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**In the Footsteps of Ambedkar  
Mobility, Identity and Dalit Initiatives for Change**

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**Indian Institute of Dalit Studies**

*Devoted to Studies on Social Exclusion, Marginalized Groups and Inclusive Policies*

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**In the Footsteps of Ambedkar:  
*Mobility, Identity and Dalit Initiatives for Change***

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**Tanvi Sirari\*\***

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

In the year 1991 India celebrated the birth centenary of B. R. Ambedkar, Chairman of India's Constituent Assembly, which drafted the Constitution for the 'new nation'. He also became the first law minister of independent India. Since the centenary year, Ambedkar's birthday has become a day of national importance, celebrated across the country and abroad by those who identify with him, particularly members of the ex-untouchable communities. While some other important leaders of India's nationalist movement—Nehru, Patel or even Gandhi—appear to be losing their political appeal, Ambedkar has continued to grow in stature and significance. Apart from his contribution to the making of the Indian Constitution, he is seen as a scholar, a political visionary, and above all a leader of the ex-untouchable communities of India.

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Though he was born in a Hindu Mahar family of Maharashtra, and converted to Buddhism in 1956, an increasing number of ex-untouchable caste communities across the regions and religions of India recognize him as a member of their own 'ethnic' or kin-group. Ambedkar's life, his persona and his political ideology have become a source of inspiration for a large number of mobile Dalits. They see in him and his writings, a reflection and articulation of their own experiences and aspirations.

The rise of Ambedkar as a contemporary icon also marked the emergence and consolidation of a new identity among the ex-untouchable communities of India. Notwithstanding its contestations by individuals and groups, the category Dalit has come to be accepted as a useful way of political self-identification among diverse ex-untouchable groups during the 1990s. The word "Dalit" has its origin in the political movements of the ex-untouchable castes in the western state of Maharashtra. It refers to "those who have been broken down by those above them in a deliberate and active way. There is in the word itself an inherent denial of pollution, karma and justified caste hierarchy" (Zelliot, 2005: 267). Over the years it has also come to symbolize the struggles of ex-untouchable communities for transformation of what they see as an oppressive social order and for a life of dignity. The growing acceptance of 'Dalit' as a category of self-identification, across regions and communities, also indicates "a move from ascribed affinity to political identity" (Gorringe, 2005: 100).

This arrival of Dalits at the national level was made possible by the process of social and economic mobility unleashed by the introduction of a modern secular educational system and a secular economic order by the British colonial rulers. The establishment of a democratic state system during the post-independence period accelerated this process. The system of quotas, or reservations, for the Scheduled Castes produced a new urban 'elite', or a 'middle class' from within the community. This emergent segment within the ex-untouchables found it hard to forget the past deprivations and difficulties of their communities. Despite being in secular occupations, the upwardly mobile Dalits experienced resistance to their 'assimilation' in the mainstream 'middle-class'. Their own experiences of 'isolation' and discrimination took them back to their communities and the realization that it is only through collective mobilizations, along with other members of their communities, that they could aspire to achieve a life of dignity.

It is this trajectory of mobility and mobilization that this study tries to explore and understand. Our questionnaire and interview guide were framed around questions of articulation and imagination of Dalit identity by Dalit middle class urban activists working in and around the city of Delhi; their personal experiences of caste and discrimination; of the growing class distance between them and the communities of their origin; the processes of negotiation with their modern settings of work and the burden of caste; the nature and forms of their activism; their visions of alternative society and challenges they confront at different levels in their work as Dalit activists.<sup>1</sup> We also asked them about their understanding of the working of the caste system and what kept it alive: How do they reconcile their 'communitarian' activism around the notion of 'Dalit' identity with the modern ideas of civil society and development which are premised on the notion of universalism? How do they engage with struggles by other marginalized groups and what are their perspectives on the questions of identity and representation. The third set of questions relate to their visions of change and their perceptions of the issues confronting the Dalit movement.

## **2. THE BROADER CONTEXT**

As per the Census of 2001, the total Scheduled Caste population in India was 166,635,700 making for 16.2 per cent of the total population of the country. The proportion of Scheduled Caste population in Delhi is quite close to the national average (16.92 per cent in 2001). Given the nature of the state, and quite like the rest of its population, a large majority of SCs of Delhi are urban residents. Only around eight per cent of them live in rural areas of Delhi. Dalit population is also internally diverse, made-up of a large number of communities with their individual caste identity. Every Indian state has its own list of Scheduled Caste communities. A total of 1,231 communities are currently listed as SCs in the entire country (Thorat, 2009).

Though like other aspects of the Indian social life, the nature of caste-based inequalities has experienced many changes over the years, but it was only during the British colonial rule that the "untouchable" communities began to attract attention of the state for welfare and change. The Simon Commission of 1935 clubbed all the untouchable castes, which were listed in the 1931 Census of India, into an administrative category, initially as "depressed classes", and later in the Government of India Act 1935 as "Scheduled Caste". The Government thereafter published a list of Scheduled Castes under the

Government of India (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1936. After independence, the Indian state continued to use the category of SC for administrative purpose. Over the years the Government of India has not only expanded the list of communities, but has also broadened the scope of state action by evolving policies and programmes for the welfare and empowerment of the SCs.

Apart from the state policies for development, the ex-untouchable communities have also been undertaking their own initiatives for change. These include protest movements of different kinds; community level initiatives by Dalits organizations, such as setting-up schools and colleges; and individual and community level initiatives for Dalit empowerment through identity-based mobilizations (Gellner, 2009:1).<sup>2</sup>

### **3. DALIT INITIATIVES, ACTIVISM AND NETWORKS**

Referring to the recent works of Escobar and Melucci, Hardtmann points to the changing focus of the students of social movements over the last decade or so. Social movement studies, she rightly argues, tend to increasingly focus on “how networks may be embedded in everyday life. This was in contrast to the earlier movement theories mainly occupied with the visible aspects of the movements that were easily recognized, such as public meetings, demonstrations, etc.” (Hardtmann, 2009: 28).

It is in this framework that this study tries to approach the contemporary Dalit activism in the city of Delhi, where the visible or conventional signs of protest or demonstrations are not frequently present, but individual activists consistent pursue or struggle against caste-based discrimination, as a part of their everyday life and through networks of individuals, institutions and organizations. They work with a clear political goal of bringing about social and cultural change.

Historically speaking, we could perhaps identify three different streams through which the present day Dalit activism has evolved, outside and independent of Dalit party politics. Following Jaoul (2007), we could identify the first stream of Dalit activism emanating from the Dalit Panthers movements of Maharashtra during the early 1970s. Influenced by the Black Panthers of the US and “wishing to give a political expression to their anger against caste and class injustices”, the educated Dalit youth formed the organization in Bombay in 1972 (Jaoul,

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2007: 199). They criticised the existing political leadership that represented the Scheduled Castes in the mainstream or Dalit political parties. The Panthers gave them a new hope of pursuing a Dalit political agenda outside the political party framework. Though organizationally the Panthers movement had declined or disappeared by early 1990s, individual Dalits continue to network with each other in pursuit of an the Ambedkarite political mission. Over the years some of them have also formed their own organizations, working outside the party political system.

The second stream of Dalit activism was shaped by Kanshi Ram during the 1980s with his initial mobilization of the Scheduled Caste employees in government jobs through Backward and Minority Castes Employees Federation (BAMCEF). The system of job reservation in government departments meant a growing number of urban employees with an explicit Scheduled Caste identity in their offices. While they moved out of the traditional caste based economy and rural social order, they continued to experience prejudice from their fellow employees, which often manifested itself in subtle, and not so subtle, experiences of discrimination. BAMCEF was formed in response to these newer forms of caste-experiences of the SC government employees.

Given the legal bar on government employees against joining active politics, BAMCEF projected itself as non-political association of a section of employees. However, it did not confine itself to raising issues relating to the workplace but started mobilising Dalit employees around ideological lines, and embarked upon building an Ambedkarite consciousness among these mobile Dalits. Kanshi Ram also set-up several socio-cultural organizations. He attacked the 'untouchable' leadership in mainstream political parties and called them *chamchas* (dependent sycophants, literally spoons) of the upper caste leaders. He called-upon the upwardly mobile Dalit officers who had benefited from reservation to 'pay back to their community'. He also propagated Ambedkar's idea that "political power was the key to all social progress". Thus, unlike the Panthers, Kanshi Ram was clearly moving towards building an autonomous Dalit political platform (Jaoul, 2007: 195). This eventually resulted in the formation of a political party in 1984, the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP).

