

Satnami Self-Assertion and Dalit Activism: everyday life and caste in rural
Chhattisgarh (central India)

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Abstract

This thesis is an ethnographic exploration of the way in which local actors who engage in Ambedkarite discourses in rural Chhattisgarh are disconnected from the larger pan-Indian social movement. It goes beyond the literature that looks at Dalits in the urban context by focusing on Dalits in rural India. The aspects under investigation are caste, social and sectarian movements, youth, rights, intergenerational difference and education.

The Satnami community examined here is located in a village where they are in more or less the same economic position to other castes. These other castes, however, practice ‘distancing’ from them to avoid ‘pollution’, which is a cause for smouldering resentment. Satnamis have been historically militant. They acquired additional land and assert themselves through a sectarian movement. They have their own functionaries and pilgrimage site. Their sectarian ideology advances the claim that they are independent (*swatantra*) from other castes and have mitigated exchange (*len-den*) with them. Nevertheless, they remain at the bottom of the village caste hierarchy and face everyday forms of caste oppression. Educated Satnamis in the younger generation claim that they know more (*jaankar*) about their rights (*adhikaar*) and aspire to change by becoming “key social animators”. These young men are organised in an association (*samiti/samuh*) that draws on Ambedkar’s ideas about overcoming caste oppression. They also appropriate mainstream spaces in the village by organising Hindu festivals, and defy ‘clean’ caste ostracism at a ritual level. But they do not have any functional power in the village or in the *panchayat*.

When urban Dalit activists, with their headquarters in Raipur, visit rural areas, they ignore this group of young men in the village. Their main activity is fact-finding and the dissemination of reports of caste-motivated atrocities on the Internet with the intention of forging links to NGOs nationally and internationally. They do not focus their attention on mundane forms of caste oppression in everyday village life, and the young men in the village remain hidden from view.

The present study examines how the Dalit movement is functioning at the grass roots level, focusing on those actors in rural India who remain hidden from mainstream channels of activism in the Dalit movement.

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Table of Contents:

Chapter 1 - Introduction to the Thesis	9
<i>Satnamis and the caste system</i>	15
<i>The caste system and untouchability</i>	20
<i>Ambedkar</i>	24
<i>Education, friendship and masculinity</i>	27
<i>'New' Dalit Movement and Dalit activism in Chhattisgarh</i>	33
<i>Methodology</i>	38
<i>Outline of Chapters</i>	42
 Chapter 2 - The Setting	 46
<i>Chhattisgarh and Janjgir-Champa District</i>	46
<i>The Village: Meu</i>	50
<i>Land and livelihood</i>	57
<i>Migration</i>	60
<i>Panchayat</i>	63
<i>Life in Meu- separation between castes</i>	68
<i>'Harijan Thana' - a break from the past</i>	79
<i>Separation from Mehars</i>	81
<i>The household in which I lived</i>	89
 Chapter 3 - History of the Satnami Sectarian Movement and Assertion of Self-sufficiency	 95
<i>Historical trajectory of the Satnami Movement</i>	97
<i>Guru Ghasi Das and Satnampanth</i>	99
<i>From 'dissenting' sect to defamation by dissent</i>	106
<i>Satnami dual identity and assertion of self-sufficiency</i>	108
<i>The Indian sect</i>	117
<i>Older Dalit Movements: Caste associations and the Satnami Mahasabha</i>	118
<i>Traditional Hindu reform movements: 'Bhakti'</i>	119
<i>Satnami substantialisation</i>	121
 Chapter 4 - Yuva Ambedkar Chetna Manch (YACM): Jaankari (awareness), Education and Social Mobility	 130

<i>YACM and Ambedkar</i>	135
<i>YACM as ‘key social animators’</i>	141
<i>Only Male Membership in YACM</i>	145
<i>Education and disillusionment</i>	148
<i>Education and morality</i>	155
<i>The idiom of ‘rights’ as ‘adhikaar’</i>	160
<i>Neither here nor there</i>	163
 Chapter 5 - Dalit Social Movements: the YACM and DMM in Chhattisgarh	 169
<i>The Contemporary Dalit Movement: A ‘New’ Social Movement (NSM)?</i>	169
<i>Trajectory of the contemporary Dalit Movement</i>	173
<i>The YACM in Meu</i>	178
<i>Activists in Dalit Mukti Morcha (DMM) in Chhattisgarh</i>	182
<i>Activism through fact-finding in cases of atrocity</i>	187
<i>The notion of ‘seva’ in activism</i>	190
<i>Political Background: Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and politics in Chhattisgarh</i>	191
<i>Satnamis and politics in Chhattisgarh: lack of representation</i>	194
<i>Not ‘Naye neta’ – new politicians</i>	197
 Chapter 6 - Activities of the YACM and the DMM	 202
<i>Analysing public events</i>	203
<i>Activities of the YACM</i>	207
<i>Organising Ganes and Durga Puja</i>	210
<i>Immersing Durga</i>	214
<i>Republic Day 26th January</i>	215
<i>Ambedkar Jayanti</i>	216
<i>Guru Ghasi Das Jayanti</i>	218
<i>Activities of the DMM: ‘Bethaks’ attended by women in SHGs</i>	220
<i>Fact-finding reports: the Tundra Case</i>	223
<i>First Indian People’s Tribunal on Untouchability (IPTU)</i>	227
 Chapter 7 - Conclusion	 233
Bibliography	251

Maps:

India, Chhattisgarh

Chhattisgarh – showing Janjgir-Champa district

Meu showing the different *paras*, ponds, schools, *panchayat*, bazaar and *jaith kambh*

List of Tables:

Table 1: Total population of Meu split by gender and caste category

Table 2: Distribution of households between the main castes residing in Meu

Table 3: Ownership of land by acres and households

Table 4: Total land (acres) in Meu and its uses

Table 5: Household income from paddy cultivation

Table 6: Hindu, *dehati*, patriotic and Satnami festivals celebrated in Meu

Table 7: Members of the Yuva Ambedkar Chetna Manch

Illustrations:

Genealogy of the family members in my host household

Photo 1 – Ambedkar statue in Pamgarh

Photo 2 – Tonga on its way to Meu

Photo 3 – Jaith Kambh in Meu

Photo 4 – Sheetla Mata shrine in Meu

Photo 5 – Punita cooking

Photo 6 – Workers under the NREGA scheme in Chewdih

Photo 7 – NREGA “job card”

Photo 8 – Mehar skinning a dead calf

Photo 9 – A Mehar cobbler in the weekly village market held every Tuesday

Photo 10 – Sitaram with his grandson

Photo 11 – Gori Bai

Photo 12 – Meeting with Lal Das in Girod

Photo 13 – YACM banner and Ambedkar portrait consecrated with flowers

Photo 14 – Main members of YACM

Photo 15 – Gudu Lahre

Photo 16 – The canopy for Durga Puja

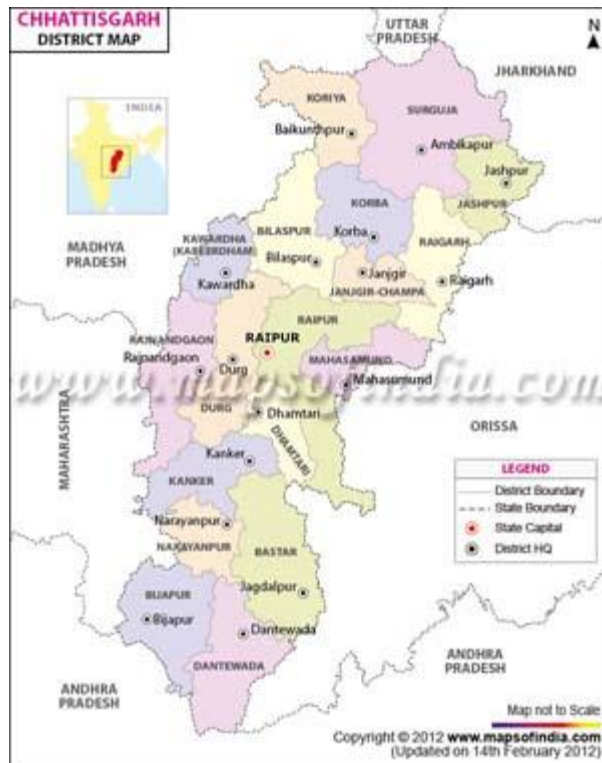
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Glossary

Aana-jana	“coming and going”
Adhikaar	“rights”
Bethak	sit-down meeting/ gathering
Bhaat	boiled rice with garnish
Bhandari	Satnami equivalent of Hindu priest
Chhatti	sixth day celebrations after child birth
Churri pehnana	putting on glass bangles (form of secondary marriage)
Dehati	rural
Dukh	grief
Gaonthia	large landowner
Ghoomna	roam about
Gotra	lineage
Harijan Thana	special cell for caste offenders in some police stations
Jaankaari	information/ knowledge
Jaith kambh	victory pole
Jamti nahi hai	a couple not getting along
Jati	caste
Kacca (food)	boiled
Khan-pin	food and drink
Len-den	exchange
Lungi	sarong type wrap worn by men
Maike	a married woman’s natal home
Malguzar	feudal landowner
Mama	mother’s brother
Maut ka kua	well of death
Mela	village fair
Mitan/ mitanin	ritual friendship between men/ women
Nai	barber
Nasta	deep fried snacks
Neya neta	“new politician”
Pacca (food)	deep fried
Panchayat	elected village council
Para	ward
Patwari	village accountant
Pera	fodder
Prasad	votive offering
Purohit	Hindu priest
Rahan-sahan	way of life
Roti-beti rista	relations of commensality and conjugality
Samaj	community/ euphemism for caste
Samiti/ samuh	village association
Sarpanc	village headman
Sathedar	in ritual contexts, the Satnami equivalent of Hindu barber
Sukh	joy
Swatantra	independent
Tonga	horse carriage
Vikas	development/ progress
Vivah	primary marriage





Chapter 1

Introduction to the Thesis

The Satnamis in Chhattisgarh in central India are the largest ‘ex-untouchable’¹ community in that state. In rural areas, the Satnamis live segregated from all other castes and are still considered by Brahmins and others belonging to the OBC (Other Backward Classes) castes to be ‘polluted’. Those castes practise ‘distancing’ towards the Satnamis and do not allow them to share the same sources of water. They even assign them to a separate area for bathing in village ponds. Restrictions on sharing food (commensality) and cross-caste marriage are also prevalent in everyday village life. Although the practice of untouchability has become more subtle and has been mitigated in many ways, the Satnamis remain at the bottom of the village caste hierarchy. The Satnamis were described as a ‘dissenting’ sect by Russell and Hiralal in 1916, and although they are no longer militant, an example of Satnami dissent was reported in the local media recently, during the course of my fieldwork. The transition of Satnami identity from the ‘untouchable’ Chamar caste² to its present status took place through a sectarian movement that began over two hundred years ago, but the Satnamis’ struggle for rights is still ongoing, and an end to caste discrimination is not yet in sight.

The victory that the Satnamis won through their sectarian movement is reflected in their own terms, such as independence (*swatantra*) from the oppression of ‘upper-castes’ and mitigated exchange (*len-den*) with those castes. Mitigated exchange was not only a matter of choice as the Satnamis have been mostly endogamous and are restricted by caste-prescribed rules concerning commensality and conjugality much like all other castes in rural India. Although they made a transition in their identity on an ideological level, structurally and socially the Satnamis remain at the bottom of the

¹ A ‘politically correct’ term for ‘Untouchable’ / Dalit / Scheduled Caste.

² The traditional occupation of the Chamar caste in many other parts of India is the removal of carcasses and tanning leather, which are deemed to be highly ‘polluting’ tasks. The Chamars thus fall under the category of ‘untouchable’ castes. However, in Chhattisgarh, it is the Mehar caste that is responsible for the removal of carcasses, and not the Chamars.

ritual caste hierarchy based on notions of purity and ‘pollution’ that are rooted in Hindu cosmology. Furthermore, in government population censuses the Satnamis fall under the Scheduled Caste (SC)³ category. This denotes those castes that were considered ‘untouchable’ in the Hindu caste system over the centuries.

The present research centres on a group of young Satnami men in a village called Meu, who in 2004 started an association by the name Yuva Ambedkar Chetna Manch (which can be translated as Youth Ambedkar Awareness Forum). They organise Hindu festivals in the Satnami ward (*para*) and hold meetings to discuss issues related to rights (*adhikaar*) and village development (*vikas*) while venerating Ambedkar as an icon of the movement for Dalit⁴ (or ‘untouchable’) rights. Although these young men symbolically draw upon Ambedkar, rural Satnamis seldom if ever adopt a politicised Dalit identity. The members of YACM are neither affiliated to any political parties, nor are they activists in the pan-Indian Dalit social movement, which is represented by the Dalit Mukti Morcha (DMM) with its headquarters in the state capital Raipur. It can be argued that the formation of YACM was catalysed by the spread of education

³This and other categories for reservations are explained further below.

⁴ ‘Dalit’ is the politicised identity that ‘untouchable’ communities have adopted since the 1970s, when it was popularised by the Dalit Panthers. It is a term Ambedkar brought into currency, which unlike his original connotation is often translated as ‘downtrodden’ or ‘broken’. Ambedkar played a major role in the post-colonial formation of the Indian state and its Constitution, and set the stage for the ‘autonomous anti-caste’ movements that followed. His legacy is the most powerful symbol in the contemporary Dalit movement, and the word ‘Dalit’ itself is Ambedkar’s creation. According to the hypothesis in his book “The Untouchables: who were they and why they became untouchables?” published in 1948, “(in Jaffrelot 2005: 40-41) he explains that all primitive societies have been conquered at one time or another by invaders who set themselves above the autochthonous peoples. In the process of social fragmentation that followed, peripheral groups, or what he calls ‘Broken Men’, split off from the centre: ‘In a tribal war it often happened that a tribe, instead of being completely annihilated, was defeated and routed. In many cases, a defeated tribe became broken into bits. As a consequence of this, there always existed in Primitive times a floating population consisting of groups of Broken tribesmen roaming in all directions’ (pp 275 in Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar, *Writings and Speeches*, Vol. 7). When the conquerors became sedentary, they turned to these ‘Broken Men’ to protect them from the attacks of nomadic tribes. Ambedkar used this theory to describe Untouchables as the descendents of Broken Men (or *Dalit*, in Marathi), and thus as the original, pre-Aryan, inhabitants of India. For Ambedkar the association of Broken Men with Buddhism did not suffice as an explanation of why Brahmins had consigned the Untouchables to a lowly status. The additional reason that he put forward was related to their eating habits: the Broken Men refused to become vegetarian and continued to eat beef, whereas ‘Brahmins made the cow a sacred animal’ (ibid).” Ambedkar’s views on the origins of the caste system and the relegation of ‘untouchables’ to the bottom of the hierarchy are similar to those of the Ad-Dharm and Adi-Dravida movements in north and south India respectively. In contemporary usage, the word Dalit does not always correspond to Ambedkar’s hypothesis. The popular usage of the word Dalit for ‘untouchable’ castes spread in the 1970s during Scheduled Caste and Hindu riots in Bombay by the Dalit Panthers, who used the term to assert their identity, which stood for a struggle for rights and self respect (Shah 2001: 21-22). Dalit is a symbol for ‘change and revolution’ and conveys these aspirations.

in the village and growing awareness about notions of citizenship and rights. Intergenerational difference in terms of education is a pervasive phenomenon observable not only in Meu but throughout rural India, as is the insertion of Ambedkarite discourses, predominantly in the repertoire of selfhood of young educated Dalit men.

This study attempts to understand how these young men, having acquired some level of schooling, navigate intergenerational differences and avenues for social mobility. How do they reconcile the ideological stance of being Satnami, self-sufficient (*swatantra*) and with mitigated exchange (*len-den*) with other castes while beginning to identify with increasingly urbanising and politicising Dalit communities throughout India? How can their seemingly contradictory approach to fighting for rights, on the one hand, by organising the celebration of Hindu festivals, and, on the other, by invoking Ambedkarite discourses for the alleviation from caste discrimination be understood? What has really changed as a result of Dalit movements for rights, and what do grass-roots actors such as these young men think about the efficacy of the pan-Indian Dalit movement of the last couple of decades?

The thesis examines why there is a lack of engagement between the young men in Meu and the Dalit rights movement. Seen from the vantage point of the urban activists and NGOs as well as the academic literature that deals with the Dalit movement, the focus is often on forms of activism or engagement with actors that are either victims of caste atrocities or those that are visible in the networks of activism. In this literature, the exploration into the ways in which the Dalit movement engages with vast rural ‘untouchable’ communities in remote villages is limited and there is barely any work done on the ways in which actors in these communities are beginning to formulate their own discourses about rights. The present research looks for the underlying reasons why urban activists do not recruit actors such as the young men in Meu into their movement as active members or activists; and why the young men in the village neither seek out the Dalit movement as a channel for fighting for their rights.

Although the present study is particularly concerned with the social mobility and aspirations of the Satnamis in Chhattisgarh, its wider relevance is to engage with and

contribute to work on Dalits more generally. It examines the interaction of those Dalit activists that belong in the 'new' Dalit Social Movement, which began organising as NGOs in the 1980s with Satnamis in a remote rural village, and is now undergoing changes mainly in terms of education. In the context of far-reaching political and socio-economic change among urbanising Dalit communities, this study uses the ethnographic method to address the dearth of anthropological research into the forms which Dalit activism takes in remote rural areas. Contemporary research related to Dalits has largely focused on political currents and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in Uttar Pradesh (Jaffrelot 1998, 2000a, 2000b; Pai 2002; Jeffrey et al. 2008) and on urban Dalit activism (Gorringe 2005, Hardtmann 2009). This research shows that activism in the Dalit movement in Chhattisgarh is predicated on upward social mobility and is dominated by educated or urban activists that are engaged with Internet-based advocacy which links them nationally, internationally and trans-nationally. This approach fails, however, to include grass-roots actors such as those in the YACM.

Urban Dalit activists can hardly represent the numerous Dalit communities that reside across class, caste, religious and regional identities, within social contexts that are contradictory, and in economic settings that are highly heterogeneous. As activists became more visible in pan-Indian, trans-national and international networks, the image that began to form gave a sense of the rise of Dalit power, not only in politics through the Bahujan Samaj Party in the north, but also as an important social movement that would transform the Dalits' position in Indian society in a radical way. This was the image being formed towards global audiences such as those convening in global social forums as well as among the urban middle classes in India. It had seemed as though subordinated people in Indian society who had recently gained opportunities for higher education and migration to the west to earn better wages were forming voluntary organisations in civil society that would simply catapult Dalits into post-neoliberal middle-class Indian society, where 'untouchability' would be a thing of the past.

Whereas the above may have been true for some Dalit activists in the past couple of decades, they actually represent only a small fraction of the Dalit population across India. The majority of Dalits still reside in villages in India which are far from being

touched by the kinds of transformation that liberalisation has brought to Indian towns and cities. In the rural setting, where caste remains an important part of everyday life, education is a means of social mobility that leads to new ways of interacting with others or becoming village elites. Educated young men and some young women (though far fewer in numbers) are beginning to organise themselves into associations in an unprecedented way. The formation of such groups can be linked to the experience of schooling and increased awareness through print and other media. Such actors are often invisible to urbanised forms of activism, and do not appear in the mainstream of political activity in rural communities. They are hidden from view because they do not easily link to mainstream channels of protest or mass mobilisation.

Such actors provide a vantage point from which to examine how rural people far removed from urban forms of activism draw upon emancipatory discourses found in the Dalit movement. They also bring into view unexpected ways in which educated young people organise events in everyday village life that symbolise the assertion of autonomy different to those of older generations. While the activities of such rural young men may seem insignificant in terms of protest or bringing about any far-reaching changes in village politics or hierarchies, it is worth examining and understanding the subtle ways in which their discourses and activities signify intergenerational shifts. The YACM is an example of the ways in which schooling and wider access to Dalit emancipatory discourses are incorporated into a repertoire of activities and conversations that rural young men are now able to engage in. The significance of the YACM lies in mapping the different ways in which Dalit discourses are appropriated for the purpose of overcoming social inferiority and subjugation in rural areas that are otherwise overlooked when gauging the extent of Dalit movements in India. Thus, rather than only focusing on the outcome of Dalit activism, this research calls attention to subterranean shifts in contemporary rural life that are not characterised by revolutionary actors or events, but by gradual changes that are just beginning to occur.

The objective here is to shed light on actors in the YACM that are otherwise hidden from view (also hidden in the research on the Dalit movement) because they are not part of activist, NGO or political networks that are more visible in towns and cities.

The young men in the YACM represent a rural generation that is literate and beginning to formulate a language of rights and dissent which does not fall neatly into existing Dalit political or social movements. The examples of discrimination and dissent presented in Dalit literature are often spectacular instances that stand out in relation to everyday forms of discrimination and the claiming of rights in rural areas. This study attempts to understand the young men in the YACM through the framework of ‘organic intellectuals’ referring to Gramsci’s conception of how subordinated groups can generate a sense of cultural awareness; and, through leadership, ‘organically’ question and change their own position within the social hierarchy or cultural status quo (Bellamy 1994). Ambedkar’s thoughts and his slogan ‘educate-organise-agitate’ - which is significant in the discourse adopted by this group of young men, and which forms a bond between them and the larger, more visible networks of activism - not only resonates with Gramsci’s emphasis on the “need to educate and organise the collective will of the masses” (ibid: xiv) but also with his claim that the dissemination of new values would give people “critical purchase of their current situation and galvanise them into action” (ibid). Education and ‘cultural preparation’ played a key role in Gramsci’s thinking about the ways in which social change from the bottom up could occur, and the attainment of higher awareness was central to it.

This analysis of everyday practices constituting the contemporary form of caste discrimination in rural Chhattisgarh attempts to explain the position of the young men in the YACM through the historical trajectory of the Satnami movement. It also explores the intergenerational changes that have led to the increased awareness or *jaankari* that they claim. Significantly, the Satnamis of Chhattisgarh do not associate themselves with the Dalit identity as readily as urban Dalits in some other parts of India, and neither do they find recourse in Dalit political movements such as that of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) as in Uttar Pradesh. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, the assertion of Satnami identity in rural Chhattisgarh is more prevalent, and secondly, the BSP does not have any political power in Chhattisgarh. In this context, the language of rights articulated by the young men in the YACM informally organised as ‘key social animators’⁵ in the village community is different from the

⁵ This is a term I borrow from Jeffrey et al (2008: 32).

kinds of rights claimed by the school of subaltern studies (Chatterjee 2008) that looks at subordinated communities from the vantage point of patronage. This ethnographical study seeks to gain an understanding of the thoughts and actions of young educated Satnami men on how their 'untouchable' past can be transcended in a rural setting. Their understanding is highly significant since the evidence illuminates areas where large numbers of 'untouchable' castes in India live and remain disconnected from increasing Dalit politicisation and activism. The disconnection between the growth of activism within the pan-Indian Dalit movement and the exclusion of actors such as those in the YACM from the activist networks calls for further exploration into the hidden forms of rights-claiming that occur in village life. These are obscured by urban activists' networks in the Dalit movement and by current ethnographies of it.

The YACM's disconnection from activist networks reveals how the contemporary Dalit movement lacks a broad base and fails to make inroads into local voluntary groups that do not necessarily engage with activism. Groups such as the YACM remain uncharted by local activists that separate themselves from actors at grass-roots level while forging links to the outside world of NGOs and advocacy. While they canvass for Dalit rights and employ resources in activities such as 'fact-finding' and supporting victims of caste-motivated atrocities by providing legal representation, they do not always organise people as a broad base. This model of Dalit activism does not replicate political power, where vote-seeking engages political actors with the grass-roots to influence individuals. For mainstream political actors, the goal is electoral victory. This is not, however, the case for activists in the Dalit movement. The need for a broad base is not deemed necessary to the work of activism. This means various groups at the periphery of the movement, such as the YACM in Meu, are not considered instrumental or important to the work of Dalit activists.

Satnamis and the caste system

En route to Meu, near the end of one's journey, is a larger village called Pamgarh. The bus screeches to a halt amidst fruit stalls and billowing dust adjacent to a stout statue of Ambedkar, gaudily painted and garlanded with tinsel. The characteristic western three-piece suit, black-rimmed glasses and thick-bound book resting in

Ambedkar's arm characterise him in stark contrast to Gandhi, whose statues portray him in a traditional *dhoti*. The bus drops passengers going to Meu at a point on the highway from which a narrower road leads to the village. This part of the journey is made by foot or by horse and carriage (*tonga*). The stretch into the village is flanked by paddy fields on both sides, hedged in places by clusters of *besram*⁶ bearing purple flowers, while the fields host clumps of mango trees. Occasional quiet sounds made by kingfishers and other birds fall into the rhythm of the turning of the *tonga*'s wheels and the trot of horseshoes. At the entrance of the village, a rusty sign bearing the name of the village in Hindi stands askew on a pole to one side and the shrine of *Sheetla Mata*, one of the three protective deities of the village, on the other. There are no statues of Ambedkar or Gandhi here; instead, a tall white structure resembling a thin obelisk looms into view as one enters the Satnami ward (*para*) in the village. This structure is a 'victory pole' (*jaith-kambh*) which is a symbol of the Satnamis of Chhattisgarh and can be found wherever a large Satnami community resides.

The importance of the *jaith kambh* and other Satnami sectarian symbols is covered in Prakasam's (1993) ethnography of rural Satnamis. It focuses on the substantialisation of the Satnami caste and describes the social organisation of the caste in structural terms. Prakasam's ethnography is set in contemporary rural Chhattisgarh and is a case study that engages with Dumont's holistic approach to understanding the caste system. Prakasam's main aim is to study the internal caste structure of the Satnamis and to thus contribute to an overall understanding of sectarian movements in India (1993: 39). Satnamis' interaction with political or social movements is not part of Prakasam's study. Rather, his focus is on sectarian and religious aspects of Satnami beliefs and he analyses the reforms (if any) that these beliefs have led to. Closely related to this study is Dube's (1998) ethnographic history, which traces the origins - and details the trajectory - of the Satnami sectarian movement in Chhattisgarh. Dube's study is derived from some primary, but mostly secondary, sources and contemporary narrations about Satnami beliefs, rituals and social organisation. Both studies focus primarily on defining the Satnami caste as separate from all other castes, and the Satnamis' position in the caste system within the sociology of central Indian castes. Dube's focus on Satnami history and identity does not include analysis of

⁶*Ipomoea carnea* (http://www.botanical.com/site/column_poudhia/68_morningglory.html)

contemporary social movements in relation to the Satnamis. His study does not attempt to engage with the view of Satnamis as Dalits or the inclusion of Satnamis in pan-Indian Dalit movements. In contrast to Dube's meticulous analysis of Satnami sectarianism in a historical context, Russell and Hiralal (1916) describe the Satnamis in the context of castes and tribes in central India during colonial times. Their description highlights the perception of the Satnamis as a militant caste, who were in a continuous 'social war' against land owners and refused to pay rent.

Babb (1972) analyses the transformation of Satnami patrilineal *gurus* into non-patrilineal political figures drawn into party politics through the Congress Party and their endorsement of Mini Mata as a political representative of Satnamis in Chhattisgarh. Berthet (2008) further analyses the state and the political scenario in Chhattisgarh and he shows that the Satnamis are a marginalised caste in the right-wing dominated state. The latter looks at statistical data for Satnamis as vote-banks and gives an account of the waning of the (insignificant) power the Bahujan Samaj Party managed to capture in the state. However, neither of these scholars analyse Satnamis in light of the Dalit Social Movement.

Parry (1999, 2001, 2004 and 2005), engages with the Satnamis through the lens of industrialisation and the transformations this brings into the lives of primarily steel workers. Parry presents the Satnamis' position within the larger context of politics in Chhattisgarh and economic changes mainly in and around the Bhilai steel plant in the Durg district. Parry's ethnographies portray the Satnamis in a semi-urban context which is very different to the rural village where I conducted my fieldwork. However, the problem of caste segregation is present in both. Whereas, Parry's studies engage with movements such as the Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha and the dynamics of the politics involving trade unions and the struggle for justice in the state, the Dalit Movement or the activists in this movement from Chhattisgarh are not the focus in any of these studies. Parry's wide ranging ethnographies related to Chhattisgarh that span caste, class, conjugal relations, consumption, childhood and corruption have been an important gateway into researching rural Chhattisgarh and to understand the larger context of the Satnamis in this state.



Ambedkar statue in Pamgarh



En route to Meu in a *tonga*



Jaith kambh in Meu



Sheetla Mata shrine in Meu

The caste system and untouchability

The Satnamis are one among numerous examples of ‘lower-castes’ and ‘untouchables’ that seek religious conversion⁷ to and/or separation from the Hindu caste system to alleviate caste oppression. While transforming their identity, ‘untouchables’ make an ideological shift but do not change their position within the caste hierarchy structurally or socio-economically. They are not able to change structurally because other castes in the hierarchy remain unchanged and continue their caste-based practices.

The notions of purity and ‘pollution’ that inform the hierarchical positioning of different castes are difficult to pin down because of the many variations in practices and contradictions that are observable in everyday life in India. While people of all castes can be temporarily ‘polluted’ by organic secretions of the body, such as saliva and blood, or by contact with birth and death, they can perform rituals to cleanse themselves. However, ‘untouchable’ castes have borne the burden of ‘ritual impurity’ for generations by traditionally being entrusted with the task of removing ‘pollution’ for all the other castes. They have thus been deemed ‘permanently polluted’ and ‘untouchable’ (Deliège 1999). In ritual terms, according to Dumont (1980), ‘untouchables’ are the counterpoint to Brahmins, whom he places at the apex of the hierarchy. This does not exclude ‘untouchables’ from the ritual sphere, but positions them at the lowest end (Fuller 2004: 137-139).

The transformation of caste in the political domain harks back to the invocation of caste as a category for enumeration of the Indian population in censuses⁸ carried out by the British (Dirks 2001). Whereas on the one hand the effect of using caste categories in censuses ‘fixed’ the traditional caste system in the imagination of communities, on the other hand it opened newfound avenues of social mobility whereby some communities began claiming other caste identities⁹. One example is the Satnami who claimed Satnami identity instead of the demeaning Chamar caste.

⁷ Examples are the Mangs and Madigas who converted to Christianity (Omvedt 1994:71).

⁸ The first decennial census using caste categories took place in 1871 (Charsley and Karanth 1998: 23).

⁹ Dirks (2001:49) notes that “by 1931 some caste groups were distributing handbills to their fellow caste members to tell them how to answer questions about their religious and sectarian affiliations, as also their race, language, and caste status”.

Another well-known example are the Ahirs, who claim to be Yadavs and descendants of Lord Krishna, and have gained political power in north India (Michelutti 2008).

The British assumed that caste was the bedrock of Indian society and therefore tried to enumerate the Indian population in censuses that used caste as a classificatory category. This resulted in new forms of caste competition. The importance of caste in the censuses led to increased focus on the recognition of caste categories by the official apparatuses of government, and this is reflected in the Constitution of 1950. The culmination of more than half a century of increasing anti-caste sentiment among reformers meant that the Constitution banned caste discrimination and abolished differences in personal law between Hindus of different castes (Galanter 1963). The formation of caste categories for affirmative action was enshrined in the Constitution, which abolishes untouchability (Article 17). However, the Constitution also classifies, firstly, 'untouchable' castes as Scheduled Castes (SC) and secondly, *adivasis* (the so-called 'aboriginals' in India) as Scheduled Tribes (ST). A special caste category for 'Other Backward Classes' (OBC) which consists of lower ranking castes was also established. Article 16 states that "no caste discrimination [is allowed] in government service; [but] reservation of places permitted for untouchables and 'backward classes'" (ibid: 549). Amongst other things, what this study illustrates is the paradoxical notion of caste in the Indian Constitution that simultaneously abolishes caste and reiterates it through affirmative action policies.

One problem with placing Brahmins at the apex is that there is complementarity between the Brahmin and Kshatriya castes (second in the hierarchy). While Hindu kings and rulers were often from the Kshatriya caste, and could provide protection and wealth to Brahmins, the Brahmins could in turn provide those rulers with legitimacy. Thus, rather than being strictly in subordination to one another, they represented separate realms, namely those of religious and political power. Dumont's critics have questioned his holistic approach to the caste system (Dirks 1987, Raheja 1988). In his approach, the sharp distinction between spiritual authority and temporal power were inadequate. The functions of the king are not purely secularised but have 'magico-religious' aspects and it is the king, not the priest, that is the pivot of the

ideological system.¹⁰ Additionally, other critics find his work to be a ‘book view’ of caste (Béteille 1969, 1979) that does not account for historical influences under Muslim and British rule. However, Dumont’s work on the substantialisation of caste, discussed in a later chapter, is of importance when it comes to understanding the changes that have occurred to the structure of caste post-independence. Srinivas (1996) has argued that the *varna* system that Dumont draws upon is not the only ideal type that describes Indian society. It is further suggested, for example by Fuller (1992), that although caste is an important institution, Dumont gives it exaggerated importance. However, the aspect of complementarities in the caste hierarchy is emphasised by Bouglé (1971) where interdependence and mutual repulsion or separation between castes presents a model of the caste system that seeks meaning in the relationships within the structure. These complementarities are still easily observable in everyday village life.

Contemporary literature on caste points at the unevenness with which changes have taken place in Indian society, and at its heterogeneity, which makes generalisation very difficult. There are many examples of how caste identity is in some contexts rigid (for example in the case of endogamy and primary marriage) whereas in others it is variable (for example, occupation). Scholars such as Béteille (1969) and Dumont (1980) have observed that castes lack hard and fast boundaries in relation to each other within a relatively fluid segmentary system. This is observable among OBCs¹¹ in Meu that invoke differences and similarities based on food and drink (*khan-pin*) and way of life (*rahan-sahan*)¹² rather than emphasising hierarchical positioning based on purity. It is because of these kinds of erosions in caste hierarchy that the separation between the Satnamis and other ‘clean’¹³ castes in Meu appears in greater relief.

The dichotomy between Brahmins and ‘untouchables’ is more or less obsolete in rural Chhattisgarh, owing to the fact that Brahmins are now absentee landowners, having moved to larger villages and towns over the last few decades. The kinds of middle-

¹⁰ This point has been clarified by Professor Johnny Parry.

¹¹ OBC denotes ‘Other Backward Classes’. This and other categories used in affirmative action policies are explained further below.

¹² See Fuller (1997: 12-13).

¹³ ‘Clean’ castes are the so-called ‘twice-born’ that can purify themselves after having contact with defiling substances or situations. By contrast, ‘untouchables’ are ‘permanently polluted’.

class consumption patterns and better 'English-medium' schools available there surpass the conditions in the village. The 'upper-castes' left behind belong in the bracket of OBC castes that are at the lower end of 'clean' castes. The kinds of discrimination these castes practise towards the Satnamis can be observed, for example, in the use of wells and hand-pumps which are the only sources of water for drinking and cooking in different wards of the village. Those in the 'clean' caste wards cannot be used by Satnamis. The village itself is divided into an area where all other castes reside and a separate ward for the Satnamis. These divisions are not immediately noticeable, but become more apparent during a longer stay.

Village life in this sense is more traditional than in towns and cities, where industrialisation has brought about a wave of changes. Parry's (1999, 2001, 2004 and 2005) ethnographies of the Satnamis dwelling in urban neighbourhoods near the Bhilai steel plant in the heart of Chhattisgarh show how rules concerning boiled (*kacca*) and deep fried (*pacca*) food¹⁴ are ignored by workers in the steel plant, albeit only whilst on the plant premises. Increasing middle-class consumption of education, holidays, furniture and gadgets for the home, and changing attitudes towards conjugality are all part of the Satnamis' everyday lives in these neighbourhoods. They are not regulated by caste *panchayats*¹⁵ or other restrictions that apply in rural everyday life. People in these townships would not necessarily resort to arbitration through a group of elders in legal or personal matters, as is the case in the village, where every caste has its own *panchayat* that is neither elected nor has any judicial authority, but exists in parallel to the elected village *panchayat* or council. However, the elders in the caste *panchayat* can impose sanctions when caste rules related to endogamy and commensality are broken, and uphold norms that perpetuate the social separation of castes.

¹⁴ See Parry (1979: 95-105). Generally, *kacca* food is only shared among people of the same caste because food cooked in water has the propensity to transmit pollution. Therefore, 'upper-castes' will not accept *bhat* (boiled rice) at a lower-caste's home, and at ceremonies 'upper-castes' leave with portions of rice and lentils that they will cook in their own homes and consume, away from the 'lower-castes'. Similarly, at ritual feasts, 'lower-castes' are given uncooked portions of rice and lentils to take away. Deep-fried foods or *pacca* foods which have been cooked in *ghee* or clarified butter, on the other hand, can be more openly and legitimately consumed by people of both 'upper' and 'lower' caste without a similar fear of 'pollution'.

¹⁵ See also Randeria (2002: 301-308).

The gradual decrease in the importance given to caste in urban India is often associated with the increasing significance of class in such contexts, although caste retains importance mainly in matters of arranged marriage. Béteille (1991: 159) has argued that the preoccupation with caste in urban India has long since been replaced by class and other indicators of cosmopolitan identity such as socio-economic status based on education, profession and so on. De-legitimation of caste inequality in political and legal spheres has led to euphemisms such as *samaj* (community) instead of *jati*, the Hindi word for caste. During my fieldwork, people of different castes in Chhattisgarh used the term *samaj* rather than *jati* when speaking about their caste and their community. However, the diminution of caste from the urban public domain of everyday life has not fully eradicated it from the private and domestic domain and caste sentiments become especially relevant in the realm of electoral politics. This study builds on recent scholarship that deals with caste and social exclusion, and analyses the position of the Satnami community in rural Chhattisgarh through an ethnographic lens.

