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Securing Livelihood Entitlements and Space: A Case Study of Balmikis in Delhi

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1. Introduction

Over the last three decades, the three words globalization, neo-liberalism, and Hindu-nationalism have become crucial words, and simultaneously, a decisive trend has been growing in contemporary Indian society. Currently, one of the broadly discussed issues in public and academic discourses is the widening gap between the haves and have-nots. Wealth inequality remains quite high in India. According to the Global Wealth Report 2020 by Credit Suisse, the share of the top 1% of wealth-holders rose rapidly in China, India, and Russia between 2000 and 2007. In India, the top 1% accounts for nearly 40% of the nation's wealth in 2020 (Credit Suisse 2020: 38). This figure takes a heavy toll on the life of socially and economically disadvantaged people.

There has been increasing concern about the violently exclusive tendency of Hindu nationalist groups. Since Narendra Modi of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a Hindu nationalist party, became prime minister in 2014, the influence of Hindu nationalism has spread not only to the political field, but also to civil society as a whole. Due to the development of "Cow vigilantism," which is said to involve Hindu nationalist organizations such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), supporters of BJP, and the conversion movement to Hinduism (*Ghar Wapsi*), there have apparently been increasing cases of violence against minorities, such as Muslims, Christians, and Dalits, in various parts of India. Findings from Amnesty International India highlighted the steepest rise in numbers since 2016. In the first six months of 2019 alone, 181 incidents of alleged hate crimes were recorded by the website, nearly double the previous three years' half-yearly counts.¹

¹ Amnesty International India, 2019, 'Hate Crime Reports on an alarming Rise: Reveals Amnesty International India's "Halt the Hate"', (<https://amnesty.org.in/news-update/hate-crime-reports-on-an-alarming-rise-reveals-amnesty-international-indias-halt-the-hate/>, accessed on 27 November 2020).

At this critical juncture, how are minorities in particular securing their livelihood and what sorts of strategies are being devised? In this paper, I will focus on the situation of the Dalit community in North India. Fieldwork conducted on one such disadvantaged group, the urban Balmikis (known as the sweeper caste) in Delhi, is drawn upon to examine their allegations and complaints. The privatization of the government sanitation department, in which sweepers are employed by the municipal corporation and central/state governments, has accelerated since the 2010s, leading to the denormalization of employment and the weakening of trade unions. Many Balmikis who have been engaged in the government sanitation department are now facing insecurity and the fear of unemployment in the near future.

In this paper, I examine the ways in which Delhi's Balmikis have tried to secure their livelihood entitlements. Collective grassroots activism is supposed to include matters like public interest litigation and workers' strikes on the street as a means of appealing to the government and civil society about such problems. The research question posed here is regarding how awareness of rights and entitlements is formed and manifested. By examining this question, this study will also attempt to analyze different aspects of exclusivity and collaboration of Dalit movements.

The idea of "gentle and peaceful cohabitation," which our collaborative project is going to propose based on case studies from South Asia, is certainly not static. Rather, it can be considered to be in progress. With this perspective, this case study will shed light on the evidence of emerging awareness of cohabitation among the community by exploring how the spatially segregated experience and stigma of urban Dalits have influenced their feeling regarding their neighborhood. This finding will help with addressing another theme, namely, the relationship to space.

2. Segregation and Socio-spatial Discrimination in Cities

There are ample number of streets and localities named based on particular communities such as "Harijan Basti," "Balmiki Colony," and "Chamar Mohalla" across the country. These are known as low-caste names and they may instantly cause discriminatory sentiments against the residents of the locality and a stigmatized experience. In addition,

the stereotypes of insecurity, gambling, drinking, and odor seem to be deeply rooted in the named areas (Ganguly 2018a). Lee (2017) highlights how the segregation of the sanitation labor caste is inscribed in space and sensoria using ethnographic research in the cities of Lucknow and Benaras in the north Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. Therefore, local residents and activists have often demanded that governments change caste-based names as a form of collective protest.²

