The Remaking of Caste Identity

Dalit Activists in New Delhi

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Summary

This thesis is concerned with the identity politics of a group of Dalit activists in New Delhi, India. It attempts to deepen our understanding of the Dalit movement through investigating some of its contemporary ideological formulations and exploring the meanings that are attached to these formulations. Central to the discussion is the formulation of caste pride and what this pride should be based on. While Dalit activists position themselves clearly in opposition to the Brahmanical ideology as manifest in discriminatory notions and practices, their relation to the Dalits for whom they claim to speak is more ambivalent. Claiming to represent the Dalits on the basis of a shared notion of 'Dalithood', the activists employ various strategies to negotiate the social distance between their own educated, middle-class selves and the 'poor and oppressed Dalits' of their discourse. While this is both an expression of solidarity and a necessity to legitimise their work, I contend that social difference as reproduced in activist narratives is also constitutive of their own self-images, and hence of their social identities. This social difference plays into the dichotomy between the 'forward' and the 'backward' – a dichotomy which is strengthened in contemporary India by the confluence of notions of development, progress and modernity with popular conceptions of caste.

Acknowledgements

Contents

Orthography and transliteration

Throughout this thesis shorter quotes are given in single inverted commas while longer quotes are printed in a smaller font. Quotes within quotes are marked by double quotation marks, also when the original source uses single inverted commas. In quotes that are translated from Hindi, words that were originally spoken in English are marked by single inverted commas. When I consider a term to be of particular importance, the original Hindi word is also given, italicised and in a parenthesis. This is also done in the main text. Here, the English plural 's' is sometimes added to Hindi words to aid the flow of the text. Names of people and places are not transliterated or italicised. I also except Hindi terms that may be considered part of the English language or that are widely used in Indological literature, like *Brahmin*. These words are not transliterated, but italicised. When transliterating words from Hindi, I use diacritical markers for the long vowels *ā*, *ī*, *ū*; for the retroflex *ṭa*, *ḍa*, *ṇa*, and *ṛa*, and their aspirated varieties; for nasalisation like *ñ* and *ũ*; and for *śa* and *ṣa*. The syllable *ca* as in *cāy* is transliterated without an h, the syllable *cha* as in *choṭā* is given with an h, and the transliteration *ccha* is used for the compound syllable as found in the word *acchā*.

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1 Introduction

This thesis is concerned with processes of identity formation and politicisation among a group of Dalit activists in New Delhi. It investigates how these activists construct their identities as Dalit in opposition to a tradition framing them as inherently dirty and 'backward'. Through reading activist self-representations in the light of larger public discourses, I will map out understandings of 'Dalithood' and explore how these are pronounced in opposition to, but also contingent on, various expressions of social difference. The argument presented here is based on a five-month field work in North India in 2009, of which three months were spent as an intern with the Dalit Cooperation Committee (DCC)[1] in Delhi, working alongside those who figure as the main 'informants' in the thesis.[2]

The very existence of these activists – highly educated, opinionated, and vocal – is testimony to the social change that has occurred in India over the last twenty-five years. Dalit political mobilisation and advancement is seen as one of the most salient features of North Indian politics today (Mendelsohn & Vicziany, 1998; Pai, 2002; Jaffrelot, 2003; Hardtmann, 2009). Through its efforts to confront established power-structures, the Dalit movement has emerged as a force which may affect one of the greatest challenges to India in the future, namely the persistence of economic and social inequalities in face of the country's recent economic growth. How India deals with these inequalities will significantly influence the future development of the country and its democratic institutions. However, the acknowledgement of these challenges to the Indian democracy is not recent. They were succinctly described by B.R. Ambedkar, the 'Untouchable' leader and chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Indian Constitution, in a speech he gave to the Constituent Assembly in 1949:

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[1] All names have been changed in order to protect the anonymity of the activists. This includes the name of the organisation with which I conducted the major part of my study. The exceptions are place names, which have been altered only where they may compromise activists' anonymity.

[2] The quotation marks around 'informants' are intended to demonstrate my uneasiness with this term as well as its unsuitability to describe how knowledge was produced for this study. Rather than the researcher entering the field with a set of questions and hypotheses, ready to elicit pre-existent data, the formulation of both the questions and their answers was the outcome of quite synergetic processes involving the DCC activists and myself, although our positions in these processes were not the same. Rather, I will use the term 'activists' to designate these people as a group.

On the 26th of January 1950, we are going to enter into a life of contradictions. In politics we will have equality and in social and economic life we will have inequality. [...] We must remove this contradiction at the earliest moment, or else those who suffer from inequality will blow up the structure of political democracy which this Assembly has so laboriously built up. (Jaffrelot, 2003, p. 1)

While Ambedkar's pessimistic prophecy may not have come true, the issue of caste as a resource for political mobilisation has become a central theme in contemporary Indian politics. '[T]he most recent period of Indian politics has also been marked by the rise in Northern India of a new political assertion of the lower caste groups. [...] the emergence of the new dalit-bahujan formations is an important aspect of the changing political structures in India' (Chatterjee, 1997, p. 39). This democratic upsurge in the 1990s has been seen as a delayed transition towards a more inclusive democracy, both in terms of participation and because the growth in political alternatives has expanded the range of people's political choice (Jaffrelot, 2003). One of the most succinct expressions of this development has been the rise to prominence of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), literally 'the party of the majority', in the populous northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. 'This party has mobilised the low-caste masses in North India through supra-local ideologies that posit "classic" forms of subalternity such as the Dalit condition, and the rights and entitlements attached to this condition, as its rallying symbol' (Ciotti, 2010a, p. 44). The emergence of this party has received generous scholarly attention.[3] Although exploring this phenomenon from different angles, most studies have focused their explanatory thrust on the consequence of the party's growth on the workings of Indian politics.

This concern with policy outcome is evidently important to understand and predict democratic developments and to evaluate the relative successes of new political bodies to bring about substantial change and improvement in the lives of their target populations. However, as has been argued by political scientist Yogendra Yadav (1999, p. 2398), '[w]hat is distinctive about the current phase [of Indian electoral politics] is not the "deadly" mix of [caste and politics] or the vicious grip of caste over politics but rather the manner in which politics has come to shape caste identities'. The politicisation of caste must also be explored with an emphasis on understanding how *caste* is changing and coming to play new roles in modern

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[3] See Mendelsohn & Vicziany (1998); Pai (2002); Jaffrelot (2003); Chandra (2004).

India. Sharing Yadav's view, this study is inspired by the more recent works by Badri Narayan (2006), Lucia Michelutti (2008), and Manuela Ciotti (2010b). These contributions are concerned with the impact of these political changes on the social fabric of India and share an emphasis on *castes* as 'discrete identities' (Gupta, 2004, p. xiv) rather than *caste* as an all-encompassing social and ritual system (Dumont, 1980 [1966]). Still, these scholars encourage a holistic view through exploring different aspects of the self-understandings of modern castes, and of the relation between these and new and emerging visions of the political.[4]

From this point of departure, the thesis will explore the construction of 'Dalithood' within the politicised environment of the Dalit Cooperation Committee (DCC). The activists who figure here consider themselves to be 'Dalit'. This entails that they are either born into *jātis* (castes) that are categorised by the state as Scheduled Caste (SC), or they are Christians that have converted from so-called 'Untouchable' *jātis*.[5] They are from different parts of India, and come from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds, but they are all connected through the same organisational network. In this environment, how is the notion of 'Dalithood' constructed? What does it entail to 'be Dalit'? How does an ascribed and highly stigmatised identity become a resource for political assertion? Analysing the construction of a Dalit identity among these activists I will particularly emphasise the close-knit relation between personal experiences and shared ideology. Describing themselves as 'Dalits' and 'activists', what stories do they tell, and what are their aspirations? What do their stories tell us about efforts towards creating a shared identity for all Dalits? When answering the above questions, I have tried to be sensitive to how activists negotiate their immediate social and economic context, and how this negotiation shapes the space within which they carry out their activism.

This thesis is an investigation of 'Dalithood', indicating some of its resources as well as limitations as a tool for creating unity among people across different *jāti* and religious belongings. I have studied Dalit activist self-representations, as well as representations of

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[4] See also the contributions in 'Caste in Question: Identity or Hierarchy?' edited by Dipankar Gupta (2004).
[5] 'Scheduled Caste' is the official term designating the former 'Untouchable' castes. The SCs are entitled to reserved seats in elected political bodies, 'affirmative action' policies directed at increasing their educational opportunities, and extended legal protection under the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act 1989. These supportive policies also include the 'Scheduled Tribes' (STs). The historical development and contemporary usage of the various nomenclatures applied to these groups will be discussed in chapter three.

their 'others'. This necessitates being concerned with both explicit expressions and more tacit sentiments of caste and social difference, and their effects on visions of Dalit emancipation. The public narrative of 'Dalithood', explored in detail in chapter three, has strong ideological components drawn from a variety of historical and contemporary sources. However, as Henrietta Moore (1994, pp. 49-50) has argued, agency can not be understood purely in social terms: 'Each individual has a personal history and it is in the intersection of this history with collective situations, discourses and identities that the problematic relationship between structure and praxis, and between the social and the individual, resides'. When highlighting ambivalences and drawing attention to differences between what the activists say and what they do, i.e. between expressed ideals and other interests and considerations, it is my contention that these serve to demonstrate how people are always situated in and relating to their immediate social context. In addition to caste, class and gender are aspects of identity that will be dealt with explicitly in this thesis. Underpinning social differentiation, positions along these axes have bearings on individual experiences of, as well as ideas about, Dalithood and activism.

Background: Identity politics

The term *Dalit* refers to the formerly so-called 'Untouchable' population of India. The word came into Hindi from Marathi and means 'ground', 'broken', or 'reduced to pieces'. According to Eleanor Zelliot (2005, p. 267), '[d]alit implies those who have been broken, ground down by those above them in a deliberate and active way', and the word itself contains 'an inherent denial of pollution, *karma*, and justified caste hierarchy'.[6] Consequently, it is a term with political implications as it designates both a condition of oppression, historical and contemporary, as well as resistance to this oppression based on a contestation of its rationale. From this it follows that the politics of the Dalit movement is based on identity.

In South Asia, the term 'identity politics' has been used about cultural and religious nationalism – today primarily to describe the Hindu political right-wing – but also about the profound experience of the creation of Pakistan, based on the idea that their religion made

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[6] Italics in the original.

Indian Muslims 'a separate and identifiable nation' (Bose & Jalal, 2004, p. 158). In a sense, modern India was founded as a response to this idea, constitutionally insisting on secularism, pluralism and citizenship as the fundaments of the nation (Brass, 1994a). In the post-colonial era, the label identity politics has been applied to various forms of political mobilisation in the sub-continent. In the 1950s and 1960s, mobilisations around regional languages lead to the reorganisation of the states under the Indian federation along linguistic lines (Brass, 1994b). The 1960s also saw the emergence of a strong cultural regionalism in South India, especially in Tamil Nadu, where it has dominated state politics ever since through the Dravida Munnetra Kazagham and its subsequent offspring parties. Although language has been central to this mobilisation, it also includes more fundamental notions of a distinct and separate culture, history, and ethnicity (Price, 1993, pp. 499-501).

Also calculations of caste have a history within Indian politics, but the implementation of the Mandal report recommendations by the V. P. Singh government in 1990 marked the onset of a new kind of politics on the national stage. The report recommended a 27 per cent 'reservation of jobs in the central government services and public undertakings for socially and educationally Backward Classes, other than the Scheduled Castes and Tribes' (Corbridge & Harris, 2000, p. 127), i.e. the so-called OBCs. The decision to implement these measures led to violent upper caste protests and a wave of suicides among students, mainly in North India, and the ensuing debate in the media was acrimonious.[7] The Mandal affair re-actualised the debate on reservations also with regards to the Scheduled Castes, and it led to an increased polarisation of caste identities. It also marked the beginning of the rise to power of new low caste political formulations like the SP (Samajwadi Party) and the BSP in North India (Jaffrelot, 2003).

This 'new' entry of caste into politics has been seen as a setback to the development of democracy, as encouraging parochial and crude identity manipulations, and as indicating the degeneration of Indian politics. 'If one goes by popular accounts, the rise of casteism and its grip over electoral politics is the distinctive attribute of the 1990s' (Yadav, 1999, p. 2398). Further, the politicisation of caste is 'found to be even more disconcerting with the changed

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[7] For more on these debates, see Jaffrelot (2003, pp. 343-349) and Corbridge & Harris (2000, pp. 127-128). Nicholas Dirks (2001, pp. 285-296) has a thorough discussion of the scholarly debate that ensued.

focus of claims and demands on the part of those who press their caste identities: from economic advancement to social status and political power' (Kothari, 1997, p. 443). However, the demonisation of these developments may well be misconceived, or also based on elite resistance to changes that threaten to erode their privileges. 'Caste', argues Rajni Kothari (1997, p. 446), 'can be used in support of secularizing and democratizing movements'. A fundamental question underlying this debate is whether group identities such as caste are seen as detrimental to the functioning of democracy – a stance which implies that a politics grounded in the 'difference' of marginalised groups is inherently incapable of ending their marginalisation – or whether the strategic employment of some form of essentialised identity may actually work to further the interests of such groups. This question is intrinsic to most of the discussions that follow, although producing a definite answer will not be attempted.

Caste

The institution of caste can be described as a system of social stratification (Gupta, 1991) within which membership in a specific caste, or *jāti*, is inherited from one's parents, ascribed from birth, and for life. A *jāti* is commonly understood as an endogamous group endowed with characteristics related to (notional) occupation as well as to a set of social and cultural practices. Related to this, the concept of *varna*[8] refers to the four broad categories into which Hindu society is imagined to be divided. These are depicted as constituting a hierarchy, of Brahmins (priestly castes), *kṣatriya*s (warrior or kingly castes), *vaiśya*s (trading and clerical castes) and *śūdra*s (agricultural and artisan castes), in a descending order. Outside of or below this *varna* scheme are imagined the *jāti*s with which this thesis is concerned, the so-called *avarna*[9] castes. Hence, while the *jāti* would constitute a person's immediate social group, and prescribe who is considered suitable partners for marriage and what kind of occupation one is expected to take up, *varna* indicates the ritual and social status of a *jāti* in relation to other *jāti*s.

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[8] Hindi *varṇ*, literally meaning 'colour; quality'.
[9] Literally 'without *varna*'.

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The idea of *varna* is derived from Brahmanical scriptures, out of which Manusmriti, the 'laws of Manu', which in its present form dates from the 1st century BC (Manu-smriti, 2011), is the one most often referred to by Dalit activists and scholars. A commonly held view is that 'it is in the Manusmriti that [...] the varna theory and the classification of castes in a hierarchy based on occupation and degree of pollution, receives its classic statement' (Michael, 2007, p. 17). *Varna* is hence an ideological system, rather than an accurate description of social realities in India at any given point in history. Several studies have demonstrated how colonial technologies and understandings of caste served to consolidate, or 'freeze', identities that had previously been more flexible and fluid.[10] Nicholas Dirks (2001, p. 5) has argued that it was 'under the British that "caste" became a single term capable of expressing, organizing, and above all "systematizing" India's diverse forms of social identity, community, and organization'. However, the *varna* scheme and its 'ancient' sources are central to popular conceptions of caste in India today, and is also a frame of reference among the DCC activists. While denying its logic and contesting its morality, they see the religious sanctioning of caste-as-hierarchy in Hindu holy scriptures as a main reason for the longevity of the caste system. Deriving from and reinforcing the status of the Brahmin, caste as a specific form of social stratification is regarded as a product of Brahmin dominance.

Since the colonial period, caste has been viewed as a vehicle for the reproduction of unequal social relations, as a social institution legitimising economic exploitation, and as a source of social exclusion guilty of producing a highly segmented society. Nonetheless, in the more recent period, scholars have argued that caste is becoming a vehicle of political mobilisation among the under-represented poor majority, and hence of the 'deepening' of democracy in India (Kohli, 2001).[11] While many in the political mainstream see the influx of caste into politics as symptomatic of the deterioration of Indian politics and governance, Dalit and other 'low-caste' political actors argue that their perennial exclusion from the political scene can only be countered by a mobilisation based on the reason for their exclusion, namely their caste belongings. The paradox of this development has been captured by Rajni Kothari:

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[10] See Bernard Cohn's essay 'The Census, Social Structure and Objectification in South Asia' (1987), Ronald Inden's *Imagining India* (1990), and Nicholas Dirks' *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (2001).

[11] See also Jaffrelot (2003) and Pai (2002).

For long, consciousness of caste was the preserve of the Brahmanical upper castes. Today something quite different is happening: the very sufferers from the system (including the caste system) are invoking caste identities and claims. Precisely those who should seek obliteration of the divisions and disparities that characterize the deeply hierarchical nature of the caste system are found to use it the most, still hoping to undermine it by undertaking basic transformation in the social order, [...] and bringing about precisely what the larger secular order has failed to provide: a society free of exploitation and oppression and indignities (Kothari, 1997, p. 441).

The view held by activists and most commentators today is that neither a class analysis grouping Dalits with general peasants and workers, nor a communal analysis placing Dalits at the bottom rungs of 'Hindu' society, are able to produce a satisfactory understanding of Dalit issues (Webster, 2007, p. 76). John Webster (2007, p. 78) leans on the classification criteria employed by J. H. Hutton, the commissioner of the 1931 Census, who argued that the 'defining characteristic of the exterior castes[12] was that contact with them entailed purification on the part of high-caste Hindus'. In this view, the definition of who is a Dalit must, ultimately, be based on caste: 'Caste alone has determined who is a Dalit, not class or religion. Social stigma and a variety of disabilities were based on caste; these were and, to a significant degree, still are the defining characteristics of a Dalit, even if a Dalit moves up in social class or changes religion' (Webster, 2007, p. 85). 'Dalithood', then, is determined by 'Untouchability', understood as particular forms of discrimination, exclusion, and exploitation on the grounds of *jāti* belonging.

Today the 'Dalit condition' emerges as a somewhat indeterminate entity. It can with difficulty be defined substantially and is often defined through enlisting some of its typical characteristics. Historically, the Dalits have, in various manifestations and to various extents, been excluded from participating in Hindu public life. They have in general been excluded from temples and schools, and even today in most rural areas, the Dalit *bastī* (hamlet, settlement) will be located outside the village proper. Because of their inherently 'impure' and ritually 'polluting' qualities, elaborate precautions have been developed to prevent physical (and even visual) contact between Dalits and other castes, and for the same reason there have been restrictions on their access to otherwise shared or public sources of food and drink.

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[12] This was another term used to designate those castes that were considered to be outside the *varna*-scheme.

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Another trait defining the Dalit condition has been the carrying out of ascribed duties and occupations that are considered to be ritually impure. These so-called 'unclean' occupations are 'associated in some way with death or with human bodily waste' and include leatherwork and beating the drum at festive occasions, removing rubbish and animal carcasses, and cleaning streets, latrines, and sewers (Shah, Mander, Thorat, Deshpande, & Baviskar, 2006, p. 106). Also, Dalits are dependent on their manual labour to a greater extent than any other caste segment. In sum, these economic, social and religious disadvantages are seen to distinguish the Dalits from other groups that suffer from poverty and discrimination.

In this thesis, 'Dalit' is used as an emic concept as it was used by the activists. As mentioned above, the activists identify as 'Dalit', and they also use the term for all Scheduled Castes in India, as well as to 'Dalit' Christians and Muslims. This implies those who are considered, by themselves or others, to have converted from 'Untouchable' castes, but who are not recognised as SCs under the Indian Constitution. I believe that the activists' use of the term indicates who they consider themselves to represent, and that it implies a contestation of the exclusion of Christians and Muslims from the SC category. However, I will not adopt the 'Dalit' label mechanically, but draw attention to and critically evaluate its usage. In order to stress that the arguments made here are not applicable to the Dalit population as a whole but pertain to the specific environment of the study, I will use the term 'activist' to denote the people I worked with in the DCC and those I encountered through their networks.

The Dalit movement

According to the 2001 Census the Scheduled Caste population of India was 166.6 million people, making them 16.2 per cent of the total population (Census of India, 2001). While lower caste does not necessarily imply lower class, the overlap between caste and class remains strong in contemporary India. The National Sample Survey of 2000 found that 'more than 60 per cent of the urban upper caste Hindus had a per capita monthly consumption expenditure of Rs 775 or more, whereas less than 25 per cent of the urban Other Backward Classes (OBC) and less than 18 per cent of the urban Scheduled Castes (SC) were in such a

position' (Jaffrelot, 2009, p. 3). At the same time, there has been increased economic stratification *within* all castes.

While statistically the Dalits remain among the poorest and least educated groups in the country (Mendelsohn & Vicziany, 1998, pp. 29-34, 141), the prevailing image of them as oppressed and exploited has by now been adjusted by the emergence of a Dalit middle class, and of political parties, scholars, writers and organisations advocating 'Dalit issues' and demanding the attention of the state as well as the rest of Indian society. These various expressions of rights claims and opposition, espoused by representatives of different but similarly placed social groups, constitute what is generally called the Dalit movement in India. The Dalit movement is a *political* movement in two ways. First, it has produced formal political parties like the BSP, and second, its aim is to alter existing power structures through redefining identities: '[R]esource flows are determined by a field of power within which identities are constantly being reformulated in categorical terms. The power to define reality is an economic and political power' (Moore, 1994, p. 5).

The roots of the Dalit movement can be traced back to the socio-religious reform movements of the late 19th century. Hardtmann (2009, pp. 49-58) has shown how both caste *sabhās* (federations), and the so called *ādi*-movements[13] produced organisational and ideational structures that were drawn upon by later reformers like M. K. Gandhi and B. R. Ambedkar. The conflict between these two crystallised over the issue of separate electorates for the 'Untouchables' following the announcement of the *Communal Award* by the colonial government in 1932 (Jaffrelot, 2005, p. 59). Opposing Ambedkar's demand for an electoral system wherein only 'Untouchables' could vote for 'Untouchable' candidates in separate constituencies (Jaffrelot, 2005, p. 54), Gandhi went on a fast until death in what he saw as a necessary defence of the social cohesion of Hinduism, and hence of the unity of the Indian nation. Conversely, 'Ambedkar felt that the joint electorate was a mechanism for selecting a member of the Depressed Classes who was acceptable to caste Hindus rather than someone

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[13] The 'ādi-movements' refer to various movements that organised around ideas about the 'Untouchables' as the original (ādi) inhabitants of India. Among these were the Adi-Dravida movement of the South, the Ad-Dharm in the Punjab, and the Adi-Hindu movement in the areas that today constitute Uttar Pradesh (Hardtmann, 2009, pp. 54-55).

who could authentically represent the interests of the "Untouchables"' (Rodrigues, 2002, p. 12). Gandhi's fast eventually led Ambedkar to admit to what has been called 'The Poona Pact', a compromise which established a system of reserved seats, but without the principle of separate electorates (Jaffrelot, 2005, p. 66). For this, and for insisting throughout his life that the 'Untouchables' constitute an integral part of Hindu society, Gandhi has later acquired the status of archenemy among politicised Dalits, and among Dalit activists 'he is condemned and the respectful title Mahatma, the Great Soul, is never added to his name' (Hardtmann, 2009, p. xiii). Hardtmann has argued that Gandhi as a negative symbol has worked to unite the Dalit movement through highlighting 'the frontiers of the movement and the differences of the activists in relation to those "others", who do not share their basic values' (2009, p. 123).

In the 1970s, inspired by the Black Panthers in the USA, the Dalit Panthers emerged as a militant group of educated activists that brought public attention to the emerging Dalit literary movement. They engaged in literary production 'to express "their hatred of the Hindu caste system, their anger toward the ineffective mainstream Dalit political movement, and their disillusionment about the oppressive conditions of Dalits"' (Contursi, cf. Ciotti 2010b, p. 122). The Panthers were followers of Ambedkar but also influenced by Marxism, and attempted to counter violence against Dalits in the rural areas of Maharashtra (Zelliot, 2005, p. 180).