Ambedkar

One of the key figures for Dalits in India is Dr. Ambedkar, the man whose statue one encounters on the way to Meu. An often stained, framed and garlanded portrait of him can be found adorning the walls of several Satnami homes in the village. Ambedkar's legacy in the fight for Dalit rights is unmatched. He was Chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Constitution and the architect of the present reservation policy (Thorat et al. 2008). The thick book under his arm that he is often depicted carrying is none other than the Constitution. Ambedkar envisioned liberating 'lower castes' and 'untouchables' from caste oppression through legislative means and a historical stand-off between him and Gandhi came about in 1932, regarding the Poona Pact¹⁶. Ambedkar wrote extensively about the caste system and on how Indian society could transform itself post-independence, in a democratic setting where all citizens would have equal rights. In denouncing Hinduism, he emphasised that the roots of the caste system lay in Hindu cosmology. This made him a rival of Gandhi's in many ways.

¹⁶ In 1932, the British were about to proceed with their Communal Award which would allow separate electorates for 'untouchables'. The award was part of the Poona Pact and an outcome of The Roundtable Conference of 1931 in London. Gandhi declared a 'fast unto death' until the clause related to separate electorates was scrapped and Ambedkar had no choice but to back down (Mendelsohn and Vicziany 1998: 104-106). See also Jaffrelot (2005: 53-69).

Gandhi tended to call untouchables ‘Harijans’ or ‘God’s children’. In 1931, Gandhi was quoted in *Young India*¹⁷ as saying:

The ‘untouchable’, to me, is, compared to us, really a *Harijan* – a man of God, and we are *Durjan* (men of evil). For whilst the ‘untouchable’ has toiled and moiled and dirtied his hands so that we may live in comfort and cleanliness, we have delighted in suppressing him.

The term ‘Harijan’ was not Gandhi’s own. It had been the invention of a ‘high-caste’ reformer, the Brahmin Gujarati saint and poet Nasingh Mehta (Charsley 1996: 8). Gandhi was himself an ‘upper-caste’ reformer¹⁸ and influenced by the Arya Samaj¹⁹. Prominent Dalits such as Mayawati (the former Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh and leading figure of the BSP), as well as an overwhelming majority of Dalits, find the term ‘Harijan’ offensive and patronising,²⁰ claiming that it perpetuates segregation.

For Dalits, Ambedkar is *their* leader, in contrast to Gandhi who is considered *Bapu* or Father of the Nation. While Gandhi fought for freedom for the entire nation, Ambedkar’s leadership is lauded by Dalits all over India and most persuasively by the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), who regard Ambedkar’s handiwork – the Constitution – to be the cornerstone of the Dalits’ fight for freedom from ‘upper-caste’ oppression. Three aspects of Ambedkar’s image resonate with Dalits and Dalit activism. One is the ‘Constitutional Ambedkar’, invoked by the Dalit Movement that is the cement in

¹⁷ This was Gandhi’s periodical and even its name was later changed to ‘Harijan’.

¹⁸ In contrast to the reformatory ideas of ‘upper castes’, Ambedkar together with Jotirao Phule and E.V. Ramaswami Naicker or ‘Periyar’ were ‘lower-caste’ leaders who did not think untouchability would be eradicated by improving the status of ‘untouchables’ in the caste system; they wanted to eliminate the system itself (Shah et al. 2006: 33).

¹⁹ In more recent times, the Hindu reformist movement called the Arya Samaj has addressed issues related to untouchability; and Gandhi’s welfare activities through the Harijan Sevak Sangh are an example of efforts towards ‘uplifting’ Dalits within an ideology similar to that of the Arya Samaj. The Arya Samaj emphasised purification (*shuddhi*) and wanted a re-conversion to Hinduism and to inculcate ‘untouchables’ into the Hindu fold through purification (Guptoo 1993: 287). Jaffrelot (2000: 763) documents the influence of the Arya Samaj at the turn of the 20th century on groups such as the Yadavs and the Chamars in north India. Views such as moral reform and teetotalism were propagated as a means of achieving a ‘cleaner’ status (ibid: 764). These reform movements did not consequently help to eradicate untouchability; in fact, it can be argued that they in effect perpetuated caste hierarchies.

²⁰ Mayawati has argued that a parallel analogy to the term is ‘Devdasi’ (God’s slaves), which connotes women who are temple dancers and sexually exploited by resident Brahmin priests. Their illegitimate children would logically be called ‘Harijan’ (Bose: 2008: 25).

the movement's discourses that binds urban as well as rural activists and communities. The language of caste discrimination and oppression is transformed from a religious register to that of secular rights through Ambedkar's move away from Hindu reform movements to emphasising notions of equality and citizenship. His work in relation to the Constitution is well known even to the youth in the Yuva Ambedkar Chetna Manch (YACM) in Meu. In their view, unlike Gandhi, Ambedkar fought for and secured legal rights for 'untouchables'. The realm of Constitutional rights is even more potent in the context of affirmative action policies and reservations, of which the youth in Meu are becoming increasingly aware. Although marred by corruption and bribery that ensure places in higher education or government jobs (through reservations), Ambedkar's efforts to secure these advantages for Dalits are not tainted in the eyes of the young men in Meu.

The second aspect is Ambedkar's denunciation of Hinduism. Ambedkar vehemently argued against '*Manuvad*' or the rule of *Manusmriti* (Laws of Manu), a scripture that 'upper castes' used to claim legitimation for the caste system. He drew extensively on his personal background as an 'untouchable' of the Mahar caste and denounced the caste system vociferously. In 1927, to show his disgust, he publicly burned the *Manusmriti*, and shortly before his death in 1956 converted to Buddhism along with thousands of 'untouchables' who followed his example. His conversion to Buddhism was a compelling statement against Hinduism and an assertive gesture which condemned the humiliation caused by the practice of untouchability perpetrated within the caste system. As discussed earlier, religious conversion and opting out of the Hindu caste system were strategies employed by 'untouchable' communities over the centuries. Many converts to Buddhism following Ambedkar's example call themselves neo-Buddhists. Most of them are Mahars, Ambedkar's own caste (Hardtmann 2003, 2009).

The Satnamis in Meu neither call themselves 'Harijans' nor find conversion to Buddhism appealing. This aspect of Ambedkar's legacy is the one rural Satnamis are least aware of. Rather, they continue to assert their Satnami identity and feel that they belong within the Hindu fold. While they defy Hindu norms of caste oppression that relegate them to the bottom of the hierarchy, they do not completely reject Hinduism and the belief in and celebration of Hindu festivals. This ambiguity is dealt with by

Deliège (1999) where he argues that ‘untouchables’ are both an integral part of Hindu society and simultaneously excluded from it.

The third and most important aspect of Ambedkar’s legacy for rural Satnamis is his emphasis on education. His slogan ‘educate, organise and agitate’ was adopted by Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) founder Kanshi Ram in the ‘70s when he led the government workers’ union for Dalits. It was called the Backward and Minority Communities Employees Federation (BAMCEF), which is the predecessor of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) (Mendelsohn and Vicziany 1998: 222; Bose 2008: 31). The BSP has actively used this slogan to inspire Dalits and remind them of Ambedkar’s academic achievements, a route to overcoming social inferiority and subjugation. The roots of Dalit political power lie in the BAMCEF, which brought educated Dalits employed in non-agricultural occupations together across the nation. These ‘middle-class’ Dalits formed the base for political mass mobilisation which BSP spokeswoman Mayawati capitalised on in the early 2000s, as Kanshi Ram’s health and role in Dalit politics diminished. Apart from the BSP’s use of this slogan, it is also a stock phrase in the publications of various NGOs and activists in the Dalit Social Movement. It is a phrase that youth in the YACM used when they talked about the importance of Ambedkar and the ways in which to access rights that in their view, uneducated people are ignorant of and unable to grasp.

Education, friendship and masculinity

The impact of education on Dalit identity is significant because it enables these communities to evoke an achieved identity other than that ascribed to them (Jeffery et al. 2004, 2005). The transformative power of education lies in overcoming the past, when ‘untouchables’ were denied education and remained illiterate, ignorant and backward in the eyes of others (Ciotti 2006). Any level of education, even attaining basic literacy, is seen as empowering by Dalit communities and most Dalits claim that it gives them a sense of dignity and the will to resist ‘upper-caste’ domination (Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan 2004). The Satnamis in Meu experience the widespread phenomenon in rural India of intergenerational difference because of the sharp divide between illiterate elders and literate youth. This applies to both genders

to an unprecedented extent (Mendelsohn and Vicziany 1998). Educated Satnami men (and women) emphasise that certain realms of knowledge or *jaankari* are only accessible to those who are literate (*parhe-likhe*). Educated-ness is central to conceptions of social mobility and is sometimes linked to Dalit masculinity, although its value is often more symbolic than instrumental (Osella and Osella 2004). Although girls are educated in primary and secondary schools, most discontinue their studies after marriage at a young age. Boys and young men's education is by contrast encouraged and financially supported by families, in the hope that the men might obtain non-farm-based employment and supplement the family's income²¹.

The present study looks at grass-roots actors in a remote village surrounded by paddy fields in the heart of Chhattisgarh, and these actors are all young men. The exclusion of women from the realm of organising social events in the village and general leisure activities is noticeable in everyday village life. These activities clearly belong in the masculine domain. The youth in the YACM are often found chatting in groups by the *para* shop or under the shade of a tree. Their presence outside their homes is far more pervasive than that of young women. They can be found playing cricket or a game of cards, chess or *chal ghoti* (similar to the African game *kalaha*²²) in spaces outside the home around the *para* or riding their bicycles around the village. These activities clearly belong in the male domain. Girls and women are present neither at the meetings concerning the association and Ambedkar, nor when the organisation of Hindu festivals is discussed. Women do not play as active a role in the preparation and setting up of the deities for these celebrations.

Young girls and women usually walk along village paths when fetching water from hand pumps or ponds and on their way to or from bathing and washing clothes at the ponds. Their presence outside the home is usually for the purpose of a chore, working in the fields or attending school in the case of teenage girls. Young girls, especially

²¹ Statistics show that only 8.3% of the entire female population of Chhattisgarh has passed the 10th class and above. These women are mostly based in Durg, where the Bhilai steel plant is located, other than in the cities where female education is higher than in rural parts (Paper by Dr Ilina Sen "A Situational Analysis of Women and Girls in Chhattisgarh" published by National Commission for Women, New Delhi, 2010). The male literacy rate, on the other hand, is 77%, and the overall female literacy rate is 52%.

²² A game similar to *kalaha* is also found in Ethiopia and is called 'bao' (Amin, M., Willetts, D., Matheson, A., (2004) *Journey Through Ethiopia* Camerapix Publishers International pp 149)

once they reach puberty, stay at home for the most part and are not found playing as children (of both genders) do on the streets.²³ Only a few girls are enrolled in a high school or college outside the village, and fewer still have access to a bicycle to get there.

Being married and bearing children (preferably sons) are the roles that define womanhood.²⁴ At the same time, aspirations of social mobility and the belief that education is the key to betterment have meant that almost all children, boys and girls, are sent to school. The increased attention to primary health care through government development schemes involves women who have at least completed secondary school (8th class). It is increasingly young women rather than the older generation who can read and write. Therefore, younger married women are now recruited in greater numbers to primary health care groups called *mitanin* in the village.²⁵ Opportunities such as these to take part in activities outside the home are few except for working in paddy fields. Most Satnami women are wage labourers similar to men and spend their lives working in the paddy fields. After marriage, such work supplements social connections left behind in the natal village. Most other work that involves teaching or village administration through the *panchayat* is more likely to be taken up by men than women. And it is mostly men who seek employment in mines or factories outside to supplement the family's income in the village.²⁶

Some young women I spoke with in the village confessed that they resented being married because of the abrupt end to freedoms enjoyed while going to school, such as meeting friends and being allowed to partake in childish pleasures. One of the main aspects they missed was time spent with school friends. Most young women are married at the age of eighteen or nineteen, and virilocal marriage means that these young girls find themselves separated from childhood friends and the home where they grew up. Instead, after marriage, they begin a life of household chores and childbearing, where education and friendship outside the virilocal family are limited. Notions of honour are pervasive in Indian society, but tight control of female

²³ See also Parry (2005).

²⁴ See also Wadley (1994).

²⁵ See also Pinto (2004).

²⁶ See also A. Shah (2006, 2007).

sexuality²⁷ does not define Satnami women's sexuality to the same extent as in other caste communities and regions in India.²⁸ Satnami women explained to me that if a couple did not get along (*jamti nahi hai*) a secondary marriage called *churi pehnana* (literally, putting on glass bangles)²⁹ is an acceptable exit route. However, at times this was not desirable because of matters related to children and inheritance.

As is the case in some Satnami households in the village, education and supplementary incomes from mining have led to some young women being housebound. As these households become wealthier, and sons attain higher levels of education, educated brides are sought after. In contrast to a life of toil in back-breaking agricultural work, a 'softer' life of household chores and the consumption of luxuries such as fairness creams and new saris and sandals is offered to these prize brides. This resonates with notions of middle-classness and upward social mobility. These luxuries come at the price of losing the kinds of autonomy women have as bread winners when they are wage labourers in agriculture. Furthermore, these women are at the beck and call of their mothers-in-law, who after a life of toil begrudge these young women their relative ease. Although the overall average literacy rate is higher in the village than ever before and includes both genders, girls' participation as adults in public arenas of village life is still determined by gendered social and economic divisions. The exclusion of women from the realms of social and political life in the village that occur outside the home renders those public spaces distinctly male dominated.

The tension between the educated young men and women becomes apparent when it comes to aspirations for a better life. Young women with college educations cannot easily aspire to find work outside their homes while living in the village, and neither are they encouraged to work in the fields, as this would tarnish the reputation and image of prosperity of their family.

Such was the case for Punita, the younger daughter-in-law in my host family. The family are relatively well off in the Satnami community in Meu. Punita had grown up

²⁷ Chakravarti (1993).

²⁸ See Parry (2001: 788).

²⁹ See also Dube (1998) and Parry (2001: 799).

in another village, where her father was a schoolteacher, and he had encouraged her education along with her brothers. Although it had been agreed that she would be allowed to continue college education after her marriage with Nares, she was dismayed by the reluctance of her mother-in-law, Gori Bai, who is illiterate, to let her out of the house. The household has two daughters-in-law and everyday chores are divided between the two. Punita is responsible for cooking all the meals and generally keeping the kitchen area clean and checking kitchen inventories. The other daughter-in-law is in charge of cleaning the house, making cow-dung cakes to be used as fuel and tending the family's cows. Thus Punita is required to stay continually by the hearth and tend to the family's needs.



Punita cooking

Furthermore, Gori Bai found Punita's aspirations for a college education to be self-indulgent and misplaced in light of the contribution she expected from her daughters-in-law. As a young bride she had tended to the needs of a large joint family and worked hard from the crack of dawn till midnight. For most of her life, she had toiled for her family and had given birth eleven times, with eight children surviving. For Gori Bai, the newfangled ambitions of her younger daughter-in-law are immature follies of youth. Punita does not even have to put in back-breaking work in the paddy fields – Gori Bai cannot understand what more she could want. According to her mother-in-law, Punita has her every desire met by a doting Nares, who sneaks in little gifts such as trinkets, henna, posters of kitsch landscapes, fairness creams or a comb for her every once in a while. Punita, on the other hand, feels imprisoned in the household under the watchful gaze of her mother-in-law, whom she likens to a “black crow” (*kauwa*) that chides her (*bahut kaw kaw karti hai*) throughout the day. When I began my fieldwork, Punita had been married for four years and told me that she had not yet been for a stroll around the village, and had never been to the village ponds or the market area. As the family has its own water supply, she never needs to go out to fetch water or to bathe. The only time she had left the house was when she went to visit her natal home to give birth to her daughter, and on a few other occasions.

Young men on the other hand, such as those in the YACM, assert their masculinity through being visible in social spaces outside the home in everyday village life. When asked what they were up to, these young men would often reply ‘*ghoom rahe hai*’ (roaming about). This particular activity is strictly confined to males. Young women are usually never found roaming around, as this would be considered out of character and promiscuous. Young men also often used the English words *time pass* to describe loitering around (see also Craig Jeffrey 2010). The general laxity of the rules governing the comportment of men is notable when compared to those governing women; almost all the chores related to cooking, cleaning, washing and tending toddlers are left to women, leaving men free to ‘hang out’ and roam about. These aspects of everyday life allow males to continue their friendships after leaving school and to organise themselves in groups in a way young women cannot. While some women in the village are organised in ‘Self Help Groups’ that are based on government development initiatives, their meetings are organised and carried out

following regulations set by government development workers. During my fieldwork, I did not come across voluntary associations of women similar to the YACM.

One of the main aspects of the activities of the YACM is that they are a group of friends who organise events in the Satnami *para* and share discourses about rights and social improvement. The roles they play in the association are closely related to those learned at school, and not through farming. As educated young men, they are able to access information (*jaankari*) and facilitate the organisation of meetings and festivals by allocating roles and responsibilities, as prefects in a school classroom might. The social space available to them in the *para* in which to meet, play and hold events makes it possible for them to become ‘key social animators’.

The inclusion of Ambedkarite discourse and event organisation in the activities of young men, who are otherwise engaged in roaming about (*ghoomna*) and *time pass*, can be related to education and literacy. It is also catalysed by the increased significance of Dalit politics and social movements in the last couple of decades. The rise of Dalit movements – both social and political - have brought the discourse on the rights of ‘untouchables’ into a realm of grass-roots mobilisation that no longer emphasises Hindu notions of caste reform but rather engages with the repertoire of rights in a secular sense. The following section sheds light on the larger background which is the context for Dalit activism in Chhattisgarh.

‘New’ Dalit Movement and Dalit activism in Chhattisgarh

A significant shift in the struggle against caste oppression in post-independence India was marked by linking the discourse on human rights with the rights of Dalits. Since the early 90s, Dalit political parties such as the Bahujan Samaj Party have been gaining ground in the populous state of Uttar Pradesh, and Dalit elites in and outside India have organised themselves as pressure groups and NGOs demanding human rights for Dalits (Hardtmann 2003, Thorat and Umakant 2004, Lerche 2008). A turning point was reached in 2000-2001 when delegations of Dalit activists representing umbrella Dalit NGOs appeared at the UN Convention for the Elimination of Racial [and Caste] Discrimination (UNCERD) and subsequently the World Conference Against Racism (WCAR). Prior to these events, publications such as

“Broken People: Caste Violence Against India’s ‘Untouchables’” brought out by Human Rights Watch in 1999 gave impetus to the *new* Dalit Movement, which consists of nationally and internationally linked Dalit NGOs that invoke the language of the Human Rights Declaration and of multi-lateral treaties and UN conventions in an unprecedented way. However, Indian NGOs and Dalit activists have consistently drawn on the figure and thoughts of national Dalit icon Dr. Ambedkar, alongside the discourse on Human Rights derived from western institutions and organisations.

These shifts caught the attention of the media and academics alike because of the insertion of Dalit issues in the burgeoning circuits of ‘global civil society’, for instance at social forums and UN conventions. The proliferation of national and transnational NGOs and advocacy groups also brought new discourses into the repertoire of Dalit activism. In India, the people directly involved have been the few educated Dalits that belong to the growing middle class. The booming Indian economy and Internet technologies barely affect the millions of Dalits living across rural India. These Dalits have been in the shadows of growing attention to Dalit Rights; and the ways in which Dalit discourses influence rural Dalits’ lives have been overlooked by the media and academics alike. The kinds of reportage that the media or NGOs have undertaken have been at best sporadic and insufficient.

One of the gateways into my research into untouchability and the Dalit Movement in Chhattisgarh was a website³⁰ published by a Dalit activist in the state capital Raipur. The website carries reports of atrocities against Dalits³¹ in Chhattisgarh and makes an appeal to the Indian government, NGOs and the public to eliminate caste discrimination and ensure justice and dignity for the Dalits violated. The website resonates with many others that demand social and legal justice. It rides the wave of global social justice movements that have proliferated with the increase in civil society mobilisations that followed the end of the cold war and the demolition of the Berlin Wall in 1989. I came across this website after having met Dalit activists at the European Social Forum in Paris in 2003. The use of the Internet as a tool for mobilisation in new social movements has been pivotal to the inter-connectedness

³⁰ <http://www.countercurrents.org/dalit-george230804.htm>

³¹ So called after The Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe Prevention of Atrocities Act passed in 1989.

between interest groups nationally and internationally and has brought issues from far-flung microcosms to our attention, making those issues more palpable than in sporadic media coverage.

There are only a handful of urban and rural activists that represent the Dalit movement in Chhattisgarh. Their organisation is called the Dalit Mukti Morcha (DMM). It is linked to pan-Indian Dalit NGOs such as the National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR), the National Confederation of Dalit Organisations (NACDOR) and the Dalit Foundation (DF). These organisations fund regional NGOs such as the DMM through fellowships for activists, and in the case of the DMM an international organisation also provided some financial assistance. The umbrella organisations provide training in the form of exposure and hold conferences in different parts of the country. The NCDHR was responsible for organising the first Indian People's Tribunal Against Untouchability in May 2007. This tribunal brought together Dalit organisations, similar to the DMM, from all over India for a few days in New Delhi. (The tribunal is covered in the sixth chapter of the present study.)

The advent of Dalit activism as NGOs, using the Internet and linking with national and international NGOs and interest groups showed its first sparks in the 1980s when Dalits in the diaspora in North America came together to form interest groups, such as Volunteers in Service of India's Oppressed and Neglected (VISION) and the Ambedkar Centre for Justice and Peace (ACJP) based in Washington DC and Toronto respectively (Lerche 2008: 245-246). These pressure groups began lobbying other NGOs and the UN to take up the Dalit cause and the first results of their efforts came in 1996, when the UN Committee on Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) declared that Dalit issues could fall within the scope of the International Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) which came into effect in 1969. In 1998, Human Rights Watch, funded by the Ford Foundation, organised a meeting of Dalit organisations in India, the outcome of which resulted in the formation of the National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR). In 1999, at the same time as the publication by Human Rights Watch, the NCDHR published their own 'Black Paper: Broken Promises and Dalits Betrayed' and presented two and a half million signatures to the Indian Prime Minister in a document demanding the end of caste discrimination (ibid; Bob 2007: 179-180).

The DMM was formed in the early part of the 2000s. A founding member of the DMM, Goldy George, told me in one of our first meetings that he had started as an activist with funding from Dalit friends in the United States and had obtained further funding later on from a European NGO. While on the one hand the DMM is an offshoot of the formation of trans-nationally linked NGOs and interest groups, on the other hand it remains a regional entity with some links to national Dalit NGOs. The linkages through this massive Dalit movement machinery, where the cogs are spatially, socially and politically dispersed, seem superficial in relation to the everyday lives of ordinary Dalits, however significant they may be in the context of global advocacy movements. The sheer number of Dalits in India and the great disparities in Indian society offset the impact of these organisations on the ground. The perpetuation of casteist practices, especially in rural India where the apparatus of Dalit Rights organisations barely reaches, poses questions as to the efficacy of the contemporary Dalit Movement. The network of activists in Chhattisgarh is scant, given the large number of Dalits³² in the state, and political representation of these communities is non-existent. While government development initiatives with regard to education, health and local governance may have increased in the past decade, the state is riddled with infrastructural, law and order problems and generally poor developmental standards, as well as an insurgency by Maoists or Naxalites in some parts. State-led clampdowns on prominent figures in social activism in the past few years have also hampered the growth of Dalit activism in the state.³³

Some of the educated, urban members of the DMM reside in Raipur and others in rural areas. The organisation has made contact with communities in only four of Chhattisgarh's sixteen districts. A few of the rural members of the DMM who have

³² According to the PHDCCI publication "States at a Glance 2006-2007", the Scheduled Caste population of Chhattisgarh is roughly 12% or 2.5 million of the total 21 million people belonging to Chhattisgarh. 80% of Chhattisgarh's population is rural. While 12% are the so-called 'ex-untouchable' or Dalit castes, 34% belong in the Scheduled Tribes (ST) category and 50% in Other Backward Classes (OBCs). The remaining 4% fall under 'General Category' or 'upper-caste'.

³³ Dr Binayak Sen is a paediatrician and national vice-president of the People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL), one of the oldest and most highly regarded civil society organisations in India. In May 2007 he was arrested in Raipur, Chhattisgarh where he has resided for many years, for allegedly violating the provisions of Chhattisgarh Special Public Security Act 2005 and the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act 1967. The grounds for his arrest were not supported by clear evidence or a fair trial. He is in alliance with other activists, academics and NGOs that have condemned the state-led counter-insurgency called Salwa Judum, in the Naxalite areas of Chhattisgarh, and his arrest sets an example of the potential consequences of speaking openly about Human Rights violations in Chhattisgarh.

university educations are activists involved in compiling fact-finding reports of cases of ‘atrocities’ or violence against Dalits in these four districts. A large number of the other rural members of the movement are women in Self Help Groups (SHGs). The members meet for a *bethak* or ‘sit down gathering’ in different villages, usually around the time of Ambedkar’s birthday or the anniversary of his death. At these gatherings, educated leaders in the DMM, urban as well as rural, make speeches about Ambedkar. A few lawyers are affiliated to the DMM and are sought out by the activists in cases of rape, murder, arson and violence suffered by Dalits in Chhattisgarh. Many cases remain pending in the courts in Chhattisgarh.

The YACM is distinctly disconnected from the urban Dalit Movement machinery and from its activities and networks in the rural countryside. Although activists from the DMM frequented Meu and became aware of the YACM, those activists did not involve the YACM in any of the activities of the DMM. Evidently, none of the members of the YACM have access to the Internet in the village, and neither do any of them own motorbikes, which are needed to conduct ‘fact-finding’ or reporting of Dalit atrocities. They were simply not equipped to take part in the activities of urban activists. People from Meu were not part of the tribunal held in Delhi as there have been no major caste atrocities in Meu. Atrocities against the Satnamis are far more common in villages where the Satnami community is smaller than that of higher castes, which was not the case in Meu. Members of the YACM did not even participate in the DMM’s meetings held in nearby Pamgarh, where the audience was mainly women from SHGs. This showed that the DMM activists were not interested in involving the YACM in any formal sense and did not recognise their association as important to the Dalit movement in Chhattisgarh. However, everyday aspects of caste discrimination in village life and education among the younger generation coupled with growing awareness about rights have led to the formation of the association in the village. And as Hardtmann (2003) notes, similar groups to the YACM are increasingly forming all over towns and cities throughout India. These voluntary groups are often excluded from formalised activist networks and remain unseen. Some of the members of the YACM could perhaps become activists in networks such as the DMM. Only then would their participation in the Dalit movement become visible through the medium of the Internet and other events and activities that involve activists.

Thus, on the one hand, the young men in the YACM are alienated from urban activists, and form an emerging group of educated youth that contrast starkly with illiterate older generations in the village. They face a kind of double disjuncture as they are neither part of activism nor have any impact on village caste politics dominated by older illiterate Satnamis. One may argue that they exist in a limbo of irrelevance. The extent to which they influence any transformative change for the Satnami community in terms of political power or in terms of tapping into cosmic power is minimal or non-existent. On the other hand, they represent an attitudinal change which, though it may be irrelevant in terms of the larger activist network in the Dalit movement, is interesting to document in terms of the ways in which highly localised actors in village associations engage with the repertoire of pan-Indian Dalit discourses.

Methodology

This study is a village-based ethnography, and its focus is primarily on the Satnami community in rural Chhattisgarh. I lived in Meu for most of the duration of my fieldwork between October 2006 and April 2008 and made a follow-up visit for two months in February and March 2010. My fieldwork was not multi-sited, and although I visited other villages and Raipur occasionally to meet with activists there, as well as attending the first Indian Peoples' Tribunal Against Untouchability in Delhi in May 2007 along with the delegation from Chhattisgarh, I spent most of the time living in the village itself. Upon arriving in the village, which I came to know of serendipitously, I decided to live with a large Satnami family of eighteen members spanning four generations with a number of youngsters and two daughters-in-law. The family farm 20 acres of land and cultivate paddy like the rest of the villagers. They had as much land as two other Satnami families, while the rest of the community had much less land - on average between one and two acres. The family had enough space for me to be included in their household and because I preferred not to cook my own meals but to eat with the family, I found living with a large family more practical.

In the first weeks of my fieldwork, people wondered whether I was a government official albeit without an entourage of vehicles and a team, or whether I was from an

NGO that was going to launch a survey in the village. This puzzlement arose from the fact that I am of north-Indian origin and speak Hindi. Soon word spread that I was from a university and was there to do research. The Satnami community was warm and welcoming and appreciated the fact that I had chosen to live among them. But, summarily, 'upper castes' in the village began questioning my choice and asked me whether I was cooking my own food or eating with the family. When they got to know that I was eating with the family, people in the 'upper-caste' communities began distancing themselves from me. A few 'upper caste' youth belonging to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)³⁴ let me know that they considered me to be an urban 'upper caste' and that it was wrong for me to mingle with 'untouchables'. Throughout my fieldwork, 'upper castes' tended to speak with me on their doorsteps and did not invite me into their homes. During festival time, I was encouraged to take photographs of 'upper-caste' displays but was not invited to participate in their festivities.³⁵

Within the first few months of my fieldwork, it became clear to my host family and people in the Satnami *para* that I was there to stay. This took a while because it was deemed highly unusual that an educated urban person would want to live in the village. Most other outsiders such as government employees who came to the village to conduct surveys or local politicians during election campaigns would usually not stay for a long duration or even overnight. As time went by, people became more relaxed in my presence, and it became easier to be part of conversations. My curiosity about all that was going on around me and my enthusiasm for learning Chhattisgarhi made it possible to start conversations with whoever was around. This made conversing with the young Satnami men who often hung around the front of the house I was living in quite easy and natural. I was careful to neither lead conversations nor show undue attention to any of the young men and to have a friendly rapport which could become the basis for friendship. Pleasingly, it was relatively simple to enter into a relationship of mutual knowledge-sharing with the young men, as they saw me as an educated young woman, like a secondary school teacher. They opened up and were

³⁴ The RSS is a Hindu nationalist volunteer organisation that promotes Hindu orthodoxy. The organisation has some militant factions as well, and is generally perceived as aggressive.

³⁵ The distancing enacted by the 'upper castes' and their claim that I, too, was an 'upper caste' did not affect me personally as I have lived in Denmark since an early age and consider myself to be a cosmopolitan person with liberal values.

cheerful after they got used to my presence and all my questions. In the beginning, I stood tentatively by as they sat in a group talking or listening to a radio. As time passed, they began making space for me to be included in their circle, and later on in my fieldwork, one of them would come and call me if I was elsewhere when they were going to have a meeting. Long sustained conversations were not always possible as I often spoke with the young men in the presence of others who volunteered answers and because it was common that answers were either short or that the conversation digressed easily, which is how conversations in the village often were.

In her work among cane-growers in rural Australia that were all agricultural men, Pini (2005: 203) observes that although gender plays an important role in research relationships, other attributes such as class are also significant. In my fieldwork, the fact that I was a woman among the young men was not the key identifier of my identity in the fieldwork context. They viewed me as someone with education and could speak with me on the basis of that common ground. This played a part in diminishing the importance of only gender in the roles as ethnographer and informants. The ways in which the ethnographer is perceived by informants and the extent to which the researcher embodies various cultural and sensual interactions during fieldwork are influenced by the age, gender, race and personality of the fieldworker (Okely 2007: 66). In some contexts, the fieldworker can be viewed as scholarly, as was the case for Johnny Parry during his fieldwork in North India (ibid: 70 - 71) while adapting to various other personas that one is during the course of fieldwork. These are mainly social personas, within the remit of friendship and as extended kin when living in a household as if a member of the family. As Okely points out, the ethnographer often subconsciously tries to empathetically fit into some 'natural' role or the other and in the process "embodies" the experience of fieldwork which is as much physical as it is social.

In the summer months, the temperature soared up to 49 degrees centigrade and the heat and glare of the sun made it impossible to move about between mid-morning and late afternoon. During these languid afternoons, I spent time idling with the young men, many of them in the YACM, under the shade of an acacia tree at the front of the house. I also spent time with the family, playing games with the children and conversing with the mother and daughters-in-law. During the monsoon season, roads

became impenetrable, and damp got into every nook and corner of the house as well as into one's belongings.

Meu is a relatively large village, and the Satnami community here is almost as large as the largest OBC caste (*Sahu*). There were many people to meet in the course of my fieldwork, and I conducted in-depth interviews and household surveys with some help from Satis, the teenage boy in the family in which I lived. He was sometimes sent with me as a chaperone by my host mother. I greatly valued his assistance as I got to know the different areas of the village and the paths and shortcuts. By sending Satis along with me, my host mother tried inadvertently to legitimise my 'loitering' around the village as a young woman – rather than just a university student conducting research. I quickly began learning Chhattisgarhi, which is the dialect spoken by most people in the village. Most women did not speak Hindi and my eagerness to learn Chhattisgarhi was seen as a positive sign that I was thriving in my new environment. The women in the community and my host mother especially appreciated that I was willing to help out in the fields during harvest time. This was back-breaking work, but a great way to feel part of life in the village.

Though I tried to spend as much time with the youth in the YACM as I could, I also spent time visiting several people's homes in the Satnami *para*. However, I mostly ate meals with my host family as I had arranged payment for board and lodging with them. I also visited a group of seven households belonging to the Mehar caste on the fringe of the village. The Mehars continue to carry out their traditional occupation, which is removing the carcasses of cattle and burning the umbilical cord of newborn babies. The Satnamis consider them to be 'polluted' and do not eat with or marry (*roti-beti rista*) the Mehars. The Satnamis in Meu did not admonish me for hanging out with the Mehars, but they quietly stared at me when I would decidedly walk towards Mehar huts. And my host mother would instruct me to wash my face, hands and feet whenever she had a clue that I had been visiting them. At first the Mehars were anxious about my visits but later I was regarded just as warmly by them as I was by the Satnamis.

Most people in Meu relished the opportunity to talk about their thoughts and experiences. They loved being photographed and derived great amusement from

teaching me Chhattisgarhi. Attachment to the community was inevitable and people wanted me to stay there. The follow-up visit made it clear to them that I too felt an attachment to the place and the people. Apart from the more formal research methods, the largest part of data collection came from ‘participant observation’: spending time with people, listening in on conversations, asking questions, watching what people did and how they did it and writing most of it down at the end of the day.

Outline of Chapters

This study is organised into seven chapters in total. The next three chapters relate to the Satnamis in Meu and the later chapters, excluding the conclusion, are concerned with broader frameworks related to social movements, the DMM and the tribunal in Delhi. The study takes a vantage point in the Satnami community in the village and examines their situation regarding untouchability and Dalit social movements, both in the village and in a larger context. Although my fieldwork was not multi-sited, it is an attempt to understand the ways in which the YACM in Meu is located in the spatially and socially dispersed movement for Dalit rights. It draws attention to those actors and events that provide context for the contemporary situation of rural Satnamis.

Chapter 2 outlines the setting of the village. Sociological data relating to the layout of the village - which castes reside there, what the distribution of land is and the occupations of the various communities - is described here. The kinds of discriminatory caste practices in everyday life that the Satnamis face are brought out through ethnographic vignettes and the sense of present-day positioning of castes vis-à-vis one another is illustrated. The socio-economic similarities between the communities make the kinds of ‘distancing’ enacted by other castes poignant and caste-centric. In contrast, villagers describe how caste practices become less important while away from the village as migrant labourers.

Chapter 3 looks at Satnami history and Satnami assertions of self-sufficiency. The history of the Satnami sectarian movement is relevant to why the organisation and celebration of Hindu festivals is important to the ways in which the young Satnami men in Meu assert autonomy and ‘independence’ (*swatantra*) from relations of

exchange with other castes. Efforts to resist caste oppression are not new to the Satnamis. Through the spiritual leadership of Guru Ghasi Das, the community transformed its identity from Chamar to Satnami and became a 'substantialised' caste. In the past, the Satnamis had been militant and acquired land and were considered a dissenting sect. As religious authority among the patrilineal successors of Guru Ghasi Das unravelled, spiritual leadership in the sect was substituted by insertion of Satnami gurus into mainstream politics. The chapter also examines how Satnami identity is both an ideological sectarian identity as well as the caste identity of the community. It also sheds light on the ways in which Satnami assertion of self-sufficiency is an important idiom of separation from other castes, thus enabling Satnami 'substantialisation'. The chapter further examines a recent conflict between the Satnami community and 'upper castes', involving a sectarian following in the Satnami community, and illustrates how the Satnamis of rural Chhattisgarh are less a dissenting sect today – rather, they fall within the Hindu fold. The discussion of Satnami history is important to understanding the present-day positioning of the Satnami community in terms of their caste identity. It also provides background for the positionality of the young men in the YACM and their assertion of Satnami identity rather than Dalit identity.

Chapter 4 examines the role of education among young Satnami men and their position as 'key social animators' in the Satnami community in Meu. The effect of education on the formation of the YACM is also discussed. The chapter deals with the way in which the literate younger generation considers the illiterate older generation ignorant and views education as a vehicle of social mobility as well as 'progress'. The emphasis on education by Ambedkar is important for the youth within the YACM, who are in several ways enacting roles learned in school when they organise meetings and events in the Satnami *para*. The kinds of moral high ground implied when speaking about educated people are discussed by informants in vignettes as is the disillusionment with village education. Theoretical frameworks related to *sanskritisation* are discussed in relation to the 'civilising' attributes of education and the ambiguity of the benefits of education. However, the youth in the YACM find themselves in limbo: restricted by the norms of village life and unable to secure employment outside. The village is at once restrictive and enabling for these young

men as they prefer village life in many ways compared to the difficulties faced in towns and cities.

