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メタデータ	言語: eng 出版者: 公開日: 2018-01-17 キーワード (Ja): キーワード (En): 作成者: 鈴木, 真弥 メールアドレス: 所属:
URL	https://doi.org/10.15021/00008676

Exclusivity Rather than Inclusion: Dalit Assertion in Contemporary Urban India

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1. A life of contradiction

On 26 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. In politics, we will be recognizing the principle of ‘one man, one vote’ and ‘one vote, one value’. In our social and economic life, we shall, by reason of our social and economic structure, continue to deny the principle of ‘one man, one value’. How long shall we continue to live this life of contradictions? How long shall we continue to deny equality in our social and economic life?¹⁾

From a sociological perspective, the social inclusion concept has often been paired with its converse: exclusion. Since the 1980s, social inclusion and exclusion have been addressed insufficiently in national agendas, initially Europe and now in several developing countries, including India. In the Indian context, caste inequality has been a persistent source of social exclusion through discrimination, poverty, and deprivation. However, Indian government has initiated various attempts to improve the socioeconomic situation of Dalit communities, ensuring equal access to basic civil liberties and facilities, education, and employment under inclusive policies.

The famous passage from B. R. Ambedkar’s 1949 speech (presented above) might be recalled when examining social inclusion and exclusion. More than 65 years ago, he reported a contradiction between state welfare intervention and the social life of Dalits following independence. While asserting that India’s political democracy of “one man, one vote” must also become a social democracy of “one vote, one value,” he apparently understood how difficult it would be to realize these principles. This difficulty would produce a long history of political mobilization and social movements among Dalits in Indian society. The Dalits’ struggle against caste-based discrimination can be traced back to the medieval era’s Bhakti movement. Ambedkar made important contributions to establishing fundamental rights, while laying foundations for the Dalit Buddhist movement’s socio-religious liberation.

This paper explores the alternative strategies adopted by low-caste communities to enhance their status in contemporary India. It focuses particularly on a case study of the

Balmiki²⁾ in Delhi. The Balmiki, known as the sweeper caste, reside mainly in India's northern states. Constituting a Dalit community, they have also been shunned and despised by other low-caste groups (Mendelsohn and Vicziany 1998: 38). During the author's fieldwork, local Balmiki activists have frequently been observed to call themselves "*Ati-Dalits*" (most backward Dalits), "*Vancit Varg*" (deprived class), and "*Upekshit Samaj*" (neglected community). Embedded discrimination against the Balmiki and their inferior social status derives from their "traditional" work. Their jobs require them to handle natural waste, thereby burdening them with "polluted" status in orthodox Hindu belief. People with such jobs as collecting night-soil from latrines and sweeping streets and houses are despised as those at the bottom of the caste hierarchy.

In seeking to precisely elucidate the concepts of social inclusion and exclusion, it must be noted that recent rapid economic growth seems to have brought historical exclusion sharply to the fore, leaving economically and socially marginalized groups, such as the Balmikis, increasingly vulnerable and insecure. The author examined them to ask two specific questions: What happens to members of these groups? What exclusion factors are more visible today, especially after global economic liberalization in the late 1990s?

Reflecting the historical development of organized (or disorganized) Dalit movements, this paper discusses how the discourse of emancipation and social justice shifted its emphasis from inclusion to exclusivity. The author's fieldwork has revealed that most Balmikis strive to avoid disclosing their caste. Some, however, affirm their caste to obtain welfare benefits and protect their rights through the judicial system. This paradoxical response explains why caste identity has become more positive and assertive, furthering the emergence of conflicts and a more exclusive society.

In this current context, it seems that the judicial, not the political, system is the forum used by less-privileged and smaller populations of Dalit groups, such as the Balmikis; they see the Supreme Court as a "final remedy" for protecting their rights in social, political, and economic spheres. It is a different strategy from their past political exertions. Can we regard this strategy as the social democracy and "one man, one value" principle intended and asserted by Ambedkar on the adoption of India's Constitution?

2. Inclusive policy and unequal development

The term "Dalit," referring to India's so-called ex-Untouchables, is synonymous with the socially disadvantaged and long-stigmatized group of people under Brahmanism ideology. Based on 2011 national census data, they accounted for around 16.6% (201.4 million) of India's total population. Given their large demographic presence, they show regional, cultural, and ethnic diversity. As described later in this section, it should be noted that among Dalit communities, considerable inter-caste disparities of socioeconomic development persist (Chalam 2009; Jodhka and Kumar 2007; Judge and Bal 2009; Suzuki 2010; Thorat 2009).