Social and spatial segregation along caste lines is not just a past phenomenon, especially for Dalits. Recently, there has been a significant amount of scholarly literature about caste-based segregation and exclusion in major socio-economical arenas such as residential patterns, rental housing markets, labor markets, and higher education (Deshpande and Newman 2007; Dupont 2004; Ganguly 2018a; Ganguly 2018b; Jodhka and Newman 2007; Kamble 2002; Madheswaran and Attewell 2007; Thorat and Attewell 2007; Thorat et al. 2015; Vithathil and Singh 2012). In past studies, caste-based discrimination and exclusion were largely assumed to be a feature of rural areas. However, it is noteworthy that recent studies have provided data collected from metropolitan cities including the National Capital Region. It appears that caste favoritism and the social exclusion of Dalits and Muslims have infused private enterprises even in the most dynamic modern sector of the Indian economy (Thorat and Attewell 2007: 4144).

The concept of segregation opposes the one of cohabitation, but it is noteworthy that the common experience of segregation can serve to enhance the feeling of “us” or brother/sisterhood among disadvantaged communities like Dalits who live together (cohabit) in the same colony. Place does matter in the history of Dalit protests and movements. This is because place can function not only as a home for living, eating, and conducting religious ceremonies (including marriages, births, and funerals) of community members, but also as a source of collective action and protests.

In the case of Balmikis, their place of residence has also meant a source of (union) leaders and activists for a long time. Balmikis working in government (central/state/

² Apart from grassroots protests, the Maharashtra government announced in December 2020 about abolishing caste-based names of localities across the state and replacing them with names of freedom fighters, social reformers, and ideologues. Social Justice Minister Dhananjay Munde explained that the aim of this decision was to solidify the notion of national integrity. The Maharashtra government has already dropped the usage of the word “Dalit” from official communication, papers, and certificates. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/maharashtra-to-drop-caste-names-from-localities/article33234784.ece> (accessed on 17 December 2020).

municipal corporation) sanitation departments are generally entitled to a flat in government colonies (known as “sweeper colony”) to live in until their retirement. They share time and space mostly with a homogeneous caste group. In this context, inhabitants construct their socio-spatial environment and a sense of security and solidarity. In the next section, I will discuss the Dalit neighborhood in Delhi from a case study based on a relatively old municipal colony of Balmiki sweepers.

3. The Plight of Balmiki Sweepers and a Sense of Neighborhood

Caste is one of the crucial factors of social inequality. This fact can be observed not only between non-Dalits and Dalits, but also between Dalit caste groups. In the case of Delhi, it has been clarified that Balmikis experience the poorest circumstances in terms of education and employment opportunities (Suzuki 2017). According to the 2011 census, the population of Balmikis in Delhi is approximately 5.8 lakh, and they constitute 21% of the SCs, being the second largest population after Chamars (approximately 1 million, 38% of the SCs). Balmikis have a literacy rate of 67.4%, the lowest among all the SCs (78%) in Delhi (Government of India 2011).

In addition to the educational development of Balmikis in Delhi being the lowest, their economic mobility has also seemed to stagnate. According to an article published in 2005, 99% of Delhi’s government sanitary workers were from the Balmiki community in 1995 (Labour File November–December 2005: 11). In addition, in the course of the author’s fieldwork from 2003 onward, comparable information was collected from local Balmiki sweepers, residents, and sweeper union leaders in the Municipal Corporation of Delhi.

It is not necessary to examine macroeconomic indices to know that the prices of goods are rising steadily in Delhi. The author, who visits Delhi once or twice a year, experiences its effects from the rising prices in hotels and restaurants—generally not accompanied by improvements in quality of the services—and has been surprised by the degree of this increase. The rooftop room that the author resided in while studying in Delhi from 2006 to 2008 was located in a luxury residential district in which safety and location are prioritized and life is comfortable. However, its rent, at 12,000 rupees (about

24,000 yen at the time) per month, was high, even for foreigners. To put it into perspective, in hot Delhi, the higher the floor, the lower the rent. The rent on this room had risen to 80,000 rupees by 2010.

At the time of the author's survey in 2019-2020, the monthly income of household heads was approximately 40,000 rupees for *pacca* ("permanent" in Hindi) sweepers, and ranged from 10,000 to 12,000 rupees for *kaccha* ("temporary" in Hindi) sweepers, and 4,000 to 5,000 rupees for contract-based sweepers.