The third stream of contemporary Dalit activism originated during the 1990s and acquired prominence at the turn of the Century, after the United Nations

World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance in Durban, South Africa (known in India as the Durban Conference) in 2001. While autonomous Dalit movements using the language of rights had begun to emerge in India during the 1990s in response to growing incidence of organized violence against Dalits<sup>3</sup>, the Durban conference provided a platform for building Dalit rights networks across India and the world. Around the same time, recognition of caste discrimination as an important issue of concern within the Christian Church provided an important source of transnational support to Dalit networks and Dalit NGOs (see Mosse, 2009). (During the DSE presentation you spoke of how dalit identity got a new meaning through these initiatives in terms of fixing dalit with un-untouchable communities and so on. You could put some of it here)

Over the last twenty years, since the 1990s, a large number of local level networks and organizations have emerged, set-up mostly by Dalits themselves. They raise the question of caste discrimination and also undertake programmes for Dalit empowerment.

#### **4. DALIT ACTIVISTS OF DELHI**

Being the capital city, Delhi provides an effective and useful location for political activism. Dalit activists, too, see the city as an important place for their work. For many of the national level Dalit organizations that came up over the last 20 years, the city of Delhi was an obvious choice. Being the capital, it also has a large number of government offices and other government-funded institutions, such as universities and foundations, which are mandated to employ members of Scheduled Castes as per the reservation policy. Thus, when we started looking around for potential respondents for our study, it was not very difficult to prepare a list and proceed with the survey questionnaire and qualitative interviews.

##### **4.1 AGE AND GENDER**

A total of 81 respondents filled our questionnaire. They were all engaged with caste-based activism in one way or the other. Most of our respondents (81.5 per cent) were men in the age group 31 to 50 (62 per cent). The number of respondents aged over 50 years was also not insignificant (around 25 per cent). A large majority of them were married (79 per cent) and lived in Delhi with their families.



## 4.2 Region, Religion and Communities

As one would expect, a large majority of Dalit activists of Delhi are from the northern states of India (70.4 per cent), with a significant number of them hailing from Uttar Pradesh. Interestingly, of the remaining, a large majority are from the Western states of India (17.3 per cent), mostly from Maharashtra and the least from the central (1.2 per cent) and eastern (3.7 per cent) regions of India. This is also a reflection of the history of Dalit movements in different regions of India. Given the history of Dalit activism and mobility in Maharashtra, a great number of them have migrated to the city and continue to identify themselves with the anti-caste movements.

Our sample of Dalit activists is also representative of a wide range of Dalit caste communities of northern India. While the largest number of them identified themselves as Chamars or Jatavs (39.5 per cent), the proportion of Valmikis and related castes was also quite significant (28.4 per cent). They all responded to the question on their caste community without any hesitation. Even though respondents were provided with the option of keeping their caste name confidential, no one chose that option.

The pattern of responses on religious identity was quite different. Even though caste is tied to Hinduism, only a small proportion of them (13.6 per cent) chose to identify themselves as Hindus. Most of them identified themselves either as Buddhists (48 per cent) or as atheists (31 per cent). Small proportions were the Dalit Christian community (7.4 per cent).

## 4.3 Education and Occupations

As one would expect, the urban Dalit activists are all educated, with a majority of them being 'well-educated'. None of them reported to be 'uneducated' or 'illiterate' and only one of them was educated up to the 10<sup>th</sup> standard. As many as two-thirds of them held postgraduate or professional degrees, while one-fourth held Ph.D. degrees.

The urban Dalit activists are all employed in secular occupations. Though a good number of them (around 20 per cent) are full-time activists, a large majority of them have full time jobs, mostly a regular salaried job with a government department or a private organization. While it did not surprise us, it may still be worthwhile to report that none of them claimed to be engaged in their traditional caste occupation.

**Table 1: Level of Education of Respondents and their Parents**

Level of Education	Self	Father	Mother
No education	Nil	25 (30.9%)	55 (67.9%)
Up to 10 <sup>th</sup>	1 (1.2%)	33 (40.7%)	21 (25.9%)
12 <sup>th</sup> to BA	26 (32.1%)	13 (16.0%)	2 (2.5%)
Postgraduate	24 (29.6%)	6 (7.4%)	2 (2.55)
Professional	10 (12.3%)	2 (2.5%)	1 (1.2%)
Ph.D.	20 (24.7%)	2 (2.5%)	Nil
Total	81 (100%)	81 (100%)	81 (100%)

Source: Field Survey, 2011.

What has been the nature of inter-generational mobility in 'education' and 'occupation' among the urban Dalit activists? As is evident from Table 1, there are significant generational differences between the respondents and their parents. While only one of the respondents was educated 'up to 10<sup>th</sup> standard', a much larger proportion of fathers (71.6 per cent) and mothers (93.8 per cent) fell within this category. A large proportion of parents (25% fathers and 55% mothers) were not formally educated.

**Table 2: Occupation of Respondents and their Parents**

Occupation	Self	Father	Mother
Salaried job	45 (55.6%)	41 (50.6%)	6 (7.4%)
Professional	6 (7.4%)	3 (3.7%)	1 (1.2%)
Caste Occupation	Nil	8 (9.9%)	5 (6.2%)
Business	6 (7.4%)	3 (3.7%)	Nil
Activist	16 (19.8%)	Nil	Nil
Student	8 (9.9%)	Nil	Nil
Farming	Nil	8 (9.9%)	2 (2.5%)
Agricultural Labourer	Nil	11 (13.6%)	4 (4.9%)
Other Labourer	Nil	7 (8.6%)	4 (4.9%)
Mostly Housewife	N.A.	N.A.	59 (72.8%)
Total	81 (100%)	81 (100%)	81 (100%)

Source: Field Survey, 2011.

While in education, fathers of urban activists of Delhi seem far behind their sons, occupationally the difference is relatively less. As mentioned earlier, all

our respondents were currently urban and employed in secular occupations with a majority (55.6 per cent) of them being in regular salaried jobs. A good number of them (19.8 per cent) are also full time activists. While there are some cases where the father and mother of the respondent are employed in the traditional caste occupations or as agricultural labourers in the village (see table 2), a majority of the fathers had also been engaged in regular salaried jobs.

Reading the two tables together helps us understand the pattern of mobility among the Dalit communities at large. A close look at Table 2 would suggest that as many as 60 per cent of Dalit activists of Delhi are members of the 'second-generation' in non-traditional occupations. However, the level of their fathers' education ('no education' or 'up to 10<sup>th</sup> standard') would also indicate the fact that they would have been employed in an organized sector job, albeit at the lower level, an unskilled Class-IV job. However, such a job enabled them to send their children to schools and they eventually moved ahead. This is further substantiated by the fact that a majority of our respondents were born in urban or semi-urban areas (52 per cent). In contrast, more than 70 per cent of them reported their fathers having been born in a village (see Table 3).

**Table 3: Place of Birth of Respondent Activists and their Fathers**

Place of birth	Self	Father
Rural	39 (48.1%)	57 (70.4%)
Urban	33 (40.7%)	16 (19.8%)
Semi-urban	9 (11.1%)	8 (9.9%)
Total	81 (100%)	81 (100%)

Source: Field Survey, 2011.

#### 4.4 Perceptions of Social Class and Mobility

How do the Dalit activists of Delhi view their social economic position beyond their caste identity? Sociologically speaking, they could all be seen as belonging to what would broadly be described as the middle class. The self-perception of our respondents about their class position is this description. As shown below in the Table 4, nearly 95 per cent of them placed themselves in the category, with a majority of them choosing the identity of 'middle-middle class', and some as 'upper-middle class' or the 'lower-middle class'. While none of them identify themselves as 'rich', a small number of them do see themselves as being 'poor'.

**Table 4: Perceptions of Social Class**

Social class	No. of activists	
Poor	4	(4.9%)
Lower-middle class	32	(39.5%)
Middle-middle class	33	(40.7%)
Upper-middle class	12	(14.8%)
Rich	0	(0)
Total	81	(100%)

Source: Field Survey, 2011.

Their perception of being members of some section of the middle class also points to their experience of social mobility. As is evident from Table 5, except for a small proportion of them, they see themselves as being socially and economically mobile. Interestingly, their perceptions on ‘social mobility’ are stronger than on ‘economic mobility’. Even when they have not become significantly rich, a large proportion of them feel that socially they and their families have moved ahead.

**Table 5: Perceptions of Social and Economic Mobility**

Extent of Mobility	Economic Mobility		Social Mobility	
Significant	29	(35.8%)	36	(44.4%)
Moderate	41	(50.6%)	35	(43.2%)
Hardly any	11	(13.6%)	10	(12.3%)
Total	81	(100%)	81	(100%)

Source: Field Survey, 2011.