Since independence, addressing Dalit empowerment on the principle of equal citizenship has remained an important task for India's government. In this regard, the government established an authority to define who should be categorized as target groups

for welfare schemes and how they should be treated in the Constitution of India. As indicated by official adoption of the term Scheduled Castes (SCs), devised by the British colonial regime and employed from the late nineteenth century to the 1930s, interventions pertaining to the Untouchables are fundamentally characterized by elevating them socioeconomically, then integrating them into mainstream society.

Government interventions aiming to uplift the Dalit are primarily based on two major goals: (i) overcome the multiple deprivations suffered historically by Dalits; and (ii) protect them against present discrimination by encouraging their effective participation in social, economic, and political processes (Thorat 2009: 4).

Toward these ends, state action has been implemented in three spheres: legislation, welfare programs, and the establishment of a national commission for monitoring and evaluating performance. These welfare efforts have produced little practical success. We have continued to observe a pattern of disparities between social groups in human development and poverty, prejudicing SCs, Scheduled Tribes (STs), and other general sections at the national and state levels. A greater gap separates SCs, STs, and other groups (Thorat and Venkatesan 2014).

Another aspect to this difficulty must be clarified. Some Dalit groups are undergoing progressive transition, whereas others lag behind. What factors might explain this unequal progress? Before considering potential explanations, it must be noted that uneven advancement is evident in pertinent statistics. The following data (Figures 1 and 2) outline Dalits' current educational attainment overall and the problem of uneven advancement among them. In sociological studies, educational factors are regarded as key parameters for social mobility. As Dalits were denied access to formal education for a long period, their literacy rate is lower than among other populations.

Figure 1 presents an overview of educational accomplishment among Delhi's SC residents³. According to the 2001 Census, their overall literacy rate was 70.8%, which was significantly higher than the national average of 54.7%. All major SCs recorded higher overall literacy rates, except the Dhobi (69.7%)⁴ and Balmiki (68.5%).

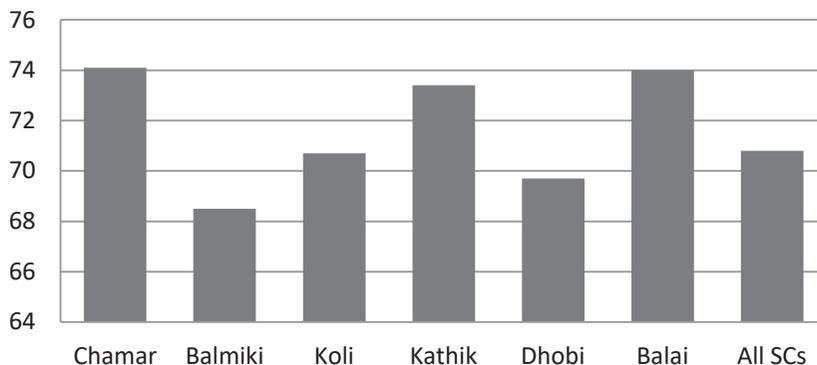


Figure 1 Literacy Rate (%) of SCs in Delhi (2001)

Source: Government of India (2001): Delhi, SC Series: Individual Scheduled Castes-wise tables (CD-ROM)

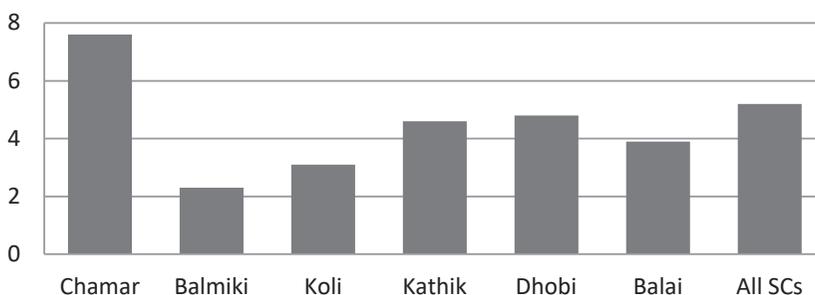


Figure 2 Percentage (%) of graduate education of SCs in Delhi (2001)
 Source: Government of India (2001): Delhi, SC Series: Individual Scheduled Castes-wise tables (CD-ROM)

To further investigate educational attainment, one can consider the extent to which each Dalit caste gained educational benefits through government measures. Figure 2 presents the ratio of graduate-level and higher education among Delhi’s SCs. Among the seven major SCs in Delhi, it is evident that the Chamar (7.6%)⁵⁾ report the highest percentage of its people attaining graduate-level education, while the Balmiki (2.3%) report the lowest percentage. These data imply that the SC average rate does not adequately explain the situation.