A "pacca" sweeper means a regular or permanent sweeper who is paid as per the pay scale fixed by the government. Along with a salary, they are entitled to government facilities such as housing, gratuity, promotion, pension, and medical care. Kaccha sweepers are those who work with the government or municipality or any agency of the state government. Kaccha sweepers are engaged on a temporary basis. They are supposed to be regularized in service after a certain period. Contract sweepers are those who are engaged by the contractor under a written agreement for a short period, and are paid as per the prevailing rate of wages in the state. Private contractors to whom work is outsourced by the government or local agencies are called government contractors. Government contractors have many NGOs, such as Sulabh International. Contract sweepers are paid as per the wage rate fixed by the government. However, contract sweepers with private contractors lack the scope to obtain regular/permanent employment in the future, as they are not entitled to a permanent job by the government.

The results of the author's interviews with the sweepers showed that each category of sweeper has been facing difficulties. For example, because contract-based and kaccha sweepers need to pay a proportion of their wages to their contractors, they are not paid their full wages by them. They used to receive half their wages. While permanent sweepers are officially supposed to receive proper benefits (family allowance, medical care, and other necessary supplies), they claim that they have not received them. Safety gear such as gloves, gumboots, and masks, along with the timely payment of salaries, cashless medical cards for treatments, and the clearing of pending arrears have been the demands of sanitation workers for close to a decade.³

³ 'Amid Covid-19 outbreak, Delhi's sanitation workers demand safety gear, masks', Indian Express, (<https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/delhi/coronavirus-lockdown-few-masks-no-gloves-or-sanitisers-complain-mcd-sanitation-workers-6336100/>, accessed on 4 April 2020).

These difficulties seem to be worsening, especially after the COVID-19 outbreak across the country. Joginder Bahot, president of Akhil Bharatiya Safai Mazdoor (ABSMS) and sweeper of the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD), said, “After the outbreak of COVID-19, we are forced to clean [the whole] city, but how can we work safely without protective suits and masks? *Kuch nahin* (Nothing)!” Bahot continued to explain to the author, “We used to be provided uniforms, soaps, and oil by the MCD before. But now, nothing. We need to work with our own clothes, and they get easily dirty and unusable.”⁴ Although Bahot and other members of ABSMS and the MCD sweeper union have been raising the issue to the corporation and the Delhi Government and have gone on several strikes, their demands have not been met yet. Meanwhile there is an ongoing political battle and disagreement over the matters of the sweepers’ unpaid salary and needful supplies between the AAP-led Delhi government and the BJP-led MCD.

Many ABSMS activists concur with the opinion that the plight of Delhi’s municipal sweepers has worsened since the MCD was replaced by three new bodies in 2012, namely, the North, the South, and the East Delhi Municipal Corporation.⁵ This significant institutional shift seems to be in line with the privatization of government sweepers employed by the municipal corporation and central/state governments, which has accelerated since the 2010s, leading to the denormalization of employment and weakening of trade unions.

Considering these Balmiki sweepers’ plight, when the cost of rent, food, electricity, water, and other life essentials were deducted from their salaries, they had almost no money left in hand. They set the balance aside for their daughters’ dowries or for religious rites and none was left to invest in the education of their children. In 2007, electric meters and yellow cables were installed throughout the city under the pretext of “preventing the theft of electricity” in order to run the electrical industry more efficiently. The people of the colony studied in the survey look up at the cables reproachfully, raging that, “Those have doubled electricity prices. I have to pay up to 3,000 rupees every other month. What can we, who do not have steady jobs, do?”

⁴ Interviewed on March 7, 2020, Delhi. Here is another similar case amid the COVID-19 pandemic: <https://www.hindustantimes.com/delhi-news/north-corporation-sanitation-workers-not-paid-salaries-for-march-civic-body-says-govt-yet-to-release-funds/story-QDmKuNDcPZvTxVty8qVQ2I.html> (accessed on December 16, 2020).

⁵ The Delhi Municipal Corporation (Amendment) Act 2011 (Delhi Act 12 of 2011).