In chapter 5, a discussion of theoretical frameworks related to social movements and in particular those related to the Dalit movement in India sheds light upon different strategies for the alleviation of caste oppression. The trajectory of Dalit movements is examined in order to analyse typologies such as ‘autonomous anti-caste movements’ in contrast to ‘Hindu reform movements’. A discussion of social movement ‘frames’ in post-independence India draws attention to how such movements are perceived in India, mainly in the light of leftist movements. Aspects related to the class-positioning of Dalits that have been most active in the ‘new’ Dalit movement are questioned in relation to the claim by some scholars that the contemporary Dalit Movement is a ‘new’ social movement. Dalit movements in Chhattisgarh draw upon BSP discourses but do not consider mainstream politics as a channel for securing rights for the Satnamis. The political situation in Chhattisgarh is examined with reference to the kinds of political brokerage Jeffrey et al (2008) describe in the BSP-dominated state of Uttar Pradesh.

The sixth chapter looks at the disconnectedness between actors such as the YACM and the larger Dalit movement machinery through ethnography of the activities of the YACM and the DMM. An analysis of public events shows that the Satnami defiance of ritual notions of purity and pollution lies in celebrating Hindu festivals for ‘entertainment’ rather than as an attempt to gain Hindu religiosity. It is a way to appropriate those public and cultural spaces that did not fall within the domain of ‘untouchable’ castes in the past. The YACM’s activities in the Satnami *para* resonate with autonomy through an assertion of Satnami identity and upward social mobility through education. These activities are inwardly oriented and relate closely to everyday life in the village. On the other hand, the DMM’s activities in rural areas are prompted by the need to disseminate Dalit discourses, and hence they hold meetings or *bethaks* with women in SHGs. Their activities are more outwardly oriented through reports of atrocities published on websites and links to the larger pan-Indian Dalit movement. The first Indian People’s Tribunal held in Delhi in 2007 drew activists such as those in the DMM and victims of atrocities from all over India. The Tribunal

is an instance where the spatial and social disjunction between the different actors in the movement becomes even more apparent.

Chapter 2

The Setting

This chapter presents the environment in Meu and the caste relationships within the village. The village is set in the larger background of the state of Chhattisgarh. The larger context of under-development and the political atmosphere in the state of Chhattisgarh poses limitations to the kinds of activism that are possible in this area. It also has an influence on the ways in which people perceive change and development and the impact education has on the younger generation. Socio-economic indicators that help position the Satnamis vis-à-vis other castes in rural areas as well as the general scene of village life are illustrated here. It is the setting for the YACM and is the context for the kinds of responses they forge against caste oppression. Aspects of social stratification within the village among castes and within the Satnami community are salient in the ways in which friendships are formed and sustained and the impact that education has on diversifying the younger generation. These issues are further discussed in the next chapters. The present chapter mainly gives a sense of where the village lies and how the Satnami community live within the context of everyday forms of caste oppression. Some observations of village life were experienced in my host household. The proximity in some cases with everyday forms of caste oppression made the resentment that the Satnamis feel towards ‘clean’ castes that practise ‘distancing’ from them even more compelling.

Chhattisgarh and Janjgir-Champa District

Chhattisgarh was newly created in November 2000.³⁶ It was carved out of the large central state of Madhya Pradesh which is known for its rich deposits of coal and minerals, forests and large population of tribal communities. Chhattisgarh is surrounded by low hills in the north and east and forests in the south. The name Chhattisgarh translates as ‘36 forts’ which refers to a specific region with administrative headquarters of a string of rulers who had established dynasties in this

³⁶ Chhattisgarh is one of the BIMARU states characterised by the emergence of new political parties; a large population that is predominantly from the lower castes; and where land reform was implemented later than in other Indian states.

region in colonial and pre-colonial times. The distinct character of Chhattisgarh's language³⁷ and culture first emerged politically around the time of Indian Independence in the 40s and 50s and was articulated by Khubchand Bhagel and Thakur Pyare Lal Singh who were supporters of the Congress Party. In the 70s the trade unionist Shankar Guha Neogi founded the Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha (CMM) and in doing so asserted regional identity but did not demand statehood (Berthet 2008). The formation of Chhattisgarh - seen especially in comparison to the formation of the two other new states, namely Jharkhand³⁸ and Uttarakhand, around the same time - did not occur through any great struggle or rebellion.³⁹ It had a relatively quiet transition into statehood and the main power brokers for its formation were the non-Chhattisgarhi Shukla family who had remained at the helm of political power in the state through the 80s and 90s, and the then chief minister of Madhya Pradesh, Arjun Singh. Today political power in Chhattisgarh today is in the hands of Raman Singh of the right wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and he, too, is not considered a son-of-the-soil⁴⁰. Opposition from the Congress Party leadership, in particular Ajit Jogi⁴¹, who claims Tribal lineage and is allegedly a Satnami (ibid: 330), has not been significant enough to regain power in the state after an Assembly Election defeat in 2003.

³⁷ Chhattisgarh belongs in the 'Hindi-belt'; however, the demand for recognition of the Chhattisgarhi dialect is ongoing (Chhattisgarh Central Chronicle 13/08/07).

³⁸ The formation of Jharkhand in a similar manner had to more to do with 'political bargains between a restricted number of elite actors than with pressures from below' Corbridge (2002 in Shah 2006:111).

³⁹ The data on the formation of Chhattisgarh is informed by the South Asia Seminar I convened which included Louise Tillin, IDS Sussex and focused on the formation of the three new Indian states. See also article by V. Venkatesan in 'Frontline' Aug 19/2000, published by The Hindu. <http://www.hindunet.com/fline>.

⁴⁰ First the Shuklas and now Raman Singh are seen as the political elite who have come to Chhattisgarh from outside the region. Berthet (2008: 328) comments that 'Chhattisgarh does not have a strong organic community-based lobbying capacity...'

⁴¹ Ajit Jogi from the Congress Party was the first Chief Minister of the newly-formed state of Chhattisgarh. He was backed by Digvijay Singh a Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh as a challenge to the power of the Shuklas who are non-Chhattisgarhi Brahmins. Jogi was trained as an Indian Administrative Services (IAS) officer. He had been known as a tribal leader prior to becoming the Chief Minister (Berthet 2008: 330-331). In present day Chhattisgarh, the question of Jogi's 'true' social background is being dealt with in the Supreme Court (see article by Louise Tillin http://www.india-seminar.com/2008/591/591_louise_tillin.htm). Ajit Jogi's wife, Renu Jogi, is an active politician from the Congress Party but his son, Amit Jogi, has been embroiled in a court case concerning the murder of NCP treasurer Ramavtar Jaggi (Chhattisgarh Central Chronicle, 06/07/07).

Chhattisgarh has 16 districts⁴², and the state capital is Raipur which has a domestic airport. The second largest city is Bilaspur, where the High Court is located. Four districts cover the plains region in the mid-north of the state. To the north and south of these lie districts that are covered by thick forests and have larger concentrations of tribal population. Many of the new mining activities are located in these northern and southern districts. A huge steel plant is located in Bhilai⁴³ which is in the mid-western part of Chhattisgarh. The southern districts of the state have a large presence of Naxalite⁴⁴ activities. However, I was told that Naxalites are not to be found in the areas around Meu, and I was able to confirm this with local newspapers, journalists and people in and around my field-site. Informants constantly reassured me that there were no Naxalites in the plains as there are no thick forests to conceal them. Others explained that the soil is either rockier and less productive or thickly forested in other parts of Chhattisgarh, which makes those parts unfavourable for agriculture. In their view, the lack of steady incomes from agriculture in those parts is the reason why Naxal activity is rife there and not in the plains.

Eighty per cent of Chhattisgarh's population is rural, of which 78% comprises small and medium-sized farmers.⁴⁵ The bulk of its population belongs to the Other Backward Classes (OBC), Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) categories used in government censuses and official documents. Only around 4% of the population falls into the General category (Berthet 2008: 330). The categories of caste split into General ('upper castes' such as Brahmin and Thakur), OBC (lower 'clean' castes), SC ('ex-untouchable' castes) and ST (tribal castes) are in everyday usage by

⁴² Most official sources state that there are 16 districts in Chhattisgarh. However, two new revenue districts were formed in mid-2007. These are Bijapur and Narayanpur in the Naxal-affected Bastar region (Chhattisgarh Central Chronicle 13/05/07).

⁴³ Since the plant's inception in the 1950s many Satnamis from all over Chhattisgarh have found employment there, and some of them live in 'ex-village-cum-labour colonies' in the surroundings of the plant. The 'Hindu' castes and Satnamis are just as socially and spatially divided (Parry 2004: 288) here as in rural areas.

⁴⁴ Naxalites (also known as Maoists) are a militant group fighting against the Indian government in the southern most districts of Chhattisgarh. The movement demands poverty alleviation and many other development related changes and has taken to guerrilla militancy that has been counteracted by a state led initiative called Salwa Judum. The conflict has taken a high toll on villagers' lives in these poverty-stricken districts. The controversial imprisonment of Binayak Sen, a highly acclaimed human and civil rights activist (who represents the People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL) in Chhattisgarh) by the state government due to alleged accusations of his involvement with the Naxalite movement has also stirred much debate in recent years.

⁴⁵ Statistical data for the state of Chhattisgarh and Janjgir-Champa district is from Bhandari, L and Kale, S (2007) *States at a Glance 2006-07 Chhattisgarh, Performance, Facts and Figures* New Delhi: Indicus Analytics and PHDCCI.

people in Chhattisgarh. These classifications are a product of the post-colonial state, are salient in terms of affirmative action policies and have become increasingly important in electoral politics. The Satnamis are the largest 'ex-untouchable' caste in Chhattisgarh and together with other SC castes comprise around 12% of the total population which is approximately two million.⁴⁶ They are the largest Scheduled Caste in Chhattisgarh, which otherwise has a high proportion of Scheduled Tribes⁴⁷ and Other Backward Classes. Some urban Satnamis also call themselves Dalits⁴⁸ or SC.

A high concentration of tribal (ST) communities make up around 32% of the total population.⁴⁹ There are some characteristic differences between Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in terms of their religious practices, livelihoods, marriage practices and positioning vis-à-vis other castes. Scheduled Castes bear the stigma of being 'ex-untouchable' on the basis of association with traditionally 'polluting' occupations such as scavenging. Scheduled Caste communities are to be found in all parts of India and are dispersed throughout Chhattisgarh. Scheduled Tribes, on the other hand, are stigmatised as '*jungle*', or 'wild' and 'uncivilised', and their population is concentrated in particular regions. The problems and issues of both communities converge to some extent, but they are treated separately by politicians and government policies.

Janjgir-Champa is the district in which Meu is located and is one of the paddy-cultivating districts of the mid-north. This district has an urban population of around 11% and in comparison to all other districts in Chhattisgarh has the highest ratio of SC at around 23% of the total population of the district. Only 17% of the district's population is employed in occupations other than agriculture. An overwhelming 83% are farmers (Bhandari and Kale 2007). There are less than half a dozen small towns in the district and a sparse web of tarred roads connecting these towns and larger

⁴⁶ <http://mohfw.nic.in/nrhm/state%20files/chhattisgarh.htm>

⁴⁷ In five of its 18 districts, the population of tribal communities makes up more than 50% of the population. Hence it is one of the only Indian states other than those in the north-east of India with such a high proportion of tribal communities (Louise Tillin's seminar paper on "Politics in a New State: Chhattisgarh").

⁴⁸ 'Dalit' is a term that is mainly used by a small group of elite educated activists.

⁴⁹ Studies related to these communities in the region include those by Verrier (1947, 1957), Bailey (1961), Furer-Haimendorf (1979, 1982), Froerer (2006) and Sundar (2006). Alfred Gell has also written extensively about tribal communities in Madhya Pradesh.

villages. Many villages are still unlinked by tarred roads and become inaccessible during the monsoon season, when torrential rainfall turns mud tracks to impassable sludge. Buses ply the main tarred roads while auto-rickshaws, battered and overcrowded jeeps and horse carriages ferry villagers to and fro. Many villagers still make use of ox carts to bring their harvests to the markets, and many use bicycles or move about on foot. A growing number of well-off farmers and townsmen are beginning to be able to afford tractors and motorbikes. However, the numbers are marginal among rural Satnamis in this district.

The Village: Meu

As one drives away from the town of Bilaspur towards Meu, one is remarkably aware of leaving signs of urban infrastructure behind. The road is flanked on both sides by paddy fields and occasional village ponds adjoining clusters of mud huts. The mud huts have tiled roofs and are characteristically coloured turquoise blue on their outer walls. On the highway, private cars, jeeps and scooters are increasingly replaced by tractors, motorcycles, lorries and ox carts. Village women dressed in colourful nylon *sarees*, often barefoot and with traditional glass bracelets on each wrist, look different from the women one encounters in town. They have weather-worn features and bear on their hands and feet the mark of hard labour in the fields. They are poorer and seem to be more matter-of-fact than well-fed, home-bound urban women. Men, too, look hardened by physical labour. Some are dressed in a *lungi* (a sarong type of wrap) or *dhoti* (loincloth) and a shirt, and many are dressed like townsmen in shirts and trousers. Their dress and demeanour is less ostentatious than that of townsmen. Such differences between urban and rural India convey a sense of disjunction between two worlds and perhaps mutual aversion.

The bus stops on the highway and a horse-drawn carriage ferries passengers along a six-kilometre stretch into Meu. On the way, in the cramped and heavily loaded carriage (*tonga*), people chat about where they have been, and there are invariably questions about where I have come from and where I am going. During my stay in the village, if any of my fellow passengers knew me well, they would answer all these questions on my behalf, only interrupting their narration to get my confirmation or

approval. There were many new people to meet in the course of my fieldwork, as Meu is a relatively large village, composed of approximately 4000 people.⁵⁰ The village itself does not seem large or extensive since only a few flagstone paths criss-crossing each other form the main routes within it. Given the high birth rate, a large proportion of the population of Meu are children and youngsters and many households are made up of a large number of kin living together.

In Meu, the Satnami population is quite large and is equal in number to the Sahu (OBC) castes. There are much smaller numbers of other OBC castes, and there are also some households belonging to the ‘untouchable’ castes such as the Mehars (or Mochi). Brahmins (General Category) also occupy a few households in Meu, but there are no Thakurs⁵¹ or Kurmis.⁵² Table 1 presents the total population broken down by caste categories and gender, and Table 2 below illustrates the proportion of households occupied by the different castes residing in Meu. The data presented in these tables was collected from the village accountant (*patwari*) and village council (*panchayat*) records and from villagers in Meu. The numbers are approximate and I present the figures below mainly to give an idea of the numbers involved, rather than as comprehensive statistical data.

Total Population of Meu broken down by gender and caste category		
	Male	Female
Scheduled Caste	1098	1075
Scheduled Tribe	22	20
Other Backward Classes	899	897
General Category	38	30

Table 1. Total Population broken down by caste categories and gender from the records of the Secretary (*sachiv*) of the *panchayat*

⁵⁰ The 2001 Govt. of India census gives the population of Meu as 3504, but the village’s own updated records show around 4089. According to census data the majority of villages in the Janjgir-Champa district are of this size and a minority are smaller.

http://www.censusindia.gov.in/Population_Finder/Population_Finder.aspx?Name=Meu&Criteria=U

⁵¹ In the four-fold hierarchy of caste based on Manusmriti, the Brahmins are at the apex followed by the Kshatriya, Veshiya and then Shudra. The Thakurs belong to the second tier i.e. Kshatriya.

⁵² The Kurmis are a large OBC caste in Chhattisgarh.

Caste	Number of Households (approximately)	Category in Government Censuses
Satnami	152	Scheduled Caste
Sahu	148	Other Backward Classes
Chauhan	49	Scheduled Caste
Yadav or Rahoud/Rawat	41	Other Backward Classes
Panika	29	Other Backward Classes
Dhimar	26	Other Backward Classes
Brahmin	21	General
Kevat	15	Other Backward Classes
Dhobi	14	Other Backward Classes
Thwait	13	Other Backward Classes
Patel	12	Other Backward Classes
Lohar	9	Other Backward Classes
Nai	8	Other Backward Classes
Kawar	8	Scheduled Tribe
Mehar or Mochi	7	Scheduled Caste

Table 2. Distribution of Households between the main castes residing in Meu (*panchayat* and *patwari* records)

Household surveys were carried out at the beginning of my fieldwork in Meu and conducted on my own by visiting around a hundred households mainly based in the Satnami ward of the village. The survey covered genealogies of the family members residing in each household and revealed that the average size of families in each household is approximately eight persons (74% of the households surveyed had fewer than ten members).

The survey questionnaire mainly contained questions relating to the number of residents in the household and to land ownership, occupations and level of education. It also included questions relating to whether any of the members in the household

were part of any associations (*samiti/samuh*) in the village and if they had a ritual friend (*mitan/mitanin*) and, if so, of which caste. On each visit, the number of people at home would vary, as would the extent that people were willing to talk. Some people talked at length, not just sticking to the survey questions, while others were not as forthcoming. However, some general information about the sociological make up of the Satnami ward in Meu can be gleaned from the data.

During these visits to Satnami homes in the village, I observed that a third of the households did not have their own water supply and had to fetch water from the village ponds or public hand pumps. Neither did these families have a latrine. For the most part, these families lived in mud huts rather than brick houses and were not part of any village associations (*samiti/samuh*). Most of them were seasonal migrant labourers. However, the majority of these households did have a television, although electricity was only available sporadically. Only a fraction of the households visited lived in brick houses, and half of them owned more than two acres of agricultural land. Most people could afford to build a brick house from their earnings as migrant labourers in either mines or brick kilns, or as unskilled manual labourers on construction sites in towns and cities. Fewer than half a dozen people said they knew someone or had a relation who had benefitted from the reservations policy for Scheduled Castes. However, most people did not secure jobs or education through reservations.

The presence of two equally large groups in Meu - that of the Satnamis and OBC castes - with internally heterogeneous levels of income and education indicates the absence of a dominant caste. Srinivas' (1966: 10) formulation of dominance is "...[the dominant caste] should own a sizable amount of the arable land locally available, have strength of numbers, and occupy a high place in the local hierarchy". The Brahmins may be 'dominant' in Meu in economic terms but they are not numerically dominant. Mendelsohn (1993) on the other hand argues that land and authority have been delinked in contemporary Indian villages. While this is true for other parts of rural India, in Chhattisgarh farmers from the OBC and the Satnami castes have historically been, and still are, large land-owners (*gaonthias*).⁵³

⁵³ The history of the sectarian movement in Chapter 3 provides the background for the accumulation of land by the Satnamis.

In villages in Chhattisgarh where there are no Brahmins the non-Brahmin OBC 'clean' castes or even Satnamis that are large land owners seem to be the dominant caste(s) in a village, depending upon their numbers and how much land they own. Brahmins are usually only a small fraction of the population in the villages of Chhattisgarh, and they often own larger proportions of landholdings in comparison to the 'lower' castes. Significantly, however, large landholdings are not held solely by Brahmins. Dube (1998: 90-100) mentions that in pre-colonial times the Satnamis were antagonistic towards oppressive "upper-caste" *malguzars* or feudal landlords in Chhattisgarh.⁵⁴

The *malguzars* extracted labour from Satnami peasants without payment and imposed unreasonable demands upon them, such as requiring them to provide fodder for their own cattle while the Satnamis' livestock starved. The *malguzars* insulted the Satnamis, calling them Chamars (a derogatory label), and levied illegitimate fines on them. The Satnamis retaliated by refusing to pay the rents, smearing the doors of the *malguzars*' dwellings with excrement and uniting against these oppressive landlords. Shunning or boycotting *malguzars* was further enhanced by appointing people of the Satnami caste in roles such as barber, washerman or priest to assert independence from other castes. The Hindu service castes would not have served Satnamis for fear of retribution from *malguzars*. Rather than subjugating to the oppression of higher castes and exclusion in the ritual sense, the Satnamis asserted their self-sufficiency by appointing their own functionaries. (These aspects of past Satnami rebelliousness are covered in more detail in the next chapter.) Brahmin authority as *malguzars* has diminished significantly, not only in Chhattisgarh but also in other parts of India, due to various transformations throughout the colonial and post-colonial periods. Some of these changes are the result of the decline of the *jajmani* system, land reform and the emergence of larger landholders of various castes.

⁵⁴ Dube's informants tended to use the phrase "*gaonthia zamana*" (the era of large landowners) to refer to *malguzars*. None of my informants used the term *malguzar* to mean 'large landowner' or 'feudal landowner', be they of Brahmin, OBC or Satnami caste. The term *gaonthia* was used instead, and with a slightly different connotation to Dube's 'informants' because it did not necessarily imply an oppressive relationship of patronage.

The father in my host household, Sitaram Tondon, explained to me in a conversation about his views on land ownership that

... Indira Gandhi had decided that no one should have private wealth. So she decided that if you had two hundred acres, you could only keep a hundred and the rest would go to the poor. She put a ceiling on how much Brahmins should own. But what the Brahmins did was to put the land in their wife's or other relative's name – sometimes even in the name of their labourers – to keep it all. But some of them were forced to sell if they became poor...

In Sitaram's view, the Brahmins have managed to keep large landholdings through corrupt practices. For him, the dominance of Brahmin landowners is not daunting but rather a result of Brahmin craftiness. Sitaram is a Satnami *gaonthia* because he farms twenty acres of agricultural land. He also hires wage labourers to work in his fields. The wages he pays them range from Rs 25 to 60 a day, depending upon the task. Weeding, for example, is less well paid than transplanting or harvesting. He has a sizeable landholding due to the fact that he is an only son and has three sisters. He obtained most of his land from his father who is now an old man. Due to his own success, he was able to add eight acres to his father's 12. It is not unusual that Sitaram has in effect taken over ownership of the land while his father is still alive. He gives a portion of earnings at every harvest to his father and to one of his sisters who lives with them.

Eventually, the land will be divided between his four sons, when he is too old to farm it, and his sisters can also claim their share. Sitaram did not refer to himself as a *gaonthia*. This label was used more often by the people he hired as wage labourers because they depended on him for work. Neither did Sitaram act in any way that was reminiscent of a feudal landowner. He and his wife worked just as hard alongside hired labourers and he had a reputation of paying a fair wage. This meant it was never difficult for Sitaram to secure help in his fields. His wife Gori Bai had a sharper temperament and maintained discipline, especially among the younger men, to make sure they did not shirk or pilfer from the fields. In return, she rewarded good workers with some corn or spinach from her vegetable patch.

Most of the Brahmin houses are padlocked. The families that used to live in them have moved away to larger villages or towns, where there is access to better educational institutions for their children as well as a comparatively higher standard of living. In a few Brahmin homes in the village, an old man or woman has been left behind as caretaker or simply to avoid having them become part of the new 'urbanised' household. This has led to changes in caste dynamics in everyday village life and has affected the way in which the caste hierarchy is experienced in the village today.

The predictable Brahmin-'untouchable' dichotomy is not relevant in Meu, and the shift has resulted in a dichotomy between 'clean' OBC castes and the Satnamis. Power is more or less shared between these two groups in the elected village council (*panchayat*) without any major biases. The communities are sharply divided along the lines of endogamy and restricted commensality at life-cycle rituals but they are not necessarily confrontational towards one another. There is socio-economic equality between them as most people from the OBC and SC castes are small farmers and wage-labourers. The disparities were greater in the past and the shift towards greater equality is an outcome of labour migration and ownership of land that is increasing in value. Significantly, the fact that Satnamis became farmers and accrued land has given them a similar position to other small land-owning castes in rural Chhattisgarh. Prakasam (1993: 107) argues that the Satnamis probably were able to take land as it was available and not being fully utilised by the "cultivating castes". The Satnamis not only accrued land during the Satnami movement led by Guru Ghasi Das (chapter 3) by being defensive and refusing to pay rents to land owners, but they were also able to retain their landholdings by earning a secondary income from migration. Satnamis were labour migrants on tea plantations in Assam (see Macfarlane 2004) and later became migrant workers in coal mines. The average land holding for villagers is between one and a half and two acres and the majority of villagers in Meu from the OBC as well as the Satnami caste own that amount of land. Very few villagers are landless and only a small minority have larger landholdings.

A small number of OBC households are better off than the Satnamis, and this is reflected in the number of tractors they own (five) in comparison to the Satnamis (three). There are also higher numbers of teachers within the OBC castes. A greater

number of shops in the village are owned by people of the OBC caste, and there are more Satnami households living below the poverty line.

Land and livelihood

The main occupation of almost everyone living in the village is agriculture and the main crop they cultivate is paddy. They all harvest only once a year. Wealthier farmers with access to irrigation can harvest two crops in a year, which is known as a ‘double harvest’. An overwhelming majority of households in Meu belonging to castes other than the Brahmin caste own less than two and a half acres of land. This includes all those castes that fall under the OBC and SC categories. Only a few households own more than this. Within the Satnami community in Meu, only four households own more than ten acres, the maximum being twenty acres. These households are extended kin and belong to the Tondon lineage. Table 3 below shows the numbers of households in the village and the varying numbers of acres that they own. This data is compiled from the records kept by the village accountant (*patwari*) and from my own fieldwork. These figures are more reliable than the figures regarding the number of households by caste. This is due to the fact that land records are maintained more meticulously than other sociological data.

Acres (1 acre= 4046 m sq. or 4840 sq. yards)	Households
Households with less than 2.5 acres	443
Households with between 2.5 and 5 acres	47
Households with between 5 and 10 acres	13
Households with more than 10 acres	26
Households that are landless	23

Table 3. Ownership of land by acreage and households. (Data from the *patwari*’s records)

Table 4 below illustrates the total amount of land belonging to the village, the number of hectares that are used for agriculture, the number irrigated and the amount of land that produces a ‘double harvest’. Irrigation water has been channelled into this area from the Bango-Hasdeo Dam located in the Korba District in the north. The cost per acre for dam water is Rs 100 (£1.20) per year. Not all farmers have levelled their

fields for dam water to flow through, and they rely instead on seasonal rains and monsoons for irrigation. Seventy acres of land around the village is ‘encroached’ land, which has been appropriated by the Satnamis. However, this has not led to any conflicts in Meu.⁵⁵ Five types of soil are found in Chhattisgarh: *laakri* (yellow soil), *murum* (red soil), *mataasi* or *dumat* (black/yellow soil), *bharvi* (black soil) and *kachaar* (black soil with sand).⁵⁶ *Mataasi* is considered best for paddy cultivation and can be found in the fields surrounding Meu.

Total land in Meu (in acres)	3027
Of which is agricultural	2507
Of which is irrigated	2457
From which a double harvest is cultivated	110

Table 4. Total land (in acres) in Meu and its uses from *panchayat* records

Most Satnami and other lower castes are wage-labourers and work on land leased by Brahmins and others who own many acres. Only a few people work outside of agriculture, namely teachers, tailors, shopkeepers, cow herders, cart makers, carpenters and the village ironsmith. Mehars or Mochi (cobblers) along with Nai (barbers) and Yadav or Rahoud (cattle herders) are the only ones left in Meu who still carry out traditional occupations alongside farming. Other castes such as Sahu (oil-pressers), Dhimar and Kevat (fishermen), Dhobi (washermen) and Panika (basket makers) no longer carry out their traditional occupations. Others who work in jobs unrelated to agriculture are those who migrate seasonally to work at brick kilns or construction sites all over India or those who have jobs in mines in the north of Chhattisgarh.

⁵⁵ Land encroached on by the Satnamis can lead to major conflicts between the Satnamis and the ‘upper castes’. One such case is described in Chapter 6.

⁵⁶ Dube (1998: 31-34) describes ‘*lakhbata*’ which enabled *gaonthias* (owners of a large area of land) to redistribute land between 1780 and 1850 to ensure that farmers got a share of both poor and good land. This was considered necessary because of the diversity of soils found in Chhattisgarh. In 1820, Patrick Agnew, a British superintendent, estimated that a third of all Chamars in Chhattisgarh were cultivators. His survey also included the numbers of *gaonthias* in the Chamar community. Around the same time, the Raipur District Gazetteer recorded the existence of Chamar single-caste (*ekjati*) villages with *gaonthias* who were converting to *Satnampanth*, and although this paints a picture of Satnami dominance in the past, the records also showed an increase in prohibitions against the Satnamis and graver punishments and hostility from ‘upper-caste’ landowners.

At the time that I conducted my fieldwork, wages in agriculture ranged between Rs 25-60 (£0.29-0.71) per day, depending on the task, and wages in non-agricultural labour such as road construction were around Rs 60.⁵⁷ Those working on leased land tend to have one of the following two types of agreement: either the landowner's share of the harvest was fixed independently of how good the harvest had been; or it was proportionate to the harvest. Most who had taken land on tenancy had the former arrangement and a bad harvest spelled despair. Government rates for paddy have been steadily increasing since the 1990s. A quintal of paddy was bought by government agents for Rs 620 (£7) in 2006 and the rates went up to Rs 745 (£9) in 2007. An average good yield per acre is around 30 quintals and a bad harvest yields 22 quintals or less.

Table 5 (overleaf) roughly compares household incomes from a good harvest and excludes the cost of sowing, fertiliser and labour (the average cost of cultivation for one harvest per acre is Rs 5000 equivalent to approximately £60). This plain calculation shows the disparity between the Brahmins and other castes living in Meu. Some Brahmin families own up to 200 acres of land, which is much more than the other castes. The majority of Meu's OBC and Satnami households own less than two and a half acres of land (see Table 3) and their average income is less than Rs. 3615 (£45) per month, or £1.50 per day. In the case of a bad harvest, the incomes calculated below can be roughly halved.

Some people in the Satnami *para* told me that, in the past, the Brahmins were extremely wealthy in comparison to the Satnamis, who were desperately poor. They said that since Indian independence in 1947, other castes have gradually become better off, and ostentatious Brahmin wealth has been offset by this growth in the living standards of other castes. According to my informants, increasing government rates for paddy is one reason for better living standards in the village, the other being the sharp increase in the price of land.⁵⁸ Access to bank loans using agricultural land as collateral is easier than ever before.

⁵⁷ Those employed through the NREGA scheme are supposed to earn Rs 100 per day, but only receive Rs 69 in hand after various administrative charges are deducted from the gross amount.

⁵⁸ I was told that in the 70s and 80s an acre of land in the middle of the fields would cost between Rs 10 and 25,000 depending upon how close it was to an irrigation canal. Now prices range between Rs

Household income from paddy cultivation (good harvest)⁵⁹				
	Per month		Per day	
Nr. of acres/HH	Rupees	Pounds	Rupees	Pounds
1 Acre	1,446	17	48	0.56*
2 Acres	2,892	34	96	1.13
3 Acres	4,337	51	145	1.70
4 Acres	5,783	68	193	2.26
5 Acres	7,229	86	241	2.87
10 Acres	14,458	172	482	5.73
20 Acres	28,916	344	964	11.5
200 Acres	289,166	3,442	9639	115

Table 5. Household income per month and per day based on size of landholding.
***Households with an income of under \$2 per day are Below Poverty Line (BPL).**

Many elders in the village recalled the drought in 1979 which led to famine and great despair. They remarked that it is only relatively recently that people eat three meals a day. Until even a decade ago, most people in the Satnami community lived on only two meals a day. To illustrate, the old man in my host household, who was generally very jovial, would become enraged and scold his grandchildren furiously when they lost grains of rice while winnowing and swept them away in a pile of dust and garbage. He would pick up every grain and place it back in the sack while cursing the youngsters for their carelessness.

Migration

Seasonal migration and migration to work in mines is a significant factor that has changed economic patterns of inequality. Dube (1998: 85-86) records a famine at the end of the nineteenth century which by the 1920s led large numbers of Satnamis to migrate to coal mines in Bihar and to mines and steel works in Bengal, Jamshedpur and Nagpur. People migrating from Meu these days usually do so in order to work at brick kilns and on construction sites in towns and cities. The migration takes place

50,000 and 75,000. An acre of land close to the highway in a larger village can sell for up to Rs 125,000.

⁵⁹ The figures presented in this table are rough averages to serve the purpose of illustrating disparity in incomes only. A sack of paddy weighs 75 kilos. During my fieldwork, the government rates for paddy during fieldwork were at Rs 745 per quintal (100 kilos). To do the above calculation, the number of sacks, an average of 30 per acre in a good harvest, is multiplied by 75, divided by a hundred, multiplied by 745 and then divided by 12 and further into 30 days.

during the hot summer months. People in Meu said that they had been to Jammu, Allahabad, Kolkata, Lucknow and Patna to work. A few have also been to places in Punjab and Madhya Pradesh as well as the city of Mumbai in search of work. A number of families stay away for longer durations, sometimes even for years. They intermittently return to tend their fields, eventually returning with enough money to build a brick house in the village. The ones who migrate seasonally return to the village for some months for paddy cultivation, which takes place roughly between the months of July and February. Some return to Meu in March and April because it is the wedding season. On the whole, almost half the village migrates for some part of the hot season and households are left deserted and padlocked unless children who attend school are left behind with grandparents. Some families take their children with them because these families are too poor to leave children behind with grandparents who cannot feed them. These children end up missing school for months every year or simply do not go to school at all. Migrant workers say that they manage to save between Rs 2000 and 5000 in a summer depending on how many of the members in the household work.⁶⁰

In Shah's ethnography (2006: 92-93) on rural migrants from Jharkhand who leave to work at brick kilns, she stresses that migration has to be seen in multifarious ways rather than just in terms of economic incentives. While recognising the exploitation suffered by the migrants, she shows that migration has to do with gaining temporary space and time away from the constraints of village life and is an opportunity to live out prohibited amorous relationships. A large majority of Shah's respondents to open-ended interviews (ibid: 107) claimed that the reasons for migrating are 'fun and adventure' among others. Migrants from Meu had similar claims although they were acutely aware that they constituted cheap labour for wealthy industrialists and complained of being cheated by middlemen.⁶¹ They also faced hardships related to moving their families across long distances with little money.⁶² Many travelled on

⁶⁰ Shah (2006:99) provides similar figures for Jharkhand's migrant labourers.

⁶¹ In some instances, people report crimes that occur while working at brick kilns. Eight Satnamis from a neighbouring village had been held captive by a brick kiln owner in Uttar Pradesh and their wages had been withheld. After being released, they complained to the District Collector and the Assistant Labour Commissioner in Bilaspur. This case was reported in *The Hitavada* 24/11/07. There was no redress in terms of compensation.

⁶² Dube (1998: 87-88) records Satnamis complaining about discriminatory practices that they faced on migratory trips in the 1920s such as being called Chamar. He also records that the Satnamis were not submissive to such insults and were defensive. This is in contrast to the situation in present day

trains for several days without reservations (and probably often without tickets), which led to their being unceremoniously ejected from the train, or having to sit crouched and cramped in the corridors by the doors of the compartments.

These hardships did not deter people from talking about their trips with a sense of worldliness and adventure. In conversations about their experiences, they enthusiastically described train journeys and the bustle of railway stations. They listed stations that the train passed along the way on their fingertips. They talked about fast colourful vehicles that they had seen on the roads and recalled tall and lavish brick (*pacca*) houses and parks that they had seen while on these trips. Some people spoke enthusiastically about airplanes that they had seen and heard, making the point that this is something villagers in Meu rarely get to see. The only time they see an airplane is at night, and some children in the village had pointed the lights out to me as ‘stars’ that moved at the same time in the night sky from one point to another before disappearing. More importantly, they mentioned that people of different castes lived and ate together to a much greater extent than is experienced in the village. Norms related to commensality are greatly relaxed in the temporary settlements of the workers; and in similar terms to those of Shah’s (2006: 100, 105) migrant workers, people in Meu spoke of a sense of greater equality among themselves and with other castes while working away from the village.

In the past, many people from Meu were employed in coal mines in Dhanbad in Jharkhand, but the numbers have dropped significantly in the last decade. The mining area where most of them have gained employment in recent years is Chirmirri in the Korba District, but even there, the numbers employed from rural Chhattisgarh are far fewer than in the 70s. Most of the Satnamis in Meu claim that it has become increasingly difficult to get jobs in mines or factories. Only those who have relations of ‘brother-nephew-ism’ (*bhai-bhatijavad*) (see Parry 1999: 133) or those with huge amounts of cash can afford to bribe their way into acquiring a job at the mines or mills in Chhattisgarh. Many villagers also lamented that factories, mines and mills in

Chhattisgarh where Satnamis are not as offensive or defensive as they have been portrayed as being in the past, when *Satnampanth* was gaining larger numbers of members and when the Satnamis were militantly asserting autonomy through the sectarian movement. The Satnamis, like anyone else today, know that the risk of getting defensive with railway authorities when travelling without a ticket would simply lead to ejection.

Chhattisgarh often attract and recruit workers from outside the area and that the preference for those workers left them no choice other than to look for work far away. They said that finding employment outside the village is difficult because it requires knowing people who can ‘pull the right strings’ and entails making large payments in bribes.⁶³ Some people talked about figures starting at Rs 5000 rising to embellished amounts such as Rs 200,000 which they said had been paid by some in bribes. These figures seem exaggerated for rural incomes, but reveal that villagers feel deterred from seeking opportunities that they think will cost too much in bribes.

Some industrialists⁶⁴ I met in the course of my fieldwork said that they preferred hiring labour from other places because those workers would not interrupt their work to attend family matters as readily as local workers might. According to them, workers from outside the area have more at stake and with a mixed workforce - representing different regions and castes - workers were less likely to unite and make demands. Such views from industrial employers, along with the failure of rural Satnamis to procure jobs because of the perceived demand for bribes and lack of ‘influential’ contacts, means in fact that many villagers wanting employment do not have viable options.

Panchayat

Meu’s *panchayat* (elected village council) serves both Meu and a smaller neighbouring village called Chewdih. During my fieldwork, it was led by a Satnami headman (*sarpanc*) who heads both villages and lives in Chewdih. People listed a couple of Sahus (OBC) and Brahmins, a Chauhan (SC), a Panika (OBC) and another Satnami who have been *sarpanc* in the past. Other members of the *panchayat* include Sahus, Satnamis, Yadavs and a Panika, and a few women are also members, but none had been a *sarpanc* yet.