Aside from education, it is also important to understand how strong the caste-related job structure continues among the Delhi’s sweeper community. Because municipal sweeping jobs include a high percentage of members from a particular group: the Balmiki. Figures 3 and 4 present data showing the percentages of SC workers engaged in sweeping based on census data from 1961 and 1981.

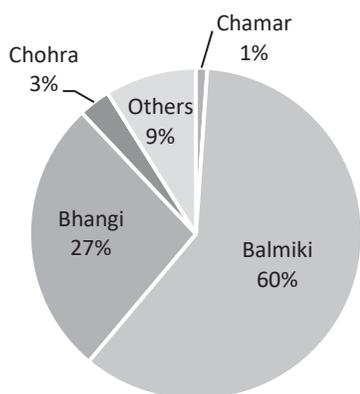


Figure 3 Distribution of Delhi’s main sweeping workers by caste (1961)

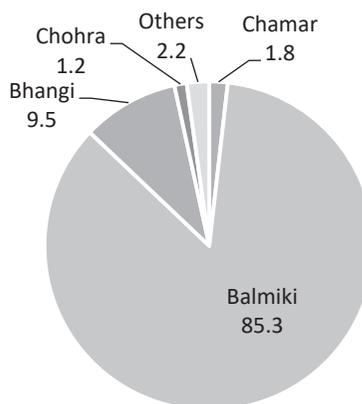


Figure 4 Distribution of Delhi’s main sweeping workers by caste (1981)

Sources: Government of India, 1966, *Census of India 1961, vol. 19 Delhi, Part 5–A, Tables on Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes*, Delhi. Government of India, 1988, *Census of India 1981, Series 28 Delhi, Part 9, Special Tables for Scheduled Castes*, Delhi

According to the 1961 census data, 90% of Delhi's sweeping workers came from sub-castes of the sweeper caste: the Balmiki, Bhangi, and Chohra.⁶ The Balmiki alone accounted for 60% of the main sweeping workers (Figure 3). Twenty years later, the sweeper caste dominance of this occupation was even more apparent in Delhi (Figure 4). According to the 1981 census data, 96% of the main sweeping workers hailed from the sweeper castes.⁷ At the same time, the percentage of each sub-caste in sweeping jobs had changed. Indeed, the concentration of Balmiki workers had increased to 85%. These figures clearly show that the Balmiki and similar sub-castes accounted for a huge share (approximately 90%–96%) of Delhi's sweeping workers during the 20 years. It should be noted that there was a gradual increase in the number of sweeping jobs due to the rapidly growing demand for public sanitation in Delhi. In contrast, the number of leather tanning jobs – also related to the Untouchables' hereditary professions (especially the Chamar) – diminished according to similar statistics from the 1961 and 1981 census data. Since the 1981 census, no further official statistics have been published concerning the linkage between castes and traditional occupations. However, 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 residents working as sweepers in the Municipal Corporation of Delhi

In summary, in terms of educational and occupational development, it is readily apparent from historic data that Delhi's Balmikis have been left behind. Although similar gaps are apparent for other advanced Dalit communities, such as the Chamar, the Balmiki situation might indicate a rigid relation between the hereditary occupational structure and low socioeconomic development.

These official data and anecdotal findings evidence contemporary inter-caste disparities among the Dalits. It is widely recognized that some Dalit groups are undergoing progressive transition, whereas others lag behind. Given this unequal development, two areas of questioning must follow. First, regarding the Dalits overall, what reasons might explain these phenomena? Second, focusing specifically on the Balmiki case, and recognizing its long-standing link with caste-biased sweeping jobs, how can the group transform itself?

3. Balmiki with brooms

Among the jobs assigned to Dalits, one of the most disrespected tasks is cleaning dry latrines that are not connected to sewage systems. Using brooms alone, workers must remove human excreta from toilets or open sewers and carry the waste to dumping grounds. These laborers are generally called manual scavengers. Without any protective tool, the working conditions appear so deplorable and hazardous to the workers' health that they have often come to symbolize untouchability. The sight of manual scavengers at work tends to move people, drawing attention from social workers and politicians, including M. K. Gandhi (1869–1948). Emotionally appealing words, such as "India's shame" or "inhuman occupation," are commonly attached to manual scavenging

(Ramaswamy 2006).