While in South India the lower castes have numerically dominated state politics since the 1960s, such a development in the North has been characterised as 'delayed' (Jaffrelot, 2003). Christophe Jaffrelot (2003, p. 6) has demonstrated how North India lagged behind in terms of 'including new groups in the political system'. The rise of the Bahujan Samaj Party from the late 1980s has since brought significant change to this political landscape. Political scientist Sudha Pai (2002, p. 9) has argued that the BSP has 'carried forward the *democratic revolution* for the Dalits and other lower castes [...]. In the social field, it has created a new identity and a counter-ideology to the *varna* system [...]. This has succeeded in removing the hold of

Brahmanical ideology and the submissive attitude of the Dalits, providing them with a new confidence and self-respect'.[14]

As a national level organisation, the DCC is executing projects that are aimed both 'downwards', providing support and training to Dalits at the grassroots, and 'upwards', engaging in networking and lobbying activities directed at politicians and civil society organisations in India and internationally. The Committee is also engaged in symbolic and mobilising activities like rallies and demonstrations, aimed at increasing the visibility of the Dalits and their issues. Urban and highly educated, the DCC activists are neither representative of the Dalit population in India as a whole, nor of the population of the various areas they hail from. As their level of politicisation is very high, they are in this sense distinct also from the small successful Dalit middle class in India. However, with their diverse geographical, educational, and organisational backgrounds, the activists can be seen as representative of what has been called a 'new' Dalit movement (Lerche, 2008). This movement consists of individuals and organisations that are engaging with issues of caste oppression and discrimination in various ways. Still, they are connected through formal and informal networks, and their work is grounded in a 'Dalit' identity (Hardtmann, 2009). This 'new' Dalit movement has attempted to internationalise Dalit issues by bringing them in front of the United Nations and getting the attention of international networks that are part of the new social movements (Berg, 2007). It has mainly been described and evaluated in terms of its international activities, whether deemed successful (Bob, 2009) or largely as failures (Lerche, 2008).

There is disagreement among scholars over whether 'the Dalit movement' should be seen as ultimately unified (Hardtmann, 2009) or as several diverse region-specific movements (Pai, 2002). Hardtmann (2009) describes the movement as constituting a counterpublic in opposition to the mainstream Indian public sphere. She argues that the varied Dalit discourses 'may be seen as different movement perspectives, all expressed and presented within the same alternative counterpublic' (Hardtmann, 2009, p. 89). Contrarily, Sudha Pai (2002, pp. 11-12), quoting John Webster, argues that 'the term "Dalit movement" has been used to describe

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[14] Italics in the original.

many similarly placed primordial Dalit collectivities with similar histories of oppression, simultaneously seeking to overcome similar deprivations within a common social system, but with differing visions of their own and society's future'. Similarly, Karin Kapadia (2007, p. 29) asserts that 'there is no "*the* dalit movement" either in Tamil Nadu or elsewhere in India – instead there are a number of disparate and (sadly) often antagonistic dalit movements, singularly lacking in political solidarity.'

I believe that this disagreement arises from the authors' different viewpoints. Hardtmann has studied a network of Dalit activists, and her vision of a pluralistic, but ultimately singular movement reflects the view of those who are working towards the consolidation of the movement on a national level. Seen from specific localities in Tamil Nadu (Kapadia, 2007) and Uttar Pradesh (Pai, 2002) respectively, the distance between these diverse organisations and groups appears greater. As the DCC is a national level organisation the viewpoint of the activists here is closer to that expressed in Hardtmann, but rather than assessing the nature of the movement I will suggest that the *effort* to build a national movement gives an impetus to generalise and stereotype, that can be discerned in the Committee discourse.

Theoretical framework

In this thesis I will be emphasising processes of social differentiation. Exploring in detail some of the meanings that are produced within a contemporary politicised expression of caste, I am not attempting to present a coherent account of caste as a social system. The analytical statements that are made here pertain to the specific setting of politicised Dalit activists in New Delhi. This approach suggests moving away from the grand narrative of caste, and is hence 'part of a general critique of universalizing theories, metanarratives and totalizing typologies' (Moore, 1994, p. 11). Postmodern interventions into anthropology have criticised 'tendencies to write hypercoherent accounts of fundamentally messy societies, cultures, and events', and to 'construct actors as coherent unitary subjects and agents with coherent unitary purposes and desires' (Ortner, 1991, pp. 4-5). While such criticisms should not lead to the abandonment of comparative or synthesising theoretical efforts, they may be useful in order to avoid, when discussing caste in India, the mistaking of a part for the whole. Here, these

challenges are attempted to be met by seeing caste identities and perceptions of social change as construed on the level of the individual, albeit within a multiple, but ultimately limited set of 'available social, public, and cultural narratives' (Somers, 1994, p. 614).

Identity and difference

Drawing upon feminist theorisation of the relation between identity and difference, a premise of this study is that identity should be understood as relational and shifting rather than as a stable feature of personhood. It reflects differences in social and material conditions, which are symbolically marked in relation to others (Woodward, 1997a, p. 12). I believe that the (feminist) concept of difference has not been utilised to its potential when discussing the emergence of new political identities in India. Thinking of identity in terms of *identification* may serve to underline that we are talking about 'a social process rather than [...] the property of individual subjects' (Gilroy, 1997, p. 315). 'Identity and difference are not so much about categorical groupings as about processes of identification and differentiation', and are engaged 'with the desire to belong, to be part of some community, however provisional' (Moore, 1994, p. 2). On the other hand, as Dipankar Gupta (2000, pp. 6-7) has argued, 'stratification and differentiation really complement each other. There is no hierarchy without difference, and every difference implies hierarchy'.

While identity is always marked by difference, under specific circumstances some differences are accentuated while others are bypassed in silence. The Dalit movement is a political movement based on historically constructed notions of a specific 'caste' identity. Here, reified notions of *difference* become crucial to create and maintain group boundaries (Moore, 1994, p. 1). This is not an unusual feature of identity politics: 'Laying claim to an identity within a political movement or as part of making a political statement is often most emphatically defined by difference, by the marking of "us" and "them". It involves marking one identity position out as not another' (Woodward, 1997b, p. 4). Further, the 'activation' of an identity for political or mobilisational purposes is also about contesting the relation between individual agency and dominant social structures. 'Oppressed groups frequently develop their own discourses that work in contra-distinction to dominant ones, but the questions are, can

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people actively recognize and choose the subject positions they take up, and to what degree are they able to resist the terms of dominant discourses?' (Moore, 1994, p. 4). In the words of Henrietta Moore (1994, p. 16), 'the problem is not just to recognize the existence of specific groups who may have alternative perspectives and may not subscribe to dominant discourses within any particular setting. The more pressing problem [...] is to work out what bearing social and cultural discourses have on individual experience'. How, then, should one analyse people's self-representations and their relation to cultural discourses and ideologies, whether dominant or oppositional?

The narrative construction of identity

Suggesting a narrative approach to social and political change, this will be explored through analysing activists' narratives in the light of larger public and meta-narratives. Here I draw upon Margaret Somers' notion of 'ontological narrativity' (1994, p. 618), which 'make identity and the self something that one becomes. [...] Ontological narratives affect activities, consciousness, and beliefs and are, in turn, affected by them'. As we have seen, identity is constructed relationally. Understanding identity as constituted through narrative allows for recognition of dimensions of time, space, and relationality, as well as of the importance of human action, or agency, 'that is nonetheless bounded and constrained by structural restraints' (Somers, 1994, 614). The concept of narrativity is hence not just a methodological tool, but a way of understanding *identity* as social and processual:

How are people's stories constructed? […] [O]ntological narratives can only exist interpersonally in the course of social and structural interactions over time. To be sure, agents adjust stories to fit their own identities, and, conversely, they will tailor "reality" to fit their stories. The intersubjective webs of relationality sustain and transform narratives over time (Somers, 1994, 618).

This 'tailoring of reality' occurs in relation to shared public narratives that are 'attached to cultural and institutional formations larger than the single individual, to intersubjective networks or institutions, however local or grand' (Somers, 1994, p. 619). These public

narratives are again central to ontological narratives, i.e. to how we experience and act in the world. The narrative of 'Dalithood' is the most important public narrative discussed in this thesis. I will argue that personal experiences of suffering and struggle constitute the basis upon which a group identity is constructed, and group solidarity forged. In the activists' stories there is no clear distinction between ideological sentiments that have been learned through political training, education, or from others, and sentiments that have developed out of personal experiences. There is, in this sense, no clear boundary between the self and the social world.

Analysing narratives of politicisation I will attempt to disentangle their meanings, suggest where they come from, and what their implications are. These processes do not have well-defined beginnings or ends or follow predetermined patterns. Rather, they are characterised by fits and starts, paradoxes and contradictions. Still, 'it is important to recognize the ways in which people themselves have always been trying, and are still trying, to make their lives and worlds coherent, to narrate themselves and the worlds in which they live in stories and practices of order and especially of purpose' (Ortner, 1991, p. 10). Hence the presentation of individual histories throughout this thesis rests on an understanding of social life as 'itself *storied*' (Somers, 1994, p. 614).[15] The analysis aims at identifying the dynamics between ontological narratives – the thoughts and experiences of individual activists, and the greater public narratives that are in different ways shared among them.

Finally, it should be made clear that this thesis is an exploration of their self-representations *as activists*, i.e. in their activist roles, and that it focuses upon themes that emerged as crucial in order to understand the complexities of this identity and the narrative of 'Dalithood'. The study does not attempt to capture all aspects of the identities of the people involved, and the questions posed are intended specifically to produce insights into processes of caste politicisation. As social identities are 'relative and to some extent situational' (Eriksen, 2002, p. 30), one may assume that both 'Dalit' and 'activist' aspects of their identities were especially enunciated within the setting of the DCC. Potentially reinforcing this, as an intern I

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[15] Italics in the original.

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was identified with the work and ideology of the Committee, rather than seen as a 'neutral' outsider.

Structure of the thesis

In the next chapter I will introduce the Dalit Cooperation Committee and its employees. I will describe my field work and problematise some aspects of it, and briefly reflect upon the ethical challenges that I faced during this process. In chapter three I will first discuss the notion of a 'Dalit condition' and delineate the historical development of the 'Untouchables' as a category. Thereafter I will explore the public narrative of 'Dalithood' as it was presented by the DCC activists, and analyse how they conveyed this narrative through reiterating experiences of discrimination and exclusion. In the second part of the chapter I will show how this notion of 'Dalithood' is linked to expressions of 'difference' that emerge within a meta-narrative of progress where caste groups and individuals are categorised as 'forward' or 'backward'. On the basis of this I argue that the Dalit identity is defined largely in the negative. Towards the end of the chapter I also consider an assertive expression of this identity through a secular ritualisation of difference. The fourth chapter will turn the attention from a discursive construction of 'Dalits' as a group to the self-representations of the DCC activists, providing a description of their processes of becoming 'aware' and 'empowered'. I contend that these self-representations are ambivalent, both expressing identification with the 'poor Dalits' and articulating distance from them. Chapter five is concerned with religious expressions of Dalit assertion through exploring narratives of conversion. I investigate the meanings of these conversions and describe how activists, through their distancing from 'Hindu values', inscribe themselves into greater historical Dalit narratives.

2 Field, methodology, ethics

<u>Introducing the field</u>

In the fall of 2009 I did a three month internship with the Dalit Cooperation Committee (DCC). I was introduced to the Committee by Professor Diksha Bhan, a scholar and senior activists I had met in Delhi. While working as an intern I also carried out ethnographic participant observation. For the duration of my internship I lived in a flat that the DCC kept a ten minute walk from the office. There I shared the premises with Sheila, an activist from South India, who was working in another branch of the organisation.

The Dalit Cooperation Committee

The DCC was formed in 1998 by Dalit activists and organisations from different parts of India. It was intended to function as a forum through which they could coordinate their efforts and make their presence felt on the national and international levels. The DCC is part of what has been characterised as a 'new' and internationally oriented Dalit movement, as opposed to the more 'classical' Dalit political party, of which the Bahujan Samaj Party is seen as the prime example (Lerche, 2008). Because of the international and online visibility of the Committee, I have found it necessary to be deliberately vague about both its history and the thrust of its present work, in order to avoid compromising the anonymity I had assured the activists of. As the thesis is not concerned with assessing the work carried out by the DCC, this should not detract severely from the arguments made in the following chapters. First, I will describe the Committee and my field work in order to give an idea of the environment of the study and of the type of interactions through which my data was produced.

In the recent past the DCC has been divided into four branches focusing on different Dalit problem areas, and as an intern I was affiliated to its Women's Branch. All the branches had some staff employed at the national level to work with the overall planning and management

of their projects and interventions. The Women's Branch counted five regular employees in Delhi at the time of my field work; two women and three men. In addition, the Delhi office was inhabited by some administrative and financial staff. A few of these sat on the same floor as us, and we would all have lunch together daily. On the floor above ours were more offices with employees of another branch, with whom I would interact regularly. The office of a third branch was a ten minute walk away, while the office of the last branch was located elsewhere.

In addition, all the four branches had State Organisers (SOs) who were based across India. Four out of the five SOs working for the Women's Branch were from the Indo-Gangetic plains; from Rajasthan in the West to Bihar in the East. The State Organisers came to Delhi for several meetings and workshops during my internship, staying for two or three days each time. The three women among them would stay in our flat while in Delhi, which gave me a chance to get to know them better. Professor Bhan, mentioned above, also attended most of these meetings and workshops. Like the Women's Branch, the other branches also had SOs working across India. On a few larger occasions I got the chance to engage in discussions with them, as well as with other resource persons who had been invited to contribute to these sessions. During my stay I went on a three-day 'field visit' to Rajasthan with Shobna, one of my colleagues in Delhi, and Pushpa, the Women's Branch SO in Rajasthan. In the course of my internship I also met activists' husbands and children, and other Dalit and non-Dalit activists and NGO (Non-Governmental Organisation) workers. On a couple of occasions, Dalit women activists not affiliated to the Committee came and stayed in our flat for a night or two. To some extent the place where I lived became a part of my field, and all these encounters contributed to my understanding of the issues at hand.

The activists working for the DCC came from all over India, and from a variety of social, religious, and material backgrounds. As should be clear from the above, the nature of my involvement with these activists varied widely; from working closely for months with some, to talking briefly once with others. It follows that when I present some cursory characteristics of the activists, this is based upon those whom I got to know quite well. While this distinction between 'close' and 'peripheral' colleagues was not clear-cut while in the field, those who are

considered 'close' would comprise about fifteen people, all employed by or formally related to the Committee.

These activists were in their twenties and early thirties. They had stable incomes of between ten and thirty thousand rupees per month from their work in the organisation, and their living standard could be broadly characterised as lower middle class.[16] 'There is considerable debate over the size of the Indian middle class; estimates vary from 50 million to 350 million' (Jeffrey, 2010, p. 5), mostly because there is disagreement of what should be the defining criteria.[17] Many among the DCC activists owned TVs and motorcycles, but most did not own cars. Several of the women activists mentioned that they would have liked to hire a maid to take care of their household, but their financial situation in general did not allow this expense. Their educational levels were overall high, but all had studied in government schools and their degree of English fluency varied. Many held Bachelors or Master's degrees, some were lawyers and some social workers by vocation, and the assisting staff had training in computers, accountancy, or graphic design. While relatively privileged today, the activists came from poor or modest backgrounds, and hence had made substantial material progress from the conditions of their upbringing. Out of those who were married a majority had married comparatively late, i.e. the women when they were in their late twenties or after turning thirty, and mostly after completing their studies. None of the married activists had more than two children. They were Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian, and the Women's Branch SO from Punjab was a Sikh. That said, these broad labels are not well suited to describe the complex religious and non-religious narratives of selfhood that I encountered among them, some of which will be explored in chapter five.

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[16] I did not make a survey of activists' household incomes including the earnings of their spouses. Many of the activists had a partner whose educational levels and occupational status matched their own, but not all. Some of the activists' wives were house-wives, the husband of one woman activist was a carpenter but did not earn much, and some of the activists were unmarried.

[17] Still, as Craig Jeffrey (2010, p. 6) has pointed out, '[t]here is nevertheless a consensus that a reasonably substantial, moderately prosperous stratum now exists in India that does not herald from traditional elites but which exerts a profound influence over the politics, culture and social organization of the country'.

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The work of the Committee

The Dalit Cooperation Committee works towards the attainment and fulfilment of Dalit rights through a variety of channels. The activists provide legal follow-up and support to victims in individual court cases, create awareness building programmes, and design training modules for workshops. They arrange rallies, demonstrations and mass meetings to get attention and to mobilise people, and do advocacy work aimed at influencing the media and public opinion. They also monitor the media for notices and articles with 'Dalit' contents, lobby politicians, government representatives, organisations and donor agencies on the state, national and international levels, and network with other organisations and individual supporters across the country.

On a more concrete note, the Women's Branch activists in Delhi spent their time collecting information from the internet and from Committee sources and processing this information for various purposes, writing reports, participating in internal meetings, discussing accounts, and planning forthcoming events. The tasks I performed were largely of a supportive nature. Among the first things I did was to revise the language of the Women's Branch annual report, which was in the process of completion at the time of my arrival. Later I assisted my colleagues in translating and systematising information gathered by the State Organisers from their respective *jilā*s (districts), and in collecting and revising information on various government schemes and rules and regulations pertaining to institutions of local governance (*pañcāyatī rāj*). I helped with the planning and carrying out of meetings and workshops within the organisation, and was also able to participate in a conference and several meetings outside the office along with DCC representatives.

I speak Hindi and did not use an interpreter at any time during my field work. Some of the activists spoke English, but many did not, and the *lingua franca* at the Women's Branch office was Hindi, albeit liberally sprinkled with English terms. Though I could mostly follow their conversations I was at times unable to express myself in a nuanced manner, and when tired or enthusiastic I resorted to English. Being familiar with the language allowed me to investigate the ways in which statements and expressions were culturally embedded, and to

overhear conversations and remarks that were not specifically intended for me (Frøystad, 2005, p. 57). Some of the activists from South India were also not very proficient Hindi speakers. Hence, language blunders were a source of general amusement in the office, and I also contributed my share.[18]

Field work

Participating in the activists' work and everyday activities to some extent allowed me to gain an insider's view of their concerns, and it provided ample occasion to discuss my questions with them. I got to know some of my colleagues quite well, and compared to the interviews I carried out it was informal conversations at work and burgeoning friendships that enabled me to understand the most about processes of identity construction. In the beginning my note taking relied on some measure of intuition. In larger gatherings I gained insight into how the Committee worked to develop and deploy strategies towards their various goals, and I increasingly felt that I got the hang of the idioms of their shared discourse. Through studying this discourse, also in Committee reports and materials, I learned how the Committee positions itself in relation to public narratives of 'caste' and 'development'.

As I got to know people in their everyday setting I gradually began conducting interviews. Consequently, most of the interviews could be grounded in the realities of their everyday lives in a way that would not have been possible without working alongside them. As it were, the stories narrated by the activists revealed differences, paradoxes, and subject positions that related to, but could not be subsumed under the 'official' Committee narrative of Dalit struggle and assertion.

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[18] As when I insisted over lunch one day that my room had been full of fish the previous night and that I'd got 'fish bites' all over, confusing *machlī* (fish) for *macchar* (mosquito).

To carry out a participatory study while being an intern had its advantages as well as its challenges, both practically and ethically. Working for the DCC allowed me to give something back to the activists in a very tangible way. This introduced a feeling of even-handedness in our relation, although I certainly ended up getting much more than I was able to give. Being an intern was also a role which was familiar and meaningful to the people studied, and hence my presence may have been experienced as less confusing (Thagaard, 2003, p. 69). Besides, working for them immediately signalised to everyone that I sympathise with the Dalit cause, which I also do. I came to the DCC mildly enamoured of the writings of B. R. Ambedkar, fascinated and astonished by Dalit Chief Minister Mayawati's policy of statues in Uttar Pradesh, and inspired by the more familiar approaches to issues of caste oppression employed by the civil society-based 'new' Dalit movement, as described by Hardtmann (2009) and Bob (2009). As being an intern entailed a basic identification with the movement and its aims it might also have deflected the danger of being suspected of having hidden or dishonest intentions.[19] And finally, the internship allowed me to work alongside the activists on a daily basis, something that gave me an acquaintance with their discourse which could not have been easily obtained as a visitor.

As soon as I embarked on my internship it became clear that to keep a balance between observing and conducting field work and performing my tasks for the Women's Branch would be demanding. On a practical note there was a shortness of time. After eight hours in the office I wrote notes in the evenings, but was mostly not able to 'write out' my experiences from the whole day. Performing my assignments as an intern often demanded concentration in front of a computer, and I worried about missing out on what else was going on at the office. Conversely, loitering around and chatting to people generated more insights for my thesis, but also gave me pangs of guilt for not being a hard-working intern. While perhaps no genuine solution, I decided to interrupt my work in order to listen and participate when my co-workers were chatting, also when this meant that I would work less effectively.

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[19] Many researchers have reported of being met with such suspicions when conducting field work in India. For instance, Frøystad (2005, pp. 59-60) describes how after four months of field work in Kanpur, she was suspected of being a spy when inter-religious riots broke out in the city, with the result that she was ostracised from her former host families for several months.

Being an intern, I was in a position explicitly characterised by knowing less than my colleagues. To some extent this position allowed me to ask 'stupid' questions and to be unaware of the most basic facts and social conventions. Occasionally someone would correct my behaviour, something that effectively served to clarify activists' practices and the meanings embedded in these.[20] Since I had been introduced to the organisation by one of its leaders, I initially worried about being too closely associated with the leadership. However, as I spent my days working with the regular employees they would crack jokes and voice leadership criticism around me – something which indicates that my presence at the office did not seriously affect the interaction between the activists working there.

While the activists' openness towards me was probably contingent on the trust and friendship that developed between us, I believe that it was also facilitated by the non-integrated nature of my presence. My integration could never be anything but partial, as my being there in the first place was contingent on my intention to write about my colleagues and friends (Narayan K. , 1993). Several activists told me things about themselves and later pointed out that this was something their colleagues were not aware of. As an outsider I was entrusted with information that somehow did not 'fit in' or that could be seen as overly critical to the leadership or to the organisational consensus. Also, knowing that I was writing a thesis, many were eager to share their views, as I might otherwise get a wrong picture of issues they considered important.

Notes and interviews

One of the fundamental tensions of conducting ethnographic field work is that between the ideal of 'immersion in the life-worlds and everyday experiences' of others (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995, p. 35), and the uneasy distance inevitably present between the anthropologist and the people from whom she is learning, stemming from 'the very nature of researching what to others is taken-for-granted reality' (Narayan K., 1993, p. 682). '[E]fforts to observe in order to write about shared experiences and witnessed events induce a distinctive ethnographic

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[20] One such instance is described and analysed in the end of chapter three.

stance. [...] [T]he ethnographer's strangeness is created and maintained exactly by writing field notes; such notes reflect and realize this socially close but experientially separate stance' (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995, p. 36). To negotiate this strangeness, to be a colleague and friend to the activists, I ended up limiting the 'othering' practice of writing notes while participating in their work. At the office I would jot down some key words after an exchange was over, and then write more complete notes at home in the evenings.

While I do agree with the principle of informed consent, I found it difficult to live up to in the field setting. Like Frøystad (2005, p. 58) experienced, 'the problem was not the consent', as everyone I encountered were willing to share information and answer my questions. Still I was not comfortable taking notes during lunch or during informal conversations. In order to exercise my powers of empathy as a research tool to 'understand what it is to be a member of the community that is being studied' (Srinivas, 2009 [1966], p. 164), it was important for me to establish rapport and become, albeit with the limitations outlined above, one of them. More importantly, this methodological choice was only to some extent informed by sound strategic considerations as a researcher. It was also the result of my own social needs in the field; to make friends and to feel included and on an equal footing (Nielsen, 1996, pp. 155-56).

During more formal interactions like meetings and workshops, however, I would take notes as we went. These meetings lasted for hours, sometimes the whole day, and as they were held in Hindi, it was crucial for me to write in order to remember what had happened. In these settings other participants would also write notes, and minutes were written to be distributed among the participants afterwards. Thus, in these situations writing was the expected thing to do rather than a strange and 'othering' activity.

In addition to notes from participatory observation at the office, at home, and in other settings, I conducted approximately twenty interviews.[21] Fourteen of these were with people formally connected to the Committee, while the remaining six were with Dalit activists who were not

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[21] The approximate number is due to the nature of these interviews. When there were other people present, they would take part in the conversation, and in one instance an interview with a senior activist gradually came to be 'taken over' by his son.

affiliated to the DCC. These six interviews were conducted before and during my internship; in Delhi, Lucknow (Uttar Pradesh), and Jaipur (Rajasthan). Four of the twenty interviews were in English and the rest in Hindi, and barring two, all interviews were recorded. Out of the fourteen interviews with DCC affiliates, four were with leaders of the organisation and ten with the 'regular' activists. The interviews lasted from half an hour to three hours, and were carried out at the DCC office, in other offices, in the flat where I lived, and in other people's homes. Throughout the thesis I will present quotes from these interviews.