The current *sarpanc*, Nand Ram, had been elected twice and had been the *sarpanc* for over ten years. He had a side-business of procuring driving licences for villagers. He

⁶³ The practice of bribing officials or anybody who claims to be able to acquire the right certificates or ‘pull the right strings’ to help obtain a ‘reserved’ government job, a seat in the local government or admission to a university is commonly spoken of as a major obstacle by rural people.

⁶⁴ The Bajpayees are a wealthy Brahmin family based in Bilaspur who own large amounts of real estate and are a major name in the local construction industry.

owned eight acres of land (which is substantially more than average Satnami households) on which he cultivated paddy like everybody else. He said that he had eight acres after a total of fifty acres had been divided up between him and his brothers. He had a BSc degree from a college in Bilaspur and worked as a bus conductor for five years before getting involved in village politics. Nand Ram did not conceal that he was a man with 'reach' or *pahunch* (see Parry 2000: 32) and informed me that he had close ties with Dauram Ratnakar, the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) politician who had stood for elections from nearby Pamgarh and who was a well-known political figure in the area. He also told me about his sons, who had both acquired lucrative government jobs - one was in the police force and the other worked for the railways.

Nand Ram is a shrewd man, and his dealings with state led developmental projects have been on the increase in the last few years. People in Meu told me that the *sarpanc* is a 'paper' or '*kagazi*' *sarpanc* because he shows up in Meu only when he needs signatures on official documents. I also found the *sarpanc* to be quite elusive and noted that several *panchayat* meetings that were scheduled ended up being cancelled or postponed indefinitely. During my visits to his home which also serves as his "office" (see Gupta 1995: 384) he was busy monitoring the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA)⁶⁵ scheme through which he had organised the digging of soil in fields close to his house. Workers including men, women and some children were meticulously digging with hoes and spades and piling up the soil that would later be used for road-building, while the troughs in the fields would be used for rainwater harvesting. Most of the workers employed here were from Chewdih and this had caused resentment among people in Meu who felt that they were being neglected by Nand Ram who had favoured people from his lineage and his village.

⁶⁵ The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), also known as the 'Rojgaar Guarantee Yojana' in rural areas, is a policy of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) led by Sonia Gandhi. It emanates from the National Common Minimum Program (NCMP) bill passed in 2004 (for more details see The Hindu 28/05/2004). The Act provides for 100 days of employment at the minimum wage for the rural poor. Only one able-bodied person per household is eligible for such employment and the scheme is mainly for those who fall under the BPL (Below Poverty Line) criteria and others on very low incomes. Those eligible are issued 'job cards' to identify them. The scheme works on the principle that workers should demand work from the *panchayat* in an infrastructural development related project such as road building or rainwater harvesting. Funds are allocated by the central government and are channelled through the state government to the Block Offices and then to village *panchayats* in rural areas. So far the scheme has been launched and implemented in all of Chhattisgarh's districts except for Durg, where the Bhilai steel plant is located.

One of the most active members of the *panchayat* is the *sachiv* (secretary) and he is a Sahu man. He has been very busy for the last couple of years accumulating data for the Block Level offices in relation to Below Poverty Line (BPL) households and those eligible for the NREGA scheme. He also conducts business from his home in Chewdih and is responsible for payments to workers employed through the NREGA scheme.⁶⁶ The Block Level administrative offices in Pamgarh are now equipped with computers, and all the data that had been recorded on paper so far is being updated and entered into them.⁶⁷

The *sarpanc* and *sachiv* are the most visible and authoritative members involved in village administration, which links village people to new policies and new methods of local governance. The introduction of schemes such as NREGA and computers at the Block Level together with expanding administrative offices (such as the new Magistrates Courts and offices affiliated to it) are all part of a wave of changes in and around Meu. These changes are happening rapidly and are unprecedented. Such changes have affected traditional forms of village administration such as the village accountant (*patwari*). *Patwaris* from neighbouring villages and Meu were ‘on strike’ for several months during my fieldwork. They were demanding recognition in the formal administrative apparatus as well as higher salaries and government benefits similar to those enjoyed by staff employed in government administrative offices.

⁶⁶ Payments were made in Chewdih, albeit with some delays. However, there have been allegations of corruption in relation to the NREGA scheme (see The Hindu, Tuesday 20th November 2007 for an article by Jean Drèze, a development economist who has worked with Amartya Sen and is one of the designers of the scheme. He is part of the Central Employment Guarantee Council).

⁶⁷ Computer literacy is spreading more rapidly than ever before in the larger villages and towns in Janjgir-Champa, and many young people desire a computer education in the hope of employment in a government office. The state government has launched a scheme under which the Minister of Higher Education in Chhattisgarh announced free computer education for students from SC and ST caste categories in two recognised private universities in Raipur. General category students have to pay Rs 6000 for the same education. It is however, unlikely that more than a few educated SC/ST youths will benefit from this opportunity (Chhattisgarh Central Chronicle 23/08/07).



Workers under the NREGA scheme in Chewdih



NREGA “job card”

A Satnami caste *panchayat* exists parallel to the elected *panchayat*. It does not play any role in the responsibilities of the elected *panchayat*. The members are Satnami elders and those men and women who are deemed astute and resourceful by other Satnamis. It only convenes when there is a matter at hand that needs to be discussed. In the household survey conducted in the Satnami *para*, most Satnamis said that they relied on this group of arbitrators to solve disputes of all types prior to seeking the help of the village *panchayat*, police or lawyers. These disputes relate to ceremonial feasts, domestic fights, unruly youngsters or legal issues with the police or in relation to land ownership.

For example, one of the times Satnami men in this group met was when an old woman had died and the family she belonged to did not have enough money to hold a funeral feast. They discussed the need to support each other in times of strain and the cost of procuring vegetables and ten or twelve chickens for the feast. The most important aspect discussed was how to help the household in need so that it would not feel left out of the community. The four larger and better-off families of the lineage (*gotra*) concerned were encouraged to help out. Just as the feast for a wedding and a *chhatti*⁶⁸ are necessary to foster unity among the Satnami community, it was argued that the funeral feast could not be disregarded. It was reiterated that members of the community ought to support each other in times of joy (*sukh*) and grief (*dukh*) and that Satnami unity would be at stake if the proper ceremonies were not carried out.

Unlike the elected village council, the caste *panchayat* is not an elected council. For the most part, it is made up of elders often representing the dominant lineages (*gotras*) within a particular caste group in the village. For example, the Sahus have their own caste *panchayat* as do the Satnamis in Meu. These *panchayats* have relative importance and powers depending upon the kinds of inter-caste relations that exist in a village. Although they have no official or judicial power, caste *panchayats* can levy fines on people in the village for open inter-caste commensality at life-cycle rituals or otherwise, and demand fines to be paid by both parties in the case of cross-caste marriage. Elders in caste *panchayats* can also call for a ‘social boycott’ of those persons or families who offend or who defy village caste norms. Social boycott is a

⁶⁸ On the sixth day after birth, hence the use of the word ‘*chatti*’ derived from ‘*cheh*’ (the Hindi word for six) a feast is held for the newborn baby. The feast is attended by kin relations and others. Money and gifts of clothing are given on this occasion.

powerful means of excluding people from social and economic activities in the village and this type of ostracisation is commonly cited in reports of atrocities committed against Satnamis. (Similar reports from other villages were presented to me during fieldwork.)

In Meu, the importance of caste *panchayats* is decreasing in favour of the Magistrates Office, which was newly inaugurated in 2007 and is located in a nearby Block-level village. More serious conflicts between people in the village, or in relation to government development schemes, end up there. But the caste *panchayats* are still the first resort for arbitration when there is a conflict within the community or between people from different castes in the village (corroborated by respondents in the household surveys).

Life in Meu - separation between castes

As an outsider living among the Satnamis for a longer duration, one cannot help but notice the kinds of separation between the Satnamis and other castes in everyday life. The village itself is split into wards or *para* according to caste, and the two main ones in Meu are those belonging to the Sahu and Satnami communities respectively. While the Sahu *para* includes the rest of the OBC castes, the Satnami *para* lies separated from those areas. The Satnami ward is where I lived throughout the duration of my fieldwork. It is located towards the east of the village and I was told that the Satnami ward in almost all villages lies in that direction.⁶⁹

The Sahus and other OBC castes occupy a large area in the heart of the village and Satnamis constantly refer to that part as the 'Sahu *para*'.⁷⁰ Most other OBC castes live dispersed in and around the Sahu *para* and were not referred to as belonging in their own wards, but rather as part of the Sahu ward. The reference to the Sahu *para* is often used as a synecdoche for all those castes residing in the village other than Satnami, Mehar and Brahmin, although the Brahmin households lie grouped amidst

⁶⁹ See also Anitha (2002: 90).

⁷⁰ In the villages around the Bhilai steel plant, the opposition is between the Satnami and the 'Hindu' *para* in which all the OBCs reside. This is one way in which the Satnamis in urbanised areas assert their distinctiveness in the Hindu hierarchy that they have ideologically opted out of through the Satnami movement.

the OBC castes within the locality of the Sahu *para*. All the comings and goings, fights and brawls, weddings, *chhattis* or funerals in that *para* were always spoken of in conjunction with the Sahu *para*. This daily reminder of the separation between the two large caste groups of the village each in its own *para* makes them visible as two distinct sociological units existing parallel to one another. It was not just shops, ponds, shrines, market squares or households that were talked of as belonging in the Sahu *para* but people were also judged as either ‘good’ or ‘bad’ from that *para*. Some were known to hold casteist attitudes and others were known to be more fair or sympathetic towards the Satnamis.

The weekly vegetable market and primary and secondary schools in the village are examples of areas where people from all castes would occupy the same space at the same time. However, the Satnamis are allocated a separate portion of the concrete steps on the edges of the communal ponds where everybody bathes. Separation regarding the use of water is a distinct manifestation of age-old forms of segregation between ‘clean’ and ‘untouchable’ castes, and people from different *paras* did not use each other’s hand pumps or wells for drawing water used for cooking and cleaning.

Caste ‘distancing’ prevails in commensality. While Satnami friends can frequent each other’s homes, eat all types of food together and participate fully in each other’s life-cycle rituals (*chatti* at birth, weddings and funerals) the same cannot be said about cross-caste friendships within the village. One young Satnami man, Laxmi Prasad, narrated the following anecdote:

I was invited to one of my Sahu friends’ sister’s wedding. I consider him to be a good friend and bought a *saree* to give her. When I got there, food was being served to the wedding guests. I patiently awaited my friend to welcome me and serve me as well. He found me a chair, which he placed away from the rows of men sitting and eating and told me he would serve me some food shortly. I kept sitting there until most men had finished eating and others occupied the spots they vacated. I felt awkward and embarrassed. I thought my friend was purposely trying to insult me. I got angry at the thought and left in a huff. I didn’t wait for him to give me uncooked portions of *dal* (lentils) and rice to take home with me. I had thought that my friend genuinely wanted me

to participate in the occasion of his sister's wedding, an occasion to share in joyousness as one does in grief.

In this anecdote, Laxmi Prasad alludes to the kind of 'distancing' that others often talk about as well. It is common practice to invite people of other castes to a wedding or a *chhatti* where guests are fed a meal of rice, *dal* and vegetables. However, because these foods are *kacca*, meaning those that are boiled rather than deep fried (*pacca* food), they cannot be consumed together with people of a lower caste.⁷¹ A portion of uncooked lentils (*dal*) and rice are given to invitees of the other castes to take home with them, instead of the hosts eating cooked food with them. Laxmi Prasad had expected his friend to ignore that custom because of the closeness of their friendship. He also refers to "sharing joyousness as one does grief" (*sukh aur dukh*) which one expects one's kin, lineage and caste community to do. Just as castes are strictly endogamous in the village, sharing in each other's celebrations related to joyous or grievous life-cycle rituals is bound by norms related to commensality. Laxmi Prasad's expectation that his friend would overlook that custom is naïve but not entirely unfounded.

Several young people talked about eating *nasta* (deep fried snacks such as *samosa*, *bhajjiya* and *maththri*) with college friends of different castes in roadside tea shops outside the village. Some had experienced a different level of commensality in coalfields where their fathers worked, or while working in faraway places at brick kilns or on construction sites. Their experiences were closer to what Laxmi Prasad had expected. They told me that when living outside the village, "one did as all others do" and explained that the rules relating to commensality in the village were often disregarded. All of them emphasised that strict rules relating to commensality applied mainly in the village where those who break rules could be fined. According to the young people, it is village elders who promote such norms and rules whereas the younger generation does not follow these as fastidiously. There are clear inter-generational differences in the experiences of 'untouchability' and the ways in which sanctioning is carried out (discussed further in the section on *Harijan Thana*). Most young Satnamis also told me that it was not uncommon that their friends from other

⁷¹ It is likely that no type of food would be taken from a Satnami if cooked.

castes would visit them at home to eat chicken, which is not normally cooked by 'vegetarian' castes. Such eating is done in secret and my Satnami informants concluded that it is impolite of those castes to never reciprocate such hospitality. They complained that Satnamis were usually not offered a vegetarian meal when they visited the homes of those friends and that they were sometimes even kept waiting outside the house.

Contact with these 'upper-caste' residents in Meu dwindled to a minimum as word got round that I was also eating with my host family. Throughout my stay, 'upper-caste' people immediately wanted to bring up the question about my eating situation. I was asked, 'Have you not learned how to cook yet?' and, 'Why don't you hire a Yadav woman to cook for you?' (The Yadav caste's traditional occupation is cattle-herding and food cooked by them can be consumed by 'clean' castes – even by Brahmins - because of the association with the cow and ritual purity.)

Women from the Yadav caste, (called the *Rahoud* caste in Chhattisgarhi) were employed by Self Help Groups (SHGs) that have proliferated in the village in the last few years to cook the midday meal served in government schools in Meu. The schools include children of all castes. In order to make sure the food can be consumed by children of all castes, it was deemed safest to let women from the Rahoud caste prepare the food. The Satnami women involved in the same SHGs procured the ingredients and fuel for cooking. (More on SHGs to follow in other chapters.)

Another aspect of social life where caste differences are maintained is in norms related to marriage. The household survey conducted in the Satnami ward revealed that there were many instances of secondary marriage⁷² which is not as common a phenomenon among people of OBC castes.⁷³ The most common type of secondary marriage talked about in my fieldwork was 'putting on bangles' (*churi pehnana*) which in contrast to primary marriage (*vivah*) does not entail ceremonies such as

⁷² Dube (1998: 108-110) documents secondary marriage among the Satnamis and argues that the practice provided Satnami women with a degree of autonomy unlike 'upper castes'. Furthermore, it valued the labour of women as the woman had to state that she had "come of her own will to live and earn".

⁷³ Parry (2001: 792) shows that secondary marriage is not as uncommon in other parts of India and the difference between Satnamis and the other castes practising secondary marriage is not as great as they would like others to believe.

anointing the bride and groom with turmeric (*haldi*) or holding a ritual feast. Symbolically, a number of glass bangles worn on each wrist show that a woman is married, while their absence means she is widowed or unmarried. The marriage can be officiated by the caste-*panchayat* through the arrangement of a sum of money paid to the former husband. Men can have more than one primary marriage as long as it is with a virgin who will only have one such marriage. Elders in Meu reflected that before the dowry became a regular feature in Satnami primary marriages a rupee was given symbolically as bride-price (*sukh dam*) in a ceremony called *tikawan*.⁷⁴

In many cases of secondary marriage, children go to live with their mothers and are brought up by their stepfather, although they can claim an inheritance from their own father. Issues related to inheritance can deter secondary marriage as was the case with a relatively well off Satnami family who owned a shop in the village. The shop was owned by the father and sons of the family. One of the sons was married and had three children and he died in a motorcycle accident. His widow could remarry but did not want to because she wanted to remain in the family of her deceased husband to make sure her children would be able to claim their inheritance in the shop and other family assets when older. Her not wanting to remarry was covered up by her in-laws as an 'upper-caste' notion that looks down upon remarriage as being something more common amongst the 'lower castes'. Such notions are increasingly adopted by wealthier rural Satnamis who, in an attempt to emulate the values and norms of the 'upper castes' (*sanskritisation*), become more conservative in their outlook.

While separation and secondary marriage are looked down on to a greater extent by people of 'clean' or 'upper-caste' backgrounds, it is not unusual in the Satnami community to come across single mothers (who are separated from a husband they have wedded either in a *vivah* or in a secondary marriage such as *churri pehnana*) as was the case in the household where I lived. Susil, my host father's sister, was living with their father and her two daughters in the same house but with a separate hearth. She had left her husband and come back to her natal home (*mai ke*). This was not

⁷⁴ The Satnami practice of presenting a symbolic bride-price as *sukh dam* (price of happiness) contradicts the Brahminical giving of a virgin as *kanya dan* which is synonymous with giving a gift which is not reciprocated (*dan*). Thus, by giving *sukh dam* the exchange becomes bilateral and the girl can return to her natal home if the marriage fails. In cases where a girl is given as *kanya dan* in theory, she cannot return to her natal home (Parry 2001: 794). Thus Satnamis "explicitly repudiate the theory which objectifies women as alienable gifts" (ibid).

considered a good idea by my host mother who competed for the family's wealth and resources for the marriages of her own daughters - some of which could be siphoned off for Susil's daughters' marriages. The wife's brother (*mama*) has the responsibility of marrying off girls in cases where a father cannot. In this case, my host mother resented Susil's reluctance to remarry and Susil simply remained unmarried because of her own disposition towards men. Such arrangements for single mothers and the instrumentality of secondary marriages are not unusual in the Satnami community in Meu.

Besides secondary marriage, which is more common in parts of central and eastern India, ritual friendship called *mitan* (between men) and *mitanin* (between women) is also common throughout these parts (Babb 1975; Prakasam 1993). Ritual friendship is formalised through a ceremony in the presence of one's kin but without the necessary participation of any religious functionaries. A coconut, some coins, flowers, a fistful of rice and a small cup of water are placed on a brass plate and held by the two friends who walk around a small fire of bits of cow-dung cakes (usually used as fuel for cooking), placed alongside a vessel with water and seven mango leaves in it. After walking around these seven times, the two take small sips from the cup of water and then exchange gifts, typically of clothing such as a *lungi* in the case of men and *sarees* for women. They end the ceremony by performing a respectful salutation (*pranam*) to each other. If water is used to cement the relationship it is symbolically water from the river Ganges, and hence the bond is alluded to as *Ganga jal*. Where they exchange *prasad* from Puri (at least notionally), they are called *mahaprasad*.

A ritual friend is a friend for life, and the relationship is more formal than ordinary friendship. When such friends meet, they must always greet each other with the respectful *pranam* which was performed at the end of the ritual ceremony. A ritual friend is considered closer than extended kin and is invited to all life-cycle rituals (see Desai 2010). In Meu, people told me that a ritual friend could be asked to 'lend' up to Rs 5000 without being expected to demand repayment and that ritual friends implicitly promise to take care of one another's children in the case of death. The choice of a ritual friend is based on similarity of looks or demeanour and on coincidental similarities in one's life such as bearing children in the same gender

sequence. In some cases, the wives of two best friends can become *mitanin*.⁷⁵ Ritual friends can be in the natal village or in other villages. Many people told me that they had not seen their ritual friend for long periods of time, but could visit and stay with their friend any time they needed to.

Friendship among the young men in the YACM, built on bonds formed at school, is distinctly different to ritual friendship. Whereas ritual friendship is an older form of friendship practised by all generations and is particularly important to the social fabric of older generations, the kind of friendship continued after schooling is a newer phenomenon that directly involves the educated generation of young people. To know someone from school and have shared experiences from that period of one's life defines the friendship as containing that experience which is different from the friendship of childhood playmates who did not go to school. The preference for friendship and the depth of the friendship can be based on similarities of other kinds rather than those that ritual friendship is often based on. In urban and semi-urban areas of Chhattisgarh, the use of Internet websites such as Facebook that link school friends to one another is increasing. It is not implausible that if young people educated in rural schools had access to the Internet and social networking websites, they too would capitalise on relationships formed during their school years to a greater extent than other types of relationships in the village such as kinship or ritual friendship.

In Meu, the majority of Satnamis who had a ritual friend had one of the Satnami caste. The criterion of similarity allows one to choose a ritual friend of any caste. However, most Satnamis claimed that closeness of the kind where one can eat together and stay in each other's homes would not be possible with a ritual friend of another caste. Desai (2010) on the other hand says that his informants in the Maharashtra region of Vidarbha, bordering on Chhattisgarh, did not consider caste when choosing a ritual friend. However, it is not surprising that the Satnamis in Meu should avoid ritual friendships with people from other castes. The kinds of physical segregation, restrictions on cross-caste commensality and the differences in norms related to

⁷⁵ See Parry (2001: 803) for Russell (1916: 2:412) claiming that "Sometimes, when two men are in the relation of Mahaprasad or nearest friend to each other...they will each place his wife at the other's disposal". There was little evidence that this was known to the Satnamis I spoke with or relevant to ritual friendships in Meu.

marriage all signify overt and subtle kinds of social exclusion experienced by the Satnamis that is part of everyday life in Meu.

An example of this kind of social exclusion is illustrated in the following vignette. On a rare occasion, an old Sahu man ventured into the small shop in the front part of the household in which I was living. My Satnami host mother, Gori Bai, cordially asked him what he wanted. He pointed at a sachet of *pan*. After a deliberate delay Gori Bai raised herself up from her haunches and ripped a packet loose for the man. She then nudged me to hand it to him even though he was standing close enough for her to make the transaction herself. The man took the packet from my hand⁷⁶ and threw a one-rupee coin on a mat on the floor of the shop, then left without further ado. Both Gori Bai and the Sahu customer had avoided 'touch pollution' by making me hand over the sachet of *pan* and by throwing the coin on the mat. I asked Gori Bai if she would have handed over the sachet herself had I not been there and she replied that she would have placed it on the ledge of the door frame for the man to pick up. She explained that if she had done otherwise he would probably have thought of her as defiant or provocative. This illustration falls in line with Bouglé's (1971: 9, 23) observation that the 'spirit of caste' is upheld when there is a "fear of impure contacts and repulsion for all those who are unrelated" and that the "sentiment of latent repulsion manifests itself clearly in certain circumstances".

The separation between the wards is most apparent at festivals as each ward has its own deities on display and carries out rituals separately. The Satnamis celebrate most Hindu festivals and, far from following Guru Ghasi Das' example of throwing Hindu religious icons on a bonfire (more on this in the next chapter), they celebrated both Ganes and Durga *puja* (rituals)⁷⁷ as elaborately as was done in the 'clean-caste' Sahu *para* in the village. At all festivals, villagers prepare the same fare of deep-fried sweet and savoury snacks collectively called *roti*. The exchange of *roti* is limited to family, friends and neighbours in one's own ward. This is one of the characteristics that make the activity of celebrating festivals bounded by caste. Table six below lists Hindu,

⁷⁶ This Sahu man was obviously not too concerned about my state of ritual purity or pollution or was simply unaware of it.

⁷⁷ This is a mode of worship in which several ritual practices are carried out including when a flame [or incense] is moved in a circular fashion before the deity (Babb 1972: 247).

Satnami and village (*dehati*⁷⁸) festivals that are celebrated in Meu (the dates presented are those from my fieldwork – they tend to change every year as festivals fall on dates according to the Hindu lunar calendar). As can be seen from this table, the Satnamis have two festivals of their own in the year apart from all the others that everyone in the village celebrates as well. However, at all the village festivals, each ward has their own canopy, and displays of deities and people from the different wards do not make offerings to the deities in each others' wards. Only small children and some youngsters from different wards take a peek at each others' displays. When they are around these displays, they are not offered any of the consecrated offerings that are given to those who come to pay their respects to the deities throughout the days when these *pujas* take place.

Festivals		Hindu	Satnami	Both
Hindu	15 th Jan. Makar Sakranti	X		
	11 th Feb. Basant Panchami (Saraswati Puja)	X		
	21 st Mar. Burning Holika			X
	22 nd Mar. Holi			X
	13 th Apr. Baisakhi			X
	14 th Apr. Ram Namvi	X		
	20 th Apr. Hanuman Jayanti	X		
	18 th Aug. Nāāg Panchami			X
	24 th Aug. Janamashtmi (Krishna's Birth)	X	X(some)	
	28 th Aug. Rakshabandhan			X
	03 rd Sep. Pola			X
	13 th Sep. Teej	X	X	
	15 th Sep. Ganes Puja starts			X
	17 th Sep. Visvakarma Puja	X	X(some)	
	24 th Sep. Ganes Puja ends			X
	30 th Sep. Pitr Puja			X
	12 th Oct. Durga Puja starts			X

⁷⁸ *Dehati* festivals are significantly different to mainstream Hindu festivals because they are mainly celebrated in rural rather than urban areas and have elements from nature and agriculture at the core of the rituals. No Hindu gods and goddesses are involved in these rituals but instead village gods and goddesses such as *Thakur Dev*, *Sat Bahenia* and *Sheetla Mata* (derived from but not necessarily deemed as the mythological Hindu gods) are given importance in these celebrations.

	21 st Oct. Durga Puja ends			X
	22 nd Oct. Dusshera	X		X
	29 th Oct. Karvachauth	X	X(some)	
	09 th Nov. Diwali			X
<i>Dehati</i>	12 th Aug. Hariyali/ Naagar Puja			X
	29 th Aug. Bhojli			X
	10 th Nov. Govardhan Puja			X
Patriotic	15 th Aug. Independence Day			X
	26 th Jan. Republic Day			X
	14 th Apr. Ambedkar Jayanti		X	
	2 nd Oct. Gandhi Jayanti	X		
Satnami	18 th Dec. Guru Ghasi Das Jayanti		X	

Table 6. Hindu, *dehati*, Patriotic and Satnami festivals that are celebrated in Meu. The festivals in bold are those on which *roti* is prepared in Satnami households.

For Ganes and Durga *puja* the Satnamis had contributed to the purchase of the images of deities and these had been placed on elaborately decorated stages with colourful canopies for protection from rain. At both of these festivals, the residents of the other wards had their own stages and canopies with their deities on display as well. The Sahu ward had an additional Ganes on display, which was the talk of the village as he was mounted on a motorcycle with a mobile phone in his hand. This ostentatious display reflected an increase in wealth and especially the aspiration to acquire motorcycles and mobile phones. Both of these *pujas* (rituals) go on for up to a fortnight and culminate with the immersion of the deity in either one of the village ponds⁷⁹ or in the Mahanadi River. While on display, the deities are worshipped throughout the day, and people make offerings of flowers, coins, coconuts and incense. Bollywood music is played on loudspeakers virtually throughout these festive days. The area where the deity is placed also becomes a spot for day-long ‘hanging out’ for the male youth in the village.

The village did not celebrate any Hindu festivals collectively where members of all the different castes that reside there were included in the rituals. The only exception

⁷⁹ The Ganes deities from all the different *paras* were immersed in the same village pond.

was a *dehati* festival called *Bhojli*, and this too only brought all villagers (though mainly women and children) together briefly and for only part of the rituals. In preparation for this festival, wheat seedlings are germinated on a plate or in a small tin can and placed in a dark corner of a room or under a wicker basket. That makes the seedlings light green in colour and prevents them from becoming fully grown quickly. The seedlings are carried to the same village pond mainly by youngsters but, along with village folk from all the different wards. Musicians accompany the procession to the pond. There is limited space on the concrete steps leading down to the water, so people take up spots wherever possible to wash the mud off the seedlings. It is interesting to note that on other occasions distance between castes is maintained while bathing or fetching water from the pond, but on this occasion people from all different castes in the village enthusiastically go to the water's edge to wash their wheat seedlings. Once the seedlings have been washed, they are fervently exchanged between youngsters and more assiduously between the grownups in the village.⁸⁰ The exchange of wheat seedlings in this way signifies friendship and the wish for a good harvest for everyone. People from all castes exchanged seedlings on their way back from the pond. However, as soon as they dispersed and returned to their own ward, people only exchanged seedlings among those belonging to their own ward and similarly only exchanged *roti* among them.

A division between the Satnamis and other castes is perpetuated at the Girod *mela* (village fair).⁸¹ Every year in February after the harvest, a huge *mela* takes place in the area surrounding the temples at Girod where the founder of the Satnami sect, Guru Ghasi Das, achieved enlightenment. The area is now a pilgrimage centre for the Satnamis.⁸²

⁸⁰ Traditionally, the seedlings are meant to be tucked behind the ears and those that have fallen on the ground are not meant to be reused for further exchange. Since the youngsters were wary of seedlings falling off their ears, they chose to keep them in their fists. Older men and women however, did tuck a few behind their ears.

⁸¹ Dube (1998: 55) records that in the late 1800s the Satnamis were not permitted to participate in *melas*.

⁸² Girod is built on a raised hillock surrounded by forests of *kahua*, *mahua*, *tendua*, *neem*, *ber*, *sal*, teak, mango and acacia trees. The *tendua* tree under which Guru Ghasi Das meditated is close by in an area called *Chatrapara*. The raised mounds on which the temples are located are rocky and bare and can be seen from a distance. The temple structures there look very similar to typical Hindu temples in India and are painted white. In the main courtyard there are three temples. One of them houses the wooden slippers of Guru Ghasi Das and another has a heap of coconuts in it, which are the offerings made by pilgrims, and not much else. The third temple was under construction and only had a clay lamp burning in it. On the site there is a well which is called *amrit-kund* ('nectar' well) and pilgrims draw water from

The Girod *mela* is mainly for Satnamis, unlike other village *melas* such as the one in Seorinarayan, which is considered a commercial village. In the view of an ‘upper-caste’ local film star from a neighbouring village, the *mela* in Girod is for Satnamis and ‘labourer-class’ people. The ‘upper-caste’ actor had wondered at my participation in the *mela* and repeatedly emphasised that people from his community (*samaj*) did not attend the *mela* in Girod but preferred the Seorinarayan *mela*, which attracts people from all castes and features entertainment such as a circus and ‘well of death’ (*maut ka kua*). It features stalls selling electronics such as TVs, CD and DVD players, and ‘talkies’ or a cinema, which are not part of the Girod *mela*. The Girod *mela* is characterised as an older *mela* that attracts pilgrims. However, for most Satnami visitors, votive attendance in the temples is a bonus activity while attending the *mela* itself. Many of the items available in the Girod *mela* are cheaper than at other village *melas* and this makes a shopping spree for rural Satnamis with less disposable income more feasible.

‘Harijan Thana’ - a break from the past

Although Dube (1998) recalls that Satnamis were the dominant landowners (*gaonthias*) in some villages, elders in the Satnami *para* in Meu claimed that dominant landowners mainly from the Brahmin or OBC castes demanded that the Satnamis work for them even if that meant Satnamis had to leave their own fields untended. It was also by no means certain that the Satnamis would be paid for their labour, because the *gaonthias* claimed that the Satnami families were indebted to them, whether this was true or not. Sometimes the *gaonthia* would demand fodder (*pera*) for his buffaloes that the Satnamis had to provide free of charge. Loan agreements often meant that the Satnamis ended up paying twice as much back (two sacks of paddy for one borrowed). Satnamis in Meu claim that it was not uncommon

this well and fill containers brought with them. They use the water for purification by drinking it and sprinkling it on themselves and their dwellings. There are numerous *jaith kambhs* in the vicinity of the temples and these have Satnami *sadhus* (‘holy-men’) lodged around them. Several of the *sadhus* have a clay lamp burning and occasionally a poster of Guru Ghasi Das on display. Pilgrims sometimes give an offering of a coconut wrapped in white fabric to the *sadhus* to be blessed and tied to the *jaith kambh*. The coconut signifies a vow or a wish made by the pilgrim.

to regularly give the *gaonthias* 'gifts' of fodder or labour because they felt 'indebted' or wanted the protection of the *gaonthia*.⁸³

Such relationships are unheard of in the village today. Furthermore, in contrast to their grandparents' generation, Satnami youth now roam freely around the village. They no longer have to step aside on village streets if they see a Brahmin or other 'clean' caste person walking past; neither do they have to think twice about their own dress or demeanour. Some elderly Satnamis recalled that when they were young, such freedoms were not as easily enjoyed. They also vividly described the stark difference in wealth between the Brahmins and wage-labourers from all other castes in the village by relating that before bicycles became a common possession for most people in the village, only few people in the Brahmin neighbourhood owned one. The grandfather in the household in which I lived remarked that people were terrified at the sight of a bicycle when they saw it for the first time, which was in the years preceding Indian independence. People in the Satnami *para* provided two explanations for these changes. The first is that since the 90s, most Brahmin families have moved away to larger villages and towns leaving only old people behind to occupy houses in the village. The absence of Brahmin men and women in the village has reduced possible friction between the communities and the old people left behind are rarely seen on village streets.

The second is the implementation of laws prohibiting derogatory remarks or behaviour toward lower castes. People in Chhattisgarh explained that offenders could land up in the '*Harijan Thana*', a special cell in particular police stations for perpetrators of caste-related offences. People in Meu remarked that even a derogatory look can land people in the '*Harijan Thana*' in the closest district police station located in Janjgir. Only one case from Meu ever went so far that the perpetrator, a Sahu man, ended up spending a night there. The dispute in that case had to do with personal rivalry between the Sahu and a Satnami man and it is well known that people may abuse the legislation of the '*Harijan Thana*' in matters of personal rivalry or vendettas (see Parry 2000: 48). However, the fact that such legislation exists and that

⁸³ Dube (1998: 55) claims that in the period around 1875 landless Satnamis were kept as 'serfs' and were forced to work without wages (*begar*) for proprietors particularly during the busy season when the landowning Satnamis' fields needed attention.

there is a cell (*Harijan Thana*) at the District police station is something more or less everyone in rural Chhattisgarh is aware of. People claim that awareness has made a marked difference in the way caste antagonism is acted out and that public displays of derogatory behaviour toward 'lower castes' in everyday life are almost a thing of the past. People no longer dare to make derogatory remarks in public and are cautious enough to refrain from making such remarks within earshot of one another. Generally, the de-legitimisation of caste inequality in the political and legal arena has had the effect of people tending to talk about the *differences* between castes rather than the *inequalities* between them, and to use euphemisms (Fuller 1997: 13-14). However, private sentiments about purity and 'pollution' and the higher or lower position of one's own and other castes are still important to the people of rural Chhattisgarh, and their justification of everyday norms related to caste.

Separation from Mehars

The caste considered undoubtedly 'untouchable' and 'polluted' or 'dirty' in Meu by all other castes including the Satnamis is the Mehar, equivalent to the *Mochi* or leatherworking caste. There are seven Mehar households in the village located adjacent to Satnami households. The Satnamis in Meu emphatically explained that they have no commensality and conjugal (*roti-beti rista*) relations with the Mehars and they consider them lower than themselves in the caste hierarchy. The Mehars still carry out their traditional occupation, which is skinning dead cattle, and they also perform duties in the village such as washing bloodstained linen and *sarees* after childbirth and burning the umbilical cords of newborn babies. A skin from a dead cow fetches Rs 30 in periodically-held larger village markets, and the Mehars are paid a few kilograms of rice or a small amount of cash for their services at childbirth, depending upon the resources of the household. Some members of this caste are called Mochi, and they solely work on repairing footwear. Men from these households run a stall in the village market every Tuesday.

One afternoon during my fieldwork, some young men of the Mehar caste were excluded from hanging out at a cricket match of Satnami young men. While they sat far away and watched, a few Satnami young men told me the following about relations with Mehars:

...the divisions have been made by someone else, not by us. These traditions have been coming down a long way... so that there will not be unity... But they [Mehars] are also SC (Scheduled Caste). Because of their work, they are segregated.

And another added:

In college, I had a Mehar friend. I could visit him in his home (*aana-jaana*) - it's not like we have animosity (*het*) towards them... they, like us, live life simply (*saada jeevan jeene wale hai*) ... In our caste community (*samaj*) we say, no matter how dirty the work they're doing, they do it for their livelihood (*roti*) so there's nothing bad about that. But we have to keep some distance. My friend was not skinning dead cattle. So I could be friends with him. We have to take into account the work that they do... if we mingle too much with the Mehars then the other castes in the village say that the Satnamis also eat carrion. They insult us (*hamari ninda karte hai*). So we have to keep a distance...



Mehar skinning a dead calf.



A Mehar cobbler in the weekly village market held every Tuesday.

The way in which the Satnamis distance themselves from the Mehars is similar to how they conceive of Sahus (and other 'clean' castes) distancing themselves from the Satnamis.⁸⁴ While they ideologically contest their own lowly position in the caste hierarchy, the Satnamis' stance towards Mehars raises the question of whether they replicate the caste system and are in agreement with it. Moffatt (1979) argues that replication occurs when 'untouchables' find themselves excluded from institutions and want to be in consensus with the larger social order; and that they play a complementary role when included in a certain set of social relations. According to him, they do not possess a separate subculture. Mencher (1974), on the other hand argues that casteism can be seen as a form of false consciousness that is weak or absent among the 'lower castes' because they are in effect forced into subordination and to so act, but cannot be forced to believe. The problem, however, is that neither presents any alternative model of the caste system followed by 'lower castes' or 'untouchables'. Moffatt (ibid: 12-21) concludes that to theorise about 'untouchability' using the foil of 'western poverty' leads to the hypothesis that 'untouchables' do not accept high-caste culture because it has no value for them but are aware of their own oppression. His study presents a case of consensus where 'untouchables' in Endavour reconstruct or replicate the same cultural code that marks highness and lowness, purity and impurity, superordination and subordination to be found among the higher castes (ibid: 98).