Along with complaints about daily expenses, the author often heard people express uneasiness concerning homes. Employees working as sweepers may live in housing for public employees in the center of Delhi to be close to their workplaces. If even one member of the household is an employee, they are qualified to live in this public housing. The author's survey confirmed three residential patterns among Balmiki people in Delhi. The first is the government (municipal) employees' housing pattern, namely, continued residence by generations of people who work as sweepers. The second pattern is ensuring housing by obtaining land in a resettlement colony after removal from a slum where people had been living. In the third pattern, when the government permanent employee in a sweeper household, which has been occupying government employees' housing, retires, the family purchases a public dwelling in the city with their savings, taking advantage of a housing support policy of allotting funds to SCs. Turning to links with the Balmiki movement discussed later, many of the leaders of the movement obtained assets using the third residential pattern.

During the 1970s and 1980s, it was comparatively easy to obtain a home in the city using the second and third patterns, but in recent years, heavy investment in land has rapidly increased land prices to levels beyond the reach of Balmiki people in the low-income class. Life in Delhi is becoming increasingly harsh. At the same time, the first pattern, government employees' housing, is not home-ownership, but does offer conveniences—they are close to their workplaces and their children's schools—and motivates the Balmiki people to choose to work as sweepers in successive generations.

Residential Patterns of Balmikis in Delhi

The 2001 and 2011 census data distinctively show that Dalits are concentrated in the city. According to the data, Delhi is divided into nine districts, North West, North, North East, East, New Delhi, Central, West, South West, and South. Based on the 2011 census data and her field study, Ganguly (2018b) points out that when we compare Balmikis' presence in each district with the population of SCs in the district, New Delhi has the highest concentration (49.2%), followed by South (27.4%) and South West (26.5%). This pattern is in close accordance with the author's study (Suzuki 2015). In the next section, I will describe a municipal colony located in New Delhi district and a resident's movement.

A Municipal Sweeper Colony

The following are the outlines of Colony A situated in New Delhi district. Colony A is located near the center of Delhi. Close to the President's residence, combined government offices, and the Parliament, this colony is surrounded by collective dwellings for employees of the central government, Delhi City, and New Delhi City. The percentage of SCs among the residents (23.4%) is higher than the average value throughout Delhi (16.7%); it is hypothesized that many of the people of SC background are gathered in this colony as government employees. Two interesting characteristics of the SC composition in New Delhi district are that it is the only district in which Balmikis outnumber Chamars to form the largest SC group, and many SC government employees are Balmikis.

Colony A was constructed as the New Delhi Municipal Council (NDMC) employee housing during 1969 and 1970. Nineteen four-story buildings stand in the district. Each building consists of approximately 15 flats, thus totaling to 288 flats. The residential population is estimated to be least 1,440 people, judging from the average household size in the colony.

Only NDMC employees qualify for residence, so at least one member of each household must be an employee of the NDMC. About 20% of the monthly wages of each household's head is deducted as rent, and the family may live in it until the NDMC employee retires. In fact, in Colony A, opinions concerning home ownership differ between officials and residents, causing severe problems dating back to their construction. This reveals the relationship between the sweeper community and the Indian National Congress, which was the governing party at the time they were constructed. Because this is considered a case of the appropriation of Gandhi's view of the sweeper caste, the author wishes to include historical episodes in Colony A based on the interviews with the residents.

The name of Colony A, *Bāpū Dhām*, means "place where Gandhi stays or lives" in Hindi. This suggests that Gandhi is somehow linked to the events leading to the establishment of the district. The year 1969 happened to be when a movement to celebrate Gandhi's 100th birthday was growing among Gandhians. Colony A was established in order to improve the lives of poor lower class government employees (sweepers in particular) as part of the SC support policies. On April 9, 1970, attendees of the

celebration of the district's completion included prominent Indian Congress Party parliamentarians such as the then Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi (1917 – 1984), and President V.V. Giri (1894 – 1980).