The interviews were open-ended and revolved around questions of what it means to be 'Dalit' and to be an activist. We talked about how and why they had come to be involved in the struggle for Dalit rights. I asked about their family backgrounds, religious affiliations, and views on marriage. Through these topics I intended to explore the meanings of what it entails to become an activist, and to map these processes on an individual level as expressions of the politicisation of caste identity. While this gives a general picture of these conversations, the same topics were not covered in all the interviews, and some were covered more thoroughly than others. This largely depended on how the interviewee responded to my probing. Hence the interviews reflect that I was more concerned with trying to understand their various vantage points and map out the variety of motivations and concerns among them, than with producing a set of directly comparable or quantifiable answers. In the few cases when I did not know the interviewee already, I also posed general questions about their backgrounds, their work, and their views on the challenges facing the Dalit community.

While a majority of the DCC employees were male, most of those I have labelled my 'close' colleagues were women. As an intern I worked for the Women's Branch, wherein most of the employees were women. Moreover, the flat where I lived became inhabited by these women from time to time, which created an arena for another, more personal kind of interaction. At the same time the male activists were both more numerous and more vocal in the common arenas of the Committee where I carried out participatory observation. Hence while there is no lacuna of male viewpoints in my observational data, my interaction with the male activists remained somewhat more formal. This gendered bias was to some extent ameliorated by the interviews; eight out of the total twenty interviews were with male activists.

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Ethical considerations

Being both an intern and an ethnographer also produced ethical challenges. The size of the organisation and its network made it difficult to ensure that all involved parties were aware of the implications of ethnography. At times, my identity as an intern completely overshadowed my identity as a researcher. In one large meeting I was simply presented as 'Guro, who is an intern here with us', leaving the participants who did not already know me unaware of my additional agenda. Obtaining written consent from everyone in the field setting was not a viable alternative. Written agreements can be perceived as a lack of trust between the parties in India, and asking for written consent may have made the activists suspicious of my intentions. The various spheres of interaction and the organisational structure of the DCC made it 'difficult [and] impracticable [...] to obtain knowledgeable and voluntary (let alone written) consent from everyone in [the] field setting' (Ellen, 1984, p. 147). The data collected in larger meetings have shaped my understanding of the DCC internal discourse, but none of the participants who were thus insufficiently informed are quoted directly in the thesis.

Compared to larger meetings and seminars, it was the daily interaction with my colleagues that truly shaped my understanding of what was going on in the organisation. They knew that I was doing research, but much of my understanding was derived from informal conversations; about food and cooking; about the leadership and their priorities; and about everyday worries and challenges. Writing notes in the evenings I often pondered whether such information could be seen as having been gathered openly and in an ethical way. While the people around the lunch table knew that I was writing my thesis about their work, I doubt that they imagined me struggling to write down their *bātcīt* (conversations) from memory in the evenings. Through the practice of writing I was constantly reminded of my uneasy role as a 'spy' (Nielsen, 1996, p. 14).

Interestingly, when I began conducting interviews I experienced that this served to clarify my identity as a researcher. However ambiguous my role was in other respects, asking questions

and taping activists' answers seemed to bring clarity to the research aspect of my presence. I sometimes asked about stories or incidents I had heard references to earlier, and when the activist replied by giving me the entire account 'on record' it became a sort of permission for me to write about it. After the interviews some expressed that my purpose had become clearer to them, and several activists later initiated discussions based on things we had talked about during these taped interviews.

Upon returning from the field, and with the distance created by the process of turning my experiences into a text, I have done my best to keep alive the difficult considerations that arose from balancing roles as researcher, intern, and friend. I have strived to make them my precept when deciding what to write and what to leave out. In order to avoid causing harm by exposing controversial or personal information, I have tried to include only that which is necessary to undergird the arguments made. I have gone to great lengths to protect their anonymity, being particularly vague both about the DCC and about individual activists. For the same reason one person has been split into two, appearing under different names in different parts of the thesis. Still, none of this can be seen as a wholesale solution to the challenges described above, as everything I experienced during my stay fed into my understanding of the social phenomena I studied.

3 Constructing 'Dalithood'

The narratives presented in this chapter illustrate how the notion of 'Dalithood' is constructed among the DCC activist. The stories they tell play into a larger narrative of Dalit exclusion and oppression, and they often carry clear moral meanings. That is, while the activists speak on the basis of their own experiences, their narratives should also be read as shaped by, and simultaneously shaping, their shared political discourse. Analysing these narratives I demonstrate how the notion of Dalithood forms the basis of a politics of difference. Activist narratives tell of experiences of discrimination and exclusion, most commonly from the educational sphere. What emerges from these stories is the sustained need for a Dalit struggle (*sangharṣ*) despite the existence of reservations and other measures of formal state support. A political climate of competition between caste groups seem to strengthen feelings of separateness, and lead to a reinforcement of 'new' caste loyalties through sharpening the notions of 'us' and 'them'. I argue that the emphasis on *difference* then becomes central to define Dalit identity.

While within the DCC 'Dalit' is presented as an inherent and 'natural' identity, this chapter aims to demonstrate the extent to which it is an identity with political implications. Further the chapter investigates the idioms through which the notion of Dalithood is expressed among the activists, and how these idioms are submerged in a dichotomised public narrative wherein individuals belong to groups that are seen as 'forward' or 'backward'. In her study of the Chamars[22] of Manupur, Uttar Pradesh, Manuela Ciotti (2010b, p. 119) found the same tendency; the Chamars 'used the expression *piche hona* (to be behind) or *age hona* (to be ahead), the latter indicating the state of being "developed"'. As she further points out, '[t]his is a discourse to which the low castes are especially exposed and which shapes progress under the form of a "social race" amongst castes' (Ciotti, 2010b, p. 119).

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[22] The Chamars are one of the more populous Scheduled Castes of North India. Traditionally associated with leather working, the Chamars have asserted themselves politically, especially through the currently governing BSP in Uttar Pradesh, and are considered to be substantially represented in the vanguard of the Dalit movement.

The Dalit condition

That Dalits have traditionally been, and still are, excluded from Hindu mainstream society is one of the activists' strongest allegations against the 'non-Dalits'. They argue that it is this exclusion which has made them into a group of oppressed subjects. Rather than seeing 'untouchability' as a modern expression of inequality or as a result of colonial politics (Dirks, 2001), the activists see it as ancient practices, anchored in tradition and sanctioned by religion. Situating such practices squarely within the domain of 'the traditional', its abolishment becomes closely associated with 'the modern'. The historical oppression of Dalits is part of a collective memory which is constitutive of the 'Dalit condition' (Narula, 2008), a notion that the DCC activists draw upon to explain how Dalits are excluded and oppressed in Indian society today. The concept of a shared past is crucial to understand the dynamics of the Dalit 'politics of difference'. Starting from a notion of difference, derived from experiences of being excluded, the activists appropriate this difference and attempt to turn it into an asset. They argue that group consciousness and solidarity is necessary in order to achieve social ascension and emancipation from oppression for the Dalits as a whole.

Caste and occupation

Seeing the caste system as originally a system of occupational categories like it was done by Gandhi (Zelliot, 2005, p. 154) has been dismissed as an historical explanation for the institution of caste.[23] Some *jāti*s never had any traditional occupation associated with them, and among those who did many of their members never carried out those specific tasks, or relied as much on other occupations for their livelihood. In short, the idea that *jātis* are primarily occupational groups has never been a sufficient description of the realities on the ground. Further, transitions in the economy have rendered many traditional occupations obsolete and led to the creative reinvention or renewed appropriation of others (Mendelsohn

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[23] Gandhi wrote in *Harijan*, his newspaper, that '[o]ne born a scavenger must earn his livelihood by being a scavenger, and then do whatever else he likes' (Zelliot, 2005, p. 154). While opposing the evils of 'untouchability' and discrimination on the basis of caste, Gandhi upheld that Indian society should be organised according to the *varna* scheme, with its assignment of traditional duties on the basis of birth.

& Vicziany, 1998, pp. 7-8). Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph (1967, p. 134) have reported how the traditional leather workers (Chamars) of Rajasthan were eager to dissociate themselves from their customary trade of leather working in 1956, but by 1963, 'because of generous government financial and technical support [...], Chamars were straining to exclude "opportunists" from invading their ancient monopoly'. In the contemporary era new markets, new occupations and increased social mobility, especially in urban areas, have further weakened the bonds that existed between *jāti* and occupation.

Still, the link between caste and occupation was emphasised by the DCC activists. When Kamal, a Committee activist now in his late twenties, was a school-going child in Delhi, he went to visit his mother's village in the summer holidays. Following his aunt around the village while she was working, he had inadvertently touched the hearth in a 'caste-Hindu' courtyard. When the lady of the house saw this she rushed out of her house and slapped and abused him. This un-anticipated outbreak of anger made no sense to Kamal, who could not understand what he had done to upset the woman. When probed, his aunt had reluctantly explained that she had reacted this way because he belonged to a family of scavengers, whose task it was to empty the dry latrines in the village. Kamal said that upon returning to Delhi he had urged his own mother to give up scavenging and solemnly declared that he himself would 'never lay hands on the broom'. He explained that this experience had made him very intent to rid his family of the stigma derived from this practice.

Cleaning work, manual scavenging, handling of dead people and dead animals, and working with 'polluting' substances like leather, are considered tasks through which Dalits are reproduced, and continue to reproduce themselves, as lesser beings. In particular, the image of scavengers collecting human excreta with their hands and carrying the waste in baskets on their heads or hips was often referred to within the DCC, cited as proof of the inhuman condition of the Dalits and of the cruelty of the Hindu social system. Decades earlier, Gandhi had also recognised the potency of this image, and 'selected the Bhangi, a scavenger caste of North India, to represent the problem of untouchability' (Zelliot, 2005, p. 154). Kamal's story is therefore not merely a strong childhood memory, but has become *storied*. Through its usage today it illustrates how such stigmatised occupations have come to embody the 'Dalit

condition'. In the DCC the carrying out of such tasks is seen as one reason why people of other castes regard Dalits as polluting and unfit to carry out more 'respectable' work. Consequently the activists considered the abolishing of such demeaning occupations and duties as central to reach their objective of Dalit liberation.

Telling me his story, Kamal stressed that he had been treated this way by a woman of the village despite the fact that his clothes and appearance was 'better' than that of the village people. The 'upper caste' violent reaction to a child touching a courtyard hearth was *more* unfair and despicable since that child was clean, school-going, and neatly dressed. Contesting the morality of practices that are derived from a traditional hierarchy based on purity and pollution, Kamal argued for the progressive middle-class values of education, cleanliness, and 'good' appearance. Reminiscent of colonial attempts to reform the Dalit population in order to improve their lot, this narrative illustrates how notions of reform and self-improvement are still central in the contemporary Dalit movement. This issue is central to several of the arguments made here and will reappear later in the thesis.

Now, besides working for the Women's Branch, Kamal also ran a tuition centre for Dalit children in the Delhi neighbourhood where he lived with his wife and young daughter. Kamal often referred to anecdotes from this tuition centre when explaining something to me. Talking to a group of children there about their futures, he had told them that there was no reason why they should clean other people's houses for a living. A young boy had then raised his hand and asked, 'but if we don't clean the Brahmins' houses, then who will?' Kamal had replied that everyone should clean up after themselves.

I read this story as being intended to demonstrate how a slave mentality is reproduced among the Dalits, and to underscore the need to curtail the reproduction of negative Dalit self-images, that are seen to limit their individual life choices. Such narratives of 'Dalithood' with quite unambiguous moral messages were often reiterated by the activists. As Gorringe and Rafanell (2007, p. 99) have pointed out, 'movement members act as part of groups who share similar world-views'. Hence, the authors stress the importance of asking 'searching questions

that disrupt [...] the pre-rehearsed narratives' (Gorringe & Rafanell, 2007, p. 99) of movement leaders and activists. While agreeing that this is important, I believe that stories that are considered 'established movement stories' (Gorringe & Rafanell, 2007, p. 99) must also be analysed to understand movement dynamics. Taken together these stories represent the image that the activists wish to present to others.

When describing the 'Dalit condition', the DCC activists emphasised the minuscule Dalit presence in high status, well paid occupations and sectors and their overrepresentation in poorly paid, insecure, low status occupations. While problems of employment insecurity and landlessness are not overlooked, they do receive somewhat less attention in the internal discourse of the Committee. Such difficulties afflict by far a larger proportion of the Dalit population than for instance the stigma derived from manual scavenging.[24] Still, the stereotypical image of 'the Dalit' as one who carries out spectacularly denigrating tasks has come to epitomise the Dalit condition.

One reason for this may be that landlessness is primarily associated with poverty and not with caste discrimination per se. People belonging to other castes and religious groups are also landless, although they are so in a smaller proportion. Consequently, activist narratives are mostly focused on forms of exclusion and discrimination that may be classified as 'untouchability'. The movement emphasis on traditional duties and conditions that are *particular* to the Dalits may be interpreted as a question of caste contra class. Manual scavenging, separate seating and being denied water are forms of exclusion which unequivocally indicate the 'Dalit condition'. It is by suffering from these and similar disabilities that the Dalits are singled out from the rest of society. I do not see this merely as a strategic emphasis on the part of the activists. Rather, the injustice of caste-based discrimination is experienced as more severe precisely because the difference upon which it is premised has been politicised and is vehemently contested by them. Other differences, as

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[24] The number of people working as manual scavengers in India is disputed. While the Indian state had identified 115.000 scavengers to benefit from a government rehabilitation scheme in 2007, the official figure was reported at 676.000 in 2010 (IANS, 2010). The largest organisation working for the abrogation of this practice, the Safai Karamchari Andolan, suggests that there were 1.3 million manual scavengers in India in 2005 (Desai, 2009). For more on various state governments' denial of the continuation of manual scavenging, see cover story in Frontline magazine, September 9.-22. 2006 (Zaidi).

between the rich and the poor, are not politicised to the same extent within the contemporary Dalit movement.

The Colonial Prelude

Discussing the historical development of 'the untouchable', Simon Charsley (1996) has showed how this notion was first put to use by officials in the colonial government, who were eager to create clear, pan-Indian categories for the purpose of conducting censuses. Schemes of classification initially varied greatly from province to province, and the census takers were frustrated by people's 'inability' to return consistent answers when asked about their caste (Charsley S. , 1996, p. 3). The colonial effort generated a profusion of claims for higher status from castes usually considered 'low',[25] and the idea of the 'untouchables' as a distinct social segment was taken up by socio-religious and nationalist reformers (Charsley S. , 1996, pp. 5-6). One of these reformers was the leader and politician B. R. Ambedkar. Himself an 'untouchable', Ambedkar saw this label as having the potential to unite people of different castes and languages through emphasising their common experience of being at the receiving end of both caste and class hierarchies. Consequently Ambedkar asserted that the 'untouchables' were 'a separate element in the national life of India' and 'argued fiercely for the fundamental nature of an Untouchable-Hindu divide' (Charsley S. , 1996, p. 9).

'The Untouchables' as a clearly demarcated, pan-Indian group never existed independently of this historical politics of naming. In its contemporary usage, Charsley (1996, p. 19) has argued that the concept 'Untouchable' 'sets up a category defined as the bottom of a hierarchically ordered society but in practice traps and equates a variety of castes [that are] differently placed economically, socially, culturally and politically.' While caste-based exclusion is not irrelevant in contemporary India, 'it is a factor of empirically varying significance which has been attributed an *a priori* salience beyond all other considerations by the twentieth-century conceptual development of "the Untouchable"' (Charsley S. , 1996, p. 19). The Rudolphs (1967, pp. 133-34) have similarly argued that the legal and administrative

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[25] An example of the process which was later coined 'Sanskritisation' by sociologist M. N. Srinivas (2009 [1966]).

term Scheduled Caste 'lends the category "untouchable" a spurious social definitiveness and homogeneity' (Rudolph & Rudolph, 1967, pp. 133-34).

Countering Charsley's constructionist argument, Mendelsohn & Vicziany (1998, p. 2) remind us that 'the Untouchables' 'were fashioned as a political grouping from clay that was many hundreds of years old. They were not conjured out of thin air'. Hence in their view 'it continues to make sense – at least for the time being – to talk in terms of a grouping called 'Untouchables', 'Harijans', 'Dalits' or other comparable term' (Mendelsohn & Vicziany, 1998, p. 13). The development of these categories is relevant not merely to acknowledge their historicity, but because this historical process should be seen as ongoing rather than as consolidated during colonial rule. The narratives that are presented here show how the process of (re-)constructing 'Dalithood' is continuously evolving in contemporary India.

Today, 'Dalit' is at one and the same time an identity ascribed by birth and an identity acquired through becoming 'aware' (Hardtmann, 2009, p. 50). On the one hand, 'Dalit' is a self-description which has been 'chosen by the group itself and [...] used proudly' (Zelliot, 2005, p. 267), but on the other it is a label which is applied by politicised Dalits to people who have never used it to designate themselves. Hence 'Dalit' is also a top-down designation which tends to 'suggest that the huge Untouchable population of India has been swept up into a single radical politics' (Mendelsohn & Vicziany, 1998, p. 4), something which is surely not the case. The degree of identification with the term among 'ordinary' Scheduled Castes is largely unknown.[26]

Still, in the present scholarly discourse, 'Dalit' has substituted other terms when talking about these groups in Indian society, as is evident in the establishment of several centres of Dalit studies across the country.[27] I agree with Mendelsohn & Vicziany that it would make no sense to abolish 'Dalit' as a self-designation for people who think of themselves as a group, but at

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[26] In an interesting observation, Alan Marriott (2003, p. 3752) notes how Scheduled Caste respondents to the National Family Health Survey in 1998-99 replied to a subordinate question about their caste; 'while harijan [...] was used by 1351 respondents in 18 different states, and a number of respondents used scheduled caste, not one respondent chose dalit'.

[27] Out of these, the Indian Institute of Dalit Studies (IIDS) in New Delhi is one of the most widely recognised.

the same time the 'natural' existence of this group must be questioned through highlighting the processes through which it is construed. The issue here is not to deny the oppression that various groups of low ritual status suffer in India. Stressing that 'Dalit' is not a self-evident category I wish to emphasise that within this politics, people are both claiming and claimed. This may also enable sensitivity as to how this label is used to claim to represent, and 'speak for', others.

A Dalit politics of difference

Dalit feminism is one field in which the meaning of 'difference' in the politics of the Dalit movement has been discussed explicitly. Professor Diksha Bhan, who was a prominent leader in the DCC, had been part of the early initiatives to raise Dalit women's issues in North India.[28] Moving from Maharashtra to Delhi after getting married, she came to the highly politicised campus of the Jawaharlal Nehru University and was soon engulfed in social and political work. She took part in initiating a reading circle on Ambedkar, and recalled that the students who were trying to raise Dalit issues had intense discussions with the Marxists, considered to be a strong force at this university. Then, for about ten years onwards from 1980, she and other vocal Dalit women got involved with the women's movement in an effort to 'make them raise Dalit women's issues from their platform' (Diksha Bhan). They argued that since discrimination and practices of untouchability persist and Dalit women are largely unable to access state and development resources, their problems should be addressed specifically. On the grounds of their 'lack of development' and their continuing involvement in highly stigmatised occupations like manual scavenging and as *devdāsī*s,[29] Dalit women comprise a separate group; a 'neglected class on the margins (*hashiye par*) of society';

We were raising this question again and again. But the Women's freedom movement, in their view they tried to evaluate it as no, no, all women's problems are the same. [...] There are 'gender' problems, there are problems of gender discrimination (*lingadārī bhedbhav*), there are employment problems. [They say] employment problems are all the same. It is not like that, in reality it is not like that. Dalit women's problems are entirely different

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[28] This section draws heavily on Prof. Bhan's rendering of this process.

[29] *Devdāsī*s are so-called 'temple servants' or 'dancing girls' (McGregor, 1993). They are often temple prostitutes, and Dalit activists argue that those who 'marry their daughters to the gods' are mostly Dalit families who are unable to pay dowry.

(*bilkul alag*) because there is a social stigma attached to them, that if you are Dalit then you are untouchable (*āchut*). So for that reason they are excluded (*alag hī rakhā*) from many matters. They are poor and most of the women are labourers. [...] OBC and 'dominant caste' women are not discriminated against like that. So to say that their problems are also the same is basically to see it with the wrong view. (Diksha Bhan)

In this narrative, Dalit women's difference emanates from the fact that they are seen as untouchable (*āchut*). 'Dalithood' is hence imagined on the basis of being exposed to various discriminatory practices labelled as 'untouchability'. Referring to a pervasive 'backwardness' as described earlier, it is argued that this backwardness requires special attention and alternative solutions. In the story as told by Diksha Bhan, Dalit feminists gradually came to understand that as long as they kept looking to non-Dalit women for leadership, their efforts would be in vain. Focusing one-sidedly on gender the feminist movement did not acknowledge *caste* as a dimension in the struggle for women's freedom. The Dalit feminists could not convince them to include 'social questions' (i.e. caste) in their objectives, and finally they decided to 'become separate' (Diksha Bhan). Coming together in their own fora, Dalit women writers, teachers, and activists were encouraged to address Dalit women's problems independently. Commenting upon these developments, Dalit scholar and activist Gopal Guru (1995, p. 2548) has argued that the social location of Dalit women is instructive in determining their perceptions of reality:

Dalit women's claim to "talk differently" assumes certain positions. It assumes that the social location of the speaker will be more or less stable; therefore, "talking differently" can be treated as genuinely representative. This makes the claim of dalit woman [*sic*] to speak on behalf of dalit women automatically valid. In doing so, the phenomenon of "talking differently" foregrounds the identity of dalit women (Guru, 1995, p. 2549).

Guru's argument assumes that the 'Dalit' aspect of the identities of these women is by far the most important one. Defining this identity on the basis of 'social location', it is used to contest perceptions of reality. Guru (1995, p. 2548) also notes that it should come as no surprise that Dalit women chose to invoke the notion of difference to organise in opposition to mainstream feminism, as 'the organisation of politics around difference has become a major feature of feminist politics'. In my view, this 'politics of difference' is not limited to Dalit feminism, but is constitutive of Dalit politics in general. Based on the construction of 'Dalithood' as

described above, a dichotomised view of society emerges. The split between Dalit feminists and the mainstream women's movement may hence be seen as analogous to that between the Dalit movement and the Indian political mainstream.

Within a context of increasing politicisation of caste, providing one's own leadership was also a strong expression of assertion among the Dalit feminists: 'We had for the first time tried to bring these things up front and bring out a picture of the sum of Dalit women's exploitation. So in that way we started a separate movement and it was we *(ham hī)* who ran it' (Diksha Bhan). The Dalit politics of difference is based on a historical and continuing apprehension towards 'caste Hindu' attempts to 'speak for' the Dalits. It thus illustrates the failure of the traditional political left to mobilise and represent the 'lowest' castes. The rise of low-caste politics in India is also an expression of marginalised people's disillusionment with the traditional left forces: 'There seems to be a continuing hold of economism, deliberate overlooking of the social dimension, whereas the reality is that central to the political crisis facing India is a social crisis and an important part though not the whole of the social crisis is a crisis of the caste system' (Kothari, 1997, p. 455).

Rejecting an economic or class approach to the problems facing their communities, the DCC activists assert that their struggle must be grounded in them 'being different' (*alag*),[30] and that this difference is determined by caste. Within these politics, one's location in the social structure is seen to determine perceptions of reality. Hence personal experiences become a prerequisite for acquiring a true understanding of what it entails to be Dalit. Invoking authenticity, this involves that legitimate representation presupposes 'Dalithood'. While sympathetic towards their efforts to let Dalits speak for themselves and thereby reduce the distance between those who represent and the people on the 'grassroots', there are, in my view, several difficulties linked to this argument.

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[30] The word *alag* can also mean 'detached', 'separate from' (with postposition *se*); 'loose, free' or 'excluded' (McGregor, 1993). In Diksha Bhan's statement above, however, the correct translation is 'Dalit women's problems are entirely *different'*, implying the nature as well as the magnitude of these problems.

When positionality is reduced to individual experience and linked to grounds for authority, this process of reduction 'encourages a view of experience which sees it as ontological, singular and fixed' (Moore, 1994, p. 2). I agree with Henrietta Moore (1994, p. 2) that while the social location from which an individual speaks *does* matter, the construction of the Dalit identity tends to ignore that 'all locations are provisional, held in abeyance [...] and if locations or positions are to be specified, they will always be in the plural'. I contend that the argument that only Dalits can represent Dalits *also* serves to subsume internal differences and create a falsely undifferentiated notion of 'Dalithood'.