It must be emphasized that while such hereditary jobs largely require proximity to hazardously unclean conditions, their caste classifications are based on ritual attributions, rather than an objective sense of sanitation *per se*. Nonetheless, it is even more striking that, in the context of welfare policy, such ritual classifications and implications appear to be replaced by a rather hygienic problem, particularly where the government addresses the sweeper issue. We turn to these matters in the next section.

4. Taking up brooms without speaking against caste

In the recent political scene, especially in the Delhi region, one frequently notices brooms (*jhadoo*) being used as a symbol of political activity. A broom, used for sweeping dirt from floors, is found in every house, building, and street. However, what makes brooms in Indian society unique? The answer might be found in considering who must carry a broom in their job. Assigning responsibility for maintaining cleanliness to a particular Dalit caste group used to be almost unique to India. For this reason, brooms have become a symbol in a political context, creating front-page news when the Prime Minister picks up a broom.

The first example of broom symbolism is drawn from the current cleanliness program advanced by Prime Minister Modi. The *Swachh Bharat Abhiyan* (Clean India Campaign) was launched at Valmiki⁸⁾ Basti, Mandir Marg, in the heart of Delhi, on October 2, 2014. It urges people to join this mass movement of cleanliness (Photo 1).⁹⁾ The time and place of this launch were not coincidental: the 145th anniversary of M. K. Gandhi's birth, and the site where New Delhi municipality's sweepers resided before Indian independence. The Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) website explains the cleanliness project as follows:



Photo 1 Prime Minister Narendra Modi takes up a broom in Delhi's sweeper colony
 Source: "Towards a Swachh Bharat," http://pmindia.gov.in/en/government_tr_rec/swachh-bharat-abhiyan-2/ (accessed on November 30, 2015)

A clean India would be the best tribute India could pay to Mahatma Gandhi on his 150th birth anniversary in 2019,” said Shri Narendra Modi as he launched the *Swachh Bharat* Mission at Rajpath in New Delhi. On second October 2014, *Swachh Bharat* Mission was launched throughout the length and breadth of the country as a national movement..... While leading the mass movement for cleanliness, the Prime Minister exhorted people to fulfil Mahatma Gandhi’s dream of a clean and hygienic India. Shri Narendra Modi himself *initiated the cleanliness drive at Mandir Marg Police Station*. Picking up the broom to clean the dirt, making *Swachh Bharat Abhiyan* a mass movement across the nation...¹⁰⁾ (emphasis added)

Scholarly attention must be devoted to why this campaign was launched only in a Balmiki Basti area. Rather than explaining this, the BJP’s website and the major media instead seem to ignore it. As described earlier in this section, cleaning work in Indian society has been associated so inextricably with a particular caste that people take it for granted as natural. Sociologist Vivek Kumar poses a similar question on what is not reported in the Modi campaign:

Why should we identify cleanliness only with the Valmiki community or a Valmiki colony? Both politicians and celebrities, including the prime minister, further indulged in symbolism by brandishing brand new brooms at the launch venue. (Kumar 2014)

What Kumar called symbolism or casteism is visible in other municipal sweepers’ colonies in the Delhi region. For example, the Bapu Dham colony, constructed in 1969–1970, is located just a few miles away from Mandir Marg, where Modi’s cleaning drive started. As implied by *Bapu Dham* (Gandhi’s home), this locality’s history is associated with Gandhi’s memory. On April 9, 1970, Congress politicians, including ex-PM Indira Gandhi and ex-President V. V. Giri, attended an inauguration ceremony for a monument built in the memory of Gandhi and his Harijan Movement (Suzuki 2015: 142–146).

The Harijan Movement against the practice of untouchability was launched by Gandhi in the mid-1930s. The aforementioned Valmiki Basti in Mandir Marg, Delhi was one of the centric places of his movement. When Gandhi stayed there for 244 days during 1946–1947, seeking to promote awareness of the issue of untouchability among caste Hindus, he claimed that untouchability and discrimination against the Balmiki was caused by the unclean nature of sanitation work. He encouraged Balmikis to maintain personal hygiene and to take up brooms to clean the city, but he never challenged the social structure of caste-based occupations.