Deliège (1992: 156-157), however, argues that replication does not imply consensus. He does not fully agree with Moffatt's (1979) notion of 'replication and consensus', according to which - when excluded - 'untouchables' replicate the hierarchical order amongst themselves; which by logical extension means they are in conformity with

⁸⁴ Just as the 'upper castes' in Meu such as the Sahus, Kashyaps, Rawats and Patels (but not necessarily 'higher' in comparison to all other 'upper castes' all over India) act in a condescending manner towards the Satnamis, they in turn act condescendingly towards the Mehars and Ganas (Chauhan) in the village and other 'lower castes' such as Dungchurhas and Devars (swineherds) (see also Babb 1975: 55), Sabariya and Nats who have dwellings on the fringes of some of the neighbouring villages. Most of the members of these latter castes visit the houses of the Satnamis and other castes in the village to collect contributions of rice, lentils and small amounts of money through the year and especially during festivals. They are considered lower in the ritual hierarchy because of their consumption of pork and other types of meat and many of them live peripatetic lives. The Sabariya, for example, are a 'tribal' caste (they fall under the Scheduled Tribe category in the censuses) and are known as hunters of *ban-bilou*, which is a wild cat. Nats are traditionally performers of circus-type acrobatics and their community is known for performing acts for alms. Some of them make their livelihoods at the railway station in Bilaspur and some on traffic intersections in cities like Delhi.

the caste system. Deliège points out that even if ‘untouchables’ do replicate the ideological foundations of the system, they have their unique values and are not always in conformity with the system. Ideologically, in most Dalit myths of origin, a tragic mistake, or a fall from an originally high position at the hands of a trickster is identified as a cause of their low status. In this sense, although subordination is constitutive of ‘untouchable’ caste identity (Mosse 1996, 1999) ‘untouchables’ are “both the victims and the agents of the caste system, its defenders and its enemies” (Deliège 1999: 69).

As interdependence between different caste communities has eroded and various castes are more ‘separate’ than hierarchical (ibid: 160-163), replication does not apply in the same way. Satnami separation from other castes and the appointing of their own functionaries to carry out life-cycle rituals provides empirical evidence for this argument. Mosse (1996: 468) reiterates Moffatt (1979: 102-109) by showing that when Christian ‘untouchables’ are excluded from priestly ritual services, they replicate the services of the ‘higher-caste’ Catholic priests by appointing ‘untouchable’ Valluvar priests which in effect is similar to replacing the services of the Brahmin *purohit* for Hindu ‘untouchables’. In a similar sense, the Satnamis circumvent their exclusion from ‘upper-caste’ ritual specialists by appointing their own functionaries at life-cycle rituals (chapter 3). When ‘untouchables’ are included, for example in village festivals, (or when a Hindu *pundit* is willing to provide services), ‘untouchable’ caste specialists or functionaries complement rather than replicate these roles (as is described in relation to the celebration of Durga Puja by Satnamis in chapter 5).

Mosse (1996: 469) argues that ‘untouchable’ funeral services are often referred to more as servile work than as ‘impure’ work, and that ‘untouchables’ carrying out this kind of work do it as a result of social positions of dependence rather than because they are inherently impure.⁸⁵ Thus ‘ritual impurity’ gets translated into an idiom of

⁸⁵ Michael Wood’s BBC documentary in 2007, ‘Story of India’, shows a man from the ‘untouchable’ Dom caste who claims that his predecessors have kept the original fire used to light funeral pyres in Benares burning for generations. He says that his profession relegates him to ‘untouchable’ caste status, but that his ritual duties are indispensable to ‘upper castes’. For him, his caste and his profession do not make him *inherently* ‘polluted’, and he remarks with irony that he is considered socially to hold the lowest position in Hindu society, although his role is of the highest importance in Hindu funeral rituals. The erosion of an internalised belief in notions of purity and pollution is no doubt also a result

domination and subordination, which is realised not only by ‘upper castes’ but also by ‘untouchable’ castes. This becomes evident in the fact that ‘untouchables’ all over India consider their low position to be attributed to them by ‘mistake, trickery or an accident’, and hence it is ‘undeserved’⁸⁶ (ibid: 166), which is also implied in the conversation above.

The debate involving Moffatt (1979), Deliège (1992) and Mosse (1996) is an important one because what looks like replication of the caste system among ‘untouchables’ adds ambiguity to the degree to which the struggle against ‘untouchability’ concerns ritual notions of purity and pollution; and to what degree it is fundamentally about the underlying situation of social and economic deprivation which is augmented by ‘untouchability’. ‘Untouchable’ castes have always played a complementary role to all other castes, and hence although they are at the bottom of the hierarchy and excluded from various ritual, social and economic spaces due to the notion of their being permanently ‘polluted’, they are nonetheless part of the hierarchical system of castes. ‘Untouchables’ have no choice other than to subordinate themselves in the role of complementarity even though they are selectively excluded by other castes because of the power of the higher castes. This signifies that ‘untouchables’ do not necessarily internalise agreement with the system but are forced into subordination because of the kinds of social and economic deprivation that being at the bottom of the hierarchy carries.

It can be questioned whether the Satnami stance towards Mehars constitutes mere replication. From the narrative of the informant above, it is significant that in a college away from the village, the Satnami young man was not only friends with a Mehar, but also visited the friend’s home (*aana-jaana*). It is not uncommon to find numerous examples of how caste becomes less important in the urban context than it is in the rural. Other signifiers of one’s identity, such as class (education and income) become more important between castes in the urban context. The proximity of cross-

of the decrease in the validity of traditional caste norms that ‘lower-castes’ can perceive around them in contemporary Indian society – albeit more so in urban than in rural areas. This perception is formed through the secular sphere in which reservations and a rise in political power among ‘untouchable’ castes has enabled them to question and defend their lowly caste position in the Hindu hierarchy of castes. The secular route to power often proves to be more viable in terms of social mobility than *sanskritisation* (emulation of ‘upper-caste’ norms).

⁸⁶ See also Mosse (1985: 246)

caste friendships however, is always variable. This adds a layer of ambiguity to the extent to which, ritual notions of purity and pollution get replicated. But in the village, the separation between castes is more clearly upheld.

The Satnamis do not consider themselves afflicted by some inherent impurity, and what is being implied in the conversation above is that they do not view Mehars as being afflicted by any inherent impurity either, but rather as positioned in a system of gradation that considers their polluting occupations as degrading, hence degrading the people who carry out those occupations. However, the fact that the Satnamis distance themselves from Mehars plays a significant part in their attempt to claim higher status. The distance they maintain from the Mehars signifies that they are protecting their 'higher' status in the caste hierarchy by not being associated with those castes that carry out 'polluting' occupations in the same way as other 'upper castes' in Meu who distance themselves from the Mehars and the Satnamis. From the viewpoint of the Satnamis, those 'upper castes' that practice distancing towards them uphold age-old caste norms that *emphasise* the spirit of the caste system, which persists regardless of changes in occupation or the economic status of a caste. Even though the Satnamis have historically shed the Chamar identity (which is associated with 'polluting' occupations) and become landed peasants, they are still considered by the 'upper castes' to be 'polluted'.

The Mehars, like the Satnamis in the past, have contested their lowly position in the caste hierarchy. Members of the seven Mehar households in Meu are followers of Ravidas (or Rohidas in *Chhattisgarhi*). Dube's (1998) claim that Mehars converted to the Satnami sect along with Chamars clearly does not apply to the Mehars in Meu. They follow Ravidas and have not changed their caste identity in the same way as the Satnamis did by following Guru Ghasi Das and joining the Satnami sect. The Satnamis juxtapose their sectarian and caste identity, whereas the Mehars distinguish their sectarian identity from their caste identity.⁸⁷ Members of the Mehar households said that they were followers of Ravidas, who was a *bhakti* saint from Kashi in north India, born in the 15th century. They explained that followers of Ravidas are to be found all over India and that in Chhattisgarh larger numbers of Mehars who are

⁸⁷ The crucial point to make here is that while more or less only members of the Satnami sect are Satnami by caste, members of lots of different castes are followers of Ravidas.

followers of Ravidas are to be found in the Raipur district. They said that they did not have similar symbols to the Satnamis, such as the victory pole (*jaith kambh*) and neither did they have functionaries to replace the role of the priest and barber in life-cycle rituals such as those in the Satnami community. According to the Mehars in Meu, Ravidas was the true disciple of a formless (*nirgun*) god and he had true knowledge given to him by the river Ganges (*Ganga*) while it gave gold and silver to Brahmins. According to them, Ravidas ripped the thread that the Brahmins wear around their torsos (*janeu*⁸⁸) from his heart, but the gods cursed him and thus he was born an 'untouchable'. They said they believed they were descendents of Ravidas and it was their duty to perform the services of cleaning up after childbirth for all other castes in the village. They were given a few kilos of rice in return for performing those services, and none of the Mehar households owned any land, but worked as wage labourers. The average earnings per household were around ten quintals of paddy at harvest, which was mainly for their own consumption.

Like the Satnamis, the Mehars in Meu often said that they were not well versed in the tenets of Ravidas' teachings because they were not literate and had not been sufficiently educated about the teachings of Ravidas. Some hoped that they might work at brick kilns near Varanasi some day so that they would be nearer pilgrimage sites and Ravidas' temples where ascetics and others knowledgeable about Ravidas' teachings could impart these to them. However, unlike the Satnamis, the Mehars did not assert a strong sense of autonomy through their sectarian identity. They juxtaposed their belief in Ravidas to being Hindu but emphasised that "since the creation of this earth, castes have been kept separate and are different" and that they did not have relations of commensality or conjugality (*roti-beti rista*) with any of the other castes living in the village. They also informed me that during censuses in the past, the Mehars were not registered as Ravidas or Rohidas in Chhattisgarh because their sectarian identity did not denote caste. The two communities deal with caste oppression in distinctly different ways: the Satnamis assert self-sufficiency through the Satnami identity whereas the Mehars are smaller in numbers in villages in Chhattisgarh and do not assert a similar sense of autonomy through sectarian identity.

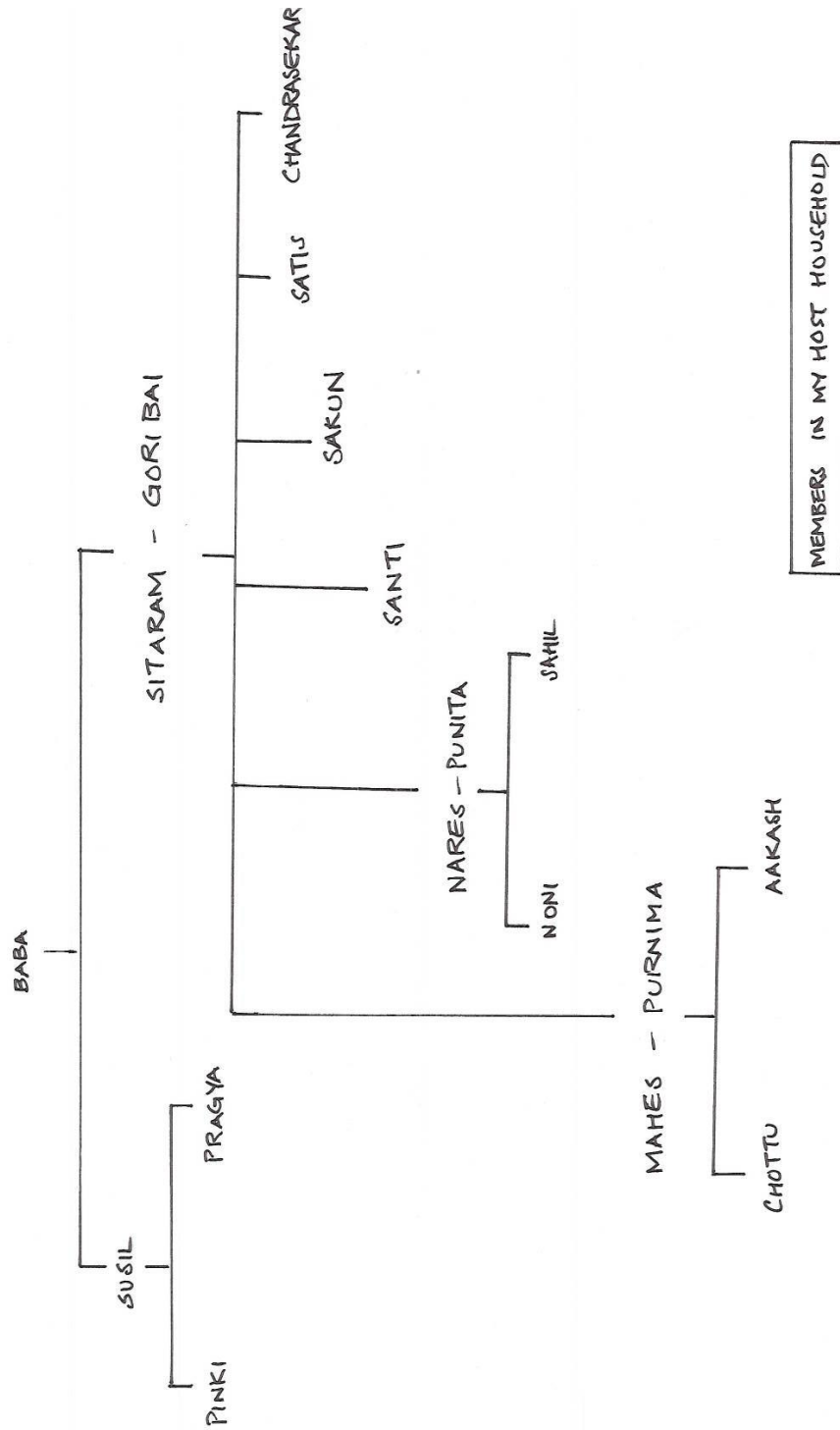
⁸⁸ The *janeu* is a sacred thread worn around the torso by twice-born Hindus only. It is a symbol of initiation into the Hindu faith. See also Babb (1975: 78).

The household in which I lived

Throughout the duration of my fieldwork in Meu, I lived with a large Satnami family that spans four generations (see genealogy overleaf) and comprises eighteen members. They are relatively well off because they farm twenty acres of agricultural land similar to only two other Satnami households in Meu (most people own only one to two acres). All members of this family engaged in agriculture, especially at those times of the year when manual labour is in most demand for seeding, transplanting, weeding and harvest. The family also own a tractor, which has a trailer. It is used not only in the fields in tasks related to farming but also to earn extra income by transporting bricks for building, or sand from the dried up Mahanadi riverbed in the summer months. None of the members of this family had ever been away as migrant labourers as they owned enough land in the village. However, the men in the family made trips to town (Bilaspur) or Raipur whenever required to buy fertiliser or make bank transactions.

The teenagers in the family were all enrolled in the village schools and the married sons and daughters of Sitaram and Gori Bai had also been educated up to the 10th or 12th class. Sitaram was one of the few educated members of the older generation in the Satnami *para*, though Gori Bai was illiterate. He had completed his schooling in a neighbouring village called Rahoud, which is now one of the bigger villages nearby. Sitaram's father had prioritised his education rather than that of his three sisters, two of whom are married and reside in different villages. In the course of my fieldwork, I met one of Sitaram's sisters who came to visit after domestic problems had erupted in her husband's home, and it seemed clear that she relied on his advice and even monetary help. One of the sisters lives in the same house, but with a separate hearth, and she also takes care of their father.

The family has relatives in three other households in Meu. They have good relations with all of them and in general with the Satnami community in the village as well as with people of other castes. Sitaram is known to others as a man with a 'cool brain' (*thande dimag ka aadmi*) and I found that he had congenial and easy relations with people around him without ever taking on a dominant role. He worked hard in the fields and enjoyed time with his family while subtly maintaining discipline among the



children. He seemed to be in a happy marriage with Gori Bai, a stunning woman with light eyes. Gori Bai came across as extremely hard-working and resilient, with a strong personality. She was often quick to laugh and with a rasping voice, in contrast to Sitaram, could beat anyone in a prolonged verbal spat. By and large, the family seemed harmonious and made an important node for me to get to know others in the community. People visited frequently and the space in front of the house was used by the young men in the YACM to meet in and to organise some of their events.

Many of the impressions about life in the Satnami *para*, and other village data presented in this thesis, are influenced by the conversations with the members of my host family and inadvertently also by my positioning in a 'wealthier' household in comparison to poorer Satnamis. This was something I was aware of from the beginning of my fieldwork and I often went to others' homes in the village to 'hang out' and talk with people. This helped me to see the village from the point of view of Satnamis who were not well off by village standards. By living with my hosts, it became possible to be part of various occurrences throughout the agricultural cycle as well as to observe moments within family life such as daily meals, watching TV when there was electricity, bathing, washing and cooking. The family and I also went on excursions to village fairs (*melas*) after having working in the fields during harvest.



Sitaram with his grandson



Gori Bai

Living with this family gave me the opportunity to observe the kinds of inter-generational differences that education has brought about in the lives of the Satnamis in Meu and to get a sense of Satnami self-sufficiency. Although they did not have antagonistic relations with people of other castes, a person from a 'clean' caste was never invited to any meals, ceremonial or otherwise, in their house. Male members of the household were sometimes invited to a wedding or a *chhatti* (birth celebration) of a person of 'clean' caste in the village or outside it, but they never stayed to eat with others in those celebrations. Similarly, in life-cycle rituals celebrated by my host family, people of other castes were invited but did not stay to consume food with other Satnami guests. This was not deemed unnatural. It was taken for granted that it was normal to uphold the traditional separation between castes. In private conversations, however, Sitaram and Gori Bai would reiterate that they found some persons of 'clean' caste held casteist attitudes. They did not make any bones about it and explained that as Satnamis they after all did not have any '*len-den*' (reciprocity) with such people.

When the married sons in the family, Mahes and Nares, went out of the village with the tractor and trailer to earn money through transporting building materials, they told me that they often ate in roadside tea kitchens among people of other castes. They claimed that the rules governing cross-caste commensality were upheld more fastidiously in the village than outside it. This was similar to the claims made by those Satnamis who migrated seasonally to earn wages. Mahes and Nares did not have aspirations of gaining higher education, white collar employment or a government job outside the village. They were committed to farming the family's land and felt prosperous doing so. In this, they differed from those young men who were not as well off in the village. But they shared the view that life in the village was more comfortable than urban life, which they considered to be tough. They also shared a sense that village life had become better than before, especially since people could now afford three meals a day. The disillusionment with the lack of proper schools and healthcare, and with corruption, were the kinds of criticisms they all had of the shortcomings of village life. Mahes and Nares supported the YACM and thought it was a good idea for an association to organise events in the *para*, but never actively took part in the meetings of the YACM as they were often busy working or spending time with the family.

Concluding remarks

Chhattisgarh is a new state carved out of the large central state of Madhya Pradesh. The state has large numbers of Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes and the remainder of the population is mainly OBCs. In Meu as well, the larger communities belong to the OBC castes and the Satnami population is numerically nearly equal to the OBC castes. People living in the village from the OBC castes are roughly in the same position as the Satnamis living in the village as most of them are landed peasants owning up to two acres of land, and they mostly cultivate paddy. This makes Meu different to those villages in Chhattisgarh where Satnamis are in minority.

Satnamis claim that institutions such as *Harijan Thana* and the awareness that acting in a derogatory way towards ‘lower’ castes can lead to imprisonment have mitigated public displays of caste discriminatory behaviour. However, covert forms of distancing and manifestations of separation between castes still prevail in everyday village life. Most Satnamis have a *mitan* or a *mitanin* from the Satnami caste because they claim that general hospitality (*aana-jaana*) is more convenient between people of the same caste. According to Satnamis in Meu, sharing the staple meal of boiled rice and garnish (*bhaat*) would not be possible with a friend from a ‘clean’ caste.

The Satnamis in Meu and my host family often said that they did not have any exchange (*len-den*) with other castes, which is a mechanism for them to cope with being ostracised by ‘clean’ caste communities. It is an assertive stance – a rejection of dependence on ‘upper castes’ which has its roots in the Satnami sectarian movement that historically took place in this region. The youth in the YACM also draw upon this sense of assertiveness of Satnami self-sufficiency which is more pertinent than the Dalit identity for the Satnamis in Meu. Satnamis all over rural Chhattisgarh tend to assert Satnami identity to a far greater extent than the Dalit identity.

It is in this larger context and setting that this study examines the ways in which the Satnami community and the YACM oppose caste discrimination in everyday life in the village. Whereas the Satnamis in the village did not recount violence in relations

between them and other castes, and did not have any links to Dalit activism in towns and cities of the kind that is connected with the larger Dalit movements in India, they were in the process of articulating a language of rights within contemporary forms of caste discrimination experienced in everyday village life. In the light of the history of the Satnami sectarian movement it becomes apparent that the Satnamis were able to gain a sense of self-assertion which underlay their relations with other castes. The Satnami sectarian movement is the focus of the next chapter.

Chapter 3

History of the Satnami Sectarian Movement and Assertion of Self-sufficiency

The Satnamis in Chhattisgarh are the largest ‘ex-untouchable’ caste in the region. They are ‘ex-untouchable’ because the Indian Constitution has outlawed the practice of untouchability. However, that has not altered the lowly position of the Satnamis in the traditional caste hierarchy, and they have – with partial success – been trying to rid themselves of the stigma of untouchability for at least two hundred years. To explain the contemporary position of the Satnamis in Meu, this chapter focuses on the historical trajectory of the Satnami sectarian movement and sheds light on the kinds of militancy and rebelliousness that have prevailed in the community in the past.

In the past, the Satnamis asserted self-sufficiency through sectarian ideology and their own functionaries, who performed the role of Hindu ritual specialists. This, coupled with rebelliousness, helped the Satnamis to maintain separation from other castes. The idiom of separation that rural Satnamis still invoke is one of the ways in which they cope with caste oppression. The paradox of Satnami dual identity - that of caste and sect - dealt with in this chapter is explained through an exploration of what sectarianism means in the Indian context, and I examine the ways in which the sectarian ideology of the community is permeated by predominantly Hindu beliefs. The interesting thing here is the way in which the separation has worked to perpetuate Satnami self-assertion, and why ideological tenets of the Satnami faith may have diminished in importance.

I will argue that, even though a sense of self-sufficiency is asserted by the Satnami community in Meu in opposing caste oppression, it does not lift them out of the caste system as such and therefore only partially solves the problem of their low position in the village caste hierarchy. From the discussion of sectarianism in India, it becomes clear that sects that have bifurcated away from Hinduism through sectarianism eventually end up looking very much like a Hindu caste (Babb 1972) and that ‘lower castes’ often contest their low position in the system rather than eradicating the caste

system. In broad terms, it has been argued that defending the institution of caste as a negative system of discrimination has very little legitimacy in progressive public discourses in contemporary India (Béteille 1991). In fact, what can be found in the public domain is a denial of the existence of caste in its 'traditional' form while issues related to caste remain salient in the private and political domain (Fuller 1997: 21). However, caste norms in a structural and ritualistic sense are present in rural life (Tanabe 2006) to a much greater extent than in India's fast-burgeoning towns and cities.⁸⁹ Caste may not be the only source of identity in the modern world, or even the most salient one, but it plays a major role in demarcating communities in rural India, and caste-related rules of commensality and endogamy are still widely practised in rural Chhattisgarh.

The importance of these issues to this study is to develop an understanding of how caste and sect play out in keeping the Satnamis within the Hindu fold - and within its caste hierarchy - while allowing them some autonomy. This is crucial to finding out what predicaments they face as 'ex-untouchables' and what means they employ to rid themselves of caste oppression. It is important to stress that while they are no longer Chamars, which is an 'untouchable' caste - synonymous with an insult in present day Chhattisgarh - neither are they accepted as 'twice-born'⁹⁰ Hindus. This becomes evident through observing the way in which other castes interact with the Satnamis in the village, which I have illustrated in the previous chapter.

The present chapter is divided into three sections. The first section presents the history of the Satnami movement in Chhattisgarh and shows how the Satnamis dealt with caste oppression in the past through the ideological movement led by Guru Ghasi Das. The history of the movement brings out aspects such as rebelliousness and militancy which led the Satnamis in the past to reject the authority of landowners and accrue land. The Satnamis used to be perceived as antagonistic towards 'upper castes' and have been described both as 'criminal' (Russell and Hiralal 1916) and as a group that

⁸⁹ The extent to which caste norms are upheld also varies greatly in towns and cities. In more traditional towns such as Benaras, caste norms may be more stringently upheld than in industrialised towns such as Bhillai.

⁹⁰ According to the 'Manusmriti' the top three of the four *varnas* that constitute the caste system are 'twice-born' and are allowed to wear the *janeu* or sacred thread around the torso that marks their 'baptism'. *Sudras* and 'untouchables' who are permanently defiled or 'polluted' in a ritualistic sense are not allowed to wear the *janeu* and are not considered to be 'twice-born' or 'clean' castes.

could defend itself against oppression as well as offend. The unravelling of the ideological movement is described through the history of the Satnamis to show that in contemporary Chhattisgarh, the Satnamis do not have the kind of spiritual leadership that existed in the past. Satnamis on the whole are not perceived as militant in present-day Chhattisgarh by anyone. An example of a recent conflict between the Satnami community and an 'upper-caste' landowner makes it clear that violence of this type is not widespread, but rather a specific case. However, the historical trajectory of the Satnami movement is important, in that it helped Satnamis in Chhattisgarh to formulate an idiom of separation from other castes that they still invoke to assert self-sufficiency.

The second section in this chapter focuses on the paradox of Satnami 'dual identity' and raises questions relating to the ways in which the Satnamis in contemporary Chhattisgarh are partially within the Hindu fold, while they preserve a sense of autonomy that emanates from the ideological movement. The ways in which the Satnamis interchangeably use their identity to express their caste while asserting separation from oppressive or inferior castes in the village caste hierarchy is examined here and explained by an analysis of their own assertion of mitigated or selective exchange (*len-den*) with other castes. Sectarianism in the Indian context is then discussed by looking at the Satnami case in this context.

The final section deals with the theory of 'substantialisation' of castes and examines whether internal heterogeneity within castes blurs the boundaries between castes in the village, and the way in which separation from Satnamis is in sharper relief than separation among the OBC castes. While internal differentiation in cities results in people of different castes sharing more in common with people of the same caste at different class levels, the salience of caste distinctions in rural Chhattisgarh and nascent class identity results in greater separation between sub-castes in the village.

Historical trajectory of the Satnami Movement

The main aim of this section is to provide a detailed description of the historical trajectory of the Satnamis that highlights the assertiveness with which they were able

to separate themselves as a ‘substantialised’⁹¹ caste group in the past. The questions that this section aims to answer are: what type of a movement did the Satnamis have in the past and what happened to it? And why has militancy declined among contemporary Satnamis?

The ideological movement that separated the Satnamis ‘horizontally’ from other castes served as a unifier of the members who joined the movement of which the largest in numbers were Chamars. The Chamars presumably could not have had any sort of vertical mobility because they were poor and many were most probably landless ‘untouchables’, which was further exacerbated by the vertical rigidity in the caste system that cannot be overridden easily. The only possible recourse for the community was to separate ‘horizontally’ and transform their caste identity in that way (Prakasam 1993: 80). The transformation of their identity is one of the ways in which they have dealt with the stigma of being ‘untouchable’. Through it they tried to realign their position vis-à-vis other castes by not only dissociating themselves from those castes that carried out polluting occupations such as leatherwork.⁹² It is not certain that the Satnamis ever were leatherworkers in Chhattisgarh, but this is one of the ways in which they draw a distinction between themselves and the Mehars, who still carry out the work of cobblers (*mochi*) in contemporary Chhattisgarh. The history of the Satnamis reveals both the successes of the community in accruing land and also the way in which the movement unravelled because of rivalries between its spiritual leaders. The inclusion of its leaders in secular politics pushed them further away from the iconic position that was once held by preceding leaders in the movement.

The salience of the history of the Satnami movement to this study is that it illustrates the kinds of attempts made by this community to rid itself of the stigma of untouchability. While in the past such attempts were related to an ideological realm rooted in religious norms and practices, the contemporary Dalit social movement is a secular ideological means for the Satnamis to deal with caste discrimination and low

⁹¹ The Satnami in Chhattisgarh can be viewed as a ‘substantialised’ caste because 1) they are a separate and unified group that has distanced itself from other castes 2) the separation is based on a ‘substance’; in this case it is an ideological belief that unifies the group. For the definition of substantialisation of caste, see Dumont (1980: 222).

⁹² In opposition to ‘Brahmanic purity’ the ‘untouchable’ person is deemed to be in a state of ‘permanent impurity’ because of an association with death and various forms of organic waste (Deliège 1999: 38-39).

caste status (this is the focus of later chapters in the thesis). The significance of Satnami history ties in with developing an understanding of what Satnami sectarianism means in juxtaposition to their caste identity.

Guru Ghasi Das and Satnampanth

There are a number of movements similar to *Satnampanth* in Chhattisgarh throughout India. Two such movements that were documented in north India prior to the inception of the Satnami sect in Chhattisgarh, which was fully established around 1850, are discussed here. Each of them invokes the concept of *satnam* (true name) of a formless (*nirgun*)⁹³ God. These movements alluded to *satnam* with slight variations and to aspects such as purity and oneness with God. I will briefly present both of these movements as background for the movement in Chhattisgarh, which resembles them. These movements are not directly linked to the Satnami movement in Chhattisgarh but they help resolve questions as to where the ideology might have originated and what it resonates with in other parts of India.

One of the movements comprising a version of *satnam* originated in Narnaul in Eastern Punjab⁹⁴ in the mid-1600s and was led by Birbhan. The followers of this movement interpreted the idea of *satnam* as equivalent to *nek nam* or ‘righteous name’. *Nek nam* embodied a status that the adherents of this movement, who were called Sadhs, aspired to achieve. The Sadhs are described as dressed as mendicants and they were peasants and traders with negligible assets (Dube 1998: 36-39). The tenets of this movement have been inscribed in the form of twelve commandments which are the *malik ka hukum* or ‘word of God’ (ibid). The Sadhs had staged a

⁹³ Or a non-anthropomorphic God as explained in relation to the Movement of Ravidas in Punjab (Ram 2008:1344).

⁹⁴ The establishment of the Sikh faith in Punjab in north India provides a comparison with the case of *Satnampanth* in Chhattisgarh. Similar to Guru Ghasi Das, the Sikh gurus were not renouncers and the philosophy of the founding guru, Guru Nanak, emphasised values of everyday life and worldliness. The Guru was able to denounce caste while living in the social world and Jodhka (2004: 173) points out that “though the Gurus rejected caste ideologically, their social and personal world could not have been ‘caste-free.’” In Hinduism, scriptures such as the Manusmriti provide ideological legitimacy to the caste system, but this is not the case in Sikhism. However, empirical studies show that caste identities are salient in contemporary Punjab and among the followers of the Sikh religion (ibid: 167) (See also Juergensmeyer (1988) on the conversion of ‘untouchables’ in Punjab to Christianity). Social relations in village communities as well as the political economy of agriculture are intermeshed with norms dictated by caste (ibid: 175). Sikh leadership has lobbied at the national level to have certain Sikh castes, such as the Ad-Dharmis, included along with Hindus in the list of Scheduled Castes in order to enable them to access special benefits and reservations (ibid: 179).

rebellion in 1657 against the then-powerful emperor Aurangzeb. In the words of Mamuri, cited in Habib:

...if anyone should want to impose tyranny and oppression upon them as a display of courage and authority, they will not tolerate it; and most of them bear arms and weapons (Dube 1998: 36).

The Sadhs did not have temples but met in the courtyards of members' houses every fortnight to eat together and to sing and recite devotional hymns and verses dedicated to Birbhan, Nanak and Kabir. Prohibitions on having sexual intercourse and eating with non-Sadhs bound the members of the group. They rejected rituals and local superstitions. In order to achieve the status of *nek nam* they worked towards a state of purity of the body and the senses by rejecting opium, tobacco, betel leaves, perfumes, gossip and dancing, and they dressed in white garments (Dube 1998: 38). Dumont (1980: 188) calls the Sadhs a 'sectarian caste' whose adherents could initiate their children into the beliefs of the sect and in this way make membership hereditary. The community had around two thousand members in the eighteenth century.

In the early 1700s, Jagjiwan Das, an 'upper-caste' Thakur, started a movement in Barabanki District in Uttar Pradesh. The central tenet in Jagjiwan Das' concept of *satnam* is derived from Hindu notions of purity, and the Satnami followers of this sect remained within the Hindu fold of castes and beliefs (ibid). Das juxtaposed *satnam* with the Hindu pantheon. His movement mainly attracted Rajputs and Brahmins and caste distinctions were retained among the adherents of the sect. Jagjiwan Das preached abstinence from food substances such as red lentils because of their likeness to blood and aubergines, which were likened to flesh. He laid down these rules of consumption, including the prohibition of meat, alcohol and tobacco, to eliminate those substances that are deemed 'polluting' from the lives of his adherents.

In a similar vein, Guru Ghasi Das founded the Satnami sect in Chhattisgarh. He was born in the 1770s in Girod, which lies on the north-eastern edge of the Raipur district, close to the border of the Janjgir-Champa district. His adherents were mainly Chamars, who were considered to be 'polluted' because of their consumption of carrion beef. By 1850, he had as many as 250,000 followers and had established

himself as a messianic leader with a repertoire of various miracles that were believed to have been performed by him (Dube 1998: 39-41). Similar to the sects in the north, he preached *satnam*, which meant 'true name' and oneness with God. Unlike those sects, he emphasised the equality of all his followers, irrespective of their caste. It is alleged that in the early period of the movement some Telis (Sahu) and Rawats also joined the Satnami community.

Guru Ghasi Das instructed his followers to abstain from consuming red lentils, aubergines, meat, alcohol and tobacco (ibid). He established patrilineal succession to the *gaddi* or seat of the guru and appointed functionaries and called them *bhandari* and *sathidar*. They were appointed to officiate at life-cycle rituals in the same way that the priest (*pundit*) and barber (*nai*) do for 'twice-born' Hindu castes (Parry 1999: 136). Some of my informants claimed that the predecessors of Guru Ghasi Das, namely Memli Das and Mangu Das, had come to Girod from Narnaul in Punjab. However, this alleged historical link between the sects in the north and *Satnampanth* in Chhattisgarh has not yet been established in the academic literature.

In the past, the Satnamis successfully resisted the authority of 'upper-caste' officials and in some instances had their own villages (*ekjati* villages) with a Satnami *gaonthia* (Dube 1998: 25-32). Historical records describe the Satnamis as warriors who were able to accumulate land to the extent that some of them became the *malguzar* (revenue collector) in a village. Russell and Hiralal (1916: 315) comment that

...a large proportion of the Satnami Chamars are owners or tenants of land, and this fact may be surmised to have intensified their feeling of revolt against the degraded position to which they were relegated by the Hindus. ... the Chamars have an utmost fondness for land and an ardent ambition to obtain a holding, however small. The possession of land is a hall-mark of respectability in India,⁹⁵ as elsewhere, and it may be surmised that the Chamar feels himself to be raised by his tenant-right above the hereditary condition of village drudge and menial.

⁹⁵ Land is a highly contentious issue in India. For further discussions see also Khilnani (1997), Baviskar (1997) and Bardhan (2000).

The Satnamis are also called a ‘dissenting sect’ by Russell and Hiralal (1916) who record that a ‘permanent antagonism’ existed between the Satnamis and the Hindu landlords to whom they refused to pay rent (ibid: 315). In their view, the Satnami movement could be likened to a ‘social war’ in Chhattisgarh. They claim that

Over most of India the term Hindu is contrasted with Muhammadan, but in Chhattisgarh to call a man Hindu conveys primarily that he is not a Chamar... (ibid: 315)

Their claim implies that the separation between the Hindu ‘clean’ castes and the Satnamis (or Chamars who were in the process of conversion at the time) was more salient than that between Hindus and Muslims at the time. An example similar to this is the Lingayats in south India who according to Dumont appear as ‘the equivalent of a huge reference group: one is in the region a Lingayat or a Hindu’ (1980: 189).

The Satnamis are also described as dangerous criminals by Russell and Hiralal (1916: 315) who add that

...if the proprietor once arouses the hostility of his Chamar tenants he may as well abandon his village...

Dube (1998: 57) lists incidents in 1892, 1896 and 1898 where respectively, “a turbulent and lawless set” was arrested for rioting in Bilaspur district, for attacking a policeman investigating armed robbery in the same area, and for attacking a court official who attempted to seize cattle as repayment of debts. He also cites evidence that punitive police were stationed in turbulent villages by colonial administrators.

The Satnamis provoked ‘upper castes’ not only by being militant and accruing land but the leaders of the sect also put on an ostentatious display of power and began emulating ‘upper-caste’ practices. When Guru Ghasi Das died, his son Balak Das took over leadership of the sect. The succession to the ‘throne’ (*gaddi*) of the guru is patrilineal and under the tutelage of Balak Das, personification of the guru was like that of a kingly person (*raja- aadmi*). He amassed wealth and took the position of the guru to unprecedented heights by building himself a castle and riding around on an

elephant. Like Guru Ghasi Das, he went on tours (*ramat*) where followers were allowed *darshan* (vision/seeing) and where they collected *amrit* (nectar) which was water in which the guru's feet had been washed. Followers drank the water to purify themselves and made suitable offerings to the guru (ibid: 58,132).

The guru embodied *Satnampanth* and its symbols and strictures that combined the features of the Satnami as a caste (*jati*) as well as a sect (*panth*). Balak Das added symbolic constructions such as the *janeu* (sacred thread) and the *jaith kambh* (victory pole) which was first displayed in the mid-twentieth century. The *jaith kambh* used to be a tall bamboo stick with a white triangular flag hoisted at the top and in present day Chhattisgarh has been replaced by concrete structures. The *jaith kambh* represented the authority of the guru and marked the tightness of Satnamis as a group. It is the main symbol that has endured over the years and can be found in every Satnami community around Chhattisgarh. The *kanthi* (string with wooden beads) had been appropriated from Kabirpanth by Guru Ghasi Das. Symbols such as the *kanthi* and *janeu* have to a large extent been discarded by ordinary Satnamis in present day Chhattisgarh.