There are historical reasons for this insistence on 'Dalithood' as a prerequisite for group belonging: '[P]rovoked by the phenomenon of co-optation over such a long period, there has emerged a tendency among the *dalits* to insist on 'autonomous', exclusivist identity and membership, striking a discordant attitude towards movements and intellectuals and political activists that are committed to them but belong to other castes' (Kothari, 1997, p. 456). A possible outcome of this is that it may lead Dalit activists and politicians to refrain from uniting in struggle with other groups that are socially and/or economically similarly placed. Kothari (1997, p. 457) has further argued that this outlook will not 'provide the dalit cause the necessary political base for it to be a catalyst of history'.

Becoming educated: Narratives of struggle

Describing what it had been like to grow up a Dalit, the narrative of struggle (*sangharṣ*) was pervasive among the DCC activists. While phrased in different ways, all the activists I asked about their background depicted their childhood with reference to a notion of struggle. This notion was manifest in different contexts, but most of the time it pertained to their efforts to get education (*śikṣā lenā*). They had all had to overcome obstacles in order to get educated and to arrive (*pahũchnā*) at the 'place' where they now were. Several of the activists recounted a lack of support from their families as a part of this struggle, and some described their parents as 'backward'. As mentioned, all the activists were highly educated, from 12th pass to Ph.D. While none of them had been kept out of school as a direct result of a lack of

money, obstacles that arose from poverty and that had detrimental effects on their educational progress made up an important part of this narrative of struggle.

None of the activists' stories can be seen as representative for the group as a whole. Each childhood was unique both in terms of family background and because the activists came from localities with different characteristics, but the stories I was told also contain some shared features. According to Vikram, who had grown up in Delhi and was now a graphic designer with the DCC, his family did not give much value to education. His mother was illiterate and he said that his parent's attitudes were 'backward'. The lack of encouragement and support from his parents as well as growing up in an environment characterised by fights and alcohol abuse had detrimental effects on his educational motivation. He had struggled to get through school, dropping out several times before finally passing his 12th grade examination several years delayed.

Pushpa, the DCC State Organiser for Rajasthan, was living with her husband and their young daughter in the state capital Jaipur. Before joining the Committee a few years earlier, Pushpa had worked both as a teacher and with another organisation. She said that her primary education had been made possible by the hard work of her mother, who had been one of the few literate women in the village where Pushpa grew up, and who had been determined to educate her two daughters.

Until 10th [grade] I studied in Mausa, and after 10th [grade], when I turned fifteen years, I got married along with my older sister.[31] That happened because my family 'background' was a little... One could say it was because of money. There was not such a lot of money. The family didn't have any 'support', right? My father used to do sewing. He is a 'tailor'. So my dad, when we were small – or until my marriage when I was fifteen – my father used to 'drink' a lot. He used to 'drink' a lot. Whatever he earned he would spend it all on drinking. So that means my mother got me educated. In Mausa our village was seven-eight kilometres away [from the school]. So we went [to school] by foot and came back from there on foot as well. Because there was a 'money problem' we studied in a 'government' school, and hence we didn't have the problem of paying monthly 'fees'. We couldn't study in 'private' because there the 'money problem' comes up. (Pushpa)

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[31] The name of Pushpa's home district has been replaced with the fictitious Mausa district.

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After getting married Pushpa wanted to continue her studies, and luckily found that her in-laws had a 'progressive' mindset. They were supportive of her studies and later of her 'going out' to work, and Pushpa stressed that they were 'progressive' despite that they were not themselves educated. Although they supported her further studies, the young *bahū* (daughter-in-law) was expected to fulfil her duties in the household: 'My in-laws (*sasurālvālō*) allowed me to study. They 'supported' me fully. So then I did BA, coming from my in-laws I did it. [...] After having done all the housework in the morning I went to college, and in the evening I came back and did the housework, and in the night I studied.' (Pushpa)

If Indian poverty is defined as 'the sum of low standards of nutrition, health, housing, general material consumption and formal education [...], the Untouchables are overwhelmingly a poor people' (Mendelsohn & Vicziany, 1998, p. 30). Historically, 'Untouchable' children were largely excluded from educational institutions in India (Ciotti, 2010b, pp. 123-124). Also during the colonial period, while the Anglo-Indian state made 'formal pronouncements requiring non-discriminatory admission of children to public schools' from the middle of the nineteenth century, it 'routinely failed to enforce its edicts' (Mendelsohn & Vicziany, 1998, p. 122).

By the time the Indian Constitution was adopted in 1950, it was not only widely recognised that Dalits should get access to schools, but also that they were entitled to special provisions through scholarships and reserved seats in institutions of higher education. Education was the tool by which the Nehruvian state intended to uplift the 'poor masses', and the Scheduled Castes were seen to hold a special position within this category. In terms of literacy rates, the last decades have seen significant change. According to the Indian Census 15 per cent of the SC population was literate in 1971, 21 per cent in 1981, and 37 per cent in 1991 (Mendelsohn & Vicziany, 1998, p. 35). By the time of the 2001 Census the literacy rate of the Scheduled Castes was 54.7 per cent, in contrast to 64.8 per cent among the general population (Government of India M. o., 2010-11).[32] While educational levels among the SCs are rising,

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[32] Provisional figures from the 2011 Census were released on the 31st of March 2011. These indicate that the overall literacy rate in the country is now 74.04 per cent, an increase of close to ten percentage points over

contemporary studies from North India demonstrate that education is far from a guarantee for meaningful employment (Jeffrey, Jeffery, & Jeffery, 2008).

Compared to what is often presented as the average Scheduled Caste condition of landlessness and poverty, most of the activists' families were relatively resourceful. A few of them had parents who belonged to the educated Ambedkarite middle class, but most came from modest or poor backgrounds. Still, all the activists had at least one close relative who had acquired some education, who had secured government employment[33] or other salaried employment, or who owned a small plot of agricultural land. Hence their social positions were ambivalent; they belonged to castes that are seen as 'untouchable' and 'backward', but many were better off than most Scheduled Caste families in the localities where they had grown up. This is in accord with what Mendelsohn and Vicziany (1998, pp. 238-248) found when investigating the backgrounds of Scheduled Caste MLAs and MPs in North India.[34] Even if their economic bases were weak, all the elected representatives they interviewed came from families that had been able, in one way or the other, to acquire some material leverage. Hence Mendelsohn and Vicziany (1998, p. 240) conclude that 'almost no one rises in a single generation from the ordinary Untouchable condition of poverty to the heights of parliament'. A similar statement can be made about the DCC activists; although the conditions they had grown up in varied widely, they all had support from some quarter. Like in Pushpa's story above, this enabling support was usually described as coming from a named individual, in Pushpa's case her mother, rather than being in any way systemic.

School was, not surprisingly, also an arena for many of the activists' early experiences of discrimination. As the educational sphere is by now shared by all, many of the activists were made aware of their 'difference' through encounters with teachers and other students. Meena, an activist in her early thirties from Bihar, told me how she had been made to sit on the floor next to the mat that the other children sat on, and to drink from her hands in stead of from a glass like the others. The experience of such discrimination obviously informed the process of

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the last decade (Government of India M. o., 2010-11). Corresponding figures for the Scheduled Castes were yet to be released by the time of writing.

[33] While government employment in general is highly coveted in India, most of the activists' family members who had obtained this were tellingly employed in Class IV, the menial grade which includes sweepers.

[34] MLAs and MPs are members of Indian legislatures, on the state and the national levels respectively.

identity formation among the activists: 'Reinforced through constant practice, this "education" profoundly shapes Dalit consciousness and identity' (Shah, Mander, Thorat, Deshpande, & Baviskar, 2006, p. 13). While the exclusion enforced by these practices is highly symbolic, its impact is both psychological and social. A group being symbolically marked as taboo also leads to its social exclusion and material disadvantage (Woodward, 1997b, p. 12). Many talked of such experiences, here strikingly described by Diksha:

I got lower 'marks', too. The teacher, if there was any 'sum' in 'mathematics', then if you knew it everyone had to come to the board and 'solve' it. So I was good at studying (*paṛhne-likhne mẽ*) from the beginning. And I worked a lot, too. Our father made us work hard. So when I wanted to go and write the teacher would say no, you stay seated, these people will come, the other students will come. In that way too they discriminated. And it was perceived (*mahsūs*) by everyone. All the students could understand that for that reason they are not calling Diksha there, even though she can 'solve' it. So in that way I got lower 'marks', too. (Diksha Bhan)

The struggle (*sangharṣ*) was, as we have seen, against both material difficulties and institutionalised discrimination. Many of these stories were told from a child's point of view, contrasting the limited understanding of the child with the adult activists' retrospective condemnation of their discriminators. This narrative technique has also been used by Dalit writer Omprakash Valmiki in his acclaimed novel *Joothan* (2003), where he describes the hardships of growing up in North India in the 1950s. As has been pointed out by Maggie Ronkin (2005, p. 505), this kind of 'double exposure [...] allows for authoritative assignments of blame'. Similarly, the activists interpret the continuation of such discriminatory practices against children on the grounds of their caste as institutionalised efforts to perpetuate Dalit social exclusion and material deprivation.

Having no prerequisites to understand why they were singled out for detrimental treatment, the activists described their experiences as confusing and frustrating. Several recounted having posed the question 'why?' either to their discriminator or to an adult whom they trusted. Taken together, these stories tell of 'the rupturing of narrativity, the fragmentation of the subject's ability to formulate projects, as specifically a condition of oppression' (Ortner, 1991, p. 7). The emphasis among the activists on becoming 'aware' and 'empowered' may be

read as a response to such a rupturing of narrativity. Reinventing themselves as empowered and outspoken, the activists (re-)gain the ability to formulate projects through becoming 'able to speak' (*bolnā*).

Today, the general perception is that SC children attend school in large numbers and that they do so free from 'grosser forms of humiliation' that were practiced on them previously (Mendelsohn & Vicziany, 1998, p. 11). Although in the activists' view, despite constitutional provisions protecting their rights, Dalit students in contemporary India can not, like their non-Dalit peers, expect to be fully accepted and included in educational settings. Being excluded and discriminated against in school was presented by the activists as difficulties facing Dalits only.[35] The focus on decisive aid from specific individuals in their narratives serves to underline that support can not be taken for granted. On the contrary, in order to progress the activists needed the aid of these particular individuals. They also stressed that this is the case despite the existence of a comprehensive formal support system for the Scheduled Castes within the field of education. Indeed, the narrative of 'struggle' serves to reinforce their critique of an Indian majority society paying lip service to Dalit educational advancement. Common to all the educational narratives that were recounted to me is that they convey notions of struggle, but also, importantly, of *progress*. The ways in which education functions as an idiom of progress will be further explored towards the end of this chapter.

'Forward'/'Backward': A discourse of progress

In India, as elsewhere, the meaning of education is wider than simply being a necessity to obtain employment in a specialised labour market. It also symbolises progress and modernity. Manuela Ciotti (2010b, p. 120) has argued that education in India may be seen as 'a living category of progress', and further that 'discourses on education as an idiom of knowledge and progress are quintessential to self and community representation' (p. 126). This discourse

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[35] The argument about being educationally excluded is even more valid in the case of the Scheduled Tribes (STs) or Adivasis. As a group the STs have not seen the same increase in literacy and educational levels as the Scheduled Castes during the last decades, and are lagging behind national average levels. With their emphasis on practices of 'untouchability' as the main explanatory factor for discrimination of SCs in educational institutions, the experience of the Scheduled Tribes is not part of the DCC discourse. The STs are hence not included in the notion of 'Dalit-hood' which is described in this chapter.

tends to frame the uneducated Dalit as its 'other', something that is also pronounced within the DCC.

[B]ecause in the development (*vikās*) of Dalit women, now there is no development, they are very backward (*pīchṛī*). In every place they are backward; economically, educationally. In education their place is smaller and there has been no change in the social view of the people. So they are always the victims (*śikār*) of that, they suffer way too many incidents of atrocities (*atyācār*) and oppression (*anyāya*), and they are always the victims of sexual exploitation (*yaunśoṣaṇ*). And because they have such insecure jobs they always remain dependent (*nirbhar*). They are dependent on one or the other. (Diksha Bhan)

Statements like this were pervasive, both in my conversations with various activists and in the printed material produced by the Dalit Cooperation Committee. Ciotti (2010b, p. 9) has further shown how entitlements to benefits through the policy of positive discrimination 'has resulted in a "socially schizophrenic condition" of progressing through claims of lagging behind amongst Untouchables and other protected categories.' She concludes that the result is that '"Backwardness" is an incredibly coveted attribute long after the constitution of independent India' (Ciotti, 2010b, p. 9). Consequently, while arguing for their urgent needs, the activists also partake in the construction of 'the Dalit' as the perennially poor and oppressed subject of a national narrative of progress and development. Diksha's statement also demonstrates the influence of an international development discourse in activist analysis of Indian society. Within this discourse Dalits in general, and Dalit women in particular, are construed as the 'backward' subjects of the modernising state, and are seen to be lagging behind and in need of aid and reform. What is seen here is hence the confluence and mutual strengthening of several discourses; a discourse of international development and a specifically Indian dichotomy between the 'forward' and the 'backward', which is inextricably intertwined with caste.[36]

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[36] See also Ciotti (2010b, p. 49).

During our visit to Rajasthan in early December, an independent Dalit activist said that 'the teachers 'demoralise' Dalit children, 'misguide' Dalit children, saying that you don't need education; you have reservations' (Mamta). Similar arguments were also commonplace among the DCC activists. Like the specific narrative of progress depicted above, this complaint arises from the Indian political context wherein positive discrimination measures deployed by the state are combined with an atmosphere of educational competition. The quite widely held view which is countered by Mamta here would be that since the government provides the Scheduled Castes with reservations in educational institutions and government positions, there is no need for them to study in order to qualify through regular channels.

Talking of her school days, Meena, the State Organiser from Bihar, explained that her results in school had been good, but that her teacher's thinking had been a little 'upside down' (*ulṭā*). 'This Meena is very sharp in her studies; she is giving competition to the girls of our social group (*varg*) so that they are not able to go forward' (Meena). In this way, Meena interpreted the 'untouchability' meted out to her in school as a mechanism with which the teacher tried to protect the 'upper class' girls of his own social group from the challenge represented by herself, a bright student belonging to a social group of lower standing.

Meena: In 'college' also, in the one where I did my 'graduation', it was there also. When people came to know; when the 'professors' and 'students' came to know that she is a Dalit woman, then a little feeling of 'untouchability' came there too. I was bright in the studies and got a good number in my 'university', so for that reason those people were a little 'down' at that time.[37]

Guro: But was it also in 'college' a matter of seating?

Meena: No, it wasn't like that.

Guro: No, then how?

Meena: How it was? In obtaining (*lenā*) 'education'. It was in obtaining 'education', like when I asked for any 'notes' and so on from some 'upper class professor' or if I asked for any help from any 'upper class' students, then they did not give it. They didn't want to give it. She is from a low caste, she is Dalit, don't give it to her. And if she goes forward then we will be behind (*pīche*), like that. There was that feeling.

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[37] The ranked results of students in Indian colleges and universities are often published in the newspapers, featuring photographs of their top achievers.

Here, the activist's interpretation is indicative of a narrative of caste as competition. By this I mean that when the progress of one caste is measured in relation to that of other castes, the progress of one will, in relative terms, contribute to the stagnation of the others. In this way, competition for seats and positions is experienced as a competition between castes. Within this narrative, progress is shaped 'under the form of a "social race" amongst castes' (Ciotti, 2010b, p. 119). This collective perception of competition leads to a reinforcement of caste loyalties through the sharpening of notions of 'us' and 'them'. Within the DCC, this competitive frame was often pronounced in relation to measures of affirmative action. Almost all the activists had benefited from such policies in one way or another. While some had qualified for reserved seats in institutions of higher education, most had received financial support in the form of small scholarships throughout their schooling. In general they saw these measures as just and as necessary for the progress of the Dalit community. However, access to privileges formally granted to them by the abstract and benevolent 'State' were often denied them by actual representatives of this state – teachers and other superiors – who generally failed to live up to the activists' expectations of equality and meritocracy.

Vikram: In Delhi when we were small I got a 'scholarship'. [...] So what happened was that the 'teacher' made a lot of trouble for me. He made difficulties when handing it out.
Guro: So the 'teacher' hands it out? I mean it comes through the 'teacher'?
Vikram: The 'teacher' hands it out; yes, you're getting it from the school. So to get it we had to fill out forms, and then for the form we had to get a stamp from a 'Minister', from someone, from an MLA, from an MP, or from a Councillor.[38] In that way he made difficulties by saying again and again; not like this, go again and do this, do that. Very difficult. Sometimes I felt that it would be better not to get it. We got books and we got clothes, but I mean they were making a lot of trouble. So that is also 'discrimination'. On the time of handing it out the teacher was very angry, irritated, like why [do I have to] give to them.

Teachers hiding their ill will behind bureaucratic procedures, the discrimination described here is covert, distinguishing it from more explicit expressions of untouchability as in practices of separate seating and being denied water. The denial of rights is explained by

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[38] An MLA is a Member of the Legislative Assembly, the elected representatives on the state level, while MP is short for Member of Parliament, the elected representatives to the lower house of the national level parliament, the Lok Sabha.

prejudices and antipathy towards Dalits among the teachers. Kamal, who ran the tuition centre in Delhi, described how one of the children coming to his centre had been abused by her teacher in the classroom over a trivial wrongdoing:

There was a girl [who] had lost one of her 'library' books. So the teacher told her to fetch the book and come. So she said, ok, I lost it, I will 'pay'. As much as the book was I will give the money. She was a child, too. Says the teacher; no, how could you forget the book? [...] That 'scholarship' you are getting, that you people won't forget. Then how could you forget the book? [...] This is straight forward a 'caste' issue (*castewālī bāt*). We are getting it [scholarships] and that makes you angry.

Several activists talked of subtle forms of discrimination that persist also in institutions and within social groups that are considered to be modern and 'progressive', and of whom they would have expected more. Prof. Diksha Bhan gave one example:

After coming here to the JNU[39] a big incident (*ghaṭnā*) happened to me. Here, because in north India too there is a lot of a kind of caste system (*prathā*) behaviour. In the teachers' minds those bad dispositions (*durbhāvnāe*) still remain, even now they are not able to see [Dalits] with an equal view. So here too, when I did my 'MA' they gave me a lower 'grade' in comparison to others. My 'paper' was very well written; I wrote very well, I worked very hard, but they gave me a lower 'grade' than the other students.

The narratives presented here demonstrate the persistence of strong prejudices against the Dalits as a group, and how new kinds of discrimination is creatively deployed to counter what the upper caste teachers and professors presumably see as 'pampering' of the SCs through state policies of affirmative action. Through these stories the activists turn the Indian debate about affirmative action and its consequences on its head. In this debate, an argument strongly voiced by opponents of affirmative action has described reservations as diametrically opposed to meritocracy. Arguing that the establishment of quotas and reserved seats seriously lower the quality of professionals, of the services, and of the bureaucracy, and that skewered competition corrupts educational institutions, opponents argue that reservations is an impediment to the future development of the country. In debates on affirmative action

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[39] The Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi.

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following the Mandal affair, 'merit has become an ideology justifying continued upper caste monopoly. "Merit" is contrasted not with "incompetence", but with "reservation"' (Omvedt, 2004). Describing the various ways in which Dalits are denied their rights within the educational system the activists demonstrate how continuing prejudices tend to override 'merit' in these interactions, thereby laying bare the status-quoist essence of the anti-reservation arguments.

Meena: Yes, and then there was, I got 'support' too from some 'lawyers' of my own community (*varg*), from 'professors' of my own class, they gave me 'question books' and books and so on. [...] That she is a Dalit woman and we need to help her advance further (*āge bharnā*). Good, she is a good student. So they helped me. Not everyone helped me, those who were from my own 'community'; they were the ones who gave me help.
Guro: You mean from Dalits?
Meena: From Dalits, some OBCs,[40] some 'upper class' who were quite 'intellectual', who were not concerned about 'untouchability' at all; those kinds of people. And where there were bad people I didn't get any help.

There is, within the Dalit politics of difference, a construction of clear categories of 'us' and 'them'. Distinguishing between 'upper class-people' and 'people of my own community' (*varg*), this narrative illustrates how expected individual behaviour was not always consistent with these categories. Among the Chamars of Manupur, Ciotti (2010b, p. 120) observed that the 'social race for progress' described above was envisioned to be between essentialised *varna* blocks like Brahmans and Shūdras. In the DCC this race is rather perceived to be between two essentialised 'groups': the Dalits and their oppressive 'other'. In their discourse this 'other' remains undistinguished and is designated interchangeably with terms like 'upper class', 'upper castes', 'Hindus', 'non-Dalits', or simply as 'they'. I believe that this indicates how the activists strive to always see the world from the vantage point of the perennially oppressed – a social place where the oppressive experience is total.

More than anything Meena's reiteration above shows how *ideas* of competition against the 'other' and of solidarity within her own community override the details of her experiences. When the dividing line between 'good' and 'bad' people did not fall along caste lines, this was seen as unusual and worthy of comment. Not suggesting that the activists were unaware

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[40] Other Backward Classes.

of individual variations in people's attitudes towards them, I wish to show how a narrative of 'Dalithood' as struggle and competition is strongly present in activist representations of their childhoods. In light of the defining features of the Dalits as community, documenting hardship also serves to legitimate the activists as rightful representatives of 'the Dalits'.

Ritualising difference: Greetings as everyday markers of identity

Doing *namaste*[41] (placing my palms together in front of me) to greet one of the DCC leaders on my first day at the office, I was told that this seemingly respectful way of greeting one another was actually a Hindu practice designed to avoid touching strangers whose caste and hence relative 'touchability' was unknown. 'We don't do that', the leader instructed me kindly. His interpretation was confirmed by the other activists. The explanation of *namaste* as an act designed to avoid ritual pollution is unlikely, since similar forms of greeting are used all over Eastern Asia, regardless of concerns of ritual pollution.[42] Further, in India the practice has grown out of the villages wherein everyone's caste was traditionally known to everyone else.[43] Hence the argument that greeting one another in this way came from a fear of touching someone whose caste is unfamiliar must be seen as a simplification. Rather, I believe it marks an effort on the part of the activists to ritualise their difference as Dalits. While *namaste* is commonly used also between persons of equal status in India, the activists see it as an expression of, and as an act of adherence to, hierarchical social relations. This interpretation is largely supported by C. J. Fuller (2004 [1992], p. 4) in his work on popular Hinduism:

If two people of similar status meet formally, each raises the hands and slightly bows the head to the other, while simultaneously saying the Sanskrit word *namaskara* [...] or, more usually, a vernacular synonym like Hindi *namaste*. If the two people are of markedly different status, then only the inferior is likely to perform the gesture, and may even fall down in prostration at the superior's feet. [...] [T]he Hindu gesture of respect – unlike, say, the handshake – expresses an inherent asymmetry in rank, because it is made by an inferior to a superior. In other words, the gesture symbolizes in a condensed form the principle of hierarchical inequality that is so fundamental in Hindu religion and society.

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[41] *Namaste* may be translated as 'greetings to you', from the root *namas*; bowing, bow, salutation, greeting (McGregor 1993). It carries deferential as well as respectful connotations.
[42] I am grateful to Cecilie Nordfeldt for making the point about the wider geographical usage of such gestures.
[43] I wish to thank Prof. Claus Peter Zoller for pointing this out.

Even though one may question the activists' discrediting of *namaste* on the basis of its origins, they have their reasons to reject it as a form of greeting: It is a matter of distancing themselves from a practice they define as 'Hindu'. Arguing that the *namaste* is incompatible with the egalitarian ideology they espouse, they refuse to use it.

Within the DCC, *jai bhīm* was used as an alternative greeting. This is an invocation of the persona of Ambedkar; its literal meaning is 'victory to Bhim', referring to Ambedkar's first name. I first encountered the expression in a tiny bookshop behind a statue of Ambedkar in the middle of a chowk in central Lucknow in early September 2009, wherein three men sat cross-legged and sold pamphlets and books by and about Ambedkar and former Bahujan Samaj Party leader Kanshi Ram. *Jai bhīm* is an explicitly 'Dalit' greeting, and a marker of political assertiveness. In Delhi, while *jai bhīm* was occasionally used when one activist greeted another, it was more commonly used in formal settings, as when inaugurating meetings or opening emails which were circulated within the network. In this way the greeting served as a secular ritual that underlined shared identity through emphasising the 'Dalitness' of the congregation that was addressed. In informal situations, as when coming into the office in the morning, one would be greeted simply with 'hello' or 'good morning', commonly not involving a handshake or other physical manifestations.