Interesting stone monuments representing the Congress Party and Balmikis remain in Colony A. There are two stone monuments: one is beside a small temple where saint Valmiki is enshrined near the entrance to the colony, and the other is constructed on land deep within the colony. The quadrangular stone monument placed on the grounds of the Valmiki Temple is engraved with inscriptions and pictures. Three sides display the words of Gandhi concerning anti-untouchability and, on the remaining side, the three-monkey design (see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil) is engraved.⁶

Gandhi viewed untouchability as the worst stain on the Hindu religion and launched a movement to abolish it (Harijan movement) in the mid-1930s. From this stone monument, it is possible to discern the situation in 1969, when the Congress Party Government, which inherited Gandhi's Harijan movement, constructed it in Colony A as a project to commemorate Gandhi's centenary celebration.

Another stone monument constructed inside the colony bears an engraved epithet (in English). The following are the English words (Fig.1):

“Keep your house clean.
Frontage of your house clean.
The whole city shall be clean.”
V.V. Giri

⁶ The three-monkey design is seen around the world, but in India, it is said to have originated from the teachings of Gandhi. Gandhi always carried an image of the three monkeys and taught people to not see evil, hear evil, or speak evil; these tenets are extremely familiar to Indians as Gandhi's three monkeys. This stone monument is now in extremely poor condition and is severely damaged. Most of the engraved text and pictures is covered with sand and is illegible, but they can be seen if the monument is washed using water.



Fig.1 The stone monument established in Colony A. (Photographed by the author)

The engraved text of the message from the then President Giri contains the word “clean” three times; clearly a message to the sweepers. Simply put, Colony A was truly established for the sweepers.

The author’s survey revealed that most of the residents of Colony A are actually employed as sweepers. They report that before the construction of Colony A, they lived several kilometers to the north, in a slum that then existed around NDMC employee housing known generally by the name *Mandir Marg*.⁷ *Mandir Marg*’s residents were also municipal sweepers, and in this connection, this colony is well known as the place in which Gandhi stayed temporarily to publicize the Harijan movement in 1946.

As asserted by the residents of Colony A, during the 1960s and 1970s, the government forcefully implemented a slum clearance project, removing slums from central Delhi. The government offered people employed as sweepers by the NDMC Colony A as a relocation site located close to their work places. The aspect of this that invites confusion was the speech by President Giri at the completion ceremony in 1970, in which he stated, “I dedicate this land to you who are poor,” and the attitude of the authorities who urged the people to relocate. According to F.C. Chouhan, who had lived there since the beginning, almost everyone relocated; this was interpreted as meaning that

⁷ Residents of the colony were interviewed by K.L. Meena, former assistant sanitary inspector in the NDMC sanitation division (October 1, 2005, Bāpū Dhām).

they could obtain their own house. Chouhan retired from the post of assistant sanitary inspector in the NDMC sanitary division and participated in negotiations as a representative of the organization conducting a movement to restore ownership to residents of Colony A called the Harijan Society Improvement Committee (Harijan Samaj Sudhar Samiti) (formed in 1970).⁸ The leadership of the resident movement for ownership was formed by union members, arising from the homogeneity of municipal Balmiki sweepers who shared the Balmikis' plight and a sense of neighborhood formed in Colony A.

Balmikis in Delhi, regardless of whether they are undertaking sanitation jobs, try to maintain their caste solidarity by celebrating several anniversaries: *Safai Mazdoor Diwas* (sweepers' day) (on 31 July) and *Valmiki saint Jayanti* (every October). They also hold meetings and organize a collective protest when atrocities against Balmikis occur. In 2020, serial rape murder cases occurred in UP (Uttar Pradesh), followed by protests of Balmiki organizations. These incidents and anniversaries have become an opportunity for Balmikis to work together and recognize a feeling of "us" and neighborhood beyond physical geographical locality.

In the next section, I overview the development of Dalit movements in north India and attempt to map a recent Dalit activism in court. Educated Balmiki activists demand a sub-classification of SC reservation and abolish privatization of government sanitation departments through petitions to the Supreme Court. It indicates a different phase of the movements and intra-Dalit conflicts over SC reservations.