To the irritation of the Hindus, Balak Das wore the *janeu* – the symbol of 'twice-born' caste status - and instructed all the followers of *Satnampanth* to do the same. In the end, he was murdered by Rajputs amidst a chaotic confrontation in the middle of the night. After his death, succession to the *gaddi* became a contentious issue fraught with rivalries and disunity among possible successors (ibid: 134). Eventually, Balak Das was succeeded by Agar Das, Guru Ghasi Das' youngest son, but his position was contested by Balak Das' son, Saheb Das.

The *gaddi* of the guru was subsequently divided between Agar Das and Saheb Das and they were unable to reconcile their differences regarding who was the rightful owner of it. Their disagreements were put aside when both of them were summoned by the English *sahib* who was the administrator in the area and asked "Do you want to govern?" To this Agar Das replied "I am a guru, I do not know law. Since I do not know politics, I cannot do this work". And Saheb Das agreed with his uncle (ibid: 141).

The *sahib* had offered them *janeu*, *tilak* and *palki* (palanquin) which they had refused by not taking the offer of becoming rulers. Apparently, each year a ‘Victoria paper’ asking the Satnami leaders if they were the rulers of their community had been sent to them and been refused by the Satnami gurus. While they did not pay the thousand rupees to own the decree, the Hindus bribed the government every year to suppress the charter that would give the Satnamis “a right over the symbols of upper-caste domination” (ibid: 141).

Agar Das and Saheb Das died without officially establishing a claim over the *janeu*, *tilak*, palanquin and the law for the members of *Satnampanth*. Agar Das had a son, called Agarman Das, with his first wife Karri, and he succeeded to the *gaddi*. After a few years, Karri bribed local officials and testified in court that Muktawan Das was Saheb Das’ son, whereas he was in fact the son of Karri and Ajab Das. This manoeuvre kept Atilbal Das, the son of Ajab Das and Gautrimata, out of the competition for the *gaddi* (ibid: 142).

By the 1920s, the tensions and conflicts between the gurus had grown worse. Around this time, the political scenario in colonial India was changing and the National Congress Party was gaining ground. The conflicts of the gurus were enacted in a new realm of institutional politics when the Congress Party nominated a Satnami as its candidate for representation in Parliament from the area (Babb 1972: 146). When Muktawan Das died Agarman Das’ son, Agam Das, succeeded him. Agam Das had strengthened his position considerably while Muktawan Das had been in jail from 1939-47 in relation to a land dispute. After his release from jail, Muktawan Das had aligned himself with the interests of the pro-British local gentry while Agam Das had actively supported the nationalist movement (ibid: 147). He was backed by the support of the sizeable Satnami community in Chhattisgarh which counted as a major potential voting bloc. Agam Das won the election by a considerable margin in 1952.⁹⁶

In the past, the gurus of *Satnampanth* had refused to become ‘rulers’ and had maintained that they were sacred leaders of the sect and were not interested in politics

⁹⁶ See also Dube (1998: 181). Neither Babb nor Dube document which constituency. Berthet (2008: 349) records that Agam Das was elected MLA for the first Lok Sabha (1952-57) and his wife Minimata, who also became an MP was re-elected twice to the Bilaspur-Durg Raipur SC reserved seat (1957-67) and then elected in the fifth Lok Sabha (1971-77) to the Janjgir reserved seat.

or the law. However, Agam Das' victory ushered new aspects into the internal politics of the sect such as prestige and political resources resulting from his success in secular politics (ibid: 148). Shortly after the victory, he died and one of his wives Minimata, supported by the Congress, stepped into his shoes. Minimata brought fundamental changes to the sect, largely because of the prestige and resources of her office and the support of the Congress Party. She was accepted by the Satnamis as their leader even though she was not a patrilineal successor to the *gaddi*. She claimed the *gaddi* for Vijay Kumar, who is Agam Das' son by another co-wife and is the present patrilineal successor to the *gaddi*.

During my fieldwork, people told me that Vijay Kumar, also called Vijay Guru, lives in Raipur, the capital of Chhattisgarh. They talked of him as a corrupt politician (*neta*) who had no direct contact with rural Satnamis. They felt distant from him and called him spoiled (*kharab*) by money and clandestine political activities and alliances. They did not speak of him as a spiritual or social leader and never as an icon. In 2003, Vijay Guru was in the Congress Party and his constituency was in Dongargarh in the Rajnandgaon District. He is now, somewhat incongruously, a supporter of the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) rather than the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) which represents 'untouchable' castes in north India. He is a trustee of the village fair in Girod (Girod *mela*), held every February on the grounds adjacent to the Satnami temples in the pilgrimage centre that commemorates the place where Guru Ghasi Das was enlightened. My Satnami informants were wary of Vijay Guru and said, in the words of one informant

... he gets people to do *puja* of him but does not do any social work. He is exploitative and is not a spiritual guru at all. It is a case of him reaping the benefits of his forefathers' legacy (*baap ki kamai, beta khai*).

According to this informant, in contrast to Vijay Guru, Balak Das had taught the Satnamis to fight and had established wrestling schools, called *akhara*, where Satnamis were trained in local martial arts. He claimed that one such *akhara* was located in a village called Bodsara in the Bilaspur district where an 'upper-caste' priest (*pundit*) was hired to guard the premises. After Balak Das passed away, the priest's family illegally took ownership of the property. A few years ago, a

descendent of Balak Das, called Bal Das, began insisting that the property should be returned to the Satnamis. The fight to claim ownership of this property is a present-day example of Satnami militancy that has its roots in the history of the Satnami sectarian movement.

From ‘dissenting’ sect to defamation by dissent

Similar to Dube’s claims of punitive police surrounding Satnami settlements in the past, police camps have been monitoring a volatile situation in Bodsara for the last few years. Satnamis in Bodsara claim that the above-mentioned plot of one acre of land upon which the Brahmin family by the name of Bajpayee has their house historically belongs to the Satnami community. According to the Satnamis in this village, the house is located on the site where a *jaith kambh* stands, which is one of the most highly regarded symbols of the sect. In the same village, Bal Das owns a house which he frequently visits. In the aftermath of the violence that erupted in Bodsara in 2007, he was arrested on the charges of inciting Satnamis in Bodsara to attack the Brahmin family that occupied the space. According to an article from 17 March 2007 in a local newspaper, the *Chhattisgarh Central Chronicle*, the Bodsara Gurudwara Mukti Andolan Samiti⁹⁷ (BGMAS) had taken out a huge rally on the day before and the controversy of the Bodsara *jaith kambh* had been going on for the past four years. Even though the president of the committee had objected to the unlocking of the main gate of the ‘Mahant Bada’, which is the gated location of the *jaith kambh*, Bal Das, along with his followers, had allegedly broken into it. The Brahmin family who own the plot on which the *jaith kambh* is located filed a petition to the High Court against Satnamis defending their right to what they claimed was their ancestral property. The High Court had ordered the property to be locked, and police officers had been posted there to keep it secure.

In the aftermath of incidents related to the same dispute in April 2008, 60 people had been arrested and Section 144 (which prohibits the assembling of five or more persons in one place) had been imposed by the police to contain the violence. Several police officers had been injured in the clashes and reports from my informants were full of descriptions of the kind of police brutality one hears about in relation to caste-

⁹⁷ Roughly translates as “Bodsara Temple Freedom Protest Association”

related ‘atrocities’. The police had allegedly raped several Satnami women, looted their homes, urinated on their cooking pots and other belongings, and severely beaten people. None of this has been reported by the mainstream media, but some informants claimed that they had witnesses’ testimonies and photo and video coverage of these assaults.⁹⁸ Furthermore, in relation to this dispute, 26 members of the opposing Congress Party had been suspended from the State Assembly for violating House Rules and granting the disputed plot to the Satnami people.⁹⁹ The case is still pending in the courts, and while some of the villagers who fled Bodsara when the violence erupted went back to their homes, many had not returned.

The fight between the Satnamis and the Brahmin landlord in Bodsara resonates with the kind of militancy Russell and Hiralal (1916) and Dube (1998) have documented. However, the fight for the one acre plot in Bodsara is an isolated incident that involves Satnami militancy in present-day Chhattisgarh. In contrast to the sense one gets from Dube, and Russell and Hiralal’s accounts, which claim that the Satnamis were in a constant “warlike” position against other castes - and could easily offend and not only defend themselves - uprisings are not widespread, and violence between Satnamis and ‘upper castes’ is not likely to erupt anytime and anywhere. The Satnamis are no longer perceived as a rebellious group in the sense that they were in the past, and nowadays they are not known to be carrying arms or weapons.¹⁰⁰ On the contrary, the majority of Satnamis today are poor peasants with small plots of land, and large numbers are wage labourers and seasonal migrant workers. In relation to Bodsara, some informants in my village had told me about the situation before the clashes took place. They had talked about the problem as something that was

⁹⁸ I will return to this point in chapters 5 and 6 in the sections on activism and the members of the Dalit Mukti Morcha who often claim that they have footage of atrocities that the police refuse to enter into the FIR. I am interested in highlighting the ways in which rural people are beginning to use high-tech equipment such as mobile phones and video cameras to document conflicts and how the footage from these gadgets is subsequently posted on websites as a strategy to expose the conflict in the wider media.

⁹⁹ <http://mynews.in/fullstory.aspx?passfrom=enterprisestory&storyid=7400>

¹⁰⁰ In a Chhattisgarh newspaper article, the Rajmahant (senior aide) Mr Basant Anchal of the Satnami community is quoted as saying, “There is some political motive and vested interests of some elements of our community who are trying to challenge the tranquillity and construct *Jaith Kambh* in Bodsara... Guru Ghasi Das showed us the way of peace, unity, non-violence and the *satnam* way. ... Activities of such elements besides disturbing the peaceful atmosphere will also defame the Satnami community.” from the Hitavada, March 23rd 2007.

particular to Bodsara, and the conflict in their view was a case of an unrelenting Brahmin owner and Bal Das' megalomania.

Ordinary Satnamis in Meu did not identify with the violence in Bodsara and considered it to be exceptional. They did not think that it represented their claims to assertion of self-sufficiency and autonomy. However, some Satnamis admitted that they thought it would be a good idea to have a Satnami *sena* (army) that could defend the Satnamis when they were attacked by 'upper-caste' vandals (*goondas*). Although the Satnamis supporting Bal Das may give the impression of a group that resembles a Satnami *sena*, there was no evidence that the Satnamis in other parts of Chhattisgarh were organised in militant Satnami groups.

Satnami dual identity and assertion of self-sufficiency

A sense of the kinds of attempts that the Satnamis have made in the past to assert their self-sufficiency and reject the dominance of 'upper castes' can be drawn from the history of the Satnami movement in Chhattisgarh. The present-day scenario still raises questions about the low status of this community in the village hierarchy. The kind of assertiveness that the Satnamis have attained through militancy and rebelliousness in the past cannot be overlooked, but in present day Chhattisgarh, as is shown in the previous section, the Satnamis are no longer perceived as a militant group in everyday life. However, their assertiveness as a group that regards itself as opposed to caste oppression is still pertinent today because they only partially subscribe to a Hindu caste identity. It is overlaid by a sectarian Satnami identity. The juxtaposition of their sectarian identity with the caste identity is what I aim to examine in this section. It throws light on the way in which the sectarian identity is a means by which Satnamis can retain separateness from other castes and they explain this in their own words as having selective or mitigated exchange or *len-den* with those castes that they deem as either oppressive or as inferior to them on a ritual scale of purity and 'pollution'.

A crucial difference between the Satnamis and other castes in Chhattisgarh is that the Satnamis practise a variation of Hinduism by being sectarian and having their own priesthood, pilgrimage site and calendar of ritual celebrations. Adherence to a sect depends, in theory, on individual choice no matter what the caste may be; however,

membership of a sect cannot be substituted for caste (Babb 1972: 146). Sects that bifurcated from the Hindu system of caste hierarchy are eventually permeated by caste practices of the predominant Hindu society in which the sect is positioned. Babb (1972: 151) points out that the development of the Satnami sect is closely related to ‘questions of ritual status’ especially those that have to do with the treatment of the Satnamis as ‘untouchables’. Rather than forming ‘a truly comprehensive system of belief’, the Satnamis have ‘re-shaped traditional elements of belief and practice in a sectarian frame’ (ibid). This primarily reflects their aspiration to rid themselves of the stigma of untouchability rather than to eradicate the caste system as such.¹⁰¹

Prior to becoming Satnami, the Chamars who converted were considered to be *avarna* (without *varna*) or outside of the *varna* system, which means that they were viewed as ‘untouchables’ by Hindus (Prakasam 1993: 45). The Satnamis in Chhattisgarh chose to use the name ‘Satnami’ to denote caste because being a Satnami is preferable to being a Chamar. ‘Satnami’ is used interchangeably to denote caste, sect or both (ibid: 88). Guru Ghasi Das admitted followers from different castes into the sect and he created a “dual identity: a religious ideological identity based on sect and a socio-cultural identity based on caste” (ibid: 95). He was “critical of the existing social order but left the contradiction between the two identities unresolved” (ibid). As pointed out earlier, *Satnampanth* emphasised equality of all its adherents before God. In contrast to the other movements that invoked *satnam*, caste rules were followed selectively by the gurus in Chhattisgarh. Members of other castes, such as Telis (Sahu) and Rawats, had also been permitted to join the sect, but the Mehars were left out. In my field site, the Mehars are followers of Ravidas and members of a movement similar to *Satnampanth*, which is however older, has fewer local members and has not made any far-reaching changes to the Mehars’ caste identity.

The Satnamis in Meu do not replace Hindu rituals but supplement them so that the everyday ritual life of the community is fairly similar to that of other Hindu castes in the village. In everyday village life, the ways in which the Satnamis juxtapose Hindu and Satnami symbols and practices are easily observable. For example, in almost all

¹⁰¹ The ‘Untouchables’ in India have never had a separate culture or religion. In Delière’s (1999: 201) view, their ‘sporadic attempts to set themselves apart from the rest of society have always ended in failure; one has only to look at the conversion movements’.

Satnami households in the village a medley of posters adorns the walls, and these depict film stars, kitsch sceneries, Hindu Gods and Goddesses and occasionally Guru Ghasi Das, amidst all the others. Moreover a *shivling*,¹⁰² which is an undoubtedly Hindu symbol, is not uncommon in their homes. It is noteworthy that posters of Guru Ghasi Das, which are sold at the Girod *mela* (the pilgrimage site for the Satnamis) are an example of iconography that the guru had forbidden. Guru Ghasi Das had allegedly thrown out Hindu idols and paraphernalia onto a rubbish heap (Dube 1998) and had instructed his followers to discard all Hindu symbols. He had encouraged the Satnamis to practise their beliefs without any iconic representations. The reversion back to revering icons provide evidence of sectarian practices that are permeated by predominantly Hindu practices and beliefs. Just as it is not uncommon to find icons and images of various Gods and other paraphernalia used in rituals in Hindu homes and temples the same can be said for Satnami homes and shrines.

On the other hand, in contrast to Hindu practices, the participation of Satnami *bhandaris* (similar to Hindu priest/*pundit*) at life-cycle rituals such as weddings and *chhatti* (sixth day celebrations after birth) is minimal and no one regards the often absent *bhandari* in the village as an authority of any sort. The *bhandari* was ironically proud of being well versed in the Ramayana - the epic mythology that belongs to Hindu spiritual practices and rituals - rather than showing interest in Satnami teachings. Village elders told me that they often performed the role of *bhandari* at life-cycle rituals because the *bhandari* is only an added expense that can be avoided. But, at the time of Ganes and Durga Puja, Satnami *para* residents had contributed money to hire a Hindu priest from another village to officiate the ceremonies.¹⁰³ Even at *chhatti* the Ramayana was loudly chanted and broadcast on loudspeakers for the entire *para* to hear. There was no sign of any texts relating to *satnam* at these occasions. While such examples could easily lead one to think that the Satnamis are *only* Hindu, it would be incorrect to dismiss the fact that they assert a separate identity from other Hindu castes.

¹⁰² It is a symbol of the Lord Shiva.

¹⁰³ In contrast to the past, Hindu Brahmins appointed to carry out rituals are generally more entrepreneurial than before and less ingrained in upholding traditional norms. See Chris Fuller's work on Tamil Brahmins (2007, 2008 and 2010).

Satnami informants repeatedly told me that they are Hindu by *dharm* (faith) and belong to the Satnami *samaj* or community, a word which is less distasteful than *jati*.¹⁰⁴ This puzzled me, and I wondered why they did not want to assert Satnami caste *and* faith because that is the underlying factor that makes them Satnami and allows them to separate themselves from the Hindu caste hierarchy in which they are at the bottom. Was it not being Satnami that was the means to resist ‘upper-caste’ oppression and assert self-sufficiency and independence from ‘upper-caste’ landowners (*gaonthias*) in the past? Why did the Satnamis in the village seem neither to be the kind of militant Satnamis the historical records describe nor feel the need to defend their Satnami identity to a greater extent?

My informants explained to me that, for them, being Satnami is defined by the fact that they have selective or mitigated interchange or exchange (*len-den*) with other castes and that they have gained self-sufficiency and autonomy through the Satnami caste.¹⁰⁵ Throughout the course of my fieldwork, the concept of no *len-den* with other castes was often reiterated to explain the way in which Satnamis relate to people belonging to other castes living in the other wards (*paras*) of the village. Sitaram Tondon is a prominent Satnami in the *para* and the father in the household in which I lived throughout the duration of my fieldwork. He explained the following to me at an early stage in my fieldwork, while I tried to grasp the duality of Satnami identity:

It is a matter of *Dharm* (faith). But when it is advantageous for the other castes to call us Hindu they do that. When they want votes, they come and say you are Hindu. And Hindu and Hindu are brothers. But when they do not need our votes, and when it concerns our advantage, they do not call us Hindu. Like in *sarvodayanik karya* (social or ritualistic activities) they do not call us Hindu. If there is a Ramayana recital then we are not Hindu. But our *Dharm* is Hindu.

His remarks were clarified further later on during my fieldwork, when on a sweltering hot afternoon, under the shade of a tree on the edge of the main road that runs through

¹⁰⁴ In colloquial Hindi / Chhattisgarhi ‘*jati*’ often implies the hierarchical connotations of caste.

¹⁰⁵ See also Jodhka (2004: 189) “While ideologically it [caste] is dead, or nearly so, caste survives and thrives as a source of identity.” Yet another point that relates to Satnami self-reliance is that the *jajmani* system (feudalistic patron-client relations), common in rural India in the past, no longer exists in the same way. In the past, militant Satnamis had also opted out of such relations to assert their self-reliance.

the Satnami ward (*para*) Jagdis Prasad said the following, while others squatting in the shade nodded in acquiescence:

Noni,¹⁰⁶ we (Satnamis) have no exchange (*len-den*) with people of other castes. People of other castes can do as they please, and we do the same. If they don't want to eat, drink and celebrate with us, we do it on our own. We work and eat through our hard labour. We do not depend on anyone else (any other caste) for our livelihood. The Sahus and other 'upper-castes' think they are better than us because they believe in untouchability (*chua-chut*) and caste discrimination (*jativad*). But the practice of untouchability (*chua-chut*) is no longer allowed.

And Net Ram interjected with the comment that

We are Satnami and we do not believe in caste discrimination/oppression (*bhed-bhav*). But we are rural (*dehati*) manual labourers (*majdoor*) and we have not been 'educated' (*siksit*) in the ways of *satnam*.

The group then together explained that the Satnamis find it difficult to live by the principles laid down by Guru Ghasi Das. The conversation veered towards recounting those principles such as teetotalism, vegetarianism and rules governing the consumption of certain lentils and aubergines. Throughout my stay in the village, I observed Satnamis eating meat such as chicken, goat and field mice, though none admitted to eating beef or pork. They often explained that giving up such practices would be difficult and that the Satnamis who adhere to teetotalism and vegetarianism are Satnami 'holy' men and women (*sadhu* and *sadhin*) who have chosen to become 'true' followers of Guru Ghasi Das. These Satnamis are believed to frequent Girod and wear white garments and the *kanthi*. According to the Satnamis in Meu, they have learned the teachings of Guru Ghasi Das in contrast to ordinary Satnamis who are not followers in that way. They explained further that they have not been 'educated' in

¹⁰⁶ Young unmarried girls in Chhattisgarhi are called *noni* by elders. I was called *noni* by my host mother and father in the household in which I lived and *didi* (older sister) by those younger than me. Some people outside the host household called me Madam (as if I were a schoolteacher or an employed young woman).

the ways of *satnam* and that as *dehati majdoor*¹⁰⁷ they do not feel inclined to follow ‘ascetic’ lifestyles or strictures. Those tendencies are for ‘holy’ Satnami men and women or those considered as renouncers.

Even though renunciation is not a requirement to be Satnami and none of the Satnami gurus were ever renouncers, my informants described ‘real’ Satnamis as those who showed traits of asceticism, in contrast to themselves. During the course of my fieldwork, I met several Satnami *sadhus* and *sadhins* and observed that adorning white garments and the *kanthi* were optional. These people were *sadhu* or *sadhin* based on their belief in *satnam* and their knowledge of Satnami myths and hymns. Most of them had spent long periods of time at Girod and were networked with other Satnamis like themselves. Most of them were older, and they lamented the decline in interest in *satnam* among the younger generation of Satnamis in the village.

While resting in the shade at midday in Girod (Satnami pilgrimage site), I met an ascetic-looking Satnami man. In our long conversation, Lal Das told me that he had come to Girod to make vows and wishes¹⁰⁸ (*manat mangne aye hai*) and to pay homage to the sacred site where Guru Ghasi Das had been enlightened. By visiting Girod he hoped that his mind would be cleared of worries and sadness. He told me that his family owns a small plot of land and cultivates paddy in a village called Ghabara in the Rajnandgoan District. He had studied up to the fifth grade in school and was always more interested in drawing and painting than in studying. He had often worked as a labourer on construction sites or at brick kilns in places as far away as Jaipur, Kutchch, Bhuj, Matarmar, Nalia and also Koteswar which lies close to the border with Pakistan. He was drawn to the idea of *satnam* after being ‘taught’ by a man while working in the Apollo Tyre Company in Baroda in Gujarat.

¹⁰⁷ *Dehati* means ‘illiterate and ignorant’ and *majdoor* implies ‘working in demeaning, exploitative and back-breaking agricultural labour’ in contrast to those who are educated – or literate – and have a *naukri* or salaried employment.

¹⁰⁸ Many Satnamis who come to Girod make a prayer or a wish to God for such things as good health for their family members or a boy child. The word they use is *manat* which is a wish that can be granted by God.



Meeting with Lal Das in Girod

Lal Das is married and has two children. He explained that he is not a renouncer, and nor is he an ascetic in the Hindu sense because he has a wife and children. In his view, “God gives everything. If you do not marry, how can you extend your family?” And he alluded to the naturalness of family life which is also God-given. He then commented on government initiatives that encourage people to get sterilised after having two children: he felt that this seemed sensible, but that men and women in his view must procreate because that was something given to them by God. While on this train of thought Lal Das, unprompted, said,

...human beings (*manav jat*) are one, and all human beings are moulded from the same clay and return to that clay when they die. All human beings emanate from the same womb. And what makes people one is drinking the same water and living together. Satnamis belong in the Hindu fold and are Hindus to begin with, but what separates them is their belief in *satnam* which is the embodiment of the idea of oneness with fellow human beings (of any caste) and subsequently with God. The message from Guru Ghasi Das and Ambedkar was to preserve the unity of one’s own people and to live and work together. The difference between the Hindus and the Satnamis lies in the

extent to which a person believes in *satnam*. Those who do not follow *satnam* are Hindus and those who do are Satnami. The ones who instil hierarchy or discrimination between castes (*bhed-bhav*) are the Brahmins. They think that nothing can be more superior to them and they say that *satnam* is backward and cannot be deemed to be 'better' than them. But *satnam* is much greater than the Brahmins. And this is the way in which the Brahmins oppress (*man-bhet*) and claim superiority.

In his narration, Lal Das provides a clarification of *satnam* as an ideological separator of the Satnamis from other Hindu castes. It also becomes evident in his explanation that believing in *satnam* does not extricate a person from being Hindu, nor from the caste system as such. The main driving force behind the idea of separation is, in effect, to bypass the hegemony of the Brahmins (this is an ideological stance rather than an empirical one).¹⁰⁹ But as Lal Das claims, the Brahmins liken *satnam* to backwardness and do not allow themselves to be seen as inferior in the Hindu caste system. Even though an ideological transgression is possible through the concept of *satnam* it neither changes the position of the Satnamis in relation to the Brahmin caste, nor is there a radical change in the existent order in the caste hierarchy itself. The idea of oneness with ones' own people described as those one shares water with highlights the idea that castes are bound by notions of purity and 'pollution'. These are most often transmitted through the consumption of water, be it drinking water or while bathing.¹¹⁰ People of other castes are admitted into the community by 'upper castes' more easily than the Satnamis; and although the Satnamis would accept water from a 'clean' caste, they ('clean' castes) would not accept water from the Satnamis. Adhering to such caste norms is not a choice for the Satnamis in Chhattisgarh because all other castes continue to practise Hindu caste norms.

Lal Das further related how 'upper-caste' Hindus treat those lower than them with contempt and maltreat Satnami women. He went on to say that they look down upon

¹⁰⁹ Although the Satnamis in Chhattisgarh often alluded to the Brahmins as the perpetrators of caste discrimination, my fieldwork showed that antagonism is mainly aimed at the 'clean' OBC castes, rather than just Brahmins.

¹¹⁰ As mentioned earlier, an area is specifically designated for Satnamis on the edges of the village ponds where people from all castes bathe.

the practice of remarriage (*churri-pehnana*) which is accepted by Satnamis.¹¹¹ He said that when a Satnami girl or boy falls in love with a person from a different caste, the couple is eventually accepted back into the community. But in non-Satnami communities, cross-caste marriage would not be as readily accepted. “‘Upper-caste’ men do not care for a Satnami wife”, he said. “They suck Satnami women and then throw them out”.

The dialectic of being within or outside a caste, and the need to separate from the condescension of others - especially ‘upper castes’ - is reiterated in the conversation with Lal Das. And it brings me back to the point that the sectarian and caste identities of the Satnamis seem to hang precariously in relation to one another and that the tension between the two categories is largely unresolved. On the one hand, the Satnami identity serves as a unifying factor in relation to other castes and is deftly used in mainstream politics and in electoral campaigns. On the other hand, the sectarian ideology of *satnam* is a pertinent framework that can provide existential and theological grounding for some Satnamis. The problem is that not *all* Satnamis necessarily find *satnam* relevant to their lives beyond a mere recognition of the concept and the use of Satnami caste denotation. The extent to which every Satnami chooses to follow the *satnam* ideal is highly variable and difficult to gauge.

The key to understanding Satnami separation lies in their own claim of mitigated or selective *len-den* (exchange) with other castes. This, in fact, resonates with the kind of self-sufficiency militancy put into place in the past. Rather than just accepting their low position in the caste hierarchy, the Satnamis in contemporary rural Chhattisgarh resent caste oppression and assert self-sufficiency through this claim. In contrast to the Mehars, who still carry out occupations that are deemed polluting in a ritualistic sense - such as disposing of carcasses – the Satnamis have established themselves as farmers and wage labourers who do not carry out ‘polluting’ occupations.

But what does their self-sufficiency mean? It is apparent that no caste can live in total independence from all others in the social and economic life of the village even though older systems of inter-dependence (*jajmani*) and dominance have been

¹¹¹ The practice of secondary marriage is also accepted by some OBC castes.

severely eroded (Mendelsohn 1993). Satnamis assert their self-sufficiency by having their own pilgrimage site and a sense of unity among themselves. Through the idiom of separation and self-sufficiency they project a sense of autonomy that can be seen as a social force¹¹² that is generated from within the community as collective agency that is exerted against the oppression of ‘upper castes’. It is not just simply a means of resistance as it is constitutive of Satnami agency and their identity as a unified caste.¹¹³

The Indian sect

The difference between the Indian sect and sects elsewhere is that in India, sects are defined as being a religious grouping that is often initiated by a renouncer or ascetic guru and set up by his/her followers (Dumont 1980: 187). In Dumont’s view, there is a close relationship between sectarianism and renunciation based on the observation that many sects were founded by renouncers (Parry 1974: 100). Dumont (1980: 184) explains that renunciation is a social institution that transcends society; and the social organisation that is governed by renunciation is a sect. Hence, it is in contradiction to ‘caste-society’ and exists parallel to it. In Chhattisgarh, the Chamars became followers of Guru Ghasi Das in an attempt to get rid of the stigma of untouchability. It is important to note that Guru Ghasi Das was not an ‘ideal-type’ renouncer in the traditional Hindu sense but was a ‘householder-ascetic’ who gained enlightenment through seclusion in a forest in a manner similar to ascetics, but returned to family life afterwards (Prakasam 1993: 101). This does not alter the significance of the Satnami movement but highlights the aspect that total renunciation (or estrangement from family life) was not deemed to be necessary in order to achieve enlightenment and leadership in the movement.

Dumont (1980: 187) explains that in theory, belonging to a sect is an individual matter that can be ‘superimposed’ on the caste of that individual, without necessarily affecting the caste. The Lingayats in south India are also considered a religious group that became a caste in spite of the fact that they ideologically reject the caste system.

¹¹² This follows from Mahmood’s (2001: 206) argument that agency can be understood as ‘the capacity to realise one’s own interests against the weight of custom, tradition, transcendental will or other obstacles (whether individual or collective)’.

¹¹³ Ortner (1995) points out, it is important not to treat resistance as something that is unambiguous in itself, as is evident in the Satnami case.

As J H Hutton and Max Weber described them, the Lingayats are characterised as a 'caste-sect' using the hyphenated term (McCormack 1963: 59 in Srinivas 1952: 31). Fuchs (1908) documents a number of movements that have arisen in the Indian subcontinent that have attempted to reject caste hierarchy by opting out of Hinduism. Most of these movements end up retaining similarities to Hindu doctrine and rituals, and the common denominator in all of them is that they react to some form of social and economic oppression, as well as being led by a charismatic leader who enables a certain amount of separation from the existent social hierarchy. The leader also creates a sense of egalitarianism within the group as a means to unify the group against Hindu caste hierarchy. Such movements of the 'untouchables' in India present a paradox whereby these communities - which are simultaneously rejected by other castes and are indispensable to society - have always felt that they are Hindu and felt close to the society that rejected them (Deliège 1999: 201).

Older Dalit Movements: Caste associations and the Satnami Mahasabha

Hindu reform movements and social reform movements such as those organised as caste *sabhas* or associations are not new in the Indian subcontinent. The Satnamis organised themselves in the Satnami Mahasabha in the 1920s when members of *Satnampanth* were led by a Mahar Hindu reformer, G. A. Gavai.¹¹⁴ Through him they presented a petition to the governor of the Central Provinces in an effort to participate in emergent politics within the region (Dube 1998: 17). At the time, the key demand in the petition was that the reformed Chamar community should be recognised as Satnami. During 1926-30 a chronicler of Satnami myths called Baba Ramchandra took over the reshaping of the Satnami Mahasabha. Under his leadership, the Mahasabha used language similar to that of the law of colonial administration alongside symbols and forms of authority within *Satnampanth* to formulate idioms of legality, authority and governance within the Satnami community (ibid). However, the extent to which the Mahasabha was successful in its demands is debatable because even until the 1980s (to the provocation of the Satnamis) the Madhya Pradesh list of Scheduled Castes in the District Census Handbook listed Satnamis as a sub-category set of Chamars (Parry 1999: 135).

¹¹⁴ Gavai positioned himself as a political rival of Ambedkar and was mostly preoccupied with Hindu unity as it had been defined by the Hindu reformist movements. For more on G. A. Gavai, see Omvedt (1994: 109-113) and Jaffrelot (2005: 43-44; 54 and 58).

The Satnami Mahasabha was a caste *association* in contrast to caste *federations* which, Hardtmann (2003: 45) argues, were the forerunners of the contemporary Dalit movement. She draws a distinction between ‘caste associations, caste federations and the Dalit movement’. Caste associations (such as the Satnami *Mahasabha*) differ from *jati* (caste group) and caste *panchayat* (village caste-council) because membership of a caste association can require payment of membership fees and involve organised meetings. Caste federations, on the other hand, can be seen as a forerunner of the contemporary Dalit movement as they are a network of various caste associations and bring different groups of *jatis* together under umbrella organisations. In the case of the Dalit movement, common experiences of exclusion brought Scheduled Caste *jatis* (castes) together in these networks (ibid). The difference between the contemporary Dalit movement and these caste federations was that the federations often emphasised a demand for higher status for Scheduled Castes (see *Sanskritisation*; Srinivas 1952) and therefore still belonged in a tradition of Hindu caste reform rather than in the ‘autonomous anti-caste’ tradition to be found in the Dalit movement of the last few decades (ibid: 46).

Traditional Hindu reform movements: ‘Bhakti’

Traditional Hindu reform movements can be traced back to between the 13th and 17th centuries when the *bhakti* movement spread to many parts of India (Guptoo 1993: 278). The *bhakti* movement was led by poets who preached equality among men and the importance of the divine in each person so that every person, regardless of their caste or position in society, could have equal access to spiritual enlightenment through devotion.¹¹⁵ Some of the well known *bhakti* ‘saints’ are Mira Bai, Kabir, Tukaram and Basavanna, who popularised their beliefs through poems, folklore, devotional hymns and discourses that often dealt with caste injustices (Shah et al 2006: 31) (see also Jaffrelot 2000: 764; Hardtmann 2003: 41).

The relevance of *bhakti* reform movements in Chhattisgarh vis-à-vis the *Satnampanth* movement is looked at in the section below. In terms of *bhakti* and sectarian

¹¹⁵ Gupta (1993: 282) explains that the idiom of self-assertion in *bhakti* is derived from its message of social equality for all castes. Ideologically, one’s caste was made irrelevant through devotion and personal communion with God, whereby all were equal in the eyes of God. According to her, *Bhakti* was claimed to be a ‘distinct and egalitarian religious tradition that pre-dated Vedic Hinduism’ (ibid: 292).

movements, Dumont (cited in Parry 1974: 116) typifies *bhakti* as “an invention of the renouncer” where the religious teachings are revolutionary but not the social message. Thus, while “renunciation transcends the caste order by relegating it to a profane concern, *bhakti* transcends both caste and renunciation by internalising the latter. For Dumont, then, it is the individual religion of choice, which does not deny the religion of the group but is supplementary to it, and which confines the equality of the devotees to the religious sphere while leaving the social order intact” (ibid). Parry (1974: 117), however, argues that *bhakti* movements have been particularly attractive for lower and ‘untouchable’ castes not only because of their teachings of religious egalitarianism but also because of the social implications of these. Significantly, he points out the element of ambivalence whereby devotees on the one hand explicitly deny inequalities between men and on the other adopt “a style of life and a set of customs calculated to enhance their standing in the eyes of orthodox society”.

In contrast to *bhakti* movements, the members of *Satnampanth* became members of both a sect as well as a caste. Most adherents of *Kabirpanth* in Chhattisgarh retain their caste identities; and it is one of the most widespread *bhakti* movements in the region. They do not acquire a new caste identity by following the tenets of *Kabirpanth*. *Kabirpanth* poses alternatives to caste hierarchy at an ideological level and, similarly to *Satnampanth*, forbids idol worship and consumption of meat and alcohol. *Kabirpanth* became popular mainly among the Panika and Teli castes¹¹⁶ in Chhattisgarh which belong in the OBC (Other Backward Classes) category in the government census (Dube 1998: 44). Thus, they are a lower ‘clean caste’ but are not ‘untouchables’. Members of *Kabirpanth* were governed by the norms of the castes to which they belong through village caste *panchayat* and the *Kabirpanth* gurus could not influence unity at the level of inter-dining or inter-caste marriage between the different castes that its members belong to (Dube 1998: 63). *Satnampanth*, on the other hand, united its members as a caste group.

The significance of distinguishing *Satnampanth* from the *bhakti* tradition and *Kabirpanth* has two implications: firstly, that *Satnampanth* united its members as a

¹¹⁶ It is important to point out that in many parts of Chhattisgarh, the Telis - also commonly known as Sahus - are the dominant caste, although they are a lower ‘clean’ caste.

substantialised¹¹⁷ caste group, which is not the case for members belonging to *Kabirpanth*. Secondly, although the tenets of both overlap in relation to rejection of idol worship and purification through denying consumption of meat and alcohol, *Satnampanth* allowed the emergence of an assertive identity among the Satnamis of Chhattisgarh that projected self-sufficiency. *Satnampanth* ideology was instrumental as a means for Satnamis to denounce caste oppression and the domination of ‘upper castes’. The militant past of the Satnamis, coupled with their assertion of self-sufficiency, has been a partially viable means for the Satnamis to defend themselves against caste oppression in everyday village life. However, the Satnami ideology does not break with Hindu tradition entirely. Many of the beliefs and rituals in the Satnami faith are similar to those of Hinduism. Satnami sectarian ideology can be seen as a bifurcation away from Hinduism, but contemporary rural Satnamis have largely tried to appropriate mainstream Hindu practices. By doing so, the Satnamis of contemporary Chhattisgarh not only juxtapose their sectarian and caste identity, but substantialise themselves as a caste. The implication of Satnami substantialisation is further examined in the section that follows.

Satnami substantialisation

According to Bouglé (1971) the caste system can be characterised as a hierarchy in which castes are interdependent (when practicing traditional occupations) and are ‘mutually repulsive’, while maintaining separation through practices such as endogamy and restricted commensality. Recent studies and my fieldwork show that the interdependence between castes in a traditional sense is nearly obsolete as a result of the decline in the *jajmani* system (feudal patron-clientalism) among other factors. Hierarchy too has become increasingly ambiguous. What remains, and is visible in everyday village life, is the separation between ‘clean’ and ‘unclean’ castes. Thus “while the hierarchical ordering and interdependence of castes has been greatly eroded, the stress on their separation remains” (Parry 2007: 482).