The activists would not do *namaste* to greet one another in the office, and found it apt to correct me when I did, as they deemed the greeting inappropriate in contexts where allegiance to a set of assertive Dalit values was considered a given. In other contexts, when interacting with people whose dedication to these values was unknown or perceived as unlikely, the activists would resign to greetings in English, sometimes accompanied by a handshake. Hence they made considerations of what greeting would be appropriate based on an evaluation of different contexts and the people they interacted with. In consonance with their analysis of the *namaste,* the use of greetings in English and a handshake was seen as relatively more egalitarian, also because it entails physical contact between those who greet one another.

What I suggest is that *namaste* and *jai bhīm* are seen to invoke two different imagined identities, corresponding to the notions of 'us' and 'them' discussed above. To the activists, *namaste* denotes Hindu tradition, and by virtue of this also the caste system and the oppression of Dalits. Formulated in explicit opposition to this and denoting a counter-narrative, *jai bhīm* is an exclamation of Dalit political assertion and cultural pride. Like BSP supremo Mayawati has attempted to 'dalitise' public spaces in Uttar Pradesh through putting up statues of Ambedkar and renaming streets and institutions after him (Jaoul, 2006), I read the activists' use of *jai bhīm* as an attempt to 'dalitise' everyday social interactions.

'Hindu tradition', as manifest in popular rituals, practices and beliefs, is seen as inimical to the Dalit struggle for freedom from oppression. This notion of 'Hindu tradition', an expression used interchangeably with 'Brahmanism', is seen by the activists as something that has to be countered on two different levels. Those who adhere to this tradition are seen to fall within one out of two categories. The first group, representing 'Brahmanic' thinking, were the 'Hindus', 'upper castes', or 'non-Dalits', all signifying the oppressive 'other' in activist rhetoric. They follow Hindu tradition out of genuine belief and because it is in their interest to contribute to the continuation of a system which confers status upon them. In the other group were imagined 'unaware' and 'backward' Dalits, seen first and foremost as the victims of Hindu oppression. When Dalits carry out Hindu practices and believe, for instance, in the power of religious fasts (*vrat*), they do so out of ignorance. Having developed a 'slave mentality', Dalits practice Hindu rituals because they are unaware that these are adverse to their interests. The analytical links between Hinduism, caste, and untouchability will be more thoroughly discussed in chapter five.

The activists' rejection of *namaste* may be interpreted as symbolising their rejection of Hinduism, based on a highly strained relation to this entire domain of religious and cultural practices. It also tells us something about how these 'Hindu practices' were defined by them. Practices that were rejected were perceived as symbolising notions of caste, in the sense that they expressed hierarchy, or they were derided as superstition and blind faith, and hence as adverse to the Dalit project of becoming 'aware' and 'progressive'. As opposed to this, other practices that are considered to hail from the same cultural sphere were seen by the activists

as part of a heritage worth preserving. An example of this was traditional Indian women's dress like the *sāṛī*. In one of our conversations a male activist ridiculed women of the 'forward classes' for wearing Western garb and for looking all strange (*ajīb*), while he praised Dalit women for continuing to wear 'proper' Indian dress. Traditionalism in dress on the part of Dalit women was also mentioned by another activist who argued that the Dalits, rather than the 'Hindus', are the real bearers of Indian tradition and culture. This argument refers to the *ādi*-theories mentioned in the introduction, which contend that the Dalits are the original inhabitants of the land. This tradition, then, was not defined as 'Hindu', but as stemming from the original (*ādi*) population of India.

Within the DCC, other shows of respect and deference are not disparaged in the same manner. Expressions of deference in India, like touching someone's feet, are not solely linked to hierarchy-as-caste, but just as often to differences in age, or in generational, economic, political, positional or religious status. In meetings within the Committee it occurred that all the participants got up from their chairs when a senior leader entered the room. On a few occasions I observed activists bending down when greeting their seniors within the movement, alluding to the Indian practice of touching the feet of an elder as an expression of respect. As far as I am aware these practices were not discussed within the Committee. One may hence argue that practices acknowledging positional status are generally more accepted in this context, while practices that are seen as linked to purity/pollution are univocally opposed. Thus, the sentiment underlying the activists' rejection of the *namaste* is a demonstration of distance to 'Hindu values' rather than an expression of egalitarianism per se.

I have described how the construction of 'Dalithood' takes place through the reiteration of stories, often based on personal experiences. This production of a Dalit identity among its politicised and 'forward' sections tends to refer back to historical practices that have come to symbolise Dalithood. This serves to strengthen ontological narratives that are seen to 'fit' with organisational ideology, thereby producing a critique of some public narratives (caste discrimination) while conforming to others (a specific 'Dalit' modernity). Interpreting their experiences of discrimination into a 'politics of difference'-frame, the activists construct a notion of Dalithood through seeing the 'non-Dalits' as their oppressive other. This is not to

say that this is merely a construction, but as has been argued in relation to feminist politics, how we experience that which happens to us is never a given, but a process which is socially constituted. While '[e]xperience can and does act ontologically for all of us, [...] it does so through a technique of construction' (Moore, 1994, p. 2). The next chapter will further explore how activists appropriate their 'difference' while at the same time contesting the grounds for it.

4 Narratives of Dalit activism

This chapter will investigate how personal processes of caste politicisation were described by the activists. Analysing how they talked about 'becoming aware' and 'empowered', I see their self-representations as accounts of past events which allow us to explore how and under what circumstances an individual 'becomes politicised'. Further, these narratives have become *stories* because of the position they hold in the memories of the activists. With time, 'some stories are discarded, and others are synthesized, restructured, and stereotyped' (Thompson, 1978, p. 111). The stories that are told in this chapter are also 'refined' – they have been told before and will be told again, their sequence and dramaturgy further cultivated. Some such stories circulating within the Committee have also been written down and published in Dalit publications. Hence they are stories which *can* be told – they are legitimising, describing how it is 'appropriate' to have become politicised. By virtue of being 'empowered Dalits' the activists attempt to counter popular prejudices that are held against Dalits as a group.

'Becoming aware'

There is a Vina Das in Patna, she is a professor. She is a Dalit woman, from the Chamār *jāti*. When I used to go to Vina Das she would always teach me about Bābāsāheb. He is this, he did this, he did that. Listening to her I felt like, *bāp*, I really don't know anything! So much has happened and I don't even know that people of my community have done such a lot! That people of my community are doing such great things. From that Vina Das I learned quite a lot. [...] [She was] the one who made me very 'aware', about our constitution, about our 'consciousness' that Bābāsāheb made, about that. So I became aware (*jāgarūk*) and to further his movement (*abhiyān*) I went and took it up, that I will work for my own people. (Meena)

Meena's story of how she 'became aware' tells of how she came out of her 'ignorance' to achieve an assertive Dalit consciousness. It is an account of her personal progress explaining how she became what she is today, namely a Dalit activist. Such stories of becoming 'aware' and 'empowered' were ubiquitous among the activists. Within this narrative, personal change is consistently understood as *progress*, as moving or developing from a state of being 'backward' to a state of being 'forward'. A professor and role model, Vina Das is the

individual that bestows this liberating consciousness upon Meena through introducing her to new knowledge of the past. She 'becomes aware' through getting to know the true history of her community, something which induces pride and becomes the source of a new ideological conviction. As observed by Ciotti (2010b, p. 120), 'the spread of education has triggered a reflexivity process leading to the Chamars revisiting their available past(s) [...] Contemporary north India has witnessed the phenomenon of low-caste reinterpretation of the past, to make it suitable to these castes' new selves'. The process of 'becoming aware' is related to education, but the notion is wider than simply referring to educational achievements. It also entails becoming 'empowered', i.e. assertive and proud, and 'progressive'. The change which is described in these stories is about politicisation, but it is also about upward social mobility. In the DCC the invoking of an honourable and proud past is, like seen in the above, typically centred on the achievements of Ambedkar. His emphatically rational and modern critique of Hindu social institutions is a central theme in contemporary Dalit assertion. As has been argued by Johannes Beltz (2004, p. 248), among his followers Ambedkar is seen as 'the Authoritative Reference'.

Another important element is Meena's expression of recognition; showing how 'subjects are recruited into subject-positions through recognizing themselves' (Woodward, 1997a, p. 42). This was also pronounced later, when she talked of the first time she had heard the word 'untouchability' (*chuāchūt*). She knew very well from her childhood what discrimination based on caste *was*, but had not know that there existed a proper term for these offences. Getting to know that these were 'practices of untouchability', and furthermore that they were illegal under the Constitution and should be punished, Meena said that she had instantly began to cry. Learning this new vocabulary enabled her to reinterpret and gain a different, broader understanding of her earlier experiences. This expansion of consciousness from the internalised individual level to the level of the social system is seen by the activists as enabling their social analysis. Also, introducing a measure of distance, memories of unjust treatment may become more tolerable through this process of objectification (Cohn, 1987). Having felt, experienced, and embodied 'Dalithood', one also needs to 'become aware' – to analyse one's experiences, to evaluate them in a larger context of institutionalised structural discrimination, and to use them to fight discrimination and to further the Dalit cause.

In the above I have illustrated how the activists described their experiences of 'difference' and what impress this made on them, and how the process of 'becoming aware' entailed a degree of objectification. In the following the stories are more explicitly about opposition and 'empowerment', playing into the same narrative of Dalit struggle and ensuing progress. Rather than generalising on the basis of a larger selection of similar stories of activist opposition and fearlessness I have chosen to present two of these narratives in greater detail, as this allows for a closer reading.

Diksha Bhan, who introduced me to the DCC, had grown up in Maharashtra as one out of eleven siblings. While her mother was illiterate, Diksha's father had been a police officer, and also a devoted follower of 'Babasaheb' Ambedkar. Her father had a strong belief in the virtue of education, and in Diksha's account of her childhood he was the one seen as responsible for the remarkable fortune of the children. With the aid of government scholarships aimed at Scheduled Caste students they had all eventually got their graduations. During the 1950s and 1960s, overt discrimination against Dalits was customary in Maharashtrian schools, and Diksha was in the sixth or seventh grade when she openly opposed this discrimination for the first time:

So there was Sharda's idol (*mūrti*), Saraswati's idol – it is called Sharda *pūjā* (worship) in Marathi – and there was Ganapati *pūjā*. So those were the two occasions on which they installed the idols in the school 'hall' and all the children went there and prayed to them and offered flowers. […] And I made very nice flower garlands, very beautiful. So once I had made a garland. They used to tell us to make a garland and bring it [to school]. And when I had made a garland and brought it then the 'teacher' would get me and say that I will put it. You shouldn't put it and place your hand on the idol. So one day I became very angry. I said that you are telling me to make the garland and then you don't allow me to put it on the idol of Ganapati, but I will put it. Then [the teacher] said that you can't go, you will pollute the idol (*bhraṣṭ kar dõge*).[44] But I didn't listen to anyone's protests (*bāt)* and I went; in front of everyone I went and hung the garland [on the idol] and remained standing there. I was thinking that today some 'teacher' will beat me too, but that day they all kept quiet. Nobody said anything in response to that opposition (*khilāf*). Because if anyone had said anything I would have gone and told

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[44] *bhraṣṭ karnā* can also be translated as 'to violate, to debase, to corrupt' (McGregor, 1993).

my father that those people 'insulted' me in such and such way. And then he would have seized them and they would have been punished. And it [the discrimination] was forbidden by law (*qanūnan ghalat*), too. So they all kept quiet.

Like in several such accounts, the narrative tells of a talented student being unjustly treated despite her apparent qualities, and subsequently of her response in the shape of a bold assertion. The narrative demonstrates her sense of social justice as well as her courage. Asserting her right to participate in the *pūjā* on par with the non-Dalit children, Diksha also inscribed herself into a history of Dalits contesting their exclusion from Hindu temples and rituals.

After finishing her BA, Pushpa had been appointed head teacher in a girl's school in Jaisalmer district, quite a distance away from her *sasurāl* (in-law's village) from where she had completed her studies after getting married. Leaving her baby daughter with her own mother and her husband with his family, Pushpa had gone across Rajasthan to work. The school she was to manage had eight female teachers, and out of these one was a Dalit while the rest belonged to non-Dalit castes. Being unaccustomed to caste discrimination Pushpa had not asked the teachers about their caste, and neither had any of them asked her.

Pushpa: [At the school] only the non-Dalit women made food and made *cāy-pānī* (refreshments); that [task] was kept for those who belonged to the Rajput caste. [...] At the time when the 'untouchability practice' happened to that teacher, they told me that 'madam'; don't tell her to come into our kitchen. I said why not? Then they said that she is Dalit, she is from the Meghwal caste.[45] Her caste was Meghwal, so they said that she is Meghwal so you shouldn't touch her, because then how can we eat if she has touched it, if she is touching it. And then I said ok, that's why. I didn't tell them which caste I belong to [...]. Then the next day I told the teacher, her name was Mehna; I said Mehnaji, you give *roṭī*s[46] to the girls. Because when we were serving food everyone had a 'duty'; which teacher will have the duty of serving food today, who will make them [the children] keep quiet today, who will lead the prayer today. In that way everyone's 'duty' would ambulate.
Guro: And you were the 'head teacher'?
Pushpa: Yes, I was the 'head teacher' there. So I told her [Mehna] that you serve the food, you please give *roṭī*s to the children. So at first; she knew those things because she was from that area, so she didn't obey me, that no,

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[45] Pushpa herself belongs to this same Meghwal *jāti*.
[46] *Roṭī*s are flat, unleavened breads, an essential part of most meals in the wheat-growing regions of North India.

'madam', I won't give them. I said why won't you give it? I am telling you to give food to the girls. Because I was seeing these things, [I knew] what was on her mind. Then on my command (*mere kahne se*) she started serving, and then the one who was making food in the kitchen, she was a Rajput woman, she seized (*pakaṛā*) her hand. Seizing her hand she said that you don't serve food. Then she said to me, 'madam', why are you telling her to, she is from a low caste (*nīce jāti*); those people are an inferior (*choṭī*) caste! If her hand has touched it then how can we and how can the children eat? How can we eat the food? Then suddenly I got very angry and I seized her hand and pulled her out from the courtyard. And making her stand on the street I said that there is no place here [for you] and I locked the main gate. From then on I didn't allow her to enter there. In that way I did opposition (*virvār*). I did not accept (*svikār*) those kinds of people there at all.

Again, the narrative revolves around an archetypical kind of discrimination against Dalits, namely the practice of avoiding contact with food and drinks that are to be consumed by people belonging to castes that consider themselves ritually 'purer'. The Rajput teacher's act invoked this belief in physical pollution, of which other manifestations would be the denial of access to wells, being expected to collect and eat left-over food, or being served in separate cups and vessels. Concerning the preparation and serving of food this incident of discrimination hence has to be understood as invoking a collective memory of a painful and humiliating history. I contend that the act was read by Pushpa into the narrative of Dalit oppression and exclusion, and that her reaction was directed against this manifestation and against the Rajput teacher as a reproducer of such beliefs.

For Diksha, who had experienced discrimination in various forms since she began school, a decisive moment was when she, still at a very young age, mustered up the courage to oppose this discrimination and face the consequences in spite of her fears. For Pushpa, who had not experienced overt discrimination previously, the juncture occurred as a response to actions directed towards someone else belonging to a Dalit caste. A shared quality of both narratives is that they describe their reactions as emotional – 'suddenly I got very angry'. While their assertion was presented as indeliberate and spontaneous, the narratives also point towards external enabling factors. In both instances the women had unusual measures of security and support. Diksha's father played a crucial role in the first narrative despite not being present when the episode occurred. He was a police officer, and also a politically conscious man. Diksha may or may not have been aware at the time that excluding her from the ritual was forbidden by law, but she was confident that her father would have reacted if her action had

brought the repercussions she feared. While emphasising her own anger, this narrative of self-assertion also illustrates that her father was an important source of strength and support.

By virtue of being the head teacher of the school, Pushpa was in a position of authority from which she could autonomously take action against the discrimination she witnessed. Besides the power and status derived from her position, another aspect of Pushpa's situation also enabled her decisive handling of the episode. This became clearer when she described the aftermath of her confrontation with the Rajput teacher. After having been thrown out of her workplace, this teacher had approached the Project Officer (PO) in charge of administering the schools in the area. The PO, who was also a Rajput, had called on Pushpa and asked her why she had thrown the teacher out. Replying that he should rather ask her what the teacher had done, Pushpa reasserted that she would not allow this teacher back into the school. Provoked by this the PO had threatened to transfer her to the Ramghat area in Jaisalmer district. Located on the border to Pakistan, Pushpa told me that this is considered a very 'backward' place. To this threat, Pushpa had replied that she was not afraid and that he could do whatever he wanted:

In this way he tried to frighten me, [saying] that if you keep opposing (*virodh karnā*) these things I will send you to Ramghat. So then I became even angrier. I said that I have already come all the way from my 'home district' to Jaisalmer, so for me that [Ramghat] is not very far. I can go to Ramghat and work, too. That is no problem. You won't be able to scare me.

Faced with this answer the PO was partially disarmed, as his strategy of instilling fear through threatening to uproot her had no effect. Having already left her daughter and husband behind to go out and work, Pushpa was in a relatively autonomous position. Being married but living apart from her in-laws created a space which offered a measure of both freedom and support. It was from within this space that Pushpa was free to 'do opposition' (*virodh karnā*). Describing how she used her freedom to deflect this concrete threat to her position, Pushpa made clear that this relative independence enabled her prompt action against the teacher. Emphasising the enabling factors evident in these narratives, this interpretation is not about a lack of agency, but about a *relational* notion of agency. As Ciotti (2009a, p. 113) has argued

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with regards to female low-caste politicians in Uttar Pradesh, it is often the 'supposedly "oppressive" household boundaries rather than alternative outer spaces that, under a series of enabling circumstances, initiate women's political activities'. Indeed, the political agency of women activists is shaped by their husbands and families. Pushpa's *sasurāl* (in-laws) were supportive of her going out to work, something which made her confident that they would support her also in the face of a transfer. Hence, the activists' narratives show the importance of family support to enable assertion, also when they are told as individual stories of bravery.

A third important feature in these narratives is their 'staged' and provoking aspects. Pushpa reiterated how she had consciously provoked the Rajput teacher to commit what is actually a law breach under the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act 1989. Rather than confronting her on the basis of her utterances, Pushpa commanded the 'untouchable' teacher to hand out *roṭīs*, fully aware of the reaction this would probably provoke from the others. Orchestrating the episode this way allowed her to demonstrate her intolerance for this behaviour in front of the other teachers and the children, forcefully asserting her authority as head teacher. For some, displaying their assertiveness through provocative language was another part of their style as activists. In relation to a rape case she was following through the judicial system, Ritu, who was an activist in the DCC had gone to the village of the victim. There,

[the upper caste peers of the accused] were saying that this is a 'matter' of the village, and a 'compromise' should be made in the village itself. When they were urging her to 'compromise' I said only one 'word', that if it was your daughter or your 'wife' in her place and this had happened to her, if that had happened would you 'compromise'? If you are willing to [do this] then go and fetch my 'husband' and give your 'wife' to him. And then you 'compromise'. I will also 'compromise'. So immediately they became angry and broke off and ran away.

Ritu said that she always made those who sought her help in this manner promise that they would not 'compromise'. Only if they assured her that they would not be threatened or cajoled into accepting a local settlement was she willing to 'take up' their case. Such a promise had to be made not just by the concerned woman, but also by the male head of her

family. In this way Ritu tried to ensure that she did not waste her time and resources on cases that would never make it to court.

Reading the public-spectacular aspect of these stories, their actions are not merely intended to punish wrongdoers and protect victims of discrimination, but to make habitual transgressors commit a crime in order to be caught, and to make an example of them to deter others from committing similar wrongs. Backed by a comprehensive legal framework and by the formal support of the state apparatus, Dalit activist provocations serve to highlight continuing injustice in India despite the alleged official adherence to equality, non-discrimination and the 'abolition of untouchability'. The element of provocation illustrates that the activists are not simply benevolent protectors of their communities, but are also pursuing a larger political agenda. While they provide help to individual victims it is perhaps just as important to hold the local police accountable; to make them register FIRs[47] at the police station, to get cases registered under the Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe (Prevention of Atrocities) Act 1989 and not under the general Indian Penal Code, and to expose them and other officials who do not carry out their assigned duties according to rules and regulations. Hence, while some activist self-representations include a notion of being a 'saviour' of the Dalits, conferring justice and progress upon the destitute masses, they also have a more political agenda. This agenda consists of demanding change through holding individual representatives of the (local) state accountable, and through publicising irregularities and abuse of power by staging protests and alerting the media, so as to discourage other officials from doing the same.

Through telling these stories, the activists also inscribe themselves into a proud tradition of Dalit assertion. The provocative idiom described here is reminiscent of Ambedkar's burning of the *Manusmriti* (Rodrigues, 2002, p. 10), as well as of Mayawati's symbolic policy of putting up Ambedkar statues and renaming public places, streets, and institutions in Uttar Pradesh. It is a characteristic of modern Dalit assertion in general, as if they had all read

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[47] An FIR (First Information Report) is a written document which is produced by the police when they receive information about an offence which is cognisable to the jurisdiction of a court. It is first when an FIR has been registered that the police will begin the investigation of a case, and hence the FIR is also a point where accusations made by Dalits against local vested interests are sometimes effectively impeded. A small pamphlet briefly introducing the FIR is accessible from: http://www.humanrightsinitiative.org/publications/police/fir.pdf.

Moffatt's description of the *Consensus at the Bottom of Caste* (1979) and agreed upon proving him wrong. This indicates what I see as the *activism* of these narratives. They make evident the radicalism and strength of the activists' approach. Invoking a history of Dalit resistance, telling these stories also serves to legitimise the activists' involvement in the Dalit struggle and to demonstrate their dedication to the Dalit cause. In the following I will further explore how their right to 'speak for' the Dalits was seen as based on this experiential legitimacy.

The activists and the 'Dalits': Difference revisited

During my introductions at the DCC office, Shobna, one of the women I was to work with, asked me rhetorically; 'where is your pocket?' I was dressed in an Indian style *pañjābī* suit with loose *pajāma* trousers and a long *kurtī*, and as she rightly pointed out I had no pocket. Shobna explained that none of the traditional forms of Indian women's wear, like the *suit* and the *sāṛī*, have pockets where money can be kept. She said that this as a symbol of women's economic dependence on men in India. As we saw in Diksha's description above, Dalit women's economic dependency on their employers, fathers, and husbands is seen to expose them to exploitation and make them extremely vulnerable. Shobna's question was one out of several questions that the activists would pose to Dalit women when they addressed them in gatherings arranged by the Committee. Such questions were asked in order to initiate a discussion through which the participating women would be made aware of the inequalities inherent in gendered structures of power.

Shobna then showed me the pocket sewn into her own *kurtā* and said smilingly, 'but we are 'empowered' women! We have pockets, we have our own money.' Having an independent income and not being dependent upon others for economic support was part of the activist's notion of what it entails to be empowered. Again, the above is a *representation* of Indian women as oppressed; although men are commonly seen as the breadwinner as well as the economic head of the family in India, also rural women commonly keep money in their blouse or in the *pallū* (end-piece) of their *sāṛī*. Hence while Shobna's argument points to gendered structures of power, it is also an evocation of Dalit women as 'in need of our help'.

Further, the self-representations of the activists were contrasted with their description of Dalit women as poor, oppressed, and deprived of agency. Shobna's example divided Dalit women into two; those who are empowered and those who are not. The women activist's image of themselves could not be reconciled with the depressing picture they painted of the condition of Dalit women in general.