4. Disparity and Solidarity among Dalit Movements in North India

For several centuries, nationwide and regional protests have occurred in India against caste-based oppression and discrimination. Modern and contemporary versions of what we call Dalit movements were initiated by Ambedkar, who made an important contribution to establishing fundamental rights and laid the foundation for the Dalit Buddhist movement for socio-religious liberation.

Dalits are not homogeneous groups; they are differentiated in terms of sub-caste,

⁸ Interview in Bāpū Dhām on October 1, 2005.

region, religion, generation, language, and internal economic situation. Contemporary Dalit movements in the post-Ambedkar period seem to have evolved with the common aims of overcoming caste hierarchy and abolishing the practice of untouchability in pursuit of dignity and equality. However, complexities and various movements exist with different visions and strategies (Gorringer 2005; Pai 2010; Shah 2004).

According to the classification of Jodhka (2015: 173-174) and Jaoul (2007), there are three different phases through which the present Dalit activism evolved in north India, aside from Dalit party politics. The first stream is from the Dalit Panther movements of Maharashtra from the early 1970s to the early 1990s. Young urban male activists, most of them Mahar caste, launched a politically oriented literature movement to express their anger against caste and class injustices. Despite its significant impact on society, the Dalit Panther movement had declined by the early 1990s.

The second phase of Dalit activism was initiated by Kanshi Ram during the 1980s, with his initial mobilization of SC employees in government jobs through the Backward and Minority Castes Employees Federation (BAMCEF). This organization indicated that SC job reservation in government sectors had steadily prevailed to some extent, enabling upwardly mobile Dalits to make a force to organize themselves. This finally resulted in the development of a political party in 1984, the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in Uttar Pradesh. Although BSP has become a national level political party and it is aimed at obtaining wide support from not only Dalits, but also other communities, it seems to have been stagnating in terms of strategy and leadership in recent years.

The third phase of contemporary Dalit activism started in the 1990s. The significant turning point was the United Nations World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance in Durban, South Africa (known as the Durban Conference) in 2001. The Durban Conference was followed by the World Social Forums in Mumbai and Nairobi in 2004 and 2007, respectively.

These international conferences provided a platform for various Indian and foreign human rights-oriented Dalit organizations to collaborate and form a network among domestic Dalits and Dalit immigrants living in Western countries in particular. Their claim and case studies showed that caste practices are common abroad and that they have been widely observed among South Asian migrant communities. Dalit NGOs such as the

International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN)⁹ raised the issue of caste discrimination as a human right violation and aimed to pressure the Indian government as well as the United Nations to address the issue immediately. A characteristic element of the third phase is that Christian organizations provided an important source of transnational support to Dalit networks and NGOs (Jodhka 2015: 174; Mosse 2009).

In addition to the three streams of contemporary Dalit movements, I would underline another landmark, the death of Rohit Vemula (a PhD student in the University of Hyderabad) in 2016. His suicide seemed to have profoundly impacted his generation across the country and abroad, such that the protest against his suicide was followed by the activism of highly educated Dalit youth in the form of the publication of their autobiographies, Bhim Army in UP, and Ambedkarite student associations, for example. They raise the question of caste discrimination, injustice, and Dalit empowerment in various public spheres such as higher education, academia, media, employment, politics, and government administration.

Intra-Dalit Conflicts over SC Reservations from the Late 1990s

Some recent studies point out the intricate circumstances involved in the intra-Dalit conflicts, especially regarding the adequate distribution of the benefits of the present reservation policy (Jodhka and Kumar 2007; Rao 2009). This is what is happening in some states of the country, particularly since the late 1990s, when, based on the recommendations of the Ramachandra Rao Commission, the Government of Andhra Pradesh decided to classify its SC population into four categories in 1997 (Jodhka 2015: 82). This distribution is exemplified by the cases of tMadigas in Andhra Pradesh and Balmikis in Punjab and Haryana. They hold that because the reservation policy has been monopolized by privileged Dalit communities such as Malas and Chamars in their respective states, the reservation policy must be revised by introducing a sub-categorization among those who belong to the advanced or backward SCs. In the contemporary northern states, especially in Delhi, Haryana, and Punjab, the Ad-Dharm/Chamars constitutes most of the SC groups. The account of Paramjit S. Judge points out that agricultural development runs parallel to the emergence of the Punjabi

⁹ The website of IDSN <https://idsn.org/about-us/> (accessed on 10 December 2020).