#### 4.5 Political Articulations and Self-identity

The so-called ‘untouchable’ communities of the sub-continent have been described in a variety of ways and through different names. It was only during the British colonial period that they were clubbed under a pan-Indian classificatory category. Over the years, social reformers and political leaders also coined categories for them that suited their brand of politics. However, as mentioned above, over the last three decades or so a new political consciousness has been spreading within the ex-untouchable communities across different regions of India with a near universal acceptance of Ambedkar as a symbol of common identity that articulates their aspirations. Dalit activists of Delhi overwhelmingly confirmed this. In response to the question—“Who best articulates Dalit interests: (a) Ambedkar, (b) Gandhi, (c) Nehru, (d) Communists,

or (e) the RSS”—nearly 94 per cent identified with Ambedkar and underlined that he alone represented their aspirations. Only one respondent identified with Gandhi while the other four (5 per cent) identified with the communists (some of these respondents also added ‘along with Ambedkar’).

Similarly, in response to another question on “preferred category of self-description”, no one chose the popular Gandhian notion of Harijan for self-description. Interestingly, even when a majority of them preferred the category of Dalit, it was not as popular with them as the icon of Ambedkar. Many respondents were reluctant to choose ‘Dalit’ as the preferred category of self-description (see Table 6).

**Table 6: Preferred Category of Self-description**

Category	Respondents	Percentage
Dalit	42	51.9
Buddhist/Religion	16	19.8
Caste	3	3.7
S.C.	12	14.8
Harijan	Nil	Nil
Ambedkarite	3	3.7
Others	5	6.2
Total	81	100.0

Source: Field Survey, 2011.

While those who chose ‘Dalit’ found it politically useful as “a catch-all term that includes everyone and unites different caste communities under one banner;” or that “it had emerged from within the movement;” or “it was coined by Ambedkar himself.” In contrast, categories like Harijan are given by upper castes. Thus, the term ‘Dalit’ expresses agency, “a mode of mobilization for politics”. Some others pointed to its potential appeal among other marginalized communities such as tribals and minorities. It also has a comparative dimension and is beginning to be understood internationally.

When we pursued this question with our respondents during the long qualitative interviews, several of them narrated their reasons for identifying or not identifying with the category of Dalit. Those who identified with it had many reasons to do so. Some of them told us that it gave them a new sense of self-worth and they no longer felt defensive or ashamed of their caste identity. A professional activist working with a Dalit rights organization put it quite vividly:

My father used to be an agricultural labourer in his native village in Himachal Pradesh. Later on he moved to Delhi. He was able to find a lower level job in Delhi University but he did not reveal his caste. He pretended to be a Rajput. He did not take the benefit of the reservation policy. Though he sent all his five children to study, he did not make use of the quotas. When we went to our native village, other kids would ask us about our caste and when I told them that I was a Rajput, they would laugh and make fun of us.

It was only in class 11 that I got to know we were SCs. In college I worked with a leftist organization and did not feel particularly bad about being an SC. I compelled my father to avail of the benefits meant for the SCs. Then he got SC certificates made for us and we used it for our admissions. Though I had read Marx and Lenin, it was only when I read Ambedkar that I began to understand the meaning of being a Dalit.

Another respondent, an activist student of Delhi University, also came from a family that tried to hide its caste identity upon moving to Delhi.

At home, caste would often be a subject of conversation. Many of my relatives used to hide their caste. I, too, avoided talking about it because I used to feel ashamed of being an 'untouchable'. During my post graduation I started reading Ambedkar and began to attend BAMCEF programmes. The idea of Dalit identity made me curious. A friend of mine took me to the 14<sup>th</sup> April celebrations. I really liked it. I felt that I should also contribute to this work. If we are doing well then there is no reason to hide our identity. Everyone should know that given an opportunity Dalits can perform equally well. Now I want people to know me as I am. I make it a point to greet people with 'Jai Bhim'. I want our people to feel proud of being a Dalit. ...Dalit identity ... is not a source of inferiority.

Others counted practical benefits of the term because "...it unifies various sub-castes and allows us to talk about our common situation. Thus, use of the term is significant. It is also an expression of assertion as we are openly claiming our identity." Another respondent extended this by arguing that "it allows all sub-castes to be within one umbrella. It allows us to connect with ST community and even members of different religious groups who were earlier classified as lower caste." This is despite her personal experience of discrimination by fellow

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SC students who ranked above her in caste hierarchy, during her college days when she was an office bearer of a Dalit organization.

Another respondent from a caste community traditionally associated with scavenging work found the idea of Dalit identity empowering as it provided an alternative language to talk about caste. It helped them come out of the disabilities inflicted by the system on 'untouchables'. A senior activist working with a national organization focusing on the scavenger communities best articulated this point –

When I started working with my people, the only aim we had was to bring them out of the municipality job (scavenging work). Families for generations, in my community, were engaged in such jobs. The question that bothered me was: Why should only a particular community be involved with this kind of work? A secure municipal job with a guarantee of regular work discouraged them from taking education seriously.

I was very happy when the national literacy drive was launched. During that time we met some Dalit activists working in Andhra Pradesh. Someone told me about a cycle *yatra* going from Chittoor to Hyderabad to celebrate Dr Ambedkar's anniversary. I participated in the *yatra*. It was a very good experience. Before this I had no idea about the caste system. I was only interested in getting my community leave this scavenging work. I did not have the vocabulary to articulate it in terms of untouchability. It was during the *yatra* that I understood how this was part of a system. I realized my work was a part of a wider struggle for Dalits. It was not confined to the humiliating job of scavenging. Now when I tell a government official that hiring only from one community for scavenging jobs is akin to practicing untouchability, banned by the Constitution, they get scared. Earlier I used to abuse my own people for focusing solely on scavenging and sweeping. Now I understand that they have been systematically pushed into these jobs. ...The identity of being Dalit gives us the courage to fight politically and recognize that it is discrimination by others. Earlier I blamed our own people and believed that others behaved with us in a certain manner because of our job of cleaning toilets.

Echoing a similar sentiment, another respondent from a similar caste background argued that words like 'Dalit' or 'untouchable' express "the pain we have undergone... Dalit is understood by people at all levels, nationally and internationally. It does not convey homogeneity of the group because it is divided, but it conveys that they have a common experience of discrimination and suffering. It provides a framework for building solidarity."

However, as is evident from the survey data not everyone liked to identify with the category of Dalit. Broadly speaking, there were two sets of objections. First, from those who felt that like the untouchables, Dalit, too, was a 'negative' term, one of the respondents argued that, "Ambedkar had himself denounced it when he embraced Buddhism. Being a Buddhist gives us an alternative identity and dignity with a sense of culture and history". In this sense being a Buddhist is seen as a 'complete identity'. Another argument was that, "Being a Buddhist also means a clear break away from Hinduism' while 'Dalit' or 'SC' still denotes the image of a Hindu. Unlike the term Dalit, Buddhism is also a positive identity."

The second set of objection came from those who see Dalit as a sectarian category, representing only some communities, invariably the more mobile among the SCs or ex-untouchables like the Mahars, Chamars and Jatavs. Some of these respondents opted for the Constitutional category, the 'Scheduled Caste,' as the best way of describing their communities. "This was not only a secular and Constitutional category but also a developmental category." Its acceptance by the Indian government was 'a result of efforts of people like Ambedkar'. Another set of respondents who did not like being identified as Dalits were generally from scavenger communities who pointed to the 'hegemonic' nature of the category that does not represent the distinctive nature of deprivation and discrimination they experience. Thus, he insisted on using 'Bhangi' as part of his name and declaring the caste identity of his community upfront.

Notwithstanding differences of opinion on the category of Dalit, there is a wide acceptance of the term among the activists and a large majority of them preferred it over their caste names or being called 'Harijans'. Even those who preferred other categories acknowledged its value and usefulness in building a broader political alliance and a new community. 'It is only through a united



block that we can confront the growing instances of atrocities against us', said the respondent who uses his caste—Bhangi—as his surname.

#### **4.6 Becoming an Activist, Becoming a Dalit**

The survey data shows that those who see themselves as Dalit activists (in Delhi) have been involved with their work for quite some time, between 5 to 25 years, or even more. Only around 16 per cent of them reported being active for less than five years; on the other side, as many as 56 per cent were active for more than ten years. The number of those who had been active for more than 20 years was also quite significant (23.5 per cent).

Our respondents were also active in a large variety of social and political spheres. Though a good number of them work with a single organization (37 per cent), a majority of them are active or associated with multiple organizations. Some of them work with more than five organizations (around 14 per cent). This should perhaps be seen in relation to the nature of their activism. While the questionnaire gave them several options on the nature of their activism, such as education, development, health, identity and caste politics, a majority of them did not find these labels useful in representing their work. A large majority of them (68 per cent) preferred to identify themselves as being active in multiple fields. The only other categories that made sense to some of them were 'Dalit rights' (16 per cent) and 'Dalit literature' (10 per cent). The individuals we interviewed for detailed qualitative input similarly worked in diverse fields related broadly to the Dalit question. Some of them have their own organizations—an individual-centric enterprise—and work with specific communities of Dalits; some others are associated with large organizations and work with a team, such as a professional NGO. The focus of these organizations ranged from campaigning for Dalit civil rights, lobbying with the local and national governments for allocating adequate funds for the SCs; undertaking fact-finding tours wherever an atrocity occurs and preparing reports for advocacy work. Some of them worked in an open-ended manner, helping individual Dalits in their problems with the local administrative system or with other aspects of city life. One organization focuses on arranging and organizing inexpensive marriages for brides and grooms from the community. Given that weddings invariably lead to indebtedness, which often results in long term dependency on the creditors..

