of whether she takes a bath in the morning. This is meant to convey an image and appearance of cleanliness to the neighbours.

Dalits criticize their upper caste neighbours when they talk about caste-related issues. Jatin Kumar thinks that his are caste-conscious but whenever any discussion on caste-related issue arises, he immediately tries to suppress it. Another respondent, Dev Karan who works as an advocate, told me about how Rs. 11 Lakh was spent to maintain the park behind his house, which therefore remained in good condition. One day, he overheard a neighbour remark that mostly Chamars were using the park, to which he immediately told the person '*Mere paas ek talwar hae, main wo talwar tumko de dunga, usse tum in sab chamaron ka gala kaat dena*' (I have a sword and I will give it to you, and you cut off the necks of these Chamars). Karan told me that the man appeared mortified and embarrassed thereafter.

Sometimes Dalits use abusive language as an act of resistance, as to prove that they do not acquiesce to caste hierarchies and could be driven to retaliate with violence. Naresh Kumar said he did not feel a sense of subordination in the multi-caste neighbourhood. He illustrated this feeling by relating the following incident. The children of an upper caste neighbour who lived in front of his house once taunted his children by saying, '*Chamar ke bacche Chamar he rahenge'* (Children of Chamar will remain Chamar). When Kumar heard about this, he stood in front of the neighbour's house and hurled abuses at him till late at night. The neighbour did not come out. Kumar seemed pleased that he had managed to scare his neighbour. Similarly, Om Prakesh, a tailor and also a part-time property dealer, living in sector 3 of Shanti Nagar (Janta Quarter) shared his strategy to resist the persistence of caste. During a discussion with his neighbours about consuming alcohol, he, in order to scare them, would tell them that one night he drank half a bottle of liquor ('*Jab bhi kabhi padosiyon se sharab pine ki baat chalti hae to keh deta hun ki raat to maine aadhi bottle sharab pi li thi*'). Om Prakesh believes that his capacity to consume copious amounts of liquor gives the impression that he is not gentle and may prove to be dangerous. In the low income Janta Quarters, it is, then, not uncommon to see such an expression of virulent masculinity as a way to resist caste. This has been documented elsewhere in the country. For example, Anandhi, Jeyaranjan and Krishnan (2002: 4405) argue that the violence and masculinity of Dalit youth could be viewed as a strategy to deal with the painful legacy of caste, insufficient material resources and continuing social marginality.

Prestige and status are played out in the neighbourhood in multiple ways. For example, the presence of SC government officers in the neighbourhood and inviting higher level administrative officers at home also strengthens the position of SC residents. Bablu Singh, who resides in the Janta Quarters and has a business supplying shoes, had a good relationship with an officer in the Indian Police Service (IPS), who was posted as the Deputy Inspector General (DIG) of Police in Meerut. The DIG would visit him frequently and have dinner at his home. The officer's car, with flashing blue lights, would be parked right in front of Singh's house and a convoy of cars would be parked on the road nearby. These visits served to strengthen the

position of Singh in the neighbourhood. Jatin Kumar also shared that many Jatav officers resided around the park, and made it a point to tell me that there were no such upper caste officers in the neighbourhood. The presence of Jatav officers enhanced the morale of Jatavs in the neighbourhood and instilled in them a sense of pride. Mahindra Kumar does independent work of water management for different companies and lives in Janta Quarters. Many Brahmins live around his house, and Kumar maintains cordial relations with them. Kumar recalled that when he celebrated the *naamkaran sanskaar*[24] of his son, he threw a feast for all the neighbours. Standing in a common open space in front of his house, he extended the invitation for the ceremony to his Brahmin neighbours and said 'you are invited but tell me in advance whether you would come, so that I may get enough food cooked'. They replied that they would come. Kumar argues that since they were standing in an open area, Brahmins knew that they were being observed so they could not reject the invitation. The tactful communication by Kumar about his son's *naamkaran sanskar* to the Brahmin men, especially in the presence of other local residents, is reminiscent of, one could argue, Foucault's declaration that 'visibility is a trap' (Foucault 1995 [1977]: 200).

Manmohan Singh purchased a house from an upper caste person in sector 2 of Shanti Nagar. The former owner of that house had taken out a big loan, and soon after Singh moved in, he started facing harassment from loan-recovery goons. Singh felt that he faced such harassment owing to his caste identity, and invited members of his kin, including his brothers, to live in the neighbourhood for support. A clerk in a department of the central government, Balveer Singh who is in his 40s, told me that he believed caste existed in his neighbourhood. However, he asserted that his wife manages to neutralize the caste-feelings of upper caste residents by her 'good behaviour'. Singh also believed that people constrain themselves within the limits of their caste, and that communicating with upper caste people without inhibitions may result in harbouring good relations with them. He also pointed out, however, that upper caste individuals have not changed the lens through which they view Dalits.

In order to push back against caste-based sentiments in multi-caste neighbourhoods, Jatavs employ different strategies, like immediately suppressing discussions on caste-related issues, criticizing caste-based mentality, using abusive language, violence, talking tactfully, placing an emphasis on cleanliness, taking advantage of their social capital, maintaining a network of close kin members for support and neutralizing instances of casteism by their 'good behaviour'. Khare notes that the Chamars of Lucknow often use social tactics to get their work done in city environs (1984: 115). Jatavs, despite being educated and holding jobs in the public sector (which are desired and considered respectable), feel that they are excluded from the collective life of their neighbourhood. Naudet argues that the upward social mobility of Dalits does not sever their social identity from their caste; rather, caste remains central to their lived experiences and serves as an obstacle to being fully recognised as a member by the desired group (2008: 437).

[24] Naamkaran Sanskaar is a ceremony conducted to give a name to a new born baby.

Conclusion

Neighbourhoods developed by housing development authorities provide opportunities for Dalits to live with upper caste individuals in the same neighbourhood. Still, in these neighbourhoods, Dalits face difficulties in buying resale houses. In multi-caste neighbourhoods, Jatavs feel that they are excluded from the collective life of the neighbourhood. They also routinely experience instances of casteism which are often encoded in the idiom of 'cleanliness'. Although disparate caste-groups live together in multi-caste urban neighbourhoods, micro-level data reflects that Scheduled Caste (SC) communities continue to feel unwelcome and isolated. Nevertheless, Jatavs continue to resist discrimination and prejudice and try to be involved in the social life of their neighbourhood by adopting different kinds of strategies. That Jatavs in Shanti Nagar are no longer tethered to occupations which make them dependent on other castes has enabled this resistance and a visible break from expressions of subservience or servitude. Moreover, many Jatavs in the neighbourhood where I did fieldwork have government jobs or are employed in senior positions of the public bureaucracy. This has assisted in instilling a sense of pride among other members of the community and, in turn, has enabled them to resist instances of casteism.

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