Chamar middle class through education, modern occupations, and international migration. They have begun to assert their caste identity, a trend that was absent in the 1970s, during which time there was a tendency to hide their caste status (Judge 2012).

Regarding the Punjab and Haryana argument over the classification of SC reservation, Jodhka (2015: 68-91) explains the historical, social, and political contexts. Long before the question of “quotas within quotas” for the SCs became a controversial subject in Andhra Pradesh, the Government of Punjab had introduced a two-fold classification of its SC population. In 1975, the state government directed various departments to offer 50% of all the vacancies of the quota reserved for SCs to Balmikis and Mazhabi Sikhs. The Government of Haryana also followed suit in 1994. It decided to divide its SC population into two blocks, A and B, limiting 50% of all seats for the Chamars (block B), and offering the remaining 50% to non-Chamars (Block A) on a preferential basis (Jodhka 2015: 83).

These schemes worked until 2005, when the Punjab and Haryana High Courts directed the two state governments regarding the “illegality” of the provision in response to a writ petition by Gaje Singh, a Chamar from the region. The petitioner cited the Supreme Court judgments against the sub-classification of SCs in the case of Andhra Pradesh in 2004 (the E.V. Chinnaiah case). The Chinnaiah judgment took a negative view of the sub-classification of SC quotas in Andhra Pradesh. However, on 27 August 2020, a five-judge Bench of the Supreme Court held that states could sub-classify SCs and STs in the Central List to provide preferential treatment to the “weakest out of the weak”.¹⁰ This latest Supreme Court judgment has drawn further controversy and intra-Dalit conflicts over SC reservation.

Balmiki Activists in Court

One example of the current trends can be traced to Delhi, the capital of India. Metropolitan Delhi is not only the center of Indian politics, but it is also a judicial field, being home to the Supreme Court and the Delhi High Court. It provides an effective and influential location for social and political activism, including Dalit movements.

¹⁰ ‘States can have sub-groups among SCs/STs: Supreme Court’, The Hindu (August 27, 2020), (<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/states-can-have-sub-groups-among-scssts-supremecourt/article32453272.ece>, accessed on 10 December 2020).

During the last decade, a considerable number of state, national, and global networks and organizations has emerged among Balmiki activists in Delhi. It is noteworthy that they are organized mostly by Balmikis who are educated and have attained white-collar jobs through the SC reservation policy. Although some are retired government officers, others are working as teachers, advocates, entrepreneurs, and medical doctors. The lawyers in the community in particular assume leadership in raising questions related to the ongoing SC quota. They seek a review of policies for an equal share through judicial action, specifically, a public interest litigation (PIL) appeal to the Supreme Court.

Meanwhile, the National Coordination Committee for Revision of Reservation Policy (NCCRRP) was formed in 2007 by Balmiki leaders, most of whom were advocates and retired government officers. NCCRRP aims to introduce a sub-classification of SC reservation and abolish privatization of government sanitation departments through PIL (Suzuki 2019). The past petition regarding a sub-classification of SCs was dismissed in 2015 by the Supreme Court. However, in response to the latest Supreme Court judgment on 27 August 2020, we are likely to continue to observe ongoing controversy over reservation policies and Balmikis' survival strategies and collective struggles.

5. Conclusion: Quest for Gentle and Peaceful Cohabitation beyond Spatially Segregated Experience

In this study, I examined the case of Balmikis in Delhi. It was confirmed that Balmikis are seeking to defend their life-world and enter the public sphere by caste-based collective protests (against subcontracting the sanitation department and demanding subdivision of SC reservation). While they attempt to maintain internal solidarity by celebrating community anniversaries and protesting atrocities against Balmiki members, there is a question of how it will be possible for Balmikis to associate with other Dalits and minorities, regardless of caste and religious backgrounds.

“Keep visible” is a key phrase the author frequently heard during fieldwork among Balmiki activists in Delhi. It appears that in the Indian society, minorities have no choice but to keep raising their voices to survive.

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