However, a majority of our respondents were not tied to any organization. While they coordinated with them, they had their own independent employment and took interest in a variety of things, from writing fiction to participating in protest meetings.

## **5. WHERE DID THEY COME FROM?**

As discussed above in sections 5.4 and 5.5, activists from Delhi are mostly second generation of mobile Dalits. Though their fathers were mostly poorly educated, they had invariably moved away from the traditional caste-based agrarian/rural economic order. Even when they continued to live and work in the village they had been exposed to the larger world, and had invariably been introduced to the persona of Ambedkar and the role he played in the making of the Indian Constitution. They grew up in an era when India had already become a Constitutional democracy. Though most of our respondents grew up knowing the reality of caste, none of them reported ever accepting it as a 'normal' or 'natural' reality. Further, even though several of our respondents denied directly experiencing untouchability or even caste discrimination in their childhood, they always felt the discomfort of living with a low-caste identity and invariably asked questions to their parents about its 'rationale'.

Perhaps the most important and critical role in the life of our respondents in relation to their encounter with the reality of caste is played by the father (not the parents or the mother). Many of them reported that it was their father who socialized them about the injustice of caste and first told them about the ways in which the institution works. At the symbolic level, the imagery of 'Ambedkar' and 'Kanshi Ram' accompanies the father. In many cases Ambedkar occupies quite a central place in this narrative of growing up and gaining knowledge about the caste system. It is perhaps best summarized in following words of one of our respondents:

My father retired as a mid-division clerk. He knew that Ambedkar had said children should be educated, so he made sure we all received education even though it was economically difficult for him.

Another respondent, a freelance researcher, similarly reported:

While I was growing-up, my father was my role model. Though he lived in a village yet he got educated and became a clerk with PWD.... I was

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also active in Dalit movement. My family expected me to become an IAS officer. I tried... Meanwhile, I was attracted to Kanshi Ram's political ideas and started to give priority to working for Dalit self-assertion.

Another respondent, a 26 years old research student, who grew up in a Dalit hamlet in Andhra Pradesh and whose father mostly worked as a marginal farmer and a labourer, told a similar story:

My father ...was a marginal farmer but he used to attend meetings and there he got to hear of Ambedkar. Since my village was part of an SC constituency, most of the people were aware of Dalit politics. My father had seen Ambedkar's statue in Hyderabad and was curious about it. He went to Hyderabad again in the late 1970s to work as a labourer and there he attended 14<sup>th</sup> April celebrations. He thought if he had a son he would want him to be like Ambedkar. He connected with Ambedkar because of the Constitution. Seeing Ambedkar in a blue suit, red tie and holding the constitution, he felt inspired.... People there told him that Ambedkar thought education would be the source of salvation for Dalits. Thus, he worked very hard to get his children educated.

Another respondent, a woman who teaches in a college in Delhi, recalled her introduction to caste as a child through her father:

My father was an attached agricultural labourer. Once his landowner/ employer came to our house and asked for my mother, using very abusive language. I did not like it. I replied to him in the same language. He got very angry. I did not know he was our employer. My mother asked me to shut-up. When my father came, he sat down near his feet. Seeing my father like this, I felt very bad. After he left my father told me about the caste system. He said, god made these relations and it has been in existence since time immemorial. Therefore, we have to follow tradition. Then I realized that we are different from others. However, my father did not say it was right. Though my father was illiterate, he understood that this was wrong. He said he did not know why such a social order persisted... He would often tell me that I must study and tell him why such a system prevails. He wanted me to study and become a *madam* (a schoolteacher). He would not allow me to work in the kitchen. Though he himself was very superstitious, he never wanted me to be like him. He never told me about the perceived value of those

superstitions. Rather, he encouraged me to interrogate those traditions (*tum hi padh ke batana ki kyun hota hai ye sabh*).

Some of our respondents were also born into activist-families. Their fathers, and in some cases even grandfathers, had been actively involved with some kind of Dalit activism. One of our respondents, a medical doctor, was born in such a family and sounded very proud of his ancestry.

My involvement with Dalit activism happened through my father. He started writing on Dalit issues at the age of sixteen, in 1943. A lot of scholars and activists working for the cause used to visit our home. As a child I got to know them and interact with them and this was my education on Dalit issues. The environment of the house was such that one became conscious of being a Dalit from an early age.

Several other respondents similarly gave credit to their fathers (surprising hardly anyone made any reference to their mothers in this context) for not only sending them to school and college for education, but also encouraging them to read literature on Dalit issues and writings of Dalit authors.

Interestingly, even though Dalit demographics clearly show that their education and literacy levels are quite low, reading and writing seemed to be an important activity in the lives of our respondents. Some were inspired by their education to write about caste and their own experience of it. As many as 8 (nearly 10 per cent) of our survey respondents reported literature as the main domain of their activism. They saw literary work as being embedded in Dalit activism, or vice-versa. "Activism can take many forms. My activism has been through my writing. I am trying, through my writings and reflections, to take my ideas to the society so that they give our society a certain direction," reported a Dalit woman, writer and activist. Similarly, another respondent, who teaches in a university in Delhi, reported:

In 1992, I had just finished my graduation. I started reading some autobiographical pieces by Dalits. Reading them, I realised I have also experienced discrimination of the kind described in these books at various points in my life. Thus, I was initiated into Dalit Sahitya (literature).

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I am now actively attached to Dalit Sahitya, which is itself a movement and thus I am an activist too. Dalit Sahitya does not work without activism. It is associated with the masses. However, there are challenges. Writing requires patience and depth. While for the activists, there is a sense of immediacy for expression of anger.... Craftsmanship is also important in literature. Literature should not become mere reporting or journalism. Literature requires reflection from the author. Different Dalit autobiographies are diverse in this sense. Most of them are an amalgamation of incidents but not of reflection.

Another important point that seems to be emerging from our interviews is that many of our respondents became activists when they recognized the discriminatory aspect of caste in their schools and colleges. It was in schools and colleges that they came into contact with non-Dalits, away from the comfort zone of their homes and protection of their parents. A senior activist, Christian by faith, currently working with an international organization reported:

I grew-up in a Dalit settlement in the village. We did not go to the main village or to the Hindu temple. We did not play with the children from other castes. We were very contained there and hardly interacted with the larger world. But coming to college opened my eyes. Before that I never claimed ex-untouchable or Dalit status but called myself a Christian. Here I realized how important it is to demonstrate one's identity to show to the world that I am not ashamed of my origin because I belong to this group. Thus, I asserted my Dalit identity. At the same time Karamchedu<sup>4</sup> and Chundururu massacres took place and there was agitation all over Andhra Pradesh. I participated in it and this enhanced my understanding of caste. As a Christian you can have your own spiritual life but the fact that society looks at you differently also matters. It made me question my identity: Who am I? and how it affects those around me. This brought me into activism.

References to violence as a source of their initial motivation to become activists were quite common. Apart from incidents like Karamchedu and Chundururu, several of them remembered anti-reservation mobilizations in wake of the implementation of Mandal Commission Report in 1990 by the V.P. Singh government. Even though the Report was about OBC quotas, these mobilizations often targeted the Dalits. One of them was founder of an

organization formed to counter the activities of Youth for Equality, a right-wing anti-reservation organization that has been active in Delhi and other cities in recent years.

Some of them also referred to personal experiences of violence and how they converted their anger into activism. A senior activist and a founder of a leading Dalit rights organization narrated his personal experience:

The goons of land mafia once attacked us because my father was working to stop their land grabbing activities. ... They blocked our way and used petrol bombs to blast the car in which I was traveling with my parents and brother. My mother was killed in the incident. My father also sustained injuries. I was 21 years of age then. . I wanted to avenge my mother's killing. My father helped us to digest that hatred and use it for positive work, and geared me towards social work and eventually to work against caste discrimination....

Earlier I thought we were all Christians.... Caste did not seem to be a big issue. When I first realized I was a Dalit I went into depression for three months. It took me two years to accept the fact that people look at me as a 'low' caste person. ..However, when I discovered I am a Dalit I could no longer look upon those people as objects of pity or charity. I was no longer fighting for the rights of others but I was the 'other'.