The activists in the DCC and those I encountered through their network are mostly highly educated, and all have 'respectable' jobs as office-workers, teachers, lawyers, or in government. They live in Delhi or in other major cities, and most have travelled widely across the country. They read books and newspapers, crack jokes about national politics, and have an intimate knowledge of the functioning of the state. In addition to their work with formal laws, rules and regulations, the activists are acutely aware of challenges related to the actual functioning of the Indian state apparatus. Its deficiencies in terms of corruption, discriminatory practices, and below par implementation of government 'schemes', are issues that they face regularly and attempt to address. Indeed, the very effectiveness of their activism is premised on this competence; on their formal knowledge as well as on more informal abilities to 'make things happen'. They know how to navigate the bureaucracy, how to get the police to register an FIR, and how to get the attention of the local media. These abilities are particularly empowering in a society where the gap between the common man's knowledge and the intricacies of the functioning of the state is great. This gap may seem almost unbridgeable for those who do not have the required education and economic resources.

Hence, the activists are distinct from the average Dalit population along a variety of dimensions; educationally, in class terms, in their urbanity, and in their formal as well as practical knowledge of legislation, bureaucracy and politics. I contend that this difference is further sharpened by the way the 'poor Dalit' emerges from the internal discourse of the DCC. In addition to the reified discursive construction described in the previous chapter, this difference has more concrete expressions. Some of those activists whose extended families live in rural areas recount that it is difficult to explain to them exactly what they do for a living. Being unfamiliar with buzzwords like 'advocacy' and 'networking', their rural kin is depicted as able to understand such 'modern' concepts only to a limited extent. Ritu, who

talked about how she had handled the alleged rape case above, had heard a female relative telling someone that 'she (Ritu) gives justice (*nyāy*) to Dalit women'. At least when talking to me, such stories were conveyed with considerable amusement:

I was speaking in a 'meeting', it was in a village, there was a 'rally' going on, and then suddenly I, what do you say; there is 'dominant caste', right? And I couldn't remember what that is called in Hindi. So the moment I said 'dominant' I realised that they won't understand it, and their understanding [of this] had to be profound (*vāstā mẽ*). And then I was thinking that if they are going to understand I will have to ask someone what you call 'dominant caste' in Hindi? What you say is 'upper cas'..., 'upper' is also 'English' [laughs]. *Ucc* 'caste' eh... *jāti*. High caste (*ucc jāti*)! That's what you say. I said those who are understood to be a higher caste (*baṛī jāti*) than you, I gave an example, and then they understood. So there are a lot of 'language problems' sometimes, for us who are connected to the 'ground level'. (Pushpa)

Having 'language problems' when speaking in one's mother tongue, in this case Rajasthani, indicates the cultural removal that results from upward social mobility. Through education, professional training, urbanisation, and economic betterment, a gap arises between the activists and the people they engage with. Having different language, which is otherwise thought to poignantly express the 'social location' of the speaker, as expressed in the argument that Dalit women must necessarily talk 'differently' (Guru, 1995), here comes to symbolise the distance between the activist and the 'ground level' or 'grassroots'.

I argue that the activists' self-representation is dependent on its dichotomy with the discursive image of the 'Dalit'. Their own identities as empowered activists are partially constructed on the basis of how they perceive the 'poor Dalit' to be 'unaware' and lacking empowerment. I see this as a problem of representation, of 'speaking for' another. Speaking on behalf of the 'oppressed masses', the activists construct their own self-image as against a reified and stereotyped 'Dalit other'. The effect is that they create a homogeneous representation which compounds the social differentiation *within* the Dalit category. This may serve to reproduce and keep alive the image of 'the Dalit' as a permanently poor and oppressed figure. And further, '[w]hile one might wonder [...] about the possible fetishising of dalit women's suffering, I would further question the analytical value of such hierarchies of suffering, which tend to reify the living social relationships that constitute dalit women's lives, and to locate

dalit women as objects of pity' (Shirman, cf. Ciotti 2009b, p. 8). Conflating differences within a politicised category creates unity for mobilisational purposes, but the image conveyed here is perhaps less suitable to understand and engage with the needs and claims of diverse Scheduled Caste individuals.

'Grassroots' activism

While in the above passage Pushpa directly acknowledged this remove, the activists would more often emphasise their proximity to the 'ground level'. When pointing to this quality they said about themselves and others that he or she is a 'real grassroots activist'. This highly valued notion was related to a sacrificial ideal that could also be discerned in their reports from the field. Reading activists' written reports from their work in rural areas, these tell of long days and physical strain; of travelling on dusty roads and working under the scorching sun, and of coming back from the 'field' late and getting up early without taking the time to eat properly during the day. The employees on the national level sometimes complained that it was difficult to use such 'field reports' from the State Organisers when writing official reports because of this tendency to emphasise sacrifice and hardship, rather than to account for meetings, include the names of participants, and describe what had been discussed and eventually agreed upon.

In the same vein several activists told me how they had chosen to work in low-status locations when they had done field works or had placements during their studies. One senior activist said that she had chosen a specialisation that was considered to be of low prestige even though she had been among the top students in her class. These decisions typically entailed involvement with rural populations or with the poorest sections in the cities. Describing how her co-students had gone to lengths to avoid working in poor and 'dirty' locations, Shobna said that she herself was not concerned with poverty, dirt, or unhygienic conditions. In my reading this demonstrates an element of sacrifice in the way the activists think about their work. Accordingly, working for the Dalit cause is also about taking on a moral responsibility. Although the activists did not use this term, presenting their work as self-sacrifice invokes the notion of *sevā* (service), an ethos that 'evokes principles of selflessness and sacrifice' (Ciotti,

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2009b, p. 1). Also when describing their current work for the Women's Branch similar self-representations surface:

If I go to the village, the women there are sitting down (*nīce*) on the ground, in the dirt. So when I go there to them and sit I am not looking at that 'time' if my clothes are becoming dirty, how I am sitting and things like that. [...] With anyone, of whatever kind they are, when I am with them I can be like they are (*usī tarah se rah saktī hũ*). (Pushpa)

This excerpt is also about abilities; to talk to 'everyone' implies the ability to adapt to settings that are materially and socially worlds apart. Generally, the activists emphasise their ability to build and maintain close relations with the people they are working amongst, unaffected by outer appearances. The competence to manoeuvre successfully across domains is seen as grounded in their specific social positions as the educated and able representatives of the lowest rungs of society. This 'in-between' position enables them to move between the 'modern' and the 'traditional', the urban and the rural, the 'forward' and the 'backward', and to convey meanings across these divisions. In that sense the emphasis on abilities is a positive take on what I have earlier characterised as activists' ambivalent social positions. Echoing this, Jeffrey, Jeffery and Jeffery (2008, p. 68) have described how young lower-caste men in Uttar Pradesh emphasised 'the adaptability of the educated', which was the ability to 'shape their behaviour according to the nature of social situations'.

Evoking notions of authenticity and proximity is also a way to minimise the class and educational gap between themselves and the 'common Dalit'. In my interpretation the emphasis on sacrifice and particular abilities are also attempts to legitimate their status as representatives with the prerogative to 'speak for' the Dalits. In addition, the activists criticise the political establishment and mainstream development organisations for being unrepresentative and unable to understand Dalit issues.

Motivated by a solidarity sparked and sustained by their own experiences of discrimination and exclusion, Dalit activists are positioned right in the middle of the competitive dynamics

of contemporary caste politics. When the purpose is to describe their relation to their 'subjects', they emphasise proximity, similarity and solidarity, underplaying the substantial 'difference' which is manifest in these interactions. In other contexts, as when describing their own work, they acknowledge and also underline these very differences, and demonstrate their own competence, abilities, and knowledge. I contend that these co-existing notions of proximity/distance and solidarity/difference show the activists' embeddedness in the society they strive to affect.

Negotiating boundaries: Using the ghūṁghaṭ *differently*

While I had noticed that the female activists were preoccupied with the issue of veiling, the significance of the *ghūṁghaṭ* became clear to me during a visit to rural Rajasthan along with Pushpa, the Rajasthan State Organiser, and Shobna from the Delhi office. The word *ghūṁghaṭ* denotes a veil, most commonly the end of the sari, but it can also be other cloth, which is used by women to hide their faces (McGregor, 1993). Practices of veiling vary across the Indian states and are in general less strict in cities than in the rural areas. In north India married women commonly practice *ghūṁghaṭ* by veiling in the presence of their husband as well as in front of all males in the conjugal village that are older than the husband. Generally, the *ghūṁghaṭ* is, at least by feminists, seen as an embodied expression of gendered power relations. Upon arriving in Jaipur, Pushpa explained to me how she perceives of the prevailing situation:

[In Rajasthan] if there is a woman *sarpañc* (*pañcāyat* leader)[48] she will speak once and then her husband will interrupt. She will say that I am not going to the [*pañcāyat*] meetings. He will say that yes, she goes to every meeting and she speaks, she speaks there, saying this and that. When she doesn't speak in front of us, the two of us, then how can she take up social issues like the use of *ghūṁghaṭ* and how can she take up caste and gender, or patriarchy (*pittar sattā*) as we call it? To take up all of those things... that woman, what can she say from where she is? She can't speak at all (*kuch nahĩ bol pātī*).

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[48] *Pañcāyat*s are institutions of local governance that are built upon the traditional village councils of five (*pañc*) village elders, but that have been gradually reformed since Independence to be subject to democratic control. One of the last major reforms was when Parliament passed the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments in 1992, delegating increased powers and responsibilities to the *pañcāyat*s as well as reserving 33 % of the seats for women in all levels of the system, in addition to reservations for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

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The purpose of our visit to Rajasthan was to support the initiation of a new Women's Branch-project. Aimed at Dalit women *sarpañc*es (leaders) of rural *pañcāyat*s (local governance institutions), the project would empower selected *sarpañc*es to address budget issues, i.e. make sure that an adequate part of the funds channelled through the *pañcāyat* is used for purposes that benefit the village Scheduled Caste population as per the Special Component Plan,[49] and to attend to issues of violence in their localities, especially focusing on violence against Dalit women. Since the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments in 1993 a quota of seats has been reserved for Dalit women on all levels of the three-tiered local government system Pañcāyatī Rāj (PR),[50] but there are still many impediments to their participation. In many cases seats reserved for women are only nominally held by them while the real power lies in the hands of male relatives. Writing on experiences from Karnataka, Kudva (2003, p. 452) maintains that 'women members and presiding officers (especially if they were dalits or adivasis) [...] are victimized, taunted, and harassed by their male counterparts amidst official apathy. Most of these women are poor, illiterate and landless, often serving as surrogates for their male relatives or powerful local vested interests'. Addressing this 'proxy woman'-problem, the DCC project is an effort to make government reservation policies for Dalit women more meaningful through narrowing the gap between policy intention and policy outcome.[51]

For the purpose of our visit from Delhi, Pushpa had chosen a model *sarpañc*. In Pushpa's assessment this particular *sarpañc* was quite able to speak out (*bolnā*), she held popular support, she was not merely a stand-in for her husband, and she had carried out substantial development work in her village during her tenure. Travelling by car from Jaipur we were met by the *sarpañc* in a small nearby town before the car she rode in escorted us to the village. When picking us up from the *cāy*-stand in town, the *sarpañc* did *ghūṁghaṭ*. The meeting was

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[49] The Special Component Plan (SCP) is a scheme that was initiated by the Government of India in 1979. Its intention is to assure that budget funds are allocated to the benefit of the Scheduled Castes in proportion to their share of the population in each State.

[50] The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments 'sought administrative and political decentralization through PR to placate and protect regions agitating against centralizing tendencies of the Indian government. The 73rd Amendment lays down policy guidelines for establishing PR institutions, including mandating reservations for women and members of designated castes and tribes' (Kudva, 2003, p. 447).

[51] Fifteen years ago, the *pañcāyat*s of Western Uttar Pradesh were described as remaining the personal realm of the *pradhān*: 'By and large, panchayats exist in name only and most members appreciate their own membership as such; it is a formality only' (Lieten, 1996, p. 2704).

held in her house in the presence of members of her extended family as well as neighbours and an array of village children who gathered outside the house, apparently to watch the visitors. Some time into the meeting, the *sarpañc* showed us photographs from the day when she had been installed in her position after winning the local elections. We could see how she was honoured with flowers and paraded through the village surrounded by a crowd of people, all the while her face fully covered by the end of her *sāṛī*. When we were sitting in the car returning from the village late that night, Pushpa and Shobna evaluated the meeting. Contemplating the fact that the *sarpañc* had been fully veiled during her first public performance as an elected representative, they interpreted this as a sign that she was not very 'free'. In spite of her demonstrated capacity to get things done, her use of the *ghūṁghaṭ* made the activists question her ability to 'raise issues' and speak freely within the village.

A symbol of patriarchal notions of female modesty and subordination, the practice of *ghūṁghaṭ* is seen by the DCC activists as both symbolising and compounding women's inability to assert their rights and participate meaningfully in the public sphere. In their internal discourse, 'Dalit women' are represented as sitting quietly 'doing *ghūṁghaṭ'*. As in Pushpa's rendering above, this is seen as closely related to their 'inability to speak (*bolnā*)', demonstrating their lack of empowerment. While practices of veiling in India are not at all limited to Dalits or to the poor, the activists argue that the *ghūṁghaṭ* symbolises the oppression of women, and further that this oppression weighs heaviest on the shoulders of Dalit women.[52]

After spending weeks at the DCC I had a casual conversation with Shobna and Vanini, two colleagues at the Delhi office, when they said that they also 'do *ghūṁghaṭ'* occasionally. Considering the outspoken assertiveness of these women I found their use of this symbol of

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[52] Rather, conventional knowledge has been that Dalit and other low-caste women are generally less restricted and enjoy more autonomy than high-caste women. This has been called 'a tradeoff between improvements in the material conditions of living (for higher-caste women) and greater autonomy (for Dalit women)' (Deshpande, 2002, p. 25). The reason is that low-caste low-class families are more reliant on the labour of women and can not afford keeping them at home. This difference is also imbued with notions of honour and respectability, so that allowing women to venture out is seen to indicate the lax sexual moral of the family or of the *jāti* as a whole. Being more preoccupied with honour and status, higher castes have been seen to impose stricter constraints on their women. According to economist Ashwini Deshpande this situation is now changing. While Dalit women are still materially worse off than their 'upper-caste' counterparts, *sanskritising* tendencies, low levels of autonomy, and high levels of domestic violence serve to compound their relative deprivation (Deshpande, 2002).

modesty and timidity paradoxical. Explaining that they did *ghūṁghaṭ* only in front of some of their elder male in-laws, Shobna and Vanini talked about veiling as a demand that was laid on them, as an expectation that they sometimes had to fulfil. Within the family, social pressure renders notions of respectability and 'proper' behaviour salient even though these are exactly the kinds of notions that the activists are devoted to undermine in other spheres of society. Contrasting herself with the Dalit woman who could not 'speak', Pushpa told a similar story:

Today, Guro, I am so educated. I have done MA. And I am [working] in the 'social field' also, right? [...] Wherever I go to work I see to it that all 'rights' are taken up. [...] But still, when I go to my *sasurāl* I have to live like an ordinary (*ām*) woman does there. The reason why I have to live like that is because [...] I'm thinking that I can't break all of the manners and customs in the family 'suddenly'. I will tell you; what I want to do is to break the minor things one after another, little by little, and to come out (*bāhar nikalnā*). Because if I try to break everything quickly and all at once, then it won't happen. It won't be 'possible'. […] Like, I also use the *ghūṁghaṭ* in my *sasurāl*, right? But the manner in which I use the *ghūṁghaṭ* is different. I use it only for the house, for the members of the household. My husband's brother – the elder one – I use it for him, and I use it for one or two others in the family. And when I am going home [to the city] and I am standing and waiting at the 'bus stand', which is in the village itself; then I do it until I go and sit in the bus there. When I have gone and sat down in the bus, then no matter how many of my in-laws are standing there with me, young and old, still I don't use the *ghūṁghaṭ* there. I have broken it (*ṭūṭ jātā*) from there, when I sit in the bus I remove the *ghūṁghaṭ*. But the other women are all standing helplessly (*becārī*) using the *ghūṁghaṭ*. Whether someone says something or not it doesn't make any difference to me. […] In Rajasthan, […] when the wife is in front of her own husband she uses the *ghūṁghaṭ*. [...] So it's still like, if my *sās* is there then I have to use the *ghūṁghaṭ* to sit [in front of her], I can't speak to her. But this is not my way; I don't do all of those things. When I am staying at home with my *sās* I sit just like that. We cannot sit on the *cārpāī* (bed), the *bahū* in front of the *sās*, but for me that's not a problem. I go to sleep at my convenience (*ārām se*) [on the *cārpāī*]. That is the thing in my house; I don't do all these things. My husband's older brother's wife is doing all these things. My husband's brother is living there, his wife is living there and my mother-in-law is living there, so she [the *bahū*] uses the *ghūṁghaṭ*. And she is the oldest and I am the youngest, so that [according to] what we call *śarm* (shame, modesty), it is I who am the one who have to use the *ghūṁghaṭ*. But she is the one doing it. She is doing those things because she is living on the 'village level'. She has to see to (*dekhnā paṛtā*) those things. […] But for me it is no problem to talk to my husband's brother on the phone, I talk to everyone. All that is no problem. If I meet any 'gents' belonging to my *sasurāl* I don't do any *pardā* (veiling), not for anyone. When I am here [in Jaipur] I don't do it however strangely it is perceived. [...] Yes, like that I break up the 'system' little by little. I will start from here a little at a time, and then I will go and reach until my house [*ghar*; referring to her *sasurāl*].

Even though the women activists are outspoken and confident they negotiate some of the same structures as those women they describe as 'unempowered'. While the self-representations presented in the first part of this chapter are part of an assertive narrative, this last part illustrates how women activists also experience social restrictions and expectations similar to those faced by the 'Dalit women' they talk of. Modifying their portrayal as unequivocally self-reliant and assertive, the activists are also embedded in gendered social relations.

Claiming to use the *ghūṁghaṭ* 'differently', Pushpa underlines the substantial difference between her and the ordinary (*ām*) women, who silently abide to the prohibitions and obligations of village life. Pushpa *should not* have to do these things because she is educated and 'working in the social field'. Conversely, her sister-in-law has to 'see to those things' because she is living in the village, lacking both the education and the independent urban base that provides Pushpa with the leverage to negotiate such expectations. Thus the salience of the urban/rural divide to notions of difference within the Dalit population emerges clearly from this narrative. Even though she feels compelled to wear the *ghūṁghaṭ* ('I have to live like an ordinary woman'), Pushpa portrays her own practice as a strategy; she partially concedes to this demand because she believes that adapting and adjusting will, 'little by little', enable her to bring about change in her close relations. She underlines that the village women do *ghūṁghaṭ* unconsciously, while she chooses to only after deliberating upon the matter. Hence, while the village women are portrayed as acting unconsciously in accordance with culture and tradition, Pushpa's narrative confers greater agency upon herself. In my interpretation this illustrates how activists construct their own agency through emphasising their 'difference' in situations that demand their allegiance to practices they consider to be 'backward'.

5 Caste, Community, and the Dalit conversion

The walls of the Dalit Cooperation Committee offices in Delhi were decorated with pictures of B. R. Ambedkar, Jyotirao Phule and other historical pioneers of the Indian low-caste movement.[53] Below their images were hanged clippings of newspaper reports with a Dalit content, posters and calendars produced for various campaigns, and photos from public meetings, workshops and rallies arranged by the Committee. Having become accustomed to the pervasiveness of religious symbols in the Indian public sphere, I initially found the lack of religious paraphernalia in these spaces striking. There were no godly depictions, no waft of incense, no tiny Ganesha on anyone's desk top, and no religious chanting from a worn cassette. Religion as such is not seen as important in the work of the DCC, and the leaders of the organisation generally argue that their religious identities are secondary to their identity as Dalits.[54] Stressing the commonality of the 'Dalit condition' (Narula, 2008, p. 5) and of challenges to the community across religious and *jāti* divisions, religious affiliations are not pronounced within the Committee discourse. And like in most workplaces, the religious beliefs of individual activists were not a topic of everyday conversations.

Still, as I showed in chapter three, the activists enact a ritualised confirmation of Dalithood among themselves that creates distance from what they define as 'Hindu' practices. Having pictures of a late community leader on the wall and greeting one another with reference to his name are both examples of non-religious rituals, designed to create a sense of belonging. In this environment I argue that the invocations of 'Babasaheb', the affectionate name by which Ambedkar is called by his followers, is a critical marker of a politicised identity, formulated in explicit opposition to practices of untouchability. Similar to the use of *jai bhīm*, an exclamation of '*yah to* "Brahmanism" *hai*' (that's Brahmanism) was a common response to stories of Dalit suffering at the hands of non-Dalits.[55] Such routinised denouncements of

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[53] Phule, born in 1827, is considered one of the forerunners of the Indian non-Brahmin movement. In 1873 he started the Satya Shodhak Samaj 'with the object of asserting the worth of a human being irrespective of his birth in a particular caste' (Srinivas, 1957, p. 533). Gail Omvedt (1971) has written on Phule's ideas of a social revolution and on the fortune of the Samaj.

[54] Berg (2007, p. 48) has reported of similar sentiments expressed by Christian Dalit leaders in the context of the Dalit mobilisation during the UN World Conference against Racism in Durban in 2001.

[55] The correspondent '*yah to* "patriarchy" *hai*! (that's patriarchy!)', highlighting gender rather than caste to explain oppression, was a common expression among female activists.

Brahmanism, the rejection of the *namaste*, and the secular aesthetics of the office should all be understood in light of the strategies for Dalit emancipation that were developed by B. R. Ambedkar.

In this final chapter I will delineate Ambedkar's analysis of the intimate relation between Hinduism and caste, and how this analysis led him to devise conversion to Buddhism as a tool to ameliorate the conditions of the Dalits. Although only a minority of the activists are Buddhists, Ambedkar serves as a major frame of reference for thoughts on community and identity among them, as it does in the broader Dalit movement (Hardtmann, 2009). I will reiterate some activist perspectives on religion and argue that these are strongly informed by Ambedkar's explication of the nexus between Hinduism and caste as well as by his understanding of religion as being primarily about the relations between men. The narratives demonstrate how modern notions of progress and rationality serve as the foundation upon which a common Dalit future is imagined. Finally, I will present a different conversion narrative that challenges the dominating notion of religion as a vehicle of community reform and progress. I argue that because of its different nature, this conversion was not seen as pertaining to an 'activist identity', but rather treated as a private matter.

Caste and Hinduism

The image of 'Babasaheb' Ambedkar has become a symbol of affiliation for many different interests claiming to represent 'the Dalit cause'. With the BSP strategy of claiming public space through putting up statues of Ambedkar, his robust figure in a characteristic three-piece suit with a pen in his pocket and the Constitution firmly in hand has become a commonplace image across North India (Jaoul, 2006). Ambedkar's deliberations on caste and on Hinduism are central to ideas and ideologies developed by Dalit activists, political parties, and organisations across the country. In his writings, Ambedkar asserts that opposing caste necessarily entails denouncing all Hindu rituals and beliefs. That of his works that was most widely referred to by the DCC activists was the *Annihilation of Caste* (Ambedkar, 1945). Originally written as a presidential address to the 1936 annual conference of the Jat-Pat-

Todak Mandal, an organisation dedicated to social reform, the leaders of the Mandal found Ambedkar's attacks on Hinduism difficult to accept. When he refused to alter his speech, the organisation ultimately cancelled his appointment as their President (Rodrigues, 2002, p. 13). In this address, Ambedkar argued that caste, and as a result of the system of castes, 'untouchability', was an inevitable outcome of Hinduism:

Caste may be bad. Caste may lead to conduct so gross as to be called man's inhumanity to man. All the same, it must be recognized that the Hindus observe Caste not because they are inhuman or wrong headed. They observe Caste because they are deeply religious. People are not wrong in observing Caste. In my view, what is wrong is their religion, which has inculcated this notion of Caste. If this is correct, then obviously the enemy you must grapple with is not the people who observe Caste, but the Shastras which teach them this religion of Caste (Ambedkar, Annihilation of Caste, 1945, pp. 46-47).

While Ambedkar identifies the *śāstra*s, held by many to be the most authoritative of the Hindu scriptures, as the source of caste, his argument that caste is a fundamental feature of Hinduism was not merely an intellectual exercise. Rather, it grew out of his frustrating experience of working with Hindu reformists in their efforts to change Hinduism from the inside. In the early 1920s Ambedkar was involved in efforts at sanskritising the 'Untouchables' through imitation of high caste religious rituals. The concept of sanskritisation was introduced by sociologist M. N. Srinivas in 1952, to describe the process by which 'a "low" Hindu caste [...] changes its customs, rituals, ideology and way of life in the direction of a high, and frequently, "twice-born" caste' in order to claim a higher position than traditionally conceded to it in the local caste hierarchy (2009 [1966], p. 6).