¹¹⁷ Dumont’s (1980) formulation of substantialisation in Fuller (1997: 12) is that “at the ideological level, structure yields to substance and each caste becomes like a collective individual with its own distinctive culture and ‘way of life’”. The Satnamis of Chhattisgarh are a ‘substantialised’ caste based on the ideology of *satnam*, which is the substance that unites them. By ‘substantialising’ in this way, the Satnamis form a separate group that, at the structural level, competes as a ranked horizontal block with other castes. (See also Pocock 1957)

In 1957, Srinivas argued that the significance of caste could be seen in politics and Fuller forty years later (1997: 11) argues that the strengthening of caste in politics could already be traced in the colonial period and it accelerated after Independence in 1947. Dumont notes that Srinivas concluded in his article published in 1957 that,

“In general it may be confidently said that the last hundred years has seen a great increase in caste solidarity, and the concomitant decrease of a sense of interdependence between different castes living in a region”.

In addition, “there has been an increase in ‘tensions’ between different castes ... these ‘tensions’ are interpreted as marking a reinforcement of caste solidarities. But, there is in general a fading away of the ‘caste system’ and this can be seen as a lessening of hierarchy which is being replaced by a ‘non-structural sense of difference’” (Dumont 1980: 226).¹¹⁸

Dumont’s approach to the caste system is holistic; it is viewed as a structural whole and thus follows his argument that the lessening of hierarchy is replaced by difference in a non-structural sense. In his view, it is the relations between castes and their relations to the whole system that comprise the system. Drawing upon the observations of Ghurye (and Srinivas) he points out that in the ‘40s and ‘50s aspects of social movements and, in particular, the non-Brahmin movement, which was inaugurated by Phule in Poona in the mid-nineteenth century, meant that “hierarchy is attacked by the non-Brahmin movement and that the rules concerning food and drink are considerably relaxed, especially in the towns” (Dumont 1980: 220-221). Furthermore, castes were no longer seen as prescribing occupation, but caste endogamy was still being widely practised. These changes were observed in the context of urban growth and what was emerging could be seen as forms of caste solidarity based on caste consciousness and caste associations called *sabhas* (ibid). (However, Dumont (1980: 225) also says that the *sabhas* rarely played a part in everyday village life.) Whereas caste *panchayats* in villages were limited to the area

¹¹⁸Dumont (1980: 222) argues that substantialisation of caste occurs when there is a transition of castes from being in a “fluid, structural universe in which the emphasis is on interdependence and in which there is no privileged level, no firm units, to a universe of impenetrable blocks, self-sufficient, essentially identical and in competition with one another, a universe in which the caste appears as a collective *individual* (in the sense we have given this word) as a substance”.

of the village itself, the newer caste associations would 'comprise all the members of the caste speaking the same language' (ibid), whether they were living in rural or urban areas. (This is illustrated by the case of the Kontaikkatti Vellalar (KV) which I discuss below.)

However, the important point that emerges from Ghurye's observations is that caste groups could be seen in competition with each other for social and economic resources. Castes thus firstly showed solidarity and secondly competition among themselves. The most important aspect of the emergence of caste in politics was the way in which the pre-colonial political system "imposed severe limits on the horizontal extension of caste ties" but "over a period of time the boundaries were mobile [and this] meant that cultural ties frequently cut across the existing political boundaries" (Srinivas 1957: 529). Thus, as internal differences between members of a caste began to fade away, this led to castes looking more like blocs. B  teille (1969: 146-151) points to the variation and 'segmentation' (based on separate sub-castes) within a caste and stresses that the boundaries between adjacent segments were becoming increasingly blurry, but a 'widening of cleavages between the larger segments' could be observed in the political sphere (ibid: 151).

A case that illustrates this is that of the KVs in Tamil Nadu, who are an example of a caste substantialised on the basis of 'blood' (*irattam*) and 'purity' (*mati*), which is the substance that unites all KVs and is inherited at birth. The KVs are orthodox and are more concerned with 'blood purity' than other non-Brahman castes. Hence, they are wary of those actions that may lower 'blood purity' such as consumption of meat and share a 'code of conduct' that unifies them (Barnett 1977: 398). KVs are internally ranked by lifestyle; those less fastidious about purity are ranked lower than others (ibid: 399). But, within the contemporary caste group, these distinctions between the KVs are eroded. Barnett (1977: 399) argues that until the 1920s, "caste hierarchy was intact as a structure stressing holism, interdependence of its parts, and rank corroborated through asymmetric inter-caste transactions". Thus "castes, sub-castes and kindreds emerged as plateaus which temporarily freeze the constant flow of relatively pure and polluting material in particular contexts within local wholes" (ibid).

In post-colonial society, the KVs experienced internal changes as a caste group where differentiation based along urban and rural lines became more apparent. But the group acted as a regional caste bloc, independent of the services of other castes. KV reformers began accepting intermarriage between the different KV sub-castes and stressed substance i.e. 'blood purity' rather than code of conduct as the unifying element for all KVs. Thus Barnett emphasises that KV identity can be seen as an "inheritable, inviolable substance" which changed the KV caste into a "KV ethnic-like regional caste bloc" where one can observe a transition from "caste as a holistic, interdependent, transitionally ranked hierarchy to caste blocs as substantial (in Dumont's sense), independent, attributionally ranked units in a plurality" (ibid: 408).

Similarly, the Satnamis in Chhattisgarh assert self-sufficiency through their own ritual specialists, the *bhandari* (instead of the Brahmin priest) and *sathidar* (instead of the Hindu barber) (Parry 1999: 136) and are thus independent of the ritual services of other castes. In doing so, the Satnamis assert their autonomy through mitigated or no exchange (*len-den*) with other castes. They are able to assert self-sufficiency as a means of circumventing oppressive relations with other castes and simultaneously rejecting their low position in the hierarchical caste system. They too are internally differentiated, a distinction being made between urban, educated and well off Satnamis and rural wage labourers. But the Satnami sectarian ideology of *satnam* and symbols such as the *jaith kambh* (victory pole) and the celebration of Guru Ghasi Das' birthday on 18th December are some of the aspects that unite the caste as a substantialised group.

Fuller (1997: 11) suggests that the theory of caste substantialisation deals, most importantly, with the ways in which modern changes in caste can be analysed. He draws upon Mayer's fieldwork, which was conducted over forty years in a village called Ramkheri where caste rank had become increasingly less sharply defined. Castes there, as in other parts of rural India, still practise endogamy, but emphasise *khan-pin* (food and drink) and *rahan-sahan* (way of life) as distinctive markers of cultural difference; and this difference rather than hierarchical rank becomes the marker of separation between castes (ibid: 12). Fuller argues that this leads to a process contrary to substantialisation because as castes become more internally heterogeneous the boundaries between castes also become more blurry. However,

relational hierarchical values are still prominent in people's private views about other castes, even though in the public domain it may seem as though there is 'no caste left' (ibid: 12-13). Substantialisation thus sharpens the divide between public and private behaviour and expression (ibid: 14).

A few years after Srinivas' essay on 'Caste in Modern India' (1966: 114 in Ishii 2007: 93), he observed that there was "freeing of caste from its traditional, local, and vertical matrix" and that there was "coming into existence of new opportunities, educational, economic and political [that] brought about an increase in horizontal solidarity". In relation to this, Fuller's argument is that increasing internal differentiation within castes and the emphasis on other markers of difference than ritual purity or 'pollution' paradoxically also leads to a greater sense of separation between castes.

This is observable in Meu. Household surveys conducted in the village showed that many OBC castes in the village had ritual friendships with people from other OBC castes than their own. In contrast, most Satnamis have ritual friendships with other Satnamis. Of the total of 74 Satnami households where members of the family have a *mitan/mitanin*, 68 had friendships with other Satnamis and only six with a person of another caste. In contrast, the same survey data for the Sahu caste showed that in a total of 74 households participating in the survey, members in 45 households had a *mitan/mitanin* of a different caste and 29 of the same caste. Similar patterns were evident among other OBC castes, such as Dhobi, Lohar, Yadav (Rahoud), Dhimar and Nai. Overall, of the 234 households that said they had a *mitan/mitanin*, 123 had one of their own caste and 111 had one of another caste.

Parry (2007: 486) argues that, amongst 'higher' and 'middle' castes, what can be observed is their 'partial merger' rather than separation. Drawing on Mayer's example of inter-caste dining at wedding celebrations, Parry stresses that in the case of Chhattisgarh, while 'Hindu' castes dine publicly at a wedding celebration, which is a show of their 'equality', it is most unlikely that a Satnami would be a part of such dining. He argues that for the 'upper'- and 'middle'-ranking castes, hierarchy and separation have declined and what can be observed is the sharp separation between the 'Hindu' castes and the Satnamis. While secondary unions and commensality that

cut across caste are tolerated among the 'clean' castes, marriage and commensality between a member of a 'clean' caste and a Satnami would be highly objectionable.

In Meu, the 'clean' or 'Hindu' castes in the village include absentee Brahmins, Sahus, Rawats, Kashyaps, Dhobis, Lohar and Panika. The largest of these are Sahus and the area of the village where these castes reside is called the Sahu *para* (ward) in the same manner as people refer to the 'Hindu' *para* in Parry's ethnography of village-cum-labour-colonies surrounding the Bhilai steel plant south-west of my field site. The Satnamis live segregated from the 'clean' castes and their part of the village is called *basti*.¹¹⁹ This is an example of separation between the Satnamis and the 'clean' castes that gives the illusion of a bloc of their own set in sharp relief against the Satnami caste. Inter-caste marriage is not the norm between the different 'clean' castes, but secondary unions that cross the caste boundaries may be tolerated. In the case of secondary unions, crossing the divide between the 'clean' and Satnami caste is not tolerated. The only case of such an arrangement in the village that people recalled was between a Brahmin and a Satnami woman whom he kept as a concubine in a separate hut and visited occasionally. No such arrangements were to be found in the village at present, and stories of young people who had eloped were to be heard - but they had either been told to break off relations or had been ostracised by village social networks.

Parry's (2007) argument is that separation among the 'clean' or 'Hindu' castes has declined because of internal differentiation and that there may even be a 'partial merger' between those castes, while there is a clearer separation from 'unclean' castes such as the Satnami. He argues that castes are more visibly differentiated internally by class and that many individuals find it easier to identify with people of a similar class, even though they may be of a different caste. Fuller (1997) on the other hand argues that separation does not decrease despite internal differentiation. In urban India, it may be the case that internal differentiation does indeed lead to lesser separation between castes, but in the rural setting of Meu for example, the separation between castes and especially between the 'clean' castes and the Satnamis can still be observed. Thus, while Parry's argument holds true for the separation between the

¹¹⁹ This is a term that can be translated as 'village' (Webster's Hindi-English Dictionary). It can be interpreted as derogatory, meaning 'lesser developed' or poorer. This is the connotation that villagers in Meu implied when they called the Satnami *para* a *basti*.

‘clean’ and Satnami castes, it is Fuller’s argument that can be applied to the general situation concerning castes in Meu.

The separation of castes through endogamy and commensality as well as their position in the ritual hierarchy still plays an important part in everyday village life. Some castes that practise traditional occupations such as Lohar (ironsmith) and Rahoud or Yadav, who are cattle herders and milkmen, are both ‘middle-ranking’ castes and fall under the OBC category in the national censuses. Cross-caste primary marriage between these castes is not acceptable in the village social hierarchy. The Rahoud have a special position in the ritual hierarchy because all castes can accept food prepared by them. Their profession of tending cows, which are considered holy, makes them ‘purer’ in a ritualistic sense. However, the restrictions on endogamy and commensality still apply. Restrictions could be observed in the village schools where women from the Rahoud caste were appointed to prepare the mid-day meals so that children of all castes could consume the food. Apart from such a public observance, in private the restrictions seemed even more obvious. ‘Lower’ caste people did not consume cooked portions of food in celebrations at life-cycle events. ‘Clean castes’, if invited, did not venture to sit together with Satnamis eating the ceremonial *bhaat*. They usually stayed away from the eating area and instead sat or stood at a distance either chatting or resting in the shade. Nobody expected them to join the eating. In the survey carried out in the Satnami *para* there were no instances of cross-caste marriage in Meu. Although I did not carry out a village-wide survey to check whether there had been any cross-caste marriages between different OBC castes, I asked informants at various points about cross-caste marriage (and often incited them to tell me about anything that would be unusual in terms of village norms) and I was not told about any cross-caste marriages that had caused a stir. I also asked them whether it would be something that would go unnoticed. Generally, the answer was that it may not be a huge concern in a secondary marriage, say between a Sahu and a Kashyap, but it would be unusual for a primary marriage between different OBC castes to go unnoticed and unsanctioned by the caste *panchayats*.

At the other extreme are the Mehars. The Mehars are strictly endogamous, and no other castes in the village openly inter-dine with them. The various caste groups in the village live more or less concentrated in their own areas or ward in the village. There

is not much internal heterogeneity within each caste group. While they may have relations in urban areas, these relations do not permeate everyday village life to a considerable extent. In fact, the separation between urban and rural lifestyles is an important marker of difference for most of these castes.

Concluding remarks

The trajectory of the Satnami movement shows both the ways in which Satnamis juxtapose sectarian identity with caste, as well as the unravelling of spiritual leadership within the sect. The duality of the Satnami identity keeps them partially within the Hindu fold and does not structurally alter their position in the caste hierarchy. However, the Satnamis have historically asserted self-sufficiency through the Satnami identity and although they are no longer a militant caste, militancy in the past enabled them to accrue land and become landed peasants. Large numbers of rural Satnamis became migrant labourers in the '70s in coal mines in central India and in the past, many had also migrated to the tea plantations in Assam. Migrant labour was an important source of secondary income and helped the Satnamis to retain their landholdings in Chhattisgarh.

The inclusion of Satnami gurus in mainstream politics changed the iconic positioning of Satnami spiritual leadership. The gurus no longer act as ideological or moral leaders of the sect and the Satnami caste identity has more salience in the everyday life of rural Satnamis rather than adherence to the tenets (or the prescribed rules) of the sect such as abstinence from alcohol, vegetarianism that also excludes the consumption of certain lentils and aubergines and other aspects that have become vestigial to the Satnami identity. By and large, what remains is assertion of Satnami identity through symbols that unify the caste as a 'substantialised' caste. Satnami 'substantialisation' can be based on the ideology of *satnam* and shared symbols of the sect. While separation between castes in the village perpetuates there is greater interaction among the OBC castes in relation to commensality as well as in instances of ritual friendship. This throws the separation between OBC castes and Satnamis into sharper relief. Internal heterogeneity within castes in the village does not lead to the kinds of cross-caste sociality that can be found in urban areas.

The importance of Satnami sectarianism to the overall argument in this thesis is to understand Satnami self-assertion and why it may be more important to Satnami identity than the Dalit identity. The historical position of Satnamis as dissident caste under lays their sense of autonomy and separation from other castes. The material presented in this chapter examines rural Satnamis' claims of 'independence' from other castes in the historical context as well as in present everyday village life. It also shows that internal heterogeneity within a caste in the village does not necessarily lead to blurring of caste boundaries in the same way as one may expect in an urban context. While Dube's, Prakasam's and Parry's ethnographies examine Satnami identity in the historical, rural and semi-urban context, respectively, the material presented here draws upon their work to relate it to the Satnamis in Meu. The focus in this chapter has been on the ways in which the dual sectarian and caste identity plays out; and how that can affect the caste positioning that Satnamis have in contemporary village life.

Chapter 4

Yuva Ambedkar Chetna Manch (YACM): Awareness (*jaankari*), Education and Social Mobility

On a cold evening, at around nine o'clock, a couple of days before Republic Day on 26th January, the YACM held a meeting. Its members were assembled in front of a small shop in Narayan's house. The shop had closed just before the meeting began, and members had bought sachets of *pan masala* to chew throughout the duration of the meeting. They were huddled together on the clay ground, which had been washed with water-diluted cow dung earlier that day. Some of them had wrapped a scarf around their heads to keep themselves warm, while others had draped a blanket around their shoulders. A hurricane lamp burning in the centre of the circle of men threw a dim light on their faces. They chewed and talked simultaneously, exchanging notes on the events of the day. They looked around at each other and called out names to check who was present. One of the members, Gautam, nicknamed *guruji* by some of the members because he is a schoolteacher, started the meeting. He began by saying:

If the *panchayat* (elected village council) does not do its job properly, we should put pressure on it. If teachers don't teach properly in the schools, we should put pressure on them. When there is a problem in the village, we should get together and find solutions. That is what our association is for. It is in the name of Baba *sahib* [Ambedkar] and we should organise events and programmes to let people know that we are an association. Every year we celebrate 26th January. We do that because on 26th January, our country became a republic and the constitution was enforced. We [the YACM] have *jaankari* (information/ knowledge) about our *adhikaar* (rights). In Chhattisgarh people don't know about their rights because 80% are *majdoor* (wage labourers) and farmers. They are not educated. They do not know about matters related to the law or their rights. They do not understand these things. Now that a few of us *yuva* (youth) are *parhe-likhe* (educated) in this village, by joining our association and its programmes, others in the village can also get *jaankari*.



YACM banner and Ambedkar's portrait consecrated with flowers



Main members of the YACM

The emphasis on education and being aware of one's rights is pivotal to the ways in which the younger Satnami generation differentiate themselves from the older generation and those who are illiterate. The spread of education is one of the factors that has catalysed a major shift towards consciousness of one's rights and prompted the formation of associations such as the YACM. The name of the association translates as 'Youth Ambedkar Awareness Forum' (called a *samiti* or *samuh* in local parlance),¹²⁰ and it is not politically affiliated to any mainstream political party. However, all the members of this group are supporters of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), which represents Dalits all over India and is particularly strong in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh (UP). The BSP does not have the same degree of support in Chhattisgarh, where the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is in power. The YACM invokes Ambedkar and the importance of education as a means of transcending caste discrimination in everyday village life and encouraging upward social mobility (see Gorringer 2005: 158) which was unavailable to previous generations of rural Satnamis.

To inaugurate the association in 2004, members of the group had met in one of the members' houses and had held a short ceremony. They had consecrated a poster of Ambedkar with garlands of marigold and incense and burst a coconut which was cut and distributed among them. Ganes (more about him further below) was elected as the president of the association, and the secretary and the treasurer had also been elected at the same time. The members said that they consecrate a portrait of Ambedkar on 14th April each year to mark Ambedkar *Jayanti* (birthday). In addition, on 26th January, they display his portrait and garland it with flowers during the celebration of Republic Day (as can be seen in the images above). When I asked different members of the YACM why they had come together to form the association in 2004, responses included: "The YACM was formed so that there could be awareness and awakening (*jaagriti*) in our community (*samaj*). We are educated now, but it does not help just to be educated; we must also take responsibility for bringing development (*vikas*) and progress (*unnati*) to our community. We want to improve the conditions for our community in the village and fight for our rights".

¹²⁰ See also Jeffrey (et al. 2008: 181).

The kinds of recent changes that had occurred in the village that the young men perceived as development, quite apart from education, were the new cement road that runs through the Satnami *para* and the fact that most people now ate three meals a day, rather than just two. There were other subtle changes that were identified by people in the course of my fieldwork, but these were the developments that people thought constituted the most progress (*unnati*) and improvement in the living standards of the Satnamis. Upward mobility through marrying daughters to Satnamis in other villages who were better educated and had secondary income through a small shop or employment other than agriculture was another means of improving status. And, as a result of the slight increase in disposable income owing to a rise in government prices for paddy, some people could more easily afford objects such as trinkets, electronic gadgets, TVs, mobile phones and personal items such as clothing and footwear.

They also said that the YACM existed in order to make sure that the flow of government funds to the *panchayat* (village council) would be allocated fairly. The *sarpanc* (headman) Nand Ram serves both Meu and the neighbouring village Chewdih, and they felt that he had to be closely monitored to make sure he would not compromise Meu in any development opportunities.¹²¹ At the time of my fieldwork, the YACM had not yet been registered with the Sub-Registrar in Bilaspur and was not recognised officially by the *panchayat*, Block or District level official authorities.¹²² In order for the YACM to have any clout with the *panchayat*, registration is necessary. Upon being registered as a village-level civil society association, the YACM would also be eligible for government loans. Registration costs Rupees 1500 (£18) and members said that they had not yet felt the need to register and that it would take a while to collect the money required.

¹²¹ A village association in the neighbouring state of Madhya Pradesh (MP) called Jagrut [Aware] Adivasi Dalit Sangathan [Group], which originated as a labour union has worked for many years on issues of tribal land rights. This organisation emphasises the importance of education and awareness of one's rights and publicises the processes through which these can be claimed. The focus of this organisation is the implementation of the NREGA scheme (more about this is Chapter 2) in villages in MP (Khera 2008: 8-10). The NREGA scheme was starting to be implemented in Chhattisgarh at the end of my fieldwork and is an example of the kinds of development initiatives that are channelled through the *panchayats* in rural India.

¹²² The five-tier governance structure in India is as follows: Central, State, District, Tehsil/Block and Village Council or *panchayat* level.

Therefore, although the young men talked about the need to curtail corruption in the dealings of the *panchayat*, they did not play an active or instrumental role in village politics. They never attended *panchayat* meetings, which were often postponed indefinitely and held in an *ad hoc* manner when they did take place. The inclusion of discourses about corruption in the repertoire of the young men is important in two ways. Firstly, as educated young men, it shows their disdain for corrupt practices and their awareness of the mechanisms by which social conditions can be improved i.e. through transparent and accountable practices in the dealings of power wielders such as the *panchayat*. Secondly, the discourse about corruption in India is ubiquitous and is part of any conversation that takes stock of the state of affairs, just as much in urban as in rural India (see also Gupta 1995 and Parry 2000). It is a way in which people relate to bureaucratic institutions and the state, to which they are otherwise distantly positioned. Village administrative authorities are viewed with scepticism because people in rural communities such as Meu are particularly wary of being given the short end of the stick in relation to development schemes. Therefore, it was not unusual to discover that the young men in the YACM had a commentary about corruption, but that they did not engage with any institutional aspects in the way in which urban activists do by invoking the recently implemented Right to Information (RTI) Act.¹²³

RTI is an example of the newer institutions that the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government, led by Sonia Gandhi and the Congress party, have implemented in the last decade. The extent to which all YACM members are aware of institutions such as 'Right to Information' varies within the group. Some of the members said they had heard of it; others could explain the implications of the newly implemented institution; and a few had not heard of it at all. The men who knew of RTI had heard about it through newspapers and radio or television news. None of the young men in the village had used the institution in any instrumental way. None had initiated court cases or other grievances that related directly to state institutions where RTI would become relevant. It was part of some of the young men's sense of awareness of newer institutions that were part of larger national debates that they could follow through the media available to them.

¹²³ The Right to Information Act was passed by parliament in 2005. The Act is implicit in Article 19 in the Constitution which guarantees the rights of citizens to free speech and expression.

Characteristically, these kinds of institutions, which have a strong element of progressive development thinking driving them, fail to impact the daily lives of rural people. The awareness of such institutions is at best gradual in rural areas. RTI has been embedded in discourses related to the rights of the common man (*aam admi*) but this discourse is mainly appropriated by urban NGOs such as the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (Labourer Farmer “Power” Association) in Rajasthan, the Peoples Union for Civil Liberties and activists such as Anna Hazare.¹²⁴ It becomes prominent in issues that relate directly to state practices and bureaucracy, or in court cases. It remains suspended in the domain of the middle-classes and in a realm of institutional democracy that is rife with corruption in India. It has much to do with opposing the culture of bribery and exposing fraud. However, such an institution is inherently top-down and barely gets internalised by rural communities that lack basic infrastructures and mostly rely on traditional forms of arbitration rather than secular courts. RTI to most people in Meu is unknown or is jargon similar to BPL (Below Poverty Line) and NREGA. It is not seen in the same light as Ambedkarite discourses that village youth can identify with through what they have learned in school.

The YACM and Ambedkar

Although Ambedkar is prominent in the name of this association, most of its members told me that the reason they got together was to “develop the village” and to “make demands of the *sarpanc*”. A few others said that the association was formed to organise festivities in the *para* at the time of Ganes and Durga Puja and events to mark Ambedkar’s birthday. And a couple of them said that “it felt good to be doing something together”. Only one member referred to “enlightening the name of Ambedkar”. The preoccupation with development resonates with the perceived benefits of formal education, such as improvement or social reform (*sudhar*) (Ciotti 2006: 899) and progress (*unnati*), as well as Ambedkar’s emphasis on education as a means of rising above the stigma of untouchability.

In rural Chhattisgarh the importance of Ambedkar as the leader of the Dalits is disseminated in the speeches of BSP local politician Dauram Ratnakar. In the

¹²⁴ Paper given by Martin Webb at the South Asian Anthropology Group (SAAG) meeting in Durham, 2008.

newspaper and television media, news and stories of Dalit politics in north India, particularly in Uttar Pradesh (UP), are regularly printed and broadcast. These present symbols and discourses related to Ambedkar and Dalit rights. The rise in UP of Dalit political leader Mayawati - and her zestful inauguration of stadiums, parks and traffic islands named after Ambedkar and new statues of him that have sprung up all over UP - are reported in the mass media. Local Hindi newspapers such as '*Chhattisgarh*' and '*Deshbandhu*' carry reports of caste oppression (*bhed-bhav*) and atrocities against the Dalits of Chhattisgarh (in these media, Dalit is generally the term for the Satnami community). These are some of the sources that the group is exposed to that inform their perception of Ambedkar and Dalit rights. The gist of these political speeches and media reports is the fight for Dalit rights against 'upper-caste' oppression and a demand for an end to the kinds of humiliation 'untouchables' have suffered for generations. In in-depth interviews conducted with each of the members of the group, most of them said that they read the local newspapers that are delivered to a village shop. More proficient readers told the rest of the group about the news in them. Thus, all the members of the YACM keep abreast of news from Chhattisgarh and other parts of India and have various means of accessing information about political and caste-related issues locally and nationally.

There are different views on Ambedkar among the members of the YACM, but most of them resonate with the same attributes of Ambedkar in Dalit mainstream discourses (Omvedt 1994; Zelliott 1992; Jaffrelot 2005) [more on this in the next chapter] and there are similarities between the way the Satnamis in Meu and the Dalits in other parts of India and abroad invoke Ambedkar (Hartmann 2003; Gorringer 2005). Michael (2007: 14) points out that contemporary Dalits have completely different aspirations from those in traditional India and that there is an increased 'intellectual activism' that has influenced Dalit culture and its spread at the regional and national levels. This growth is outside of formal education (*ibid*) but is an outcome of increased education among Dalits. In general, all over India, Ambedkarite discourses in the realm of social movements and politics tend to hinge on four contrapositions: Gandhi versus Ambedkar; Harijan versus Dalit; *Varna* versus *Jati*; and *Manu* versus casteless society (Michael 2007: 33). These categories have been constructed by Dalit as well as non-Dalit intellectuals and activists and serve as synecdoche for Dalit debates. Hartmann (2003: 79) points out that since the early 90s small Dalit

groups were being formed in villages and cities, and they all united in the name of Ambedkar. The small groups were driven by educated activists who worked socially to educate their relatives, friends and others about Ambedkar's writings and ideas. This was in the aftermath of the controversy sparked by the then Prime Minister V. P. Singh who wanted to implement the Mandal Commission Report,¹²⁵ which led to heightened debates nationwide about affirmative action. This coincided with Ambedkar's birth centenary celebrations (ibid) and led to galvanized grass-roots Dalit social movements.

More than a decade later, the small group that is the YACM can be considered a corollary of that movement in the sense that it, too, came about through the dissemination of Ambedkar's thoughts. One of the members of the YACM, Ganes, is studying journalism in Raipur. He brings Ambedkarite discourses from the city to the other members of the YACM living in Meu. He has learned about Ambedkar from political rallies, meetings with social and intellectual groups interested in Dalit issues and from other journalists. Ganes is the member of the YACM most connected to the city and one of the most educated (see Table 7). Ganes became increasingly involved in his studies and networks in the city during the course of my fieldwork. His participation in the YACM dwindled and he was often replaced by Gautam in the role of the main organiser in the YACM. Ganes' family is one of the most well-off in the Satnami *para*, with 20 acres of land. They live in a *pacca* house made of bricks and have invested in the education of not only Ganes, but also his sister, who aspires to become a schoolteacher. Ganes was an outlier in the group because he was the most connected to city life outside the village. Some of his stories inspired awe among the others in the YACM, but they were mostly a source of great entertainment. Ganes was also quite a performer, and this links to his interest in journalism and the media. His

¹²⁵ The Mandal Commission Report recommended extended reservations for Other Backward Classes (OBC) in public sector employment and government higher education institutions. The reservations system was first established as a means of affirmative action during colonial rule in India. Since then, the central government has reserved a certain quota of jobs in government employment, places in government universities and a number of seats in the Parliament and in the State Assemblies for the Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST) and Other Backward Classes (OBCs), which is a heterogeneous group of lower castes. An estimated third of India's population falls into these three categories (Galanter 1984: 187). Extended reservations for OBCs did not directly concern Scheduled Castes or Dalits, and many Dalit activists argued in favour of them (Hardtmann 2003: 79). 'Upper-caste' groups viewed the Mandal Report in a highly unfavourable light, and some 'upper-caste' students set themselves on fire to protest against it.

role in the YACM was to inspire the others. Yet when his presence diminished, the group neither deteriorated nor fell apart. It continued to meet and discuss and organise events, and Ganes became part of the group whenever he returned to the village.

On a hot afternoon, I heard some of the members of the YACM talking about Ambedkar. A group of young men were assembled close to a small shop on stilts selling sachets of *pan masala*, *lai* (puffed rice) and *jhaal muri* (snack made with puffed rice). An adjoining clump of acacia trees provided shade and this was a favourite spot for meeting. Amidst them Rames and Bhagat sat tensely perched on their haunches. Their bodies leaned forward and they engaged in a heated discussion, index fingers wagging. Rames argued:

We are in the ‘age of technology’ (*aadhunik yug*)¹²⁶ and you are calling Ambedkar a *devta* (god)? He was not a *devta* like Ram or Hanuman; he was a man just like the rest of us and lived here on Earth just like us. He was a *maha-purus* (enlightened being) who was highly educated and who dedicated his life to improving the condition of his fellow beings. He was no god!

And Bhagat furiously replied:

Are you saying that Ram and Hanuman never walked the Earth? They were here too! And just as we show our respect to them and do *puja* of them, so should we do *puja* of Ambedkar *Saheb*. He is a *devta* to us.

Not all the members of the YACM alluded to Ambedkar as a god, but all of them expressed veneration for Ambedkar and said that he was a “great man who wrote the Indian constitution”. They all held the view that Ambedkar was responsible for improving the legal status of ‘untouchables’. They considered his role in facilitating access to education and rights for ‘untouchables’ as greater than that of Gandhi, who is known to have contested Ambedkar’s views on reforming the caste system. One of the ways in which the young men in the YACM assert their autonomy vis-à-vis other

¹²⁶ This is in contrast to the view of elders in the village, who often lament that we are in *kal yug* or the last of the four ages in Hindu cosmology, the age of degeneration. *Aadhunik yug* can also be interpreted as ‘modern’.

castes is through appropriating Ambedkar as *their* leader, which he is not in the same way for any of the ‘clean’ castes residing in the village. In a conversation about Ambedkar with a few members on another day it became clear that they draw on Ambedkar’s emphasis on elimination of caste oppression through education and laws protecting the rights of Dalits. This has been internalised by the group. But these discourses are learned from influences outside the village and do not directly pertain to village life. The importance of such discourse is the symbolism of Ambedkar and his views, and to show adherence to those secular ideas that have ‘civilising’ attributes (such as education) while rejecting caste oppression. This is illustrated by the comments of two of the members, Sidh Ram Banjare and Puran Lal Tondon, who said:

It is because of Baba *Saheb* Ambedkar that we have education today. The British educated him and people say that Gandhi is the father of the nation, but Baba *Saheb* is the one who did something for us.

Ambedkar *ji*¹²⁷ taught Dalits how to live with respect, honour and pride and that is why we worship him like a god. *Manuwadi* (upper-castes) praise Mahatma Gandhi and we worship Ambedkar *ji*. We worship him because he gave us reservations so that we can get jobs and seats in the Lok Sabha (Lower House of the Parliament) and more respect in the Rajya Sabha (Upper House of the Parliament). If we follow in the path of Ambedkar *ji* no one should abuse us or call us impure. That is why he is our *devta* and we want to join with him.

Some of the members brought up Ambedkar’s role in fighting caste oppression and they alluded to Brahmins as the perpetrators and Harijans as the target of that oppression:

Ambedkar was a great person. He got many accolades in the fields of education, law and rights. At his time, there was a lot of caste discrimination

¹²⁷ *ji* is an honorific

(*bhed-bhav*). Baba *Saheb* brought all the untouchable castes together and gave them their rights through law.

Brahmins used to oppress Harijans, but Ambedkar gave Harijans a place in the Indian constitution. Without him, there would never have been any progress for Harijans. But people still think that we are lower than them so we cannot bathe at the same spot (*pachri*) as those from the other *samaj* (caste). I want to be like Baba *Saheb* Ambedkar and remove *chua-chut* (untouchability) and *bhed-bhav* by joining the *samiti*.

In these discourses, the way in which members speak about caste oppression and Ambedkar's role is far from based on the reality of village life: there are hardly any Brahmins in Meu these days, and people usually refer to themselves as Satnami and not as Harijans. The way in which YACM members speak about Ambedkar thus points to something that is not an explicit description of the situation in Meu but resonates with BSP propaganda. Caste oppression is talked about as something that was a major problem at the time when Ambedkar lived. The implication is that caste oppression was worse in the past and that it is through Ambedkar that young Satnamis are able to assert themselves and defend themselves against caste subordination.

The discourses relating to Ambedkar are novel. Most of the older generation said that they were unsure if they ever heard of Ambedkar while growing up, other than as one of the important leaders who fought for independence from the British. They did not think of Ambedkar in terms of caste oppression to the same extent as the youth in the YACM. The possibility of rights as enabled through education, along the lines of Ambedkar's thoughts about opposing caste discrimination, is something more explicitly drawn upon by the youth in the YACM. They are able to correlate their experience of schooling with the kinds of autonomy that allow questioning and overcoming caste oppression in a way that is different to that of older generations. The allusion to an era of modernity (*aadhunik yug*), rather than the twilight era of *kal yug*, which older generations refer to more frequently, also shows that the young men in the YACM increasingly associate appropriation of knowledge (*jaankari*) or information with their generation.

The YACM as ‘key social animators’

As a *samiti* or village-level association, the YACM organises the celebration of Hindu festivals and events on Independence Day on 15th August and Republic Day on 26th January. They also mark Ambedkar’s birthday on 14th April and Guru Ghasi Das’ birthday on 18th December. For each of these celebrations, they collect money or *chanda* (donations) from all the members as well as *para* (ward) residents. *Para* residents told me that they have always celebrated Hindu festivals in their own homes. However, since the YACM took over the organisation of these events, the celebrations have been more elaborate, with a canopy and dais for the deities as in the other *paras* of the village.

The festivities are now carried out on a larger scale and in a more organised manner. The young men cut out shapes from Styrofoam to decorate the podium on which they place a large plaster of Paris statue of the deity procured from village markets and other paraphernalia used in the *puja* rituals. Priests are hired to carry out the *pujas* just like in the ‘clean’ caste *paras* of the village, and the deities are subsequently “cooled off” – that is, immersed - in the village ponds or in Mahanadi in a similar way. Through the celebration of these festivals, the YACM youth are able to demonstrate their resourcefulness and organisational capability, not only to their own families and elders but also to the whole Satnami community as well as other castes in the village. The ability to stage similar festivities to the other castes in the village is of great significance as it proves that the Satnamis match the other castes, not just in terms of education, but also in terms of staging events of social and cultural importance. The YACM take charge of every aspect of the organisation of these festivals, and their taking charge at these *para* events can be understood through their own explanation of their role in the community:

Those of us who have got an education and have learned from coming and going [outside the village] can speak to officials and bring information (*jaankari*) and awareness (*jaagriti*) to the neighbourhood (*muhhall*), put programs up and organise events in the *para*. That is what we do in our association (*samiti*). (Ganes)

The public display of Satnami Hindu celebrations alongside those in the ‘clean’ caste *paras* of the village is important as an appropriation of mainstream cultural spaces from which Satnamis do not want to be excluded. Celebrating Hindu festivals is in defiance of the prohibition on Hindu idol worship laid down by Guru Ghasi Das (Chapter 3). However, Satnamis in Meu do not reject Hindu practices, rather they juxtapose them with their Satnami identity. The celebration of these festivals in a manner similar to that in the ‘clean’ caste *paras* of the village shows that the Satnamis in Meu do not acquiesce when faced with ‘upper-caste’ rejection and ostracism at a ritual level. The appropriation of Hindu celebrations can be equated to *sanskritisation* and upward mobility whereby the Satnami community strives to claim equal status to that of the ‘clean’ castes in the village.

However, I will argue that *sanskritisation* only partially serves as an explanation for Satnami appropriation of Hindu mainstream cultural spaces. While upward social mobility is a key aspect to understanding the Satnamis’ varied strategies for overcoming caste oppression, they are less concerned with Brahmanical ‘purity’ even if it may seem as though they are emulating norms and practices of ‘clean’ caste Hindus in the village. Segregation between the Satnamis and ‘clean’ castes is maintained during these celebrations in a similar way to the segregation at life-cycle rituals when there is no cross-caste commensality. Therefore, the impossibility of equal status through Hindu religiosity is clearly felt by people in the Satnami *para*, and I was given the explanation that Hindu festivals are celebrated for entertainment (*manoranjan*). Through this explanation and observations of the ways in which these festivals were celebrated (expanded in Chapter 6) it became apparent that the emulation of Hindu practices had more to do with assertion of Satnami autonomy and defiance of exclusion from those cultural spaces that symbolise inequality between communities.¹²⁸ Members of the YACM play an important role in the cultural life of the Satnami *para* and assert a sense of autonomy through organising the festivals.