Another respondent, who also came from a relatively rich background, realized the need to work on the caste question through her activism. A woman respondent working with a prominent Dalit rights organization in Delhi told us about her personal discovery of caste through her professional work:

During childhood, I never realized that I was a Dalit. I belonged to an upper-middle class Christian family. No one in the family ever spoke to me about caste. We are Madigas from Andhra Pradesh but my grandparents had moved to Maharashtra. After doing masters in social work I started working with a Bangalore based NGO. It was during my work with rural communities that I realized the importance of caste.... Even while I worked with CRY, which focuses on child rights, caste was salient as Dalit children faced discrimination in the classroom and were more susceptible to malnutrition and lack of health care.

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Some others acquired their political consciousness and inspiration from BAMCEF and the movement initiated by Kanshi Ram. They were encouraged by their families to work with the organization. Some reported having acquired their motivation for joining activism from their activist colleagues in the university. Mobility, both horizontal and vertical, can be a source of escaping from caste but it can also enhance understanding of caste and the disabilities it could inflict onto a group of people. Some of our respondents reported that they started working for the uplift of their community when they saw the contrast between the rural Dalit communities and the rapidly changing outside world. A leader of a prominent Dalit organization that works with scavenging communities told us:

After spending six years in a hostel... when I came back to my community in the village and saw them engaged in scavenging work, I felt something should be done to enable them to get out of it.... We gathered some people and started thinking of ways to change things. Our people do not think of the need for education. Once they turn 15 years old they want to get a job in municipality. The imagination for a different life was absent...

.... in the world outside everyone is educated, thinking, and with aspirations, while nothing had changed in my community. However, even though a Dalit consciousness was missing, our people would dress up well once they finished their day's work. Looking at them no one could make out that they were scavengers—cleaning toilets and sweeping streets. My elder brother kept two pens in his pocket though he cannot write anything except signing his own name.... I felt this showed that they wanted to come out of the life they were living provided they are made aware and given options for getting out of it. ... This is what we do in the organization here.

### **6. GIVING BACK TO THE COMMUNITY**

We asked our respondents, what keeps them going? Having achieved middle class status, why don't they try to merge with the mainstream and forget their caste identity? They seemed very clear about these questions and had ready answers. Though their responses varied, the core issues they identified seemed common. For most of them it was important to be active and political because

the system of caste distinctions had not yet completely disappeared from the society. Even if, individually, they could escape from the burden of caste, they needed to 'keep the fight going' for other members of their community. This has been very well articulated by a scholar from a leading university of the city:

I am often reduced to being a Scheduled Caste even in my professional life. It does not matter what my professional interests are. People think I am best suitable for speaking on Dalit issues simply because I come from a Dalit background. I am reduced to a narrow professional identity because of my caste.

Another scholar, a writer, similarly pointed to the close relationship that he thinks exists between individual and community in the context of caste in the Indian society.

...I am not just an individual, but also member of a community. The two cannot be separated in the Indian society. If someone insults a Dalit person, it is not just one person being insulted but the entire community because the insult or violation is often based on caste identity of the person. If someone does well, it is not because of the individual alone, it is also a contribution of the community. ... Being a part of the community I must work for its uplift and for my own good.

People have a certain image of Dalits. They often tell me—as if they are giving a compliment—that I do not look like a Dalit. They think they are being nice to me but I feel extremely hurt by such comments. This is not a comment on me but on my community. How will a poor person look good? In a village, any poor person will look bad. Even in rural areas, a Brahmin will not look so clean and will not be able to maintain himself well. It is a question of economic status. Earlier they would not let us wear good clothes, eat good food or get educated and would blame us for being dirty and having unkempt hair. Give us an opportunity and we will prove our worth. I feel so bad because I am being cut off from my community... It is a conspiracy of drawing a wedge between individuals like me and the Dalit community.



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Another respondent put it in words that are more concrete and argued that her achievements were a part of the ongoing struggle. She worries for her children:

....I am doing well now but in my past I have suffered a lot and I need to remember that and fight against the system, which makes such discrimination possible. It is not like my son will not have to face this discrimination. He will face it too though the form of that discrimination might change. We continue to live in a caste society.

Many others articulated their social and political work more clearly in terms of paying back to the community. A college teacher articulated this in the following words:

I am here not because I am educated but because my forefathers have struggled for it. It is not an individual effort of my parents. My grandfather used to work as a bonded labourer for a few *annas*. A social and political movement is behind my getting here. A community has invested in me. Struggle done by people like Ambedkar and Phule has made it possible for me to be here in Delhi. My well-being is dependent upon the well-being of the community. It is my organic responsibility to pay back to the community.

For most of our respondents, activism was a source of great satisfaction. Through activism, they could relate to their community and help others get justice. The following responses echoed this sentiment:

A large number of people from my community are still suffering. I need to help them in raising their consciousnesses, or when there is a fight between the oppressed and the oppressor I have to stand with the oppressed. When I know people from my community are suffering so much because of our common identity I have to do something about it. I cannot shut my eyes to oppression.

Activism also helped in bridging the 'class distance' between these mobile and middle class Dalit activists and the deprived communities they come from. Several respondents used the term 'role model' to describe their position in their communities. Even when they were distanced in class terms, the wider community tended to look at their mobility as its own achievement. A respondent said, "People see our achievements positively. We inspire them. It helps them realize that Dalits can also achieve successes."

A senior activist with an international organization told us that

... Many of my professional colleagues hide their caste identity. I always put myself across as a Dalit Christian. People ask me why I do not just call myself a Christian... When I go to my native place people recognize me as a Dalit activist. They consider me as a success story. Most of my friends are still working as agricultural labourers. They want to know how much salary I get and whether I own a car and a house. They are curious. But more than distance this leads to identification. I try to relate with them as one of their own.

Another activist and college teacher in a women's college, similarly felt less distanced from those who still live in the village as she herself had grown up in the village. :

...I do not feel I am any different from them. They also treat me like one of their own and that gives me satisfaction. When I went to the village driving my car, they teased me and reminded me how I used to race with them on a bicycle. I am a role model for my family and community. Looking at my success, they are now interested in sending their girls to school. I do not face any problems interacting with my people.

Mobile Dalits also become a resource, a kind of social capital, for other members of the community as it emerges from this response:

...people from my community connect with me. They take me as a role model. They believe that I will be able to give them guidance. I assist youngsters from my community coming to the city for education, job interviews, etc. They live at our place when they are in Delhi. They feel there are people from their own community in the city who will support them.

Another respondent, a woman writer, told us that even when there was a distance, mobile Dalits were looked-upon positively by most members of their communities:

I think there is an obvious difference in 'thinking' between me and my family or the community. People think I am *kitaabi* (bookish) and distant from their everyday realities. However, in our family there is a tradition of supporting relatives in their education and providing them with

professional guidance. Youngsters in my community consider me a role model, particularly women of the community. My brother's wife got inspired after interacting with me and is now actively engaged in Dalit issues.

However, not everyone could relate to the community in this manner; they felt distanced. Growing differentiations within caste communities also made it difficult for them to relate to everyone. Those from the second and third generations, even when active, have a different language and a different experience of caste. On the whole our interviews did not reflect a serious problem of class distance or alienation from the larger community. Activism certainly helped them connect with their communities and the communities, too, seem to connect with them rather easily because of their activist identities.

## **7. DISCOURSES OF DISCRIMINATION, PREJUDICE AND HUMILIATION**

We also asked questions on their personal experiences of discrimination and untouchability, during childhood and in adult life, their memories relating to their own experiences and of their close circle of friends/relatives. Though not everyone had personally experienced untouchability, almost all of them told us their experiences of encountering discrimination and prejudice. They narrated experiences of discrimination even when not directly asked about it. In fact, this subject that kept coming-up in different during most of the interviews. The idea of being a Dalit activist is premised on the presence of things like discrimination and deprivation. However, what we were looking for was an understanding of the specific nature of discriminations that they had personally experienced, given their own location and working in the metropolitan city of Delhi.

Our respondents talked about several forms of discriminatory situations that they had personally encountered, subtle, not so subtle and obvious. We can classify these experiences into three broad categories. First could perhaps be described as the classical experience of 'denial and untouchability' that they personally encountered. While recounting this, they invariably referred to the village, but not always. Several of them had experienced some form of 'denial' and 'untouchability' in the urban context as well. The second set of experience they counted could be described as 'devaluation and humiliation'. Almost all of these happened in the urban middle class setting where a "normally" expected

treatment is denied to the person because of his/her caste background. The third set of experiences could be described as 'institutional and cultural bias', which mostly related to their experiences during their education and/or in the institutions/organizations they are currently working with.

Our respondents narrated several instances when they had encountered the first kind of discriminatory situation. The following story narrated to us by a university teacher is a classic case of untouchability:

I never liked going to the village because of the significant presence of caste. I once attended a wedding. We were part of the groom's procession.... We were walking and dancing. After sometime, I got very tired and thirsty. I went to a house and asked for water from the woman in the house.. First she brought water because we were ahead of the procession but then she looked at the procession and enquired whether we were with the wedding procession. On hearing 'yes' she simply refused to give us water. She knew it was a wedding procession of Dalits.