In a retrospective view of the dominant ideology of Neruvian India, Satish Deshpande observes: “The new constitution, reservations and the legacy of the Gandhian Campaign against untouchability and caste prejudice had made it seem that active discrimination was a thing of the past” (Deshpande 2014: 10). Though we recognize that, even today, those of lower caste origin suffer discrimination and limitations on their life opportunities, this prejudice now tends to occur in a hidden or less visible manner. In fact, in launching his cleaning campaign, Modi constantly recognized that sanitary jobs

are handled only by members of the sweeper community without fundamentally undertaking to address their problem.

Not only Modi's silence but also his earlier speech concerning cleaning jobs sparked controversy among Dalit activists. According to the *Times of India* (November 24, 2007) and a critical blog, *Kafila*, the Gujarat Modi government published a book titled *Karmyog (spiritual path of selfless action)* in 2007, which is presumably a collection of Modi's speeches to Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officials. Though circulated only among members of an inner circle, some of Modi's remarks created heated disagreement among Dalits. This is the part mentioning sweepers:

I do not believe that they have been doing this job just to sustain their livelihood. Had this been so, they would not have continued with this type of job generation after generation.... At some point of time, somebody must have got the enlightenment that it is their [Valmikis'] duty to work for the happiness of the entire society and the Gods; that they have to do this job bestowed upon them by Gods; and that this job of cleaning up should continue as an internal spiritual activity for centuries. This should have continued generation after generation. It is impossible to believe that their ancestors did not have the choice of adopting any other work or business.

Although Modi's speech collection, *Karmyog*, has not been published, and so is unavailable for inclusion in this paper, the idea of scavenging as an "internal spiritual activity" provides a vivid reminder of Gandhi's paternalistic and moral attitude in his Harijan Movement.¹¹⁾

The second example is drawn from the Aam Aadmi Party's (AAP) election signage (Photo 2).¹²⁾ Like the Modi example, it also includes broom symbolism, raising a similar issue to Balmikis' marginalization in an "inclusive" society. It is particularly interesting that the author observed a notable contemporaneous reaction to the symbolism among local Balmiki activists.

Under the leadership of Arvind Kejriwali, the AAP is currently Delhi's ruling party. As an "anti-corruption crusader," it set an agenda of sweeping away the age-old problem of corruption from Indian society. In the 2015 Delhi legislative Assembly election, it won



Photo 2 Aam Aadmi Party Gets 'Broom' as its Election Symbol
 Source: AAP website, <http://www.aamaadmiparty.org/news/aam-aadmi-party-gets-broom-as-its-election-symbol> (accessed on December 7, 2015)

67 of the 70 seats. The broom, which symbolizes the party's clean image, is carried by the AAP's candidates. The AAP's website makes the following claims:

Aam Aadmi Party is happy to announce that the Election Commission has allotted the party a reserved symbol of 'Broom' for all the 70 assembly constituencies of Delhi. With this the party has crossed the second milestone [after the party's registration] on its way to cleaning up the polity of the country. *With the Broom which symbolizes dignity of labor*, the party hopes to clean the filth which has permeated our government and our legislature. The country needs a clean sweep of its corrupted mainstream political parties.¹³⁾ (emphasis added)

These simple statements appear to be attractive and catchy. Indeed, it is evident from the positive election results that the party's slogans strongly appeal to most Delhi residents. However, Mr. Rai, a Balmiki informant to the author who works as a social activist, disagrees with the party's use of broom symbolism to convey the dignity of labor: "AAP has come to us and just borrowed our community symbol, [the] broom (*jhadoo*)! If they want the symbol, why don't they take up all of our burdens and issues?"¹⁴⁾ His comment implies the perceived historical linkage between the broom and caste-related jobs, through which his community has suffers. More importantly, given the Balmiki dominance of sweeping jobs in Delhi (as discussed in the previous section), they seem to have a perception of "ownership" or "exclusive right" over broom issues.