From 1927 to 1935, Ambedkar worked for the forced opening of Hindu temples to the 'Untouchables' in the so-called temple entry campaign (Zelliot, 2005, p. 157). Becoming disillusioned by the lack of change brought about by his efforts, in 1935 he decided to 'reject all claims to Hinduism and to convert to another religion' (Zelliot, 2005, p. 157). Concluding that reform of Hinduism was impossible due to its fundamentally unequal and hierarchical nature, he urged his followers to leave the religion as a step on the way to liberate themselves

from the untouchable condition.[56] In what has later been called his 'Conversion Speech', given as an address to the Mahar Conference in 1935, Ambedkar famously stated:

Because we have the misfortune of calling ourselves Hindus, we are treated thus. If we were members of another Faith, none would dare treat us so. Choose any religion which gives you equality of status and treatment. We shall repair our mistake now. I had the misfortune of being born with the stigma of an Untouchable. However, it is not my fault; but I will not die a Hindu, for this is in my power (Zelliot, 2005, p. 206).

Both Ambedkar's reading of Hinduism as a social system and his political experiences led him to believe that the Dalits had no future within the Hindu fold. For the rest of his career he vacillated between giving precedence to cultural-religious and political strategies for Dalit liberation. However, neither his deliberations nor the political challenges facing the community offered a clear-cut answer to the question he posed himself in this period; if not Hinduism, then what? In retrospect Buddhism may look like the only possible religious alternative for the Dalit community, but for the first few years after 1936, 'Ambedkar flirted with Islam, Sikhism and Christianity in an attempt to combine a personal need for self-respect […] with an astute political move that would allow Untouchables more political power' (Zelliot, 2005, p. 193). Still, Zelliot (2005, p. 193) argues that 'his threatened conversion particularly to Islam, seems to have been more in the nature of a weapon to force recognition of the Untouchable needs from the Hindus than a genuine interest'. Also Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph (1967, pp. 139-40) have supported this view, arguing that both Islam and Christianity were 'embarrassed by their non-Indian connections, the former by its association with the established state religion of India's chief international rival, Pakistan, the latter by its association with an alien foreign culture and imperial subjection'. Alternatively, to 'become a Buddhist was to reject Hinduism, to repudiate Brahmanism, but to remain closer to Hindu Indian traditions than either of the other faiths allowed' (Rudolph & Rudolph, 1967, p. 140).

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[56] See Ambedkar, *Away from the Hindus* (Rodrigues, 2002, pp. 219-238).

Ambedkarite Buddhism[57]

Twenty-one years after his 'Conversion Speech', Ambedkar converted to Buddhism in Nagpur in the erstwhile Bombay Presidency on 14 October 1956, along with thousands of his followers (Beltz, 2005, pp. 55-57). 75 per cent of the Mahars, the *jāti* to which Ambedkar belonged, as well as several small groups outside present-day Maharashtra followed Ambedkar into Buddhism, resulting in three million converts (Zelliot, 2005, p. 198). In Nagpur that day, the lawyer and statesman led the crowd in reciting first the traditional Buddhist vows in Pali, followed by a twenty-two point Marathi 'declaration of faith' (Beltz, 2005, p. 57) that he had authored for the occasion. Eight out of these twenty-two oaths, including the first six, were concerned with the rejection of Hindu beliefs, worship and rituals:

1. I do not believe in Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh (Shiva) and I shall not worship them.

2. I do not believe in Rama and Krishna and I shall not worship them.

3. I do not believe in any of the Hindu deities such as Gauri, Ganapati, etc., and I shall not worship them.

4. I do not believe in divine *avataras*.

5. I believe that the idea that Buddha is an *avatara* of Vishnu is false propaganda.

6. I shall not worship my ancestors. I shall not make rice ball offerings to them.[58]

As Johannes Beltz (2005, p. 58) has argued, through recommending certain acts and prohibiting others, Ambedkar created a new code 'with which the Buddhists could identify and distinguish themselves from Hindus'. As he was highly sceptical of the main representative of Buddhism in India at that time, the Mahabodhi society, Ambedkar did not

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[57] Eleanor Zelliot (2005, p. 233) is critical of the tendency to classify 'ex-untouchable' Buddhists as 'Buddhists with a prefix' (neo-Buddhists, Ambedkarite Buddhists). 'The Buddhists themselves point out that the words "Neo-Muslim" or "Neo-Christian" are not used, and they find "Neo-Buddhist" a patronizing and unacceptable term' (Zelliot, 2005, p. 233). Laura Jenkins (2008, p. 162) further argues that 'the "neo" label is particularly hurtful to those who consider their conversion a return to past identity', as it denies the myth that Dalits were former Buddhists. Ambedkar himself named his interpretation of Buddhism 'Navayana', to distinguish it from the three accepted 'ways' of Buddhism: Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana (Omvedt, 2003, p. 2). While sympathetic to the argument that such distinguishing labels may serve to undermine Dalit religious identity, to diminish their status as Buddhists (Jenkins, 2008, p. 162), and to uphold the separateness of the Dalit community, it is my assessment that this Buddhism is intrinsically different from other branches of Buddhism, and that this difference is above all related to the emancipatory strategies developed by Ambedkar. For analytical purposes, then, I have chosen to use the term Ambedkarite Buddhism, as it allows for the critical importance of Ambedkar's contribution to the recreation of Buddhism in India.

[58] Quoted from Beltz (2005, p. 57). The oaths have also been translated into English by Zelliot (2005, p. 215).

imagine his followers to enter into an already established tradition (Omvedt, 2003, p. 3). Apart from the apparent revolt against Hindu belief and practice, what were the main points of Ambedkar's reworking of the Buddhist tradition? While attracted to Buddhism as a 'teaching that was equalitarian, universalist and rationalist', Ambedkar attempted to 'bring Buddhism to the world of social action and social change' (Omvedt, 2003, p. 3). He even refused to speak of Buddhism as a religion and preferred to use the term *dhamma*, which he defined in terms of 'a principle of morality and social justice' (Beltz, 2005, p. 62). To Ambedkar, *dhamma* was 'a kind of social contract regulating the relations between humans in their private and public lives' (Beltz, 2005, p. 62).[59]

Ambedkar's reworking of Buddhism was primarily based on texts from the Pali canon, but he also included new interpolations, some of whom aimed at providing 'Buddhist answers to Marxist questions' (Omvedt, 2003, p. 3).[60] Significantly, Ambedkar denied the notion of *karma* as linked to rebirth.[61] Omvedt (2003, p. 5) has argued that there were two reasons for this. First, the metaphysical assumption underlying the link between *karma* and rebirth can not be proved scientifically. Second, this link can be used to convince believers to 'accept their social lot', and hence to justify the caste system (Omvedt, 2003, p. 6). Considering the centrality of the doctrine of *karma* in the other Buddhist schools, this exemplifies how 'Ambedkar approached Buddhism not with the heart of faith but with the scalpel of a practical reformer, and seemed to believe that he could take what he wanted and leave the rest' (Omvedt, 2003, p. 7).

In *Away from the Hindus*,[62] written after his decision to renounce Hinduism in 1936, Ambedkar described religion as having primarily social functions and purposes, and defended his decision against contemporary critics on this basis. In short, the purpose of religion was

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[59] Quoting Ambedkar's 'The Buddha and his Dhamma', pp. 316-323.

[60] See Ambedkar's study 'Buddha or Karl Marx', printed in Rodrigues (2002, pp. 173-189), chapter 14.

[61] Ambedkar deliberated on this topic in 'The Buddha and his Dhamma' (note that *karma* is *kamma* in Pali):'The theory of the law of Kamma does not necessarily involve the conception that the effect of the Kamma recoils on the doer of it and there is nothing more to be thought about it. This is an error. Sometimes the action of one affects another instead of the doer. All the same it is the working of the law of Kamma because it either upholds or upsets the moral order' (verse 30). And in verse 31: 'Individuals come and individuals go. But the moral order of the universe remains and so also the law of Kamma which sustains it.' And finally, verse 36: 'The Law of Kamma has to do only with the question of general moral order. It has nothing to do with the fortunes or misfortunes of an individual' (Ambedkar, 2006, pp. 244-45).

[62] This essay is printed in Rodrigues (2002) as chapter 18, 'Conversion'.

primarily to regulate the relations between men, rather than to mediate between man and God. This interpretation differed from the *bhaktī* (devotional) Hinduism he had grown up with – his father was deeply attached to the devotional mystical Varkari sect and also became a follower of the *Kabīrpanth* (Rodrigues, 2002, p. 7). From the medieval period onwards, *bhaktī* sects and movements had functioned as a route of escape for the 'Untouchables', providing 'at least the illusion of new religious societies in which the power of priests held no sway and all devout followers were regarded as spiritually equal, regardless of caste' (Juergensmeyer, 1982, p. 4). To Ambedkar, however, egalitarianism in the individual's relation with God was not enough. He saw religious legitimacy as depending on the *moral* qualities of a religion. As a consequence his choice of Buddhism was based on what it could enable his community to achieve, rather than on a deep sense of spiritual belonging. He chose Buddhism as he believed it would enable the Dalits to liberate themselves from the burden of untouchability.

Eleanor Zelliot (2005, p. 195) has described the Buddhist conversion as having reference to 'the possibility of Buddhism as a moral force'. The change of religion can be seen as an effort by Ambedkar to establish an alternative moral community, one in opposition to the moral relativism of the traditional Hindu *varṇāśramadharma*. According to this thinking, going back to the Bhagavad Gītā, one's *dharma* (religious and social duties), which forms the basis for right and proper action, varies with the *varna* (estate; caste) and the *āśrama* (stage of life) of an individual. To put it simply, the *dharma* (right action) of a Brahmin will be different from that of a *kṣatriya* or a *śūdra* and that of a *brahmacary* (student) different from that of a *grihasth* (householder), if they were to find themselves in otherwise similar situations. The central message of this system is reiterated in the Gītā; '[b]etter one's own duty badly performed than that of another well done' (Omvedt, 2003, p. 49). While the above is a simplified classical formulation of the *varṇāśramadharma*, this thought was fundamental to the nationalist visions of many of Ambedkar's contemporaries:

Gandhi used much the same definition of an ideal originary caste system as had been developed by such earlier Hindu social reform figures as Dayananda Saraswati and Vivekananda, who defined the Sanskrit term

varnashramadharma to mean the ideal order of things (around caste, stage of life, and the performance of duty), shorn of any hierarchy or power' (Dirks, 2001, p. 278).[63]

Ambedkar opposed this continuation and saw it as yet another superficial attempt at reforming the social system; an attempt that would ultimately change nothing. As against this, he envisioned a community in which morality would be universal, and based on liberty, equality, and fraternity. In his concluding speech to the Constituent Assembly, he said: 'We must make our political democracy a social democracy as well. Political democracy cannot last unless there lies at the base of it social democracy. What does social democracy mean? It means a way of life which recognizes liberty, equality and fraternity as the principles of life' (Das, 2002 [1963], p. 222). In his recreation of Buddhism, Ambedkar was influenced by the rationalism of his time, by the non-Brahman movement, and by the Hindu renaissance,

[b]ut the movement that influenced him the most was the Buddhist revival also known as 'Buddhist Modernism' or 'Protestant Buddhism'. The modernist Buddhists turned towards an attachment with the world. They promoted a politicization of Buddhism [...]. Their knowledge of ancient Buddhism was essentially based on Western sources and English translations of the scriptures. The essence of the modernist theory is that Buddhism is a philosophy scientific in nature, condemning all superstitions and beliefs in numerous gods and that Buddhism is not a religion. This is an idea that originated in the Western interpretations of Buddhism (Beltz, 2005, p. 72).

Further, the conversion was legitimised by Ambedkar's claim that the Dalits were in fact originally Buddhists. He argued that their present condition as 'untouchables' deprived of access to resources was the outcome of a historical civilisational conflict between Buddhism and Brahmanism (Omvedt, 2003, pp. 17-18).[64] Hence, when Dalits in modern India embraced Buddhism this would not really be '"conversion" to a new religion, but liberation and a return to their original identity' (Omvedt, 2003, p. 18). While this historical justification and the

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[63] Italics in the original.

[64] This theory was drawing upon earlier *ādi*-formulations, explaining the origin of untouchability: '[T]he brahmans lost their superior position due to competition from the Buddhists. In order to gain dominant status, the brahmans decided to become vegetarian, to prohibit beef-eating and to reject the Buddhists. As a result the Buddhist broken men who ate beef like the rest of the world, were stigmatized as "impure". This is how untouchability came into being around AD 400' (Beltz, 2005, pp. 69-70, quoting Ambedkar's *The Untouchables: Who they Were and Why they Became Untouchables*).

recreation of the moral community was most urgently needed by the Dalits, Ambedkar intended the new Buddhist community to be open also to people of other castes.

The Dalit conversion

Ambedkar's arguments about the intrinsic relation between caste and Hinduism were well-known among the DCC activists, and they often applied these in their own reflections on the inequalities of contemporary Indian society. For some of those activists who were born into Hindu families, the process of 'becoming aware' had also entailed deciding whether or not to convert out of Hinduism, and what to eventually convert into. Sitting in the office with Vikram one afternoon, I asked him what religion (*dharm*) he followed.[65]

Now I am 'neutral'. I want to change my 'religion'. I haven't done it yet, but I have definitely left Hinduism (*choṛ cukā*). I don't 'follow' even one of its things. Even my wife and my daughter, we don't 'follow' anything. My parents are doing it; they are 'following' Hinduism. [...] They're doing *pūjā* also, [unintelligible]. I don't do *pūjā*, I don't do anything. My wife does not keep a fast on *karvācauth* or anything like that. Me and my family don't do anything like that. I am done with it; I have completely abandoned Hinduism (*bilkul choṛ diyā*). But until now I have not made up my mind, what I think. Islam, Buddhism, what ever. What ever it will be, I'm not going back to Hinduism! [laughs] [...] Because since it is Hinduism which has thrown us so far behind (*pīche*), which has so much abuse for us, which has placed us in such a bad condition (*burī hālat*), it doesn't have any value. The way our situation is no-one can stay with it [Hinduism]. So that's why I have left it. *Pūjā-vūjā, mandir-vandir*, none of it.[66] (Vikram)

Seemingly moulded on the process of religious deliberation that Ambedkar had gone through seventy years earlier, Vikram had found it necessary to leave Hinduism as part of his

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[65] Translating the word 'religion' with '*dharma*', as I have done here, is not unproblematic. 'Religion' is an emic, Western concept, and has no direct equivalent in Hindi or other Indian languages. '*Dharma*' covers overlapping but different semantic fields, including duties, customary ritual observances, law and justice (McGregor, 1993). In the field setting I used this word for want of a better alternative. However, I believe that the activists also understood the word thus, at least additionally; as a retranslation into Hindi of the English concept of 'religion' rather than as '*dharma*' with its specifically Hindu connotations. In the above quote Vikram replies to my question about his '*dharma*' by using the word 'religion' in English.

[66] *Pūjā* (worship) is a term that covers worship and deity adoration, both everyday practices that are carried out in people's homes and more elaborate public rituals during festivals. It is 'the core ritual of popular theistic Hinduism' (Fuller, 2004 [1992], p. 57). *Mandir* means temple. Vikram's statement hence ascertains that he no longer carries out such practices that are seen as characteristic of Hinduism.

politicisation, but had no great rush to settle into a new religion. Rather, he seemed quite content in his self-imposed religious hiatus. Breaking away was the crucial action, and when this was accomplished he allowed himself and his family time to contemplate the possibilities. Leaving Hinduism was part of a process of personal change, of 'becoming aware', and he perceived it to be an improvement to him and his family. This improvement consisted in freeing himself from the enslavement of Hindu 'superstition'. It was also clear that Vikram valued the signal effect emanating from the symbolic action of leaving Hinduism, and that having done this was closely intertwined with his identity as an activist. In this way 'conversion' became part of the greater transformative process that was envisioned by the activists; individual as well as collective.

Although Vikram was, at least not yet, a Buddhist convert, his understanding of conversion as symbolising freedom and notions of progress resonates with much of what has been written about Dalit conversions to Buddhism. In her studies of Ambedkarite Buddhists, Zelliot (2005, pp. 218-219) has emphasised the 'profoundly satisfying psychological meaning of the conversion', consisting in a sense of pride in Buddhism, in love and respect for Ambedkar, and in a 'freedom from the sense of being a polluting person.' Through conversion, 'the convert himself feels a [...] new freedom and self-respect' (Zelliot, 2005, p. 196). Studying women converts in Maharashtra, Laura Jenkins (2008, pp. 162-3) has similarly held that conversion has led to a change in 'attitudes and choices […], epitomized by the educational empowerment of Dalits. Understanding is yet another form of empowerment, as Dalit Buddhists look back and critically view the past and aspire to a better future.'

In Vikram's statement above as well as in the Buddhist vows prescribed by Ambedkar, the act of leaving Hinduism is an enunciated aspect of the conversion. As Hindu morality and beliefs are held responsible for the oppression of Dalits, continued participation in Hindu practices has also come to symbolise Dalit 'backwardness' within this discourse. This was evident when Vikram talked disapprovingly of his parents, whom he described as uneducated and with a 'backward' mindset, still doing the *pūjā*. As I have described, the nature of Dalit exclusion, as from education, is perceived as a feature of the social organisation of caste, which is again determined by Hindu religion. While love and respect for Ambedkar is a

central theme of the Dalit conversion, I argue that among these Dalit activists the very crux of the conversion lies in producing a specific narrative of progress wherein the community will proceed into a rational future through shedding their old superstitions.

Through their emphasis on discarding a problematic past in order to reform the Dalit community, the activists also convey a specific moral vision. This first became apparent to me through an interview with a senior activist who had followed Ambedkar into Buddhism in 1956. Mr. Prasad was not part of the DCC, and our meeting was set up through other contacts. I met him in his home in Delhi, and his son, a medical doctor in his fifties, was present in the living room during parts of our conversation.[67] Born in 1927, Mr. Prasad was a lawyer, an intellectual, and an influential promoter of Dalit rights. He had joined the Scheduled Caste Federation in his home town at the age of sixteen, and later initiated and held positions in various organisations concerned with Dalit issues. The impact of Ambedkar on his generation of upwardly mobile Dalits could be discerned in what he told me about his conversion.

Yes, [I converted] when Ambedkar converted to Buddhism. I'd been to Burma during the war; I joined the air force and after training I was posted to Burma.[68] So I came across Buddhists [there] and was not impressed. You know, when you inherit a religion you may not be rigid in following [it]. So I was surprised when Dr. Ambedkar announced renunciation of Hinduism. I belonged to a state which had a Buddhist population, so I didn't have a very good opinion about Buddhists. They were regular about prayer, but not [about] conduct. I mean, I've seen people drink alcohol in shops. [...] Then I became interested in conversion because Babasaheb Ambedkar wrote some articles about conversion and I used to go to his office [...]. [I had a] change of mind by looking at his work, and especially [at his] books on Buddhism. It was different from what I'd seen in Burma, Nepal, the Tibet border and Ceylon. So I got a different opinion of Buddhism. He [Dr. Ambedkar] had approached [it] differently, and I was convinced.[69]

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[67] This interview was conducted in English. It was not taped, so the quote given here is a reconstruction based on notes from our conversation. I believe it to be an accurate account as Mr. Prasad was an adept English speaker who answered my questions very slowly and clearly.

[68] The Second World War.

[69] Note the true surprise Mr. Prasad expressed over Ambedkar's decision to convert. While the conversion and his choice of Buddhism is seen by many as inevitable in retrospect, it was not necessarily experienced thus by his contemporaries.

This narrative emphasises intellectual deliberation and loyalty to Ambedkar over faith and spiritual conviction. During his encounters with Buddhists of different geographical regions, Buddhism had never appealed to Mr. Prasad. However, different from the Buddhist lived realities he had encountered across South Asia, it was the written Buddhism as interpreted by Ambedkar that became an attractive religious alternative and led him to convert in spite of his disapproval of common Buddhist conduct. Echoing this, Hardtmann (2009, p. 140) has reported from a conversation with a Dalit intellectual; 'he does not consider himself to be a traditional or orthodox Buddhist. [...] According to him the conversion to Buddhism aims at getting out of the caste system and giving Dalits a new identity'. Through imbuing Buddhism with a new purpose, Ambedkar offered the Dalits freedom from the oppression of Hinduism, replacing it by a rational philosophy of conversion.

Mr. Prasad recounted how he had previously seen Buddhists 'drink alcohol in shops'. Behaving more or less like anyone else, the Buddhists he had met previously did not represent an advanced moral community. It was first through the intervention of Ambedkar that Buddhism acquired the potential to transform the Dalit community, and thus became attractive to a man dedicated to social change. I argue that this potential for transformation was partly constituted by Ambedkar's vision of *reform* as integral to Dalit emancipation. Thus while conversion aimed to change the 'Hindu' image of the Dalits, it also aimed to change the Dalits, or rather to improve them into better and more worthy citizens.

In Ambedkar's writings there is much to show what Zelliot (2005, 131) has called a 'process of self-purification of those practices which "justified" the untouchability of the Untouchable'. He urged his followers to put an end to stigmatised practices like ritually polluting work and the eating of carrion, and through his newspapers he called upon them to 'dress well; don't drink; don't beg; get educated and send your children to school; be self-respecting' (Zelliot, 2005, p. 131).

At the Mahad conference [of 1927] [Ambedkar] asked all those who attended to take a vow to renounce the eating of carrion [as an] attempt to remove the basic root of Mahar pollution [...]. He also asked his listeners to "improve the general tone of our demeanour, *re-tone our pronunciations* and revitalise our thoughts". Women in

special meetings were asked to dress like caste Hindu women, to send their children to school, not to feed their husbands if they were drunk. Internal attempts at reform, now much stressed by the Mahar movement, fit very well into M. N. Srinivas' rubric of Sanskritization, but note here that the emphasis is on elements which are social rather than ritualistic' (Zelliot 2005, 205).[70]

As we have seen in the previous chapters, similar notions of reform inform how Dalit activists think about Dalit empowerment and social change. Arguing that 'when you inherit a religion you may not be rigid in following [it]' Mr. Prasad assumed that as a result of the conscious choice that conversion entails, Buddhist converts are more likely to become good Buddhists than those who are born into the religion. This valuing of the deliberate religious choice over the inherited, assumedly 'unconscious' religion of the masses was found also among the DCC activists. Quoting a *Times of India* newspaper article from 1975, Eleanor Zelliot (2005, p. 219) explains how young Buddhists in Maharashtra fear that the vacuum of Hindu 'dogmas and superstitions' after the conversion will be filled by Buddhist religious rituals. '[T]he very sort of replacement of Hindu processions, yatras, festivals and temple life which might involve the Buddhist masses in visible Buddhist practice is discouraged by educated Buddhists' (Zelliot, 2005, p. 220). Because rituals are seen as manifestations of 'superstition' they need to be exorcised and completely replaced by an educated and rational outlook. Merely trading Hindu rituals with Buddhist ones is not sufficient.

Zelliot (2005, p. 131) writes that 'if he did not stress the need for Untouchables to become "an integral part of Hinduism", Ambedkar did insist that Untouchables should look and act like the highest of caste Hindus'. And while Ambedkar was never very concerned with ritual rights, even less so after abolishing the temple-entry campaign in 1935, 'those who followed him expected that participation in institutionalized Hindu activities would be a consequence of their activities and self-improvement' (Zelliot, 2005, p. 205). In another essay Zelliot (2005, p. 204) argues that 'Ambedkar's "westernization" could also be called "brahmanization" in a broad cultural sense, and this met some ideal goal current among his people'. Dalit reform as envisioned by the DCC activists is not a variety of sanskritisation in my opinion, their idiom of reform is rather one of modernisation. Their reform does entail a personal transformation and efforts towards establishing a new moral community, but these

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[70] Italics in the original.

efforts are made through scrutinising and criticising the morality of upper caste Hindus, not merely through imitating them as in processes of sanskritisation. Rather, I argue that a specific idiom of *modernity* is predominant among the DCC activists within which reform, anti-ritual, and anti-superstition is equated with becoming modern, understood as rational and 'forward':

The dalit stress on books and formal education, on "cultured" speech and urban manners, clean clothes and shoes, in the construction and presentation of the dalit self makes a good deal of sense in the context of the struggle to transform dispositions – that of the dalits and that of their opponents. If rationality, science and a belief in progress was to provide the spirit of a modern, democratic society, and adult franchise, elected legislatures and governments, a free press, transparent laws and an independent judiciary its political institutions, then education, articulate speech and self-confidence reflected in dress and manners, were the conditions of their use (Pandey, 2006, p. 1786).