In another case, one of our respondents went with his family to a village in Rajasthan in 2007 to visit a relative. He entered a shop and enquired from the shopkeeper about the location of the house. The shopkeeper asked him if he also belonged to the same caste. On hearing 'yes', the shopkeeper asked him to immediately move out of the shop and it was only when he came out of the shop, did the shopkeeper give him directions.

Another respondent, a senior teacher in a leading university of Delhi, mentioned that while he was growing-up "Dalits could not greet an upper-caste person with 'Namaste'. In the villages and towns of Uttar Pradesh, they had to greet the upper-caste men by saying '*paye-lage*' (I touch your feet)."

Such cases are not confined to rural settings. 'Open denial' is common in urban centres as well. This is particularly the case when a Dalit wants to rent a house. An activist with a Dalit rights organization narrated to us two such stories:

A friend of mine rented a small house in Palam area in Delhi. After a few days she put up a picture of Ambedkar in her house. When her Jat landlord noticed it, he asked her about her caste. When she told him that she was a Balmiki, the house owner was shocked. Since then, the

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house owner and other members of his family began to behave rudely with her and eventually my friend had to shift to a new house.

In another case, a Dalit woman was staying with her family for one and a half year in a rented house in Mukherjee Nagar. She had not informed the landlord that they were Chamars. When the landlord got to know of it he shut off water supply to the house and asked her to vacate immediately. They were also beaten-up by the landlord and the case was reported to the police. The case is still pending in the court.

One of our respondents argued that the experience of direct denial could sometimes be sharper in the urban setting. In the village, he argues, “we are separated from the main village and normally we do not mix with other castes. The experience of discrimination is thus not so stark.” In contrast, the denial could be much stark in the city. He gave his own example of visiting the office of a civil servant for collecting data while he was a student at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) in Mumbai. The civil servant was nice to his colleagues and gave them all the data they required for their work. He was nice to him as well till the moment he heard his name, which revealed his ‘caste’. The officer refused to entertain him and referred him to a lower -level officer. As our respondent claimed, the officer refused to even look at him. Similarly, another respondent mentioned that when she was studying Sanskrit in a leading university of Delhi, fellow students would avoid sitting next to her in the class.

Another respondent narrated his experience of living in the city of Jaipur for two years where he had to constantly hide his caste identity because otherwise it was impossible to get a house on rent. Even in a city like Delhi, children have to bear the brunt of caste. This respondent, a lawyer with a Dalit rights organization told us:

My neighbours do not allow my daughter to enter their home because of our caste. My daughter is one and a half year old but they close the door if she tries to enter their home.

However, in most cases, our respondents narrated stories of discrimination fitting more into the second category. Perhaps the most illuminating experience was narrated to us by a senior academician and leading Dalit rights activist:

I grew-up in urban Maharashtra, mostly small towns. My father was a middle-level police officer, a *thanedar*. A *Thanedar* is a very powerful person in a small town. However, despite being '*thanedar ki beti*' (daughter of the police officer) everyone in the school would identify me by my caste, because everyone in the town knew which caste my father belonged to. Even when he was transferred to another town, our caste would invariably reach there before us.

Social relationships and friendships were always determined by caste. We often found it hard to interact with officers of comparable rank. We could interact only with other SCs in the town. There was a constant feeling of isolation. I could rarely visit homes of upper caste girls. Even though I was good in studies and active in sports and other extracurricular activities I had very few friends.

Once, an upper caste family in one of the towns where my father served invited my mother and me for dinner. My father's surname did not reveal his Dalit identity. Because of our middle class status they assumed we were upper caste. However, somehow after we reached there they got to know of our caste. Their attitude towards us changed suddenly. They tried to make us sit separately from others. We felt very uncomfortable. My mother and I left without eating.

A Christian Dalit activist narrated a similar story to us:

When I was studying in class 10<sup>th</sup>. I had a Brahmin friend. He would often come to my home to study and occasionally ate with us. Once I went to his home. His mother asked me about my caste. I told her that I was a Christian but she insisted on knowing my caste. When I told it to her she asked me to sit at a distance from her son and removed the plate she had set for serving me food. She served me on a leaf and asked me to clear it after the meal. When I returned home I asked my father about it. He told me never to visit the friend again. Though my friend later came to my home and apologized I could no longer accept him.

Caste endogamy is another important axis of caste and it continues to be widely prevalent among the urban educated Indians. One of our activist respondents narrated a story of his romantic involvement with a non-Dalit girl from a Sikh family. Even though he became a Sikh and followed Sikhism for three years, he could not marry the girl because her parents would not accept him.

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Several other respondents also told us about their encounters with this kind of discriminatory behaviour from their fellow students, mostly in educational institutions

The third set of stories closely resembled and often overlapped with the second set, but they should be treated separately. Institutional and cultural bias has much wider and lasting implications. For example, a teacher discriminating against a Dalit student is not personalized, or simply a question of relationship between two individuals. Such attitudes of the holder of an institutional position in a secular institution tend to reveal a deeper structural bias. Dalit activists of Delhi narrated several stories, some of which have already been presented, which point to the prevalence of discrimination in the city. The most frequently mentioned experience in this context was discrimination faced in school. An articulate Dalit writer not only narrated his experience, but also told us about the broader implications of corporal punishment on education of Dalits.

Teachers used to give very harsh corporal punishment to SC students. I was beaten-up so badly on the first day of school that I did not want to return to the school at all. This leads to high dropout rates among SC community students. As a child I did not make this connection then. I felt if the teacher, the guru, is hitting me it must be okay. Later, when I started reading Dalit Sahitya I understood this is an example of systematic discrimination.

This did not stop in the school.

When I was a student in Delhi University during early 1990s there was a teacher who liked me a lot because I was a good student. He would often discuss with me... but the moment he got to know my caste he stopped talking to me.

Another respondent who grew-up in Karnataka narrated his experience of discrimination in school and living in a hostel:

My first memory of discrimination is of school. The other children used to call me *'totti'*, which means dustbin. I asked my mother why everyone laughs at me and calls me a *totti*. To console me, my mother would tell me that they did so because we have a big *totti* near our house.

In the hostel, too, I was identified by my caste. Other students addressed me using my caste name. They would make a joke of it and laugh. At that time I did not fully realize its implications. Often I would also join them and laugh about it. Only later did I realize that they were insulting me. It was very painful and humiliating.

Another activist respondent spoke about the institutional bias against Dalits in the police force. He narrated the incident of 1984 anti-Sikh riots where the police and popular media assumed, without any evidence, that Bhangis were responsible for anti-Sikh violence.

We used live in Trilokpuri in 1984 and there had been anti-Sikh riots in the area. For no reason, police started arresting Bhangis and accused them of inciting violence. While Sikhs were victims of communal violence, Bhangis became victims of state repression. My father mostly stayed at home during those days, but he, too, was arrested for no reason. We were easy prey. The police stormed our area and picked up people for all kinds of reasons. I even overheard a policeman telling his colleague that, "we will pick up people from 32/33 blocks if we have to." Bhangis in Trilokpuri occupy these blocks. Police treats them as a 'criminal caste'.

He also spoke about discrimination in his current workplace, where for the last six months he is being told that his performance has not been satisfactory. "No one had any problem with me for the past 20 years that I have been working there. Now when I am due for promotion, they are trying to create a negative image of me." Some other respondents also similarly narrated their stories of being stereotyped and felt that their colleagues hated them because they had availed the benefit of reservation. Though on the face of it they criticized 'reservation' policy, in reality they found it hard to accept a Dalit colleague, particularly if he happens to be in a senior position, or otherwise in a position of authority.

## **8. CASTE AND BEYOND**

What is caste? What keeps it going? How could one break away from this system? We asked our respondents about these obvious but important questions. As expected, no one said anything positive about caste. The terms through which they made sense of caste and that kept appearing in the



discussions were 'discrimination', 'inequality', 'prejudice', 'hierarchy', 'graded inequality', 'endogamy', 'untouchability', 'exclusion', 'restrictions' 'separation', 'segregation', 'humiliation', 'indignity', 'mental slavery', 'Hinduism' and 'power'. They were all invoked in a negative sense. Interestingly, no one referred to *karma* and we hardly heard anything about its 'ritual' significance while we were discussing caste with our respondents.

### 8.1 Notions about Caste

Our respondents mostly looked at caste as a peculiarly Indian reality, and more specifically, a part of Hindu religion. Even though they worked with the notion of Dalit being a 'communitarian' identity, most of them accepted the presence of internal differences within Dalits on caste lines and admitted that untouchability and caste divisions exist even among Dalits.