Such a reaction from local Balmikis is not uncommon. In 2013, one Delhi-based Balmiki social organization, *Raashtreeya Dalit Bachao Andolan* (National Dalit Protect Movement), sent a letter to the AAP titled "Issues relating to *Ati*-Dalits require utmost attention for inclusion in the manifesto of the 2014 general election"¹⁵⁾. It includes an appeal for Balmiki's exclusive reservation in the area of sanitation, in addition to education and the prevention of atrocities against SCs/STs. The letter explains the reason for Balmiki's exclusive reservation as follows:

This community was having monopoly over the sweeping/scavenging work during the British period all over India and thereafter till today in this country. Even the British Government recognized their claim over the sanitation/scavenging work as their '*Birth Right*.' The reason obviously was twofold, firstly that without control over and possession of their means of survival, the sweepers/scavengers would have neither economic security nor a sense of dignity. Secondly, attributable to massive untouchability in society, nobody was willing to employ them for other work...(emphasis in the original text)

In this statement, we recognize the Balmikis' ambivalent attitude toward scavenging. They seem to be adversely affected by the historical linkage with this caste-related, degrading job; simultaneously, though, they recognize it as their monopoly by right of birth.

With respect to political parties among local Balmikis, Mr. Rai's criticism is directed against parties with whom the Balmikis used to align themselves: Congress and,

occasionally, the BJP. He further added: “I think it should be a welcome step that the AAP is the first party in Delhi politics to appoint a minister from our community.” He pointed out that Rakhi Birla was the youngest cabinet minister in the Delhi government after winning the fifth legislative assembly seat in 2013. Although she remained in the legislature for only 49 days, her presence as a minister strongly appealed to the AAP’s commitment to the Balmiki community. The AAP’s sweeping victory followed in the subsequent election in 2015.

Although most Balmikis have been embracing Ambedkar’s legacy and thought, few have converted to Buddhism. They continue to identify themselves as Balmikis while worshipping the legendary Saint Valmiki, believed to be the author of the epic *Ramayanaas*, as their community *guru* (Leslie 2003; Prashad 2000; Saberwal 1990).

Regarding their political mobilization, many previous Balmiki leaders used to belong to municipal sweeper unions, working under the umbrella of the Congress Party. In return for their support, they received “benefits” through welfare schemes and party tickets to contest SC constituencies in various states, covering assembly and parliamentary elections.

As a senior leader of the Indian National Congress, Buta Singh (1932–) presents another example. Belonging to the *Mazhabi*,¹⁶ he was the first person from the sweeper communities to be appointed as a central government cabinet minister. He was posted as the Union Minister of India (1986–1989), the Governor of Bihar (2004–2006), and was, more recently, chairman of the National Commission for Scheduled Castes (2007–2010). Between the 1970s and the early 1990s, Singh had become a major leader, a mediator, and bridge between the sweepers’ socio-political organization, the *All India Mazdoor Congress* (AISMC), and the then-ruling government led by Congress.

For a short period before Buta Singh appeared on the political scene, several *sabha* (caste associations) of sweeper castes were established, mainly in Maharashtra in the early 1960s (Shyamlal 1999; Suzuki 2015). The names of those organizations (*Akhil Bhartiya Valmik Sabha*, *Utter Bhartiya Valmik Harijan Sangh*, *Valmiki Sewa Samaj*, and *Harijan Sewa Samiti*) underscore the influence of Gandhi’s Harijan Movement, as well as the worship of Saint Valmiki.

On September 21, 1990, with support from the Congress leaders, including the late Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, Buta Singh and the AISMC organized their own rally and dharna in New Delhi. It passed resolutions pertaining to the socioeconomic plight of sweepers in their working conditions, which included: (i) opposition to the privatization of government sanitation departments, (ii) improving salaries and working conditions, (iii) enacting a law to ban the physical handling of human excreta by manual scavengers, (iv) fixing minimum wages for sweepers working in private houses, and (v) declaring the birthday of Saint Valmiki as a public holiday in the government’s gazette (Shyamlal 1999: 102–103). Of those resolutions, (iii) was implemented as a central piece of legislation known as the “Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993.” In addition, two national commissions were set up to monitor compliance: the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) (active from 1994 onward) and the National Commission for Safai Karamcharis (NCSK), which was active

from 1994 until 2010. Despite various welfare interventions, they have achieved little practical success (Suzuki 2010).

5. Abandoning brooms: Dividing the Dalit assertions

Over several centuries, there have been various protests in India against caste-based oppression. Some are traceable back to the medieval era's Bhakti movement, but modern and contemporary versions of what we call Dalit movements were initiated by Ambedkar, who made an important contribution to establishing fundamental rights, while laying the foundations for the Dalit Buddhist movement's socio-religious liberation.