The overarching caste system in the village attributes moral qualities to social categories that contribute to the basis of *differences* between castes (Pocock 1957:

¹²⁸ Srinivas (1997: xv) remarks that ‘*sanskritisation* of SCs embodies a strong element of protest against the high castes: “We dare you to stop us emulating you” seems to be the spirit underlying emulation. In other words, both *sanskritisation* and emulation challenge the position and authority of higher castes.’

294). Thus ‘moral judgement is relative to the caste system’ and this becomes even clearer where moral principles common to all castes are concerned (ibid). To quote Pocock, “in the hierarchy of castes one caste may certainly raise its status by abstaining from certain practices but while it continues to practice them it is not judged”. And he cites Hegel (1907) to explain,

If...we say that courage is a virtue, the Indians on the contrary say: Courage is the virtue of the Kshatriyas... human duty as such does not exist, all that exists is the duties of the different castes.

The point that Pocock is making with reference to Hegel and Bouglé (1927) is that castes are not only hierarchically positioned vis-à-vis one another, interdependent and ‘mutually repulsive’, but also maintain differences that are of great importance to the way in which the system functions. The inherent differences, apart from hierarchical notions of ritual purity, are what ‘makes a caste what it is and not otherwise’. Hence, there are always innumerable ways in which a superior caste can ‘affirm its superiority in the local hierarchy and so its difference’ (ibid). No matter to what extent a ‘lower caste’ may emulate an ‘upper caste’, differences can and will remain. To stretch the sense of differences intrinsic to the hierarchical positioning of castes, Lynch (1969) remarks that, “by the time they (‘lower castes’) reach their destination of *sanskritisation*, they will discover that the Brahmin himself has vacated the spot and moved onto the higher hill of Westernisation where he still gazes contemptuously down upon them from an elevated perch”. The generation of educated youth in Meulana attempt to avoid the above impasse in overcoming the differences and inherent inequalities in the caste system, strengthened by their assertion of Satnami autonomy and rejection of notions of Brahmanical ‘purity’.

Unlike in other parts of India and especially in the north, where ‘lower’ or ‘untouchable’ castes may be emulating particular ‘upper castes’ such as Rajputs in an effort to *sanskritise*, the Satnamis do not seem to be emulating any particular ‘upper caste’ in Chhattisgarh. Satnami *sanskritisation*, which is highly ambiguous, may be remotely modelled on *kshatriya* rather than Brahmanical notions, indicated by their practice of claiming to be ‘*suryavansi*’ (descendants of the sun) to demarcate their

sub-caste. However, there are no dominant *kshatriya* castes in Chhattisgarh similar to those in the north.

An example of a 'lower caste' emulating *kshatriyas* in north India is the Koli caste in Kangra, which is also a so-called 'ex-untouchable' caste. The Kolis attempted various strategies, including *sanskritisation*, to claim higher ritual status in the caste hierarchy. By claiming to be '*chhote* Rajput' or 'junior' Rajput they wanted proximity to the *kshatriya* caste rather than the Brahmins because of the inconvenience of upholding Brahminical vegetarianism and other puritanical norms. *Kshatriya* Rajputs are neither vegetarian nor teetotal but are nonetheless second from the top in the ritual hierarchy. The Kolis faced the dilemma of losing Scheduled Caste status if they successfully claimed *kshatriya* status, which was instrumental in gaining political leverage and was significant for those Kolis able to access reserved quotas in government jobs and education. Others took a different approach to rejecting caste hierarchy by converting to a new religion. In both cases, however, the Kolis have traditionally endeavoured to change their position within the system rather than the system itself. When the Arya Samaj movement learnt of the conversion of Kolis to Islam they intervened to get concessions from 'upper castes' in order to prevent those conversions (Parry 1979: 115-128). Significantly, this example shows that at least some members of 'lower castes' judge that they have a greater possibility of overcoming caste oppression through secular routes such as reservations and through social and economic upward mobility, rather than in the Hindu system of caste hierarchy. This view is reflected not only in the older militant Satnami movement; today, secular routes to overcoming caste oppression are increasingly influencing the younger generation of Satnamis in Meo, along with the 'lower castes' and 'untouchables' in other parts of India.

Secondly, a combination of Satnami assertion and secular Ambedkarite discourse leads the young men in the YACM to be critical of the hypocrisy of 'clean' castes claiming superiority based on 'purity'. The breaking down of village rules of commensality whilst outside the village (as labour migrants or otherwise) and secret consumption of meat in Satnami homes by 'clean' caste friends were examples they gave of that hypocrisy. Moreover, the invocation of secular notions of rights and citizenship has diminished the value of *sanskritisation* for these village youth.

Srinivas (1989: 20) concedes that the significance of *sanskritisation* for ‘lower castes’ and ‘untouchables’ decreases in the face of growing secular dimensions of life. For older generations, *sanskritisation* was never a means of transcending subordination to ‘upper castes’. In fact, the assertion of Satnami identity refuted ‘upper-castes’ authority through militant action. The rejection of orthodox practices such as teetotalism and vegetarianism by ordinary Satnamis also generally devalues *sanskritisation* among rural Satnamis.¹²⁹

Only Male Membership of the YACM

The YACM has no female members. In the next chapters, I shall discuss women’s inclusion in these SHGs and the subsequent participation of the Dalit movement group, the Dalit Mukti Morcha (DMM), in the monthly meetings of SHGs. In the village itself, girls attending high school or college did not interact with the young men from the YACM when the latter occasionally met after a day’s labour, or loitered outside a small shop in the *para*. Young women are not found loitering in front of village shops in the same way. While some educated young women in the Satnami *para* rode bicycles to and from school or college and occasionally stopped on their way to chat with me, they tended not to strike up conversations with young males. The Satnami girls going to college are from a few well-off Satnami households that have supplementary income from mines or more land than average households.

Table 7 below lists the members of the YACM and their age, marital status, education, occupation and sources of income. This data gives an idea of the socio-economic position of these young men and sheds light on their education and social backgrounds. Most of them are educated at least up to the 8th class which is the level considered necessary for employment in some basic village development programmes initiated by the government, such as in primary health. Almost half of the group have college degrees and there are only a couple of members who dropped out of school at an early stage. Significantly, most of the members of the group are young upwardly mobile educated young Satnamis whose families have gained additional income from other sources other than agriculture, such as coal mines, paper mills or owning a small

¹²⁹ However, some Satnamis are extremely keen to distance themselves from the consumption of carrion beef, with which they were formerly associated. This suggests that they have been influenced by ‘orthodox practices’.

shop. Some of their families have earned supplementary income from seasonal migrant labour, and a few belong to households with more than ten acres of farm land, which is higher than that of the average Satnami household in the village (Chapter 2).

Name	Age	Marital Status	Education	Occupation(s) (WL= Wage Labour F= Farming)	Acres of agricultural land & additional family income (SML= Seasonal Migrant Labour)
Mohit Kumar Tondon	18	Single	10 th grade	WL and F	1.5 acres Father is a carpenter
Sidh Kumar Banjare	18	Single	12 th grade	WL and F	2 acres SML in brick kilns
Dev Kumar	19	Single	2 nd grade	WL and F	2 acres SML in brick kilns
Laxmi Prasad Shastri	21	Single	B.A. First Year, C. C. College Pamgarh	WL, F and <i>Baiga</i> (shaman)	5 acres Father works in paper mills in Bilaspur
Shiv Kumar Banjare	22	Single	B.A. Final Year, C. C. College Pamgarh and PGDC*	WL, F and teacher in a village private school	1.5 acres SML in brick kilns and 1 brother employed in Bilaspur
Puran Lal Tondon (Secretary of YACM)	22	Single	B.Sc. First Year, C. C. College Pamgarh	F and teacher in village private school	2 acres Father, grandfather and uncles employed in coal mines in Dhanbad, Bihar
Jagan Nath Banjare	22	Single	M.A. Final Year, JRD College	Unemployed	2 acres Both parents employed in Bhalomaru coal mine in

					Kotma District in Madhya Pradesh
Net Ram Tondon	23	Single	8 th grade	F	10 acres
Gautam Kumar Tondon (Vice-President of YACM)	25	Single	B.A. from C. C. College Pamgarh and PGDC	F and teacher in village private school	10 acres
Bhagat Ram Banjare	26	Single	B.A. Final Year, C.C. College Pamgarh	WL and F	10 acres
Ganes Ram Sonkar (President of YACM)	27	Single	M.A. Fourth Semester in P.R. Shukla University, Raipur	Employed at MTV in Raipur	20 acres
Nat Ram Tondon (Accountant for YACM)	28	Married, 1 daughter	9 th grade	F and owns a small shop in the village	2 acres
Ram Kumar	30	Married, 1 daughter and 1 son	1 st grade	WL and F	½ acre SML in brick kilns
Naraiyan Tondon	33	Married, 2 daughters and 2 sons	12 th grade	F and used to sell ready-made garments in the village	2 acres Father used to work in coal mines in Dhanbad in Bihar
Jamunia Prasad	35	Married, 3 sons	10 th grade	WL and F	2 acres His wife is in charge of the midday meal in the government primary school

*PGDC= Post Graduate Diploma in Computers

Table 7: Members of the YACM

NB This data was collected during my fieldwork (2006-08) and in the follow-up visit to the village in 2010 I found out that in the interim 5 of the 11 single men had got married.

The members listed above represent not only the sons of better-off Satnami families in the *para* but also some from more ordinary households. This mixture has come

about because the group consists predominantly of extended kin and members have strong friendship ties among one another. Some of the members are brothers. It is arbitrary that the group is as large as it is. The factor that brings some of them together is that they are more articulate and interested in social dynamics than other youth in the village. Their organisation is not driven singularly by ambitions of leadership (more on this in the section comparing them to “*neya netas*” in UP in a subsequent chapter) or by the desire to form a broad base of consensus in the *para*. I view the YACM as ‘key social animators’ and will argue that they are a ‘pioneer’ group which has only recently formed as an outcome of widespread education among the younger generation in the village. The parents and other family members of these young men are also inclined towards social engagement in village affairs. Some are involved in the midday meal scheme in government schools and others are *bhandaris* (Satnami ‘priests’) or members of the Satnami caste *panchayat*. There did not seem to be any animosity towards the group from other youths in the village. However, while this group invited and included other Satnami youth in its repertoire of activities - whether leisure pursuits or festival organisation - they always maintained distance from Mehar youth.

While most of the key members of the YACM have more education than most Satnami youth in the *para* they are all engaged in farming during the agriculturally active months of the year, although they may also engage in other income-generating activities such as teaching, running a small shop or carrying out migrant labour. A recurrent theme in conversations with the members of the YACM was the poor quality of village education. They were acutely aware of the inferiority of their education in comparison to that available in towns and cities. An analysis of this in terms of intergenerational differences and social differentiation among youth in Meu follows in the next section.

Education and disillusionment

“In everyday interaction in India, education as a civilizing resource is a common discourse across caste communities” and in contrast to educated people are those who are described as ‘thumb-impression’ (*angutha-chaap*), synonymous with ‘unintelligent’ and ‘subservient’ or ‘small people’ (Guptoo 1993: 277; Ciotti 2006:

900; Parry 2004: 292). Furthermore, “literacy is popularly associated – and not only by literates – with rational understanding (and also more broadly with “civilised” values and behaviour); illiterates with the opposite attributes” (Parry 2004: 294). Although education is an idiom of ‘modern knowledge’ and ‘progress’ in everyday village discourse, the young men in the YACM are disillusioned with the quality of village education. This is a point I expand on in this section. However, the unevenness of levels of education among village people sharply divides those who are literate and those who are ‘*angutha-chaap*’.¹³⁰ There is a divide between those who are educated and have access to information (*jaankari*) and therefore ‘know’ about things, and those who are naïve village yokels (*dehati / gawar*) and are easily willing to subordinate themselves to authority.

Generally, throughout India, young male villagers’ changing attitudes due to formal education and the shift away from traditional norms and displays of servitude by older generations is embodied by the case of the Vankars. The Vankars, a widespread Dalit community in Gujarat in western India, are also paddy farmers and are valued by employers from the Patel and Rajput castes for their nimble fingers, which allow them to transplant rice seedlings and weed fields faster than workers from other labouring groups (Gidwani & Sivaramakrishnan 2004: 354). Another aspect that made them desirable as farm employees was that “Vankars ‘knew their place’ in society” and were more docile and subservient than other Dalit communities such as the Rohits, Vaghris and Bhangis (ibid). While the older generation of Vankars displayed attitudes of subservience towards ‘upper-caste’ employers, the younger generation openly oppose the established caste hierarchy. They refuse, for example, to tolerate being called *dhed* (derived from the word for day-labourer) and are better dressed than previous generations. They “place a premium on education as a mark of their difference” and several are educated in schools outside the village (ibid: 355). They view education as a means of gaining non-farm employment outside the village, preferably a government job, and see that as a way out of their subordinate position as wage labourers for ‘upper castes’ and working in paddy fields. In a similar vein to the Vankars’ case, the YACM’s discourse is beyond the realm of tradition upheld by the

¹³⁰ Illiterate people are called ‘*angutha-chaap*’ or ‘thumb-print’ because they sign official documents with ink on their thumb. People with limited literacy and those who have only learned to sign their names are also stereotyped in this way.

older generation, which gives importance to hard work and servitude rather than education or demanding rights since they have limited experience of the latter (see Parry 2004).

In another part of rural India, Shah's (2007: 137) ethnography shows how Munda¹³¹ young people aspire to join village elites and how they may contradict their elders' conceptions of the exploitative powers of the state (*sarkar*) which they think are due to the elders' illiteracy. Munda elders on the other hand perceive young people's attitudes as further evidence of *sarkar*'s exploitative powers that have misled the young generation. The older generation in Meu is less convinced by what to them seem to be impersonal procedures of law and governance and rhetoric related to rights as they had less experience of the newer systems of bureaucracy and governance when they were young. To many of them, the state is perceived as arbitrary and indifferent to the suffering of the poor, as it is by Munda elders in Shah's ethnography (2007). Their experience of the state can be likened to the kinds of subordination they have been subjugated to by wealthier resident 'upper castes', who are now absentee landlords. The kinds of arbitrariness and indifference they encountered there is similar to the kinds of structural violence (Galtung 1969) that the state enacts. Just as they defended themselves from 'upper-caste' oppression by opting for mitigated *len-den* (exchange) (Chapter 3) with those castes, their rejection of the state is similarly entrenched in wariness and a preference to avoid encounters with it as far as possible. On the other hand, educated young people are able to provide an 'exegesis of everyday life' through their ability to navigate 'arcane bureaucratic procedures and paperwork' that actually help with the transfer of knowledge between state institutions and illiterate older generations (Ciotti 2006: 903). However, although the intergenerational differences in the village and in the Satnami *para* in terms of education are unprecedented, and while education brings some freedom from earlier forms of subordination, village education is highly insufficient and inferior to urban education. The awareness of its insufficiency adds to young villagers' frustration at

¹³¹ Mundas belong to the Scheduled Tribe category which includes those castes that fall outside the four-fold *varna* system. Scheduled Tribe castes are interchangeably called *adivasi* (literally translates as 'resident of earliest times' (Shah 2007: 131)) or indigenous. Whereas Scheduled Castes are excluded from the four-fold *varna* system of so-called 'clean castes' on the basis of permanent ritual pollution, Scheduled Castes are deemed to be '*jungli*' (animal-like), low and polluted as well (Shah 2007: 139).

under-development, but only a few have the resources to gain education in towns and cities.¹³²

Over the last couple of decades, the Satnamis in Meu have experienced a dramatic rise in literacy compared to older generations. In the village today, an average of 31% of Satnami households house young people who have completed high school and 17% contain inhabitants who are studying for a college degree. These figures are unprecedented and indicate an enormous change in the number of people who are literate and 'educated' in the community. The numbers also include many Satnami girls who are able to read and write, in stark contrast to their mothers and grandmothers who were mainly occupied as wage labourers working in paddy fields or serving Brahmin households in the village. Some college-educated young Satnami women in the village now aspire to become schoolteachers and primary health care workers. This shift reflects changes that are pan-Indian and mark intergenerational changes in terms of education that can generally be found throughout rural communities in most parts of India.

In some Dalit biographies (Valmiki 2003: 5-12; Freeman 1979: 67) the protagonists tell us that as children they were not allowed to sit together with children from other castes in the classroom.¹³³ They were ridiculed and made to feel ashamed of their caste. The association between their caste and the kinds of degrading manual work their parents carried out to earn a living was brought up along with other explicit insults.¹³⁴ Teachers and students bullied them and they were unjustifiably beaten and punished, all in an effort to dissuade them from getting an education that an 'untouchable' was considered not to deserve. In Freeman's legendary ethnography of the life of the Bauri pimp Muli, his uncle is quoted as saying "Studying doesn't take a man to Heaven" (1979: 235) in the context of Muli being unable to pay his son's fees.

¹³²Those with a city education are seen as role models and can act as 'key social animators' in the village (see Jeffrey et al. 2008: 32).

¹³³ An exception is Vasant Moon (2002: 14) who attended school together with Brahmin boys and claims that in his experience, teachers "took care that the poison of casteism never spread among the boys of the class". However, financial constraints on his family made it difficult for them to afford his fees (2002: 34).

¹³⁴ Omprakash Valmiki (2003: 4) recalls hearing "*Abey, Chuhre ke*, get away from me, you stink." He belongs to the 'untouchable' Chuhra caste whose traditional occupation is scavenging. The insult is both in addressing him as 'hey you' (*Abey*) and in the pejorative words (*Chuhre ke...*) that indicate that he is the offspring of Churhas.

This is one among many examples of how that dissuasion was at times internalised by ‘untouchables’. Such tales seem to be a thing of the past. Only the elders and middle-aged Satnamis in Meu may recall similar stories from their own childhoods. In present-day village life, almost all children from all the different caste communities in the village go to school and no one is made to sit at the back of the classroom because of his or her caste. Corporal punishment may be rife in schools in rural and semi-urban Chhattisgarh (Parry 2005: 289-291; 297) but does not resonate with the older kind that included derogatory caste insults. Gautam explained to me one day that:

There are now two to three private schools in the village. In these schools no one pays attention to the ‘*samaj*’ (caste) of the students. They [teachers] in fact come home to get children admitted to their schools. They are interested in making money - and less interested in keeping the quality of education high.

The largest private school in Meu is run by a Brahmin man named Pandey, and hence it is called the Pandey School. (A smaller private school up to the 5th class is run by a Sahu man and thus is called the Sahu School.) Pandey boasts a string of degrees in his title such as BEd, MEd, MSc and Law. He says he acquired some of these degrees through long-distance learning and it is not certain that all of them are legitimate. However, he is dedicated to providing village children up to the 12th class with an education that will “teach them to live in the right way”, inculcate “correct behaviour and manners (*bol-chaal*)” and make them “capable and worthy” (*kabil aur laiyak*). The school has a total of 800 students, and these include both boys and girls. In the present 10th class, there are 92 students and in the 12th class, 121 students. Mr. Pandey told me with confidence that at least 20% of the graduates from his school will pursue a college education after completing the 12th class. He emphasised, however, that literacy in the village is more a matter of status than of getting a job. The most popular choices in college include the Diploma in Computer Applications (DCA) and the Postgraduate DCA (PGDCA) which are computer courses available in Pamgarh (the nearest large village 10kms from Meu); and BSc degrees in Biology that could lead to training as a primary health care worker.

Mr. Pandey employs a staff of 21. This includes himself as the principal and he draws a salary of Rs. 8000 (£114) per month. Lecturers are paid Rs. 2000 (£28) per month

and upper division teachers Rs. 1500 (£21) per month. A similar salary goes to the school clerk, a librarian and a lab technician, although there is no library or laboratory on the premises of the school. Mr. Pandey may have given a couple of his assistant teachers these titles in order to make his school sound impressive. Assistant teachers, who comprise the majority of the school's employees, earn Rs. 1200 (£17) per month. The cost of running the school is met through fees collected from the students. These range from Rs. 40 to Rs. 100 (£0.57 – 1.42) per month. Poorer students are given discounts and older students are charged more than primary school pupils. Additional fees are required for examination registration in the 10th and 12th class. The school does not provide any meals to students, and they have to buy uniforms, books, stationery, satchels and shoes at their own expense. The school does not have furniture in the classrooms. Students sit on rugs or *daris*, and there is a single chair at the front of the classroom for the teacher. The school is housed in a brick building, whitewashed inside and out. Some electrical wiring has been put into place, but bulbs are missing in most classrooms. There are windows and blackboards in most rooms, and posters of the Hindi alphabet and national heroes, precarious primary health care hoardings and images of popular Hindu gods adorn the walls.

Some of the young men in the YACM who were educated up to high school or college level spoke dejectedly about the poor quality of education in the village. They are aware of the shortcomings of village education and have had their fears confirmed when they attempted entrance examinations for various government jobs, such as a lineman in the railways or police constable. Their results were far below average and some of them repeatedly attempted these examinations in the hope of some day being able to pass them and acquire a government job. Government jobs¹³⁵ are preferred because these guarantee a stable income and pension; and accessing these jobs is (in theory) possible through the Reservations System¹³⁶ based on caste quotas. Jobs in the private sector on the other hand are unstable and without benefits. However, because of the poor quality of education in the villages of Chhattisgarh, the prospect of

¹³⁵ In north India, village people make a distinction between three kinds of employment: secure government jobs (*sarkari naukri*), insecure and poorly paid private jobs (*private naukri*) and demeaning and exploitative manual wage labour (*mazduri*) (Jeffrey et al 2004: 967).

¹³⁶ The Indian Constitution provides reserved seats in Parliament and the State Legislatures for the Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST) and Other Backward Classes (OBC). Besides these, and as welfare benefits that are part of larger affirmative action policies, reserved seats are also allocated to these groups in state-run higher education and government jobs (Galanter 1963: 553-554).

gaining employment based on educational qualifications is bleak. In an explanation about the poor quality of village education, Puran Lal said:

In the government schools in Meu where I studied up to the 10th class, education was not good because the teacher who should have been teaching us science taught us Hindi; the one supposed to teach us Hindi taught us maths and so on... we were not taught by *talented* teachers and we didn't understand what they were teaching us. In the 11th I was in Mahamaya School in Pamgarh. There wasn't a single *talented* teacher there. The assistant teachers were better than the employed teachers, and we learned something from them.

And Rames said:

We are made to feel like *gadhe* (asses) in these village schools. The teachers teach from guide books. And they teach us things we have no need for. No one here [in the village] speaks English or can actually understand what they teach us to read in school. What good is that? In the towns and cities people get a good education so that they can become engineers and doctors and they can speak English. What are we going to get from our '*third class*' (he used the English term) schooling?

The trend in village schools that differentiates private schools from government schools is the absence of teachers in the latter. Government school teachers draw a ten-fold larger salary (Rs 12000) than assistant teachers in private schools who actually do most of the teaching in the village. These government employees are more or less guaranteed their large salary whether they do their job properly or not. It is well known that being assured of this salary, without serious checks in place, government schoolteachers can be commonly found becoming small time politicians and entrepreneurs, and spending less time teaching. This is not true for all of them, however. Some also invest in pursuing higher education for themselves and others open private schools. However, in general, the young assistant teachers on paltry salaries in private schools are more dedicated to teaching. They are however, often just as inept as the badly trained government schoolteachers, rendering the overall level of village education rather low.

Education and morality

Even though the young men in the YACM paint a depressing picture of village education, it is important to point out that there is a discernible divide between those who are '*angutha-chaap*' (thumb-print) or can only sign their names, and those who are *parhe-likhe* (educated) to at least the 8th grade in everyday village life. They are disillusioned because they are increasingly aware that their futures would be brighter had they learned English and how to use computers (Parry 2005: 291), but nonetheless they are part of a growing generation gap between themselves and their parents, who are often "illiterate yokels or *anparh gavar*" (ibid). Education works like an idiom of 'knowing better' in village discourses; an example is Somvaru's explanation to Parry about his role as the *bhandari* (Satnami 'priest') that "'all sorts of incomprehensible practices have come down from old people', and he cannot say whether they have any meaning at all. 'Now the world is 'educated' and now they know better'" (Parry 2004: 294). Similar to the Zafiminairy elders (Bloch 1997: 100), village elders in Meu may be seen as having more knowledge and wisdom in the traditional world-life of the village but not in the 'modern' sense. They are more inclined towards attitudes of servitude that the younger generation disdains. The idiom of education as knowledge or 'knowing things' is linked to educated people having access to *jaankari* (information) from books, newspapers and other educated people. In response to my question about the formation of the group, I invariably heard members of the YACM explain this in terms of inter-generational differences that mainly have to do with levels of education and awareness:

Unlike our parents' and grandparents' we are *parhe-likhe* (literate/educated) and we like to have *jaankari* (information) about what the authorities are doing and what is being decided on our behalf. In 2004, we got together and called ourselves 'Yuva Ambedkar Chetna Manch' because we wanted to be able to demand *jaankari* from the *panchayat* (village council) and the *sarpanch* (headman) and influence the workings of the *panchayat* so that we could bring *vikas* (development) and *unnati* (progress) to our village. (Puran Lal Tondon)

The words education (*shikhsha*), information (*jaankari*), development (*vikas*) and progress (*unnati*) are repeatedly used - almost interchangeably - by the young men of

the YACM. No longer are they village yokels incapable of reading and writing. They claim that they are freer of the kinds of subordination that older generations suffered from ‘upper-caste’ power brokers in the village and outside it, and they explain this newfound freedom through *sikhsha* (education) which enables awareness and awakening (*jaankari* and *jagriti*) regarding the laws that protect their rights.¹³⁷ Education in itself is also spoken of as ‘intelligence’ (*budhi* / *sujh-budh*), and the implication is that an educated person is less gullible or naïve. Notions of formal education and schooling are perceived as a form of development (Jeffrey et al. 2008: 8), and education can be seen as an appealing development idea because it offers “marginalised groups a model of *achieved* status distinct from *ascribed* definitions of respect.” (Jeffrey et al. 2004: 975)

Not only do people in Meu equate education with development and ideas of equality and social justice, the National Policy on Education (1986) stresses that a central issue related to education is its importance for the “removal of disparities and to equalise educational opportunity by attending to the specific needs of those who have been denied equality so far” and highlights the “empowering role of education in people’s struggles for equality and justice”. (Ramachandran and Saihjee 2002: 1600)

Ciotti (2006) shows how the Chamars¹³⁸ in northern India use education as a means to generate an alternative identity to the essentialised and derogatory Chamar identity. She argues that on the one hand, there is a “constructed and shared ‘educated’ substance which acts as a unifying force amongst the Chamars”; and on the other hand, education is an individualising experience that is related to upward social mobility that has the effect of producing new inequalities in the community itself (ibid: 899). The effect that education has on producing inequalities within the community itself can be observed among the Satnamis in Meu, as well as the members of the YACM. Those with higher levels of education and exposure to schools and colleges outside the village endorse the developing aspects of education

¹³⁷ An example of a legal institution that is often mentioned is in relation to the ‘*Harijan Thana*’ (‘*Harijan*’ Cell) where caste offenders can be locked up if they make derogatory remarks or act discriminatingly towards a person of Scheduled Caste. And another example, less well known among older generations, is the Right to Information (RTI) Act that stipulates that all citizens have a right to access publicly open documents and information. This Act has particular relevance for rural communities in relation to the opaque practices of local government, courts and the police.

¹³⁸ A large ‘untouchable’ caste in north India.

to a greater extent than those with fewer years of schooling. Variable levels of education among the members showed that each of them had differing aspirations of education and their futures. Some young men questioned the value of getting a higher education because they were convinced that they would stay in the village and farm and work as wage labourers for the rest of their lives. And others with higher levels of education lamented the lack of job opportunities.

Some of these educated young men found themselves in limbo, bound to agriculture and village life with all its restrictive norms, being unable to actualise themselves in an urban sense. Jeffrey (et al. 2004: 961) points out that ‘education is of central symbolic importance to the identities of educated young people excluded from secure salaried work’. They have observed young Dalit men in north India emphasising the “value of education as a form of cultural distinction” that is in contrast to an emphasis on ‘traditional’ identities. Furthermore, they say that “educated young men prefer to regard themselves as ‘educated people in transition’, or people engaged in development (*vikas*), than to stress an attachment to indigenous, traditional or village lifestyles”. (ibid)

Education is especially significant among those people whose children grew up in semi-industrial areas or that have additional income from work in coal mines or factories outside the village. Parry’s (2005) ethnography of young people belonging to a section of workers in the ‘aristocracy of labour’ in the rapidly industrialised area around the Bhilai steel plant, in the Durg district of Chhattisgarh (approximately 200 km from Meu), describes how children’s lives are subordinated to education and ‘modern values’ related to education. Parents of these children may be illiterate but feel “chained to the educational treadmill” (ibid: 290) as their children’s futures are increasingly tied to diplomas and degrees obtained from English-medium schools. These young people’s lives are far removed from the daily life on paddy fields and probably consider their village cousins to be rural (*dehati*) yokels (*gavars*) who have no choice but to live amidst cow dung, ox-carts (*bel-gari*) and a future of toil. Private tuition, for example, which is pervasive in the life of those semi-urban Satnamis, is not so in the village.

There has been a rapid rise in literacy among ‘untouchables’¹³⁹ all over India and Mendelsohn and Vicziany (1998: 122) argue that “it is less problematical to admit a Chamar boy into school than to allow his father to draw water from a well used by Brahmins. Children, not adults, go to school, and perhaps it is easier for a high-caste person to turn a blind eye to the infringements of orthodoxy encountered by children”. The point they also make is that secular school education in India is not seen in the same light as education in Hindu holy books which would be preserved as the domain of the Brahmin castes and their children. Above all, the practice of ritual untouchability is seen as officially and publicly disallowed, and this is a sphere in which secular education also falls.

Educated young men in Uttar Pradesh and elsewhere, who live in villages on the periphery of towns or cities (such as those in Ciotti’s ethnography) project disillusionment towards the lack of white-collar employment which would ideally follow the attainment of higher education. Among the young men in Meu, disillusionment is prominent in relation to the bad quality of village education rather than only towards acquiring white-collar employment in cities. This has to do with two factors: firstly, most of the educated young men and women in the village are interested in becoming *shikhsha karmi*¹⁴⁰ (assistant teachers in government schools) in the village itself or neighbouring villages. Primary health care jobs or jobs in local governance are another preference and these are becoming increasingly available through NGOs and government development schemes (Pinto 2004: 339). Secondly, the demand of exorbitant sums in bribes to obtain employment in the public or private sectors is a constant worry among village people. They consider those positions unattainable because of a lack of financing for bribes and a lack of ‘*pahunch*’ or

¹³⁹ The rise of school enrolment of ‘untouchable’ children is from 0.1% in 1901 to 37.4% in 1991 (Mendelsohn and Vicziany 1998: 141). The 2001 Census of India does not list this data, but the number available from the 55th Round of National Sample Survey (NSS) lists the rural literacy rates of Scheduled Castes at 46.6% and the urban rate at 66.2% (http://www.wikieducator.org/images/0/09/PID_534.pdf)

¹⁴⁰ The Chhattisgarh state government has a budget of over Rs 15 crore (150 million) for the training of around 50,000 *shikhsha karmis* or ‘education workers’ who will be employed as assistant teachers in government schools and be paid a monthly salary of between Rs 3000 and Rs 4000. The requirements for the position are passing both 12th grade and the entry examination for the mandatory training programme, which takes two months. www.business-standard.com/india/news/chhattisgarh-aims-to-train-all-teachers-in-two-years/290263/

influential connections (Gorringe 2005: 165) necessary to facilitate such opportunities¹⁴¹ (see Chapter 2).

However, although education is viewed as inherently positive and equated to self-betterment and social mobility, which are unattainable through any other means, it is also seen as something alien to traditional village life. The moral aspects of being educated and being deprived of 'traditional' knowledge can be a cause of friction in the educationally disparate group of young men. In a conversation with Nat Ram, his brother Net Ram and Dev Kumar, the latter remarked:

Educated people have *tension*¹⁴² about trying to make money. Some want to become teachers and others want to open a shop... they start drinking and doing *nasha* (smoking hash) because they have these *tensions*. Illiterate (*unpad*) people do not have such *tensions*.

And to this, Nat Ram said:

I know a *shikhsha karmi* who consumes alcohol! Some of the educated ones drink alcohol and this is bad. So, they are no better than the uneducated ones.

And Net Ram added:

Illiterate people consume alcohol. Educated people do not live like that.

Being educated carries with it connotations of the 'right lifestyle' and morality that emphasises 'respectability' and 'sanitised' social practices. Education has the capacity to instil good manners, refinement and morality (Jeffrey et al. 2004: 969). On the other hand, vices such as alcohol consumption, gambling and using abusive language are the mark of illiteracy and 'uncivilised' lifestyles. Ciotti (2006: 911) points out that Chamars in UP attribute the shortcomings of their caste to the lack of education and this is verified by the view that education leads to the development of moral qualities.

¹⁴¹ Bourdieu defines cultural capital as 'the range of goods, titles and forms of demeanour that are legitimate within arenas of power' and social capital as 'instrumentally valuable social bonds' (Jeffrey et al. 2008: 11). The lack of '*pahunch*' in this context alludes to young Satnamis' lack of social capital.

¹⁴² People often use the English word 'tension' to mean 'worry' or 'bother'.

The moral qualities being alluded to relate to how education is largely prevalent in the domain of ‘upper castes’ in India and abstinence from alcohol is one of the ways in which ‘lower castes’ emulate the practices of the ‘upper castes’ as an attempt towards upward social mobility (*sanskritisation*). Educated young men in Meu (similar to young Dalit men in other parts of rural India) aspire to become rural elites through formal education and in an effort to replace the ‘upper castes’ in that role. Therefore, morality that emphasises ‘purity’ in a ritualistic sense is endorsed as the ‘right lifestyle’. The discourse on sanitised practices as synonymous with the ‘civilising’ attributes of education emanates in secular notions of education as character building and that morality spans all castes, the difference being illiterate versus educated.

The idiom of ‘rights’ as ‘adhikaar’

In a conversation with members of the YACM one evening, one of them said,

...even if everybody gets the same rights, only those who can understand these things can make correct use of them. The ones who do not understand cannot have rights and there are also those who misuse their rights...

These views resonate with claims by members of the YACM that education is a means of gaining knowledge about one’s rights. Those who are illiterate are considered less knowledgeable and thus cannot perceive rights. According to the members of the YACM, not everyone in the village had an equal sense of their rights. They were believed to be positioned differently in their ability to ‘gain’ rights or information (*jaankari*) about rights, especially those related to the secular sphere or the state. The difference in the positioning of people vis-à-vis one another in terms of being educated and illiterate and subsequently having different levels of access to rights can be further understood through an explanation provided by a man I met in the course of my fieldwork. He said

...in Hinduism, there are many viewpoints (*darshanas*) and practices (*saadhanas*). All human beings have different ‘views’ or ‘understandings’ of the world around them and, depending on their position vis-à-vis one another

and that in the caste hierarchy, they can employ certain practices to gain higher understanding...

In his view, rights (*adhikaar*) meant 'fitness' and he explained that

...there is *adhikaar bheda* [in Hindu cosmology] or 'difference through fitness.' Every human being has to work out their own beliefs according to this difference in 'fitness'.

Thus, a right was not seen as something universal, but as a function of one's 'fitness' or capacity, which is determined by one's positioning and 'viewpoint'. The word *adhikaar* in this sense is imbued with connotations of the unequal positioning of human beings. The conversations above provide interpretations of rights or *adhikaar* often implicit in what people said in relation to both religion and politics. In the discourses of the young men in the YACM, 'education' catalyses the capacity to 'know one's rights' in a way that illiteracy cannot. Evidence for this claim lies in their assertion that they are more 'knowledgeable' of 'rights' because they are educated; in contrast to rural (*dehati*) wage-labourers (*majdoor*) that are uneducated.

O'Flaherty (1978: 96-105) discusses the notion of duty (not rights) in Hindu cosmology and differentiates between two levels of duty: *svadharma* (one's own particular duty) and *sanatana* or *samanya* (eternal or equal duty, which is the same for everyone). She explains how the two levels can conflict when individual duty, such as to kill for the warrior caste, is in contradiction to the moral or universal duty to be non-violent. She traces this paradox by comparing the Vedic and post-Vedic age. Individual duty can be evaded because it only allows limited free will, but performing individual duty properly maintains cosmic order and the contrary leads to individual ruin. However, she claims that for the individual, appropriate ritual duty can only be carried out in accordance with caste (*jati*). Ritual duty is at the second level, which is the same for all and is the level at which social roles (for individuals) become more rigidly codified. Thus, at the level of the individual, upholding a sense of duty becomes variable, dictated by the restrictions to one's caste positioning in the context of the larger or eternal duty that applies to all.

Perceiving rights as *adhikaar* allows an understanding of the existing meanings of the notion of rights, rather than only in a western sense, in which rights should be universal. In the discourses related to Dalit Rights, the term Human Rights is often translated into the Hindi neologism *manav adhikaar*. In this context, *adhikaar* may legitimately be used as the term translated as ‘rights’. But in most everyday contexts, the term is more commonly used to denote “authority”; and an *adhikaari* is someone ‘vested with authority’. Thus, the word *adhikaar* connotes a right in a double sense, in the secular human rights sense when used in the context of *manav adhikaar*; and can otherwise imply “authority”. In the context of Meu, education not only makes the members of YACM know their ‘rights’, it more importantly ‘authorises’ them to demand ‘rights’. When the educated and socially mobile youth in the YACM employ this term, they do so at a point of intersection between notions already there, and those meanings that they invest in it by drawing upon discourses from social movements and mainstream politics. Claiming rights is considered both democratic and universal