Caste... is a division of people... primarily based on principles of inequality and discrimination. It is based on the belief that people are not born equal, which means they can be legitimately treated unequal. Discrimination is thus an inherent part of caste system. So long as caste remains it will be impossible to overcome discriminatory practices. Caste divides people and makes it convenient for them to make divisions permanent... At the bottom there are numerous castes. Within the Dalit community also there are many divisions into sub-castes and not a single identity, which shows that Dalits have internalized the caste identity. The degree of discrimination varies between Dalits...

Another respondent, a woman lawyer also underlined the negative elements of caste:

Caste... plays a negative role by dividing people. It separates them into compartments. It has no positive role and should not be there. It survives because upper caste people benefit from it. Even some Dalits perpetuate the system. It is based on hierarchy and divides people into superior and inferior. ...It is very hard for people to get out of their caste status.

Though they agreed that caste represented past 'tradition' and 'culture', many of them also pointed to 'power' and 'dominance' as being the core elements of caste. 'Caste is also about prejudice ... everywhere. In the village, upper castes

exhibit their arrogance openly... It benefits the dominant communities and that is why it survives.'

How could we get out of caste system? What are the roles and responsibilities of the state in the reservation system? What has changed in caste and what remains? What is their vision of an alternative society?

During the course of long interviews, almost all of our respondents referred to the ideological nature of caste, the 'mentality', and the legitimacy it gets from Hinduism. Hardly anyone liked being identified as 'Hindu'. Though a large majority of them would have been born in 'Hindu' families, only a small proportion of them, less than 14 per cent, identified themselves as Hindus in religious terms (see section 5.2).

While getting out of Hinduism was perhaps seen as an imperative to getting out of the caste system, no one saw it as being sufficient. Many of them also pointed to the materiality of caste. 'Caste', many argued, had always had strong political and economic connotations' and that 'it is about unfair and unequal distribution of productive resources'. Some of them even disagreed with Ambedkar's decision to convert out of Hinduism. 'Religious conversions do not end caste,' asserted a Dalit writer. Many others pointed to the crucial significance and need of 'education', 'economic empowerment' and 'citizenship rights', if Dalits have to move ahead.

How could that be achieved? Given that our respondents identify themselves as activists, they are engaged in community mobilization and awareness-raising through activities tailored to local culture and practices in order to eliminate the caste system. However, they all pointed to the crucial role of the State in ending caste-based disabilities. Notwithstanding their personal political inclinations, they all viewed the potential role of the state in positive terms. They invoked the idea of the 'Indian Constitution' and its close affinity to Ambedkar. Unlike the left-wing working-class struggles, "Dalits should not fight the state, but use it for their development," argued a college lecturer. Another activist, an engineer working with Delhi government elaborated this point further:

Underprivileged sections of society, such as Dalits, need support from the state. It is a constitutional responsibility of a democratic state. Instead of blaming the state we need to focus upon getting maximum

benefits from it. Here the role of social activists becomes critical. They have to raise awareness.... There are many state schemes, which can be used for the benefit of the community. Social activists should facilitate this so that corruption can be contained, and the middle men, who are mostly from upper caste communities, are not allowed to benefit to the disadvantage of Dalits.

The State was also important, underlined another activist, because the society in India was divided on caste-lines and Dalits could not expect anything from the society. "Society does not give any space to Dalits, ideologically or materially. Our only hope is the State and the democratic political processes," argued several of them.

They also talked about the significance of political power for Dalits. They invoked Ambedkar and Kanshi Ram and the idea of political power being the 'master-key'. Even those who were very critical of the current political dispensation and/or the Dalit politicians in the mainstream electoral politics agreed that it was only because of the 'politics of votes' that cases of atrocities against Dalits get raised in the Indian Parliament. It was only through political pressure that they could get pro-Dalit policies implemented.

Though many of them criticized the process of economic liberalization and the presumed withdrawal of state from the economic sphere, they did not view it as being synonymous with globalization, or its inevitable outcome. Many of them see globalization as a different and a positive process for Dalits.

Globalization offers an opportunity to widen our movement, forge alliances with similar kind of movements across national borders. Discrimination is not unique to India. It gives us a broader vision. The process of globalization also makes it mandatory for the Indian Government to honour international Human Rights obligations. We can demand bringing 'non-discrimination' into the fundamental principles of governance, as practiced in some other democratic countries.

## **8.2 Role of Reservations**

The most important policy measure for the development of Dalits in India has been the system of quotas or reservations. Many of them attributed their social and economic mobility directly to reservations. 'Today I am here because of

reservations'. 'Whatever we have achieved is because of reservations', were the typical opening lines of their response to the questions on the subject. A senior activist elaborated this point in the following words:

Reservations have played a critical role in giving Dalits access to education and employment and getting them elected to legislature...Voluntary inclusion does not happen as we can see from the case of Muslims. Without reservations people would not be able to enter the realms of education and employment. Reservations should continue till caste-based discrimination continues. People are living parallel lives. I studied in a classroom where one teacher taught five subjects. There was no blackboard in the school and just one classroom. The dominant castes did not allow us to enter the main village. I stayed in a social welfare hostel struggling all through. Thus, there is no point talking of equality or merit as the race does not begin on equal footing. Our community children who do not get access to nutritional food, books or tuitions cannot be expected to compete on equal terms. It is not that they are not meritorious but the field is not leveled. To begin with there has to be equality of opportunity.

Several respondents pointed to the presence of active prejudice against Dalits in the job market. Even if a Dalit was well educated, s/he may not get a job because of the wide-spread prejudice.

Any job that requires appearing for an interview and is not "reserved", is not given to a Dalit candidate. In the first meeting itself they will ask your caste. When they are unable to place you looking at your name, they will ask you directly, "Who are you...?" or else they will keep asking this question in roundabout manner and over again.

Apart from it being a sole source of Dalit social and economic mobility and a shield against caste-based prejudice and discrimination, our activist respondents also looked at reservation as 'a right'. 'I see reservations as representation. "The people who have been victims of discrimination for so long need to be provided special provisions,' argued one of our respondents. Reservations have also helped in producing 'leaders' who are working for the community and taking the agenda of Dalit rights ahead. Underlining this point, another activist argued:

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Reservations have played a great role in Dalit empowerment and political consolidation. However, they are not for poverty alleviation but for creating worthy individuals who can negotiate with the power structure on behalf of the community they represent.

While the general attitude towards reservations was universally positive, some raised the question of internal disparity across communities. Most of them were from communities that were traditionally engaged in scavenging work. 'Reservation benefits only those who are educated. Very few people in our community are educated. Benefits of reservations have gone more to other communities', a respondent argued. However another respondent from the same community was more cautious. 'No one has stopped us from taking benefit of reservation. Our community also needs to reform itself. It needs to prepare itself for social and economic mobility that the reservation policy offers'. Another respondent who found the proposal of caste-based sub-classification of quotas appealing was not very sure about its political implications and about the intentions of those who wish to implement it.

The danger to reservation system came from the process of privatization. Some of them underlined the loss that Dalit communities had experienced because of a near complete privatization/ informalization of Class-IV jobs. 'It was at the secure class IV job that the mobility process began for most of us.' Connecting it with his personal story of social and economic mobility, one of our respondents said:

Privatization is a big danger for Dalits. Majority of Dalits are in class-IV employment. Here privatization has led to contract-based employment where wages have been drastically reduced. My father was a government employee, a sweeper in the municipality. He earned Rs 4500 per month. Today, three generations down, those who are being recruited in the same job begin with Rs. 1800 per month. Same is the case with employment in security agencies. My father had a permanent job. He was given a good sum of money on his retirement. With this money my parents were able to give me education. However, today it has become impossible. Private sector does not give permanent jobs. Economic growth and liberalization may have increased jobs, but our jobs have shrunk. Had it not happened, jobs for us in the government sector would have increased many-fold... Reservations should be mandatory for the private sector, too.

Some activists also blamed the state sector for not hiring against the existing unfilled vacancies in different departments. Others argued for extension of reservations to other sectors, such as bank credit or the contracts government departments give for supplies. They were all very insistent that reservation continued to be a very important part of the state policy for development of Dalit communities and should not only be continued but strengthened.

### **8.3 Milestones and Challenges**

How do the Dalit activists of Delhi look at their work in terms of achievements and challenges?

They all seemed quite involved with their work. They also seemed very proud of their activism, and saw it as socially valuable and personally important for them. Even when they complained about discrimination they experienced in the past and in the current jobs, they also recalled their milestones and achievements. Most of them recognized that caste system has undergone many changes and there have been some positive developments. A senior activist who works with an organization engaged in abolition of the traditional form of scavenging underlined this point quite sharply:

There have been changes in the caste system. We are able to question the system today. Earlier our main struggle was confined to getting better buckets and good brooms for our work. Now we fight against scavenging. Sense of dignity is also growing. Even the elderly in the community are talking about caste. We no longer feel embarrassed about our caste background/ identity. Most people seem happy to keep their caste titles. Now people want to fight and come out of the caste order. Others have also understood that no one will take discriminated forever. However, in the villages, there is still a lot of struggle as the dominant castes do not want to lose power.