An anticipated outcome of a Dalit leaving Hinduism is that other people's perceptions should change. After all, shedding the derogatory qualities that are attributed to the Dalits by others is a central motivation behind these conversions.

But then it remains that if you're in India, then there's that 'mentality', the 'mentality' of the people that Hinduism has created, you cannot leave that with the religion. No matter what religion [they choose] it stays with them. Perhaps they will become Dalit Muslims, Dalit Christians – that has [already] happened. Now those who are Dalit Christians or Dalit Muslims, what are they supposed to do? Say that I am a convert, I do cleaning work (*safāī*), I have become a Christian. My helplessness is that I can't leave my work, [and so] I will still be recognised by that (*merī pahacān to vohī rahegī*).[71] They can't change that. So sometimes I think that, *yār*, what is the point (*fāydā*) of changing the religion […] Now that I am 'neutral' I feel that that's better. (Vikram)

The various aspects of the Dalit condition emerge as a web of closely intertwined sources of oppression and humiliation. Ridding oneself of one aspect of this condition through converting out of Hinduism will not necessarily put an end to the condition as such. Although conversion may free ex-Untouchables from religious discrimination, Vikram deplored how in

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[71] *pahacān* may also be translated as discrimination, judgement, and characteristic (McGregor, 1993).

the eyes of the non-Dalits 'a Dalit remains a Dalit'. Being compelled to carry out traditional duties or manual labour continues to be a strong distinguishing feature. Quite surprisingly, in Vikram's view, as long as people will continue to be recognised as Dalits, there is no real reason why they should convert. This implies that the activists saw conversion out of Hinduism as only a partial solution to the problems of the Dalits.

Vikram made this point by referring to a kind of 'Dalit' who is in a situation quite different from his own. With his education, type of employment, and general appearance, Vikram can not be identified as 'Dalit' by strangers, something he pointed out himself. While conversion was experienced as a necessity because it was intellectually and emotionally impossible for him to stay within Hinduism, he wonders if it has any point (*fāydā*) for those who are anyways unable to leave their stigmatised occupations, i.e. the poor and illiterate. This shift in Vikram's explanation, from talking about himself to talking about the 'oppressed Dalit', indicates the elite scope of the conversion movement. If being a Buddhist, like being an activist, is a condition marked through by the 'modern' and the 'forward', Ambedkar's religion is perhaps of less use to those whose bodies are marked by manual labour, whose clothes are dirty and unkempt, and who are, in short, 'backward'.

Gita's experience: A different conversion

Gita was a lawyer by profession, an unmarried activist in her early thirties. She was in Delhi for a workshop, and stayed over night in my room in the intern's house. In the morning, before going to the office, we sat on the bed for an interview. Gita came from the Hindi-speaking region, and her family was Hindu.[72] She had experienced a crisis when her younger brother fell seriously ill in 2004. His marriage had been arranged not long before his illness was discovered, something which added to the gravity of the situation in the eyes of the family. While it did not become clear to me what exactly her brother had suffered from, she told me that it was a condition that people do not normally survive, and the doctors in the nearest city had not left the family with much hope. After arranging for different treatments

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[72] For purposes of anonymity I have named the capital of the activists' home state Rajpur.

by several foreign-educated doctors, Gita had finally been told that if she wanted to save her brother's life she would have to get him admitted to a particular hospital in Rajpur, the state capital, known for its high standards.

[At this hospital] all the people are from the mission, the doctors are Christian missionaries, the nurses, too. The hospital itself is a missionary hospital, and it is the very best hospital in Rajpur […], and it is a quite expensive hospital. So I took [my] brother and went there. When I took him there I was crying, and because I followed Hindu religion at that time I thought of my gods and goddesses (*apne devī-devtā*). I cried a lot and thought that he is my little brother; I have educated him [...]. I was [feeling] quite empty from the inside. So I invoked the name of God (*nām lete the*), right? But then none [of the gods] were to be seen anywhere (*kahĩ dikhāī to nahĩ detā thā*)! What I saw was that the cross was hanging there, right? Jesus' cross was hanging there. There [on the wall] was Mother Mary (*mā mariam*); Mother Mary's image and the cross were there. Then in my mind; I was crying and thinking that here too everything is given, they are showing everything here. Fine, I said, that fine, then that is God (*yahĩ to bhagvān hai*). It looks like God; it is one form (*rūp*) of him, right? That is also a form of *bhagvān*, because nobody has seen 'God', right?

After shedding her initial hesitations, Gita cried and gave vent to her fears and frustrations in front of the picture of Mother Mary on the hospital wall.

After that, when my brother returned to consciousness, when the doctor got me and took me there to show me, I was very 'nervous'. [...] And when I got there what did my brother say? "You know" [speaks in a weak voice], he had just become conscious, so he spoke slowly, "you know, a woman came and did like this to me with her *dupaṭṭā* twice, and then left" [moves her arm as though letting a thin fabric slide along her brother's body]. I mean, she was the same as the Mother Mary of the 'wait room', where I had done her *pūjā*, in the hospital. Mother Mary's *dupaṭṭā* had a 'white colour' too, and hers [the woman in her brother's room] was the same. She had gone there, that same appearance (*rūp*), my brother said that "a person just like that came and did this to me and left, in the night. And I became all right". So because I thought of her with a true heart (*saccā dil se*), she made my brother all right. Who you are, that I don't know, but my brother became all right, and I started having faith (*viśvās*) in Jesus. Yes, he has a lot of power (*śakti*).

This narrative of conversion is divergent from the religio-political strategy of Ambedkarite Buddhism which is generally embraced by Dalit elites in several ways. The premises behind this conversion are different from those behind the conversions of Vikram and Mr. Prasad.

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While the latter two presented their 'conversions' as being based on social and political considerations, Gita's conversion was an act of faith (*viśvās*), induced by a personal crisis and the subsequent efficiency of a godly intervention. When re-narrating her miraculous experience, Gita emphasised the *śakti* (godly power or ability) of Jesus Christ.

Also, compared to the other conversions I have described, she presented her own role in the whole process as less deliberate. Her part was both central and active as she was the one who prayed and did *pūjā,* but her efforts did not grow out of her political conviction and was not a response to larger questions about caste, community, and social change. She did not see her conversion as part of a larger solution to the problems of the Dalits. Rather, it arose as a response to the unusual circumstances of the hospital and to her feelings of fear and grief in face of the threat of loosing a dear one.

The point that I want to make relates to the somewhat more private nature of this conversion: Gita said that she had not told any of her co-workers about her change of faith, and she described her faith in Jesus Christ as 'from the inside' (*andar se*). Her decision to convert was nothing to display within the network of activists. Unlike Vikram, Gita did not talk about her religious conversion as part of a process of becoming 'aware' and 'empowered'. I believe that the complete divergence between these narratives of conversion is also gendered: As an unmarried woman Gita's change of faith was treated, by herself as well as by her family, as a private matter pertaining only to her. She had told her father what had happened and asked for his approval, and said that if she was ever to get married she would prefer her husband to be 'a little bit Christian'.

While conversions to Buddhism convey Dalit assertion and a new-won feeling of social liberation, this narrative was based the practical intervention of a godly power (*śakti*). Being outside the meta-narrative of individual and communal progress the story of Gita's conversion throws into relief the promotion of a specific modernity within the Dalit movement. As opposed to the stories told by Vikram and Mr. Prasad, her conversion was personal, rather than a social and political statement. This demonstrates how some religious expressions serve

to reinforce while others are defined out of an ideological narrative of activism. I argue that this is primarily based upon how well a religious expression 'fits' into this vision of 'becoming modern'. Within this vision, popular practices like fast, idols, and prayer are seen as 'superstition' and 'blind faith'. Simultaneously the activists preach a specific *modernity* for the Dalits, one within which 'progressing' and 'becoming forward' is premised on discarding such practices. The spirituality of Gita's conversion invokes an entirely different realm of human experience – one that cannot be accommodated within the framework of Ambedkarite Buddhism and its strictly rational modernity. Chiefly, this narrative serves to underline how the thrust of Ambedkarite Buddhism is *social* rather than otherworldly.

6 Conclusion

Through the mechanisms of competitive electoral politics, caste is being continuously reinvented in contemporary India. The 'deepening' of the Indian democracy has come with a fragmentation of politics, producing new political bodies representing newly politicised groups that express new demands in a new language (Yadav, 1999). This development has shattered modernist expectations that democracy, industrialisation, and economic liberalisation would lead to a shift from 'traditional' primordial identities to people seeing themselves as citizens whose rights and duties should be negotiated individually, primarily through the ballot. Rather, the formulations of rights claims in India have happened, and are now expected to happen increasingly along caste and community lines.

In this thesis, this process of politicisation is seen through the idea of 'Dalithood'. The activists that figure here are 'Dalit' by birth, but they are not 'Dalit' in the sense 'broken, ground down, oppressed'. The activists are part of what I have argued is an emerging 'politics of difference', which seeks to redefine collectively the status of the group to which they belong. This politics is premised on a sharp conceptualisation of 'us' and 'them', where the 'upper castes' or 'non-Dalits' are the oppressors and the Dalits the victims of their oppression. I argue that the dynamics between a narrative of community progress and this specific narrative of 'Dalithood' serve to situate 'the Dalit' as perpetually at the receiving end of relations of status and power.

When talking about their own 'Dalithood', the activists describe the process of acquiring an education as a struggle against exclusion and discrimination, stemming both from poverty and from the prejudices of 'upper castes'. Within their discourse, archaic practices like manual scavenging, enforcement of physical distance, and the denial of water and food to 'Untouchables', have come to epitomise the Dalit condition. It is by suffering from these deprivations that the Dalits as a group are singled out from the rest of society. These experiences form the basis of their 'difference' – a difference upon which their Dalit unity and solidarity is based. I contend that the relatively stronger emphasis on discrimination than on

economic inequalities has to do with the power of images such as that of the 'manual scavenger' to convey a feeling of total human denigration. The emphasis is also related to downright feasibility – a comprehensive body of legislation protecting Dalits from discrimination is already in place, and they use this effectively as a tool to address these issues. Also, the activists may see the continuation of discriminatory practices as more problematic since these are the kind of challenges they still meet despite being educated and relatively privileged. Still, what I find most striking is how personal narratives of discrimination and exclusion serve to legitimate the activists as the 'true' representatives of the Dalits, thereby laying claim to the right to 'speak for' them.

Within the activist discourse, being poor is equated with being 'backward'. This notion of 'backwardness' implies not only poverty and a lack of education, but also a lack of the 'right' progressive attitudes. Some activists describe their own families as backward, but while poverty and ensuing 'backwardness' had been impediments to their education and 'going forward', the activists place relatively more emphasis on experiences of discrimination. The effort to get education is thus seen as *communal*, and obstacles are often interpreted into a framework of competition between castes; a 'social race for progress' that tends to produce a collective agency (Ciotti, 2010b, p. 120). Their interpretation may also be a way to deal with memories of humiliating experiences, as when discrimination at the hands of their teachers is explained in terms of protecting students of a 'higher' social standing from the fierce competition represented by 'low caste' students.

When describing their path towards becoming 'aware' and 'empowered', most of the activists draw attention to the support they received from named individuals along the way. Many describe the process of 'becoming aware' as having been initiated by a fellow Dalit. This was often someone in an unusual position – a professor or someone politically knowledgeable – who introduced them to a different narrative of 'being Dalit', providing a new frame of interpretation for understanding their own position in society. Their emphasis on the roles played by extraordinary individuals also serves to underscore how Dalits still do not expect to be treated in accordance with their rights despite the existence of a progressive body of legislation to that end. The individuals who had helped them had merely done what should

have been a matter of course, and thus to some extent rectified the misbehaviour of 'non-Dalit' teachers and others. In accordance with the community construction delineated above, individual support was mostly interpreted along these lines – if someone had helped them it was because they were also Dalit. The activists' stories conformed to this public narrative also when further probing revealed that some of these 'helpers' belonged to other castes. I argue that this indicates the power of this discursive frame of interpretation.

Symbolising community awareness, stories about the life and thought of Ambedkar often played into these processes, which always entailed getting new knowledge. Sometimes the activist had also been presented with a new vocabulary, enabling her to reinterpret earlier experiences of discrimination and exclusion. This reinterpretation was in some instances described as the beginning of a reinvention of self, where one was 'going forward' or 'growing' from a 'backward' condition of being 'unaware' and 'unable to speak' because of ignorance.

I also found that the activist construction of 'us' and 'them' was characterised by an indefinite notion of the 'other'. Where the educated Chamars studied by Ciotti experienced the social race as a competition between the *varna*s, 'viewed as blocks and essentialised by fundamental traits' (Ciotti, 2010b, p. 120), the DCC activists simply distinguished between themselves and the 'upper castes', 'non-Dalits', or 'Hindus'. A similarly dichotomised view of Indian society is also apparent in Ambedkar's writings. I maintain that this emphasis on 'difference' goes against attempts to integrate the 'Untouchables' into Hindu society as in Gandhian visions of reform, as well as against integrative analyses of Indian society, most forcefully formulated in Dumont's *Homo Hierarchicus* (1980 [1966]). 'Difference' is hence an oppositional stance that provides a definite starting point for mobilisation through clear-cut categories of 'oppressor' and 'oppressed'.

'The Dalit identity' as presented by the DCC activists is on the whole not defined substantively, but in the negative. By this I do not mean that their self-images are negative, but that they insist that collectively their social position and their 'issues' and problems are

'completely different' from those faced by individuals belonging to other caste groups, and that this 'difference' pertains first and foremost to the outreach and intensity of suffering. Also when it comes to (religious) community definitions, politicised Dalits are most emphatic that they are *not* Hindus (see also Hardtmann, 2009, p. xiv). But what are the cultural resources that substantiate 'the Dalit identity' beyond a fellowship of suffering and an insistence on what it is not? Badri Narayan (2006) has written about how local mythological and historical heroes are adopted and reinvigorated by the Bahujan Samaj Party in Uttar Pradesh. He argues that 'imagination and memory, which may be constructed out of myth and history, is "the foundational requirement for the identity, self-respect and social existence of the marginalized communities [...]"', through establishing *positive* claims of identity (Charsley & Karanth, 2006, p. 13).[73]

The units of Narayan's study are different from the DCC activists in several ways, but his findings illuminate how being a national level organisation makes adopting such cultural politics unviable in the Committee. Consisting of people from across the country, it must take into consideration political, cultural, and religious differences that have produced different 'movement perspectives' (Hardtmann, 2009). Consisting of and appealing to Dalits across these divisions, it is not practicable to make locally anchored mythologies and heroes meaningful to all. Since symbols like these are so powerful, they are also often contested. 'At common conferences where Dalit activists from across the country come together, disagreement may also arise about which figure to put on the scene: Buddha or/and Ambedkar or/and Jesus' (Hardtmann, 2009, pp. 116-117).

Still, I contend that some symbols shared among the DCC activists contribute to the everyday production of boundaries that constitute notions of self. What I found, and what Hardtmann (2009, p. 226) has also argued, is that 'the discourses and tensions between different movement perspectives take place within the framework of the tacit knowledge regarding the "most other", "the Hindu"', from which dissociation is 'constantly repeated and agreed upon' (p. 227). In addition, positive and shared identity markers are seen to revolve around the figure of Ambedkar, through greetings, through the discussion and dissemination of his ideas,

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[73] Italics mine.

and through identifying with his image, which has become an immediately recognisable symbol worn on T-shirts and buttons. The linkages between the iconography of Ambedkar and notions of progress and modernity within the Committee have only been cursorily touched upon in this thesis, but constitute a topic that invites further investigation.

When talking about their work, the activists represent themselves as confident and brave, acting out courageous roles. While the narratives seem to depict their assertive actions as emotional outbreaks based upon an inherent sense of justice, I argue that their actions also hinge on their unusual social positions. Such bold assertions are partly enabled by exactly those positional and relational characteristics that set them apart from 'poor and illiterate' Dalits. Still, these narratives serve to legitimate their participation in the Dalit struggle. Their narratives of assertion contain a strong element of provocation, and I contend that this draws upon a *history* of Dalit assertion. Provocative actions are intended to expose the continuation of discriminatory practices that are both immoral and illegal, as well as a majority society paying lip service to values of equality and the abolition of caste. This, I argue, indicates how the activists inscribe themselves into a greater narrative of Dalit struggle, aimed at contesting their allotted social and economic space within Indian society.

While expressions of caste pride are increasingly formulated and expressed also by other castes and caste constellations in contemporary India (Gupta, 2004), I contend that expressions based on the notion of 'Dalithood' may be understood as inherently different. The DCC activists are set out not merely to change popular perceptions about the Dalits as a group, but also to reform the Dalit community. As their community is 'backward', it is also in need of reform. Their discursive portrayal of the Dalits as 'backward' does not only entail that they are poor and oppressed, but also that they are lacking 'awareness' and 'empowerment'. Through this discourse the activists create a singular victimised image of 'the Dalit' and make this image stand for all those who are denoted by this ambiguous label. I further argue that the activists' own self-image was construed in opposition to this particular image of the 'backward' Dalit, and that their identities as activists relied on the dynamics of this contrast. They emphasise this difference – a difference rooted in education, 'empowerment', and knowledge – seen to confer upon them a higher social status.

This discourse creates distance, but the activists also construct ties through emphasising shared 'Dalithood', as manifest in their own willingness to associate with, and their ability, based on experience, to truly *understand* the poor and oppressed. The ideal of being a 'real grassroots activist'; of working hard for the cause without concern for one's personal comfort or appearance, may be seen as an effort to bridge the gap between middle-class activists and the 'poor Dalit'. Through this idiom the activists stressed their ability to move across arenas, to talk to everyone, to get things done, and to 'move in an accomplished manner between practices coded as "traditional" and those imagined as "modern"' (Jeffrey, Jeffery, & Jeffery, 2008, p. 68). This ideal shows how solidarity with and proximity to the 'poor Dalit' is highly valued among them. At the same time the narratives of what it entails to be a 'real grassroots activist' reiterates how they perceive themselves to be different from their Dalit 'other'. Through these different identifications the activists underline sameness and solidarity in some contexts, and distance and difference in others. For instance, responding to the strong imagery of 'the Dalit woman' as veiled and muted, and 'thrice oppressed' by caste, class, and patriarchy, female activists emphasise how their own practices of veiling are different from those of the 'oppressed woman'. I contend that *this* difference is prominent because it also pertains to the differences between the village and the city – imagined as traditional/'backward' and modern/progressive respectively – as well as to the difference between the illiterate and the educated.

Among the activists in the DCC as well as in the wider Dalit movement there is a strong sentiment that the interests of the Dalits can only be legitimately represented by Dalits (Guru, 1995). Since the definition of who is a 'Dalit' is ultimately based on *jāti* belonging, this might seem contradictory within a movement whose self-professed goal is the abolition of caste. I argue that the anti-caste rhetoric of the activists is, in this sense, embedded in an idea of caste-as-community where castes are seen as 'natural' groups and are believed to share some features. This does not necessarily imply that they think of caste as inherited 'substance' (*guṇa*) (Kolenda, 1978, pp. 71-74), but reflects belief in a common history, in shared needs of the present, and in a *collective* future destiny.

Accordingly, 'Dalithood' can not be reduced to shared interests or dedication; it is also about an inherited social position. Hence while derogatory qualities and meanings attached to their caste belongings are opposed and denied, caste as a primary social unit is reproduced through employing caste solidarity and emphasising caste concerns in their efforts to unite and mobilise the Dalit population. As it has been phrased by Dipankar Gupta (2004, pp. xix-xx), '[c]astes cannot change intrinsically as long as they are fundamentally founded on identities that draw their sustenance from a rhetoric of natural differences [...]: the more things change the more they are the same'. The widespread co-optation of Dalit political leaders by mainstream political parties and reform movements is an important historical factor explaining this insistence on exclusiveness and 'difference' within the contemporary Dalit movement.

Caste in political mobilisation

As an epilogue, what may these considerations tell us about the role of caste in contemporary processes of political mobilisation in India? One dimension that has been explored is the relation between caste and a kind of 'class', understood as levels of education and 'progress'. This notion of 'class' is expressed in stereotyped notions of people as 'forward' and 'backward'. I have described how these categories run counter to notions of 'us' and 'them' as discernible in the activists' ideological statements, and argue that these notions are closely linked to a *moral* vision of upward mobility.

Whatever the truth about 'Untouchables' accepting their own inferiority in the past (Moffatt, 1979), today these groups undoubtedly express an increased assertion about their human and political rights (Mendelsohn & Vicziany, 1998). This also entails that *caste* has come to play a new role. According to Sudha Pai (2002, p. 10),

From an instrument of oppression in the hands of the upper castes, it has become a tool for political mobilisation, creating solidarities among the oppressed. The use of caste as *class*, as an "ideology" and a tool for mobilisation of the Dalits and capturing of power through Parliamentary means are important steps, which will help in further

democratisation of the civil society. This is possible because of the strong correlation between caste and class at the bottom of the hierarchy. Hence, Dalit assertion can be viewed as a 'class', and not a 'caste' assertion.[74]

In my opinion this argument is somewhat misleading. On the contrary, I argue, differentiations on the basis of 'caste' and 'class' produce cross-cutting allegiances which repeatedly pose fresh challenges to attempts to rally people around caste identities. As Dipankar Gupta (1991, p. 4) has argued, 'the oft asked query of whether caste is giving way to class, is an outcome of conceptual fogginess. There is no reason to believe that if there is caste there cannot be class, nor is it the case that as one grows the other must wane. [...] Caste and class after all do not constitute a continuum'. Despite increased Dalit consciousness and a new wave of radicalism, writes Rajni Kothari (1997, p. 452), 'there is as yet no clear and categorical "new alignment of forces", no real phenomenon of solidarity of the lower castes despite growing and intensifying conflicts across the hierarchy of the "caste system". In fact, the parallel often drawn with class is misleading'.

Numerical considerations spurred by electoral political competition have resulted in efforts to build broad caste-coalitions, uniting discrete *jātis* in aggregate caste groups (Chandra, 2004). The 'Dalits' are one such group; another is the attempt to forge broader *bahujan* ('plebeian') solidarity. Further, such efforts are not at all limited to the Dalit or 'lowest' castes; the Yadavas (Michelutti, 2008) and other OBC as well as upper caste groups attempt the same. Some have succeeded in forging political alliances between proximate *jātis*, making them into newly powerful political groups.[75] These attempts are not entirely novel; as has been argued by the Rudolphs (1967), and most recently elaborated by Hardtmann (2009, pp. 45-54), contemporary efforts to merge castes into broader segments for the purpose of capturing political power have often built on earlier caste federations, or *sabhā*s. Hence while caste in contemporary India has become a basis for political mobilisation, producing parties representing aggregate caste groups that statistically correspond broadly to the poorer sections of society, the similarities grasped by the equation that 'caste' is becoming 'class' can not justify the differences it conceals.

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[74] Italics in the original.
[75] See the contributions in Gupta (2004).

Dalit mobilisation is not primarily about poverty or class struggle. 'The Dalit identity' as it emerges from the political activists of this study, is primarily a social identity. Its assertion has definite political implications, but it does not inherently encourage solidarity across caste divisions. Rather, it is an *exclusive* identity, based on the notion of 'Dalithood'. Further, an equation of caste with class may serve to blur another aspect of Dalit assertion that comes to the fore in this thesis: it is to some extent a middle-class phenomenon. The 'new' civil society-based Dalit movement is largely dominated by educated middle-class Dalits. As I have showed, the activists emphasise their relatedness to ordinary, 'backward' Dalits, but are also concerned with distancing themselves from the derogatory connotations that still cling to this term of identification. In most instances their status as 'middle class' is both recent and quite precarious, and their closeness to experiences of exclusion and discrimination makes the label 'creamy layer' to describe these activists seem quite incongruous.

The findings of this thesis imply that while different caste groups attempt to mobilise around newly politicised identities, the mechanisms of such mobilisations are not the same. In determining these, the community's perceived position on dimensions of status and power are decisive. From a Dalit activist point of view these dimensions are still seen to run largely along the groves of the 'traditional' system of castes. I have attempted to show how an identity constructed on the basis of being excluded and 'at the bottom' has idioms and mechanisms that are specific to it. In this thesis, caste politicisation emerges as a process of sociality that significantly informs people's actions, aspirations, and self-perceptions.

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