In the post-Ambedkar period, contemporary Dalit movements seem to evolve with common aims to overcome caste hierarchy and abolish the practice of untouchability, in pursuit of dignity and equality. However, the situation is complicated by the existence of various movements with different visions and strategies (Gorringer 2005; Pai 2010; Shah 2004). The Dalit is not a homogeneous group: its members are differentiated in terms of sub-caste and region.

Some recent works identify the intricate circumstances involved in intra-Dalit conflicts, especially over the adequate distribution of benefits from the present reservation policy (Jodhka and Kumar 2007; Rao 2009). This effect is exemplified by the cases of Madiga in Andhra Pradesh and Balmiki in Punjab and Haryana. They hold that because the reservation policy has been monopolized by privileged Dalit communities, such as Mala and Chamar, in respective states, the policy must be revised by introducing sub-categorization, distinguishing those belonging to the advanced SCs from members of the backward SCs. In the contemporary northern states, especially in Delhi, Haryana, and Punjab, the Ad-Dharm/Chamar constitute most of the SC groups. As Paramjit S. Judge observes, agricultural development runs parallel to the emergence of the Punjabi Chamar middle class through education, modern occupations, and international migration. They have begun to assert their caste identity, in stark contrast to their tendency to hide their caste status in the 1970s. In those historical developments, three interesting features have recently been observed: (i) the public display of their identity; (ii) the maintenance of their caste identity through rigid caste endogamy; and (iii) their transformation into an exclusive caste group, rather than uniting with other Dalit groups, for which they have to pay political costs (Judge 2012: 273–274).

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

During the last decade, a considerable number of state, national, and global networks and organizations have emerged among Balmiki activists in Delhi. It is noteworthy that they are mostly organized by educated Balmikis who 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. In particular, lawyers in the community take the lead in raising questions on the ongoing SC quota.

They seek to secure an equal share through policy review by the judiciary action, known as a public interest litigation (PIL) to the Supreme Court.

Leader and petitioner O.P. Shukla (1947–), a president of the National Coordination Committee for Revision of Reservation Policy, stated that the policy in force for the last 65 years was lopsided. Only a few groups have been obtaining benefits, enabling them to become advanced and gain political and financial affluence. He further states that “their continuing to get the benefits of reservation was a fraud on the Constitution and also on citizens. This has caused a total violation of Articles 14, 15, and 16.”¹⁷⁾

During the author’s fieldwork in Delhi and other northern states, claims to exclude affluent SC groups were heard repeatedly, mostly referring to the Chamar/Ravidasi and Mala communities from the SC list. As described earlier, Balmiki activists identify themselves with the most deprived groups (*vancit varg*) and set themselves apart from other dalit groups by caste line. The underlying proposition here concerns the question of exclusivity in the context of lower caste activism. It is precisely the competing demands of equal rights and share, on the one hand, and the monopoly over caste-based “privilege” on the other.

Soon after Shukla retired from his government officer post, he started his own legal action. His father was a sweeper employed by the central government, but did not allow his children to take up a broom in the same sweeping job. Shukla called himself *Ambedkarite*, but admitted that he did not embrace Buddhism: “Firstly, our community should get educated and independent. Social activities can only succeed after that. The Balmiki have been so depressed for so long that they don’t know how to fight. The cost of litigation is not affordable, but we advocate, and legal experts know how to proceed.”¹⁸⁾

Shukla’s remarks emphasize the importance of activists having legal knowledge. This perspective is shared within a new type of Balmiki activism occurring since the 2000s, in contrast to the old movement mobilized by sweeper union leaders. In this context, new activists admire Ambedkar’s pioneering legal work in drafting the Constitution. They attempt to motivate younger followers to study law.

It might be queried why Balmiki activists turned to the PIL movement, rather than a political formation such as the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) organized by the Chamar community in Uttar Pradesh. Shukla and his followers told the author, “We don’t have a large population in Delhi and we are not well-financed to launch a major movement. Political activities require a huge amount of money. However, the PIL does not cost much and national news media entities convey our message to all! Furthermore, the young generation commands social media as well.”¹⁹⁾

6. Conclusion: Between inclusion and exclusivity

The discipline of “one man, one value” has not been achieved in Indian society. This paper explored the current situation from the perspective of a disadvantaged Dalit community: the Balmiki in Delhi. As the case study shows, this community is facing two sorts of inclusion. The first emerges from mainstream society. The example of Modi’s

broom symbolism indicates the persistent link between caste and a particular occupation. Cleaning work in Indian society has been associated so inextricably with a particular caste that people take it for granted as natural. Even today, Balmikis suffer from discrimination and marginalization. As demonstrated by the interesting example of the AAP, local Balmikis seem aware of their ownership of, or exclusive rights over, broom issues, including municipal sanitation posts. Before the 1990s, the leader Buta Singh used the community's distinctiveness to receive support via state schemes in return for supporting the Congress Party.