Notwithstanding this recognition of positive changes, none of our respondents suggested that they were anywhere near their goals. Caste, for most of them, continued to exist and determine life chances of Dalits negatively. Many of them pointed to the increased atrocities and violence against Dalits in different parts of India. While they agreed that in most cases it was also a result of growing assertion among Dalits, the conflict seemed to be, sharpening caste identities and most importantly, the victims of violence were always from

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Dalit communities. Many of them also pointed to the challenges faced by Dalits because of the quality of education available in state-run schools and the contents of education. Some also talked about the growing influence of corporate media, which has no sympathies for Dalit related issues.

Challenges also come from within. Many of our respondents, across communities, admitted that internal division among Dalits is a serious challenge for their movements. A respondent who publicly identified himself as Bhangi (from scavenger community) put it quite sharply:

Internal differences between the Dalit communities should be overcome if the movement has to go forward. Bhangis are not a part of the category Dalit. *Even Dalits (read Chamars) consider us to be Bhangis and thus lower than them.* A Chamar officer once said to me, your people don't study....The Chamars avoid close social relations with Bhangis. They deplore casteism but keep *roti-beti* relations within their own community. Thus there is casteism among Dalits, too. Dalit is not a unified or homogeneous category. They say that we are all Dalits but where is the evidence? I have heard that some Chamars keep separate utensils for Bhangis. How then can I agree to be a part of Dalits? I feel isolated.... The distance between Chamars and Bhangis is almost the same as between Brahmins and Chamars.

Along with underlining the inter-caste differences, a women activist pointed to another set of internal challenges, the question of gender and patriarchy that Dalit movements needed to address. As she argued:

Issues of Dalit women and sub-castes have to be taken up more seriously. The question of Dalit patriarchy needs to be addressed. There are internal differences among Dalits across regions and on political party lines.... Dalits should also connect with other groups suffering from marginalization, minorities, women or those fighting against displacement.

While they all seemed to be comfortable about the 'sectarian' nature of Dalit activism, and were clear about their affiliation to an identity movement, there were many who felt uncomfortable with the emerging discourse of Dalitism. Some of them no longer wanted to identify with the category Dalit because the movement has moved ahead. As a college lecturer put it:

I think the term Dalit should now be transcended. It was okay when I made a transition from Chamar to Dalit. Today I am not interested in being a Dalit because now it is not simply a question of dignity but also of power and contestation...

Another activist was worried about the absence of a larger or holistic vision in contemporary Dalit movements:

We seem to be focusing only on the Dalit question. We are no longer talking about the caste question? ....There seems to be no debate on caste in the Indian society today. I think we are afraid of talking about it because somewhere it has affected all of us individually. Non-Dalits feel very uncomfortable with any open discussion about caste. Only Dalits seem to be talking about it. There is a need for crossing the hedge between Dalits and non-Dalits. There is a need to engage with the reality of caste—we need to draw our strength from it and not hide in weakness. ...We need to be clearer in our vision. There is a need for articulation of vision in terms of free human-hood. It should not be limited to 'freedom from' but should include a discourse on 'freedom to'. Only that would enable us to annihilate caste.

Interestingly, not everyone talked about annihilation of caste. In fact, the emphasis of a majority of our respondents seemed to be more on constructing a community, a distinctive identity, where difference is recognized and respected and does not imply hierarchy and dominance.

## **9. CONCLUDING COMMENTS**

The term 'activism' has often been invoked in relation to the idea of 'civil society' and the so-called non-governmental organizations (the NGOs). The term civil society, as John Harriss rightly points out, has a modernist connotation. It is 'a sphere of associational life' or a 'space of association, independent of market, and between the family and kinship groups on the one hand and state on the other. It also connotes a set of values that may be summed up as those of ... tolerance and respect for others as citizens with equal rights and responsibilities' (Harriss, 2005: 3; also see Chatterjee, 2001: 172). However, the contemporary revival of the term civil society also has its own historicity. The rediscovery of 'civil society' as NGOs in the late 1980s, as David Gellner points out, coincided with the rise of neo-liberalism and the



retreat of the welfare state in many advanced capitalist societies (Gellner, 2009: 2), a trend that soon caught-up with developing countries like India as well.

Interestingly, the very idea of Dalit activism questions this mainstream conception of 'civil society' and the contextual meaning of its revival. While many of our respondent activists worked with NGOs and invoked the notion of civil society, they were clearly 'sectarian' about their politics in the sense of working for the upliftment of 'their' communities. While their work is indeed geared towards the universal ideals of citizenship and equality, their politics is grounded on caste and kinship, and not on 'associational principles'. Their politics is premised on a communitarian identity and the discourse of dignity for their communities. As evident from the discussion above, while many of them work with their own community for its development, they all look up to the state and the electoral political process, not only for protection from atrocities, but also for implementation of job quotas and special welfare schemes.

Their invocation of caste and communitarian identity is not a traditional project for reviving primordial values of 'belonging' to the community, or attachment with past traditions. They have very little to gain from tradition. As a communitarian identity, 'Dalit' is a mobilized collectivity, a modern category that is a product of the political dynamics unleashed by constitutional democracy. Dalit activists have a different worldview and conception of Indian society. Our survey and the detailed interviews provide a window to this worldview and the nature of contemporary Dalit movement.

Notwithstanding their self-identification with a 'sectarian' identity, our respondents seem to be pursuing a 'modernist' project. They were all mobile, and technically speaking, had already moved out of caste. None of them lived in the village any longer and many of them had grown-up in urban and semi-urban environment. However, they often referred to village as the site of caste-based social order. No one invoked a positive image of the Indian village. Village was almost always equated with discrimination and violence. In other words, it is the relational dimension of village life, and not the lack of development, that they seem to be referring to.

As is evident from our survey, most Dalit activists of Delhi are men. Predominance of men could perhaps explain why questions of gender and

patriarchy, primarily internal to family life, do not figure much in their discourse on caste and in their everyday politics. However, more important point in this context is the fact that Dalit movement has so far been mostly preoccupied with what is happening in the outside world, interactions in public sphere, economy, employment, state and electoral politics. These are also areas where men dominate. Not only were respondents predominantly men, they also invoked the imagery of their 'fathers' as their role models. Fathers were the first to go out, confront the wider world of caste relations, and develop critical understanding of caste-based discrimination.

Notwithstanding their internal differences of community and political strategies, responses provided by our respondents during long interviews have many things in common. They all shared common understanding on critical subjects like caste, state, democratic politics and modernity.

A large majority of Dalit activists do not work with a single organization or identify with a specific area of work. What does this mean? One way of looking at this could be that Dalit activism is still not professionalized in the manner in which the so-called mainstream civil society organizations or the NGO activism is. They tend to work with several organizations and devote their energies to whatever they find important. In other words, they perhaps identify with the larger issues of dignity and development of their communities. For them the agenda is that of social transformation of the caste order. Their work and worldview is essentially political and not simply professional.

## Endnotes

1. While we recognize the critical significance of Dalit participation in electoral process and their experience with the state-power and party politics, this paper does not deal with the subject. None of our respondents was an active 'politician' who represented a political party or actively engaged with electoral politics. Though this was a deliberate choice, we do not draw any clear lines of distinction between 'social' and 'political' activism. Given the significance and complexity of the subject, Dalit party politics would require a different kind of study with appropriate focus. We also agree with Nicolas Jaoul that the two 'have coexisted historically and relied on each other to create the... Dalit movement' (Jaoul, 2007:192).
2. Even though we use the category of 'activists' and 'NGOs', we would not like to locate our Dalit activists in the framework of 'civil society', or the 'third sector', independent from state and market. Unlike activists of the development centric NGOs, Dalit activists do not see themselves as being outside the domain of 'politics' and do not necessarily see their activities as being a reflection of civil society action. (For a useful discussion on NGO activism, see Gellner, 2009).
3. Incidences of violence grew particularly in the southern states of Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu (Gorringe, 2009; Mosse, 2009).
4. Karamchedu is a big and prosperous village of Prakasam district in coastal Andhra. On July 22, 1985, a 3,000 strong mob of the locally dominant caste, the Kammas, had assaulted the members of a Dalit community, Madigas, *en masse* and killed six men and raped three girls. Source: August 3, 1985, EPW.

On August 6, 1991, 8 Dalits were hacked to death in broad daylight, with over 400 dominant caste members chasing them along the bund of an irrigation canal in Chundururu village of Guntur District, Andhra Pradesh. Source: Insight Young Voices: Dalit Youth Voices. <http://archive.insightyv.com/?p=517>

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