The second challenge is occurring from within the Dalit community. As we see in the article's second section, socioeconomic development disparity exists among the SCs. The PIL movement seeks to introduce sub-categorizations in SC quotas, implying an increasing sense of inequality and unfairness among less-privileged groups. Do these examples of activism indicate the Dalit's exclusive nature? Does Chamar's trend continue towards the emphasis on exclusivity? Is it being followed by other privileged Dalit communities? In my view, it probably will be.

We are currently observing an upsurge in the Dalit movement. This can be understood as a product of increasing political and judicial democratization, and Dalit political awareness and reservation schemes. Our understanding is that the Dalit assertion will advance by changing strategies and positioning in a direction between inclusion and exclusivity. No straightforward answers are forthcoming. Further empirical research must be undertaken to elucidate a broader perspective, seeking to identify and examine similarly marginalized groups in disparate locations.

Notes

- 1) Ambedkar's speech delivered to the Constituent Assembly on November 25, 1949 (Das ed. 2011 [1963]: 218–9).
- 2) Some terms concerning lower caste names that are explained in this article are only used to examine the community, as well as their persisting issues based on historical subordination. The paper's purpose is to focus on a problem that exists in society today. Words such as "Bhangi," "Balmiki," and "Chamar" are not used herein to derogate the feelings of any person or community.
- 3) The recent 2011 census data are only partially available; caste-related details about SCs have not yet been released. For this reason, the data presented in this article are based on the 2001 census data.
- 4) Dhobi is known as a washermen community.
- 5) Chamar is regarded as a "traditional" leather-tanning community.
- 6) The ratios of castes among all sweepers were Balmiki 60%, Bhangi 27%, and Chohra 3% (*Census of India 1961*).
- 7) The ratios of castes among all sweepers were Balmiki 85%, Bhangi 10%, and Chohra 1% (*Census of India 1981*).
- 8) In this article, the terms "Balmiki" and "Valmiki" are used almost interchangeably as community names. The names are derived from worshipping the Sanskrit "Bhagwan Valmik,"

known as a legendary saint and composer of Ramayana. The caste name “Balmiki” reflects the pronunciation of the prevailing vernacular language, Hindi and Panjabi, and is in widespread usage among local Dalits. However, it is interesting to observe that the name “Valmiki” is much preferred in the UK (Leslie 2003: 3).

- 9) “Modi launches ‘My Clean India’ campaign” <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/modi-launches-my-clean-india-campaign/article6468047.ece> (accessed October 4, 2014).
- 10) “Towards a Swachh Bharat,” http://pmindia.gov.in/en/government_tr_rec/swachh-bharat-abhiyan-2/ (accessed November 30, 2015).
- 11) “‘Karmayogi’ swears by caste order, ‘Scavenging a Spiritual Experience for Valmiks’” <http://epaper.timesofindia.com/Repository/ml.asp?Ref=VE9JQS8yMDA3LzExLzI0I0FyMDA3MDA%3D> (accessed February 12, 2016). “How Modi Views Untouchability: Dissecting the ‘Toilets First, Temples Later’ Debate” <https://kafila.org/2013/10/08/how-modi-views-untouchability-dissecting-the-toilets-first-temples-later-debate/> (accessed February 15, 2016).
- 12) “Aam Aadmi Party Gets ‘Broom’ as its Election Symbol,” AAP website, <http://www.aamaadmi-party.org/news/aam-aadmi-party-gets-broom-as-its-election-symbol> accessed December 7, 2015.
- 13) Same as 12)
- 14) From the author’s interview with Mr. Rai on January 4, 2014.
- 15) The author obtained this letter on June 11, 2013 through a member in the organization. It comprises five male Balmiki representatives, most of whom were retired from government services.
- 16) *Mazhabi* used to belong to the Chuhra community, before they converted to Sikhism.
- 17) “Notice to Center, State on PIL against blanket quota,” *The Hindu*, August 24, 2011.
- 18) From an interview with the author on August 29, 2012.
- 19) Same as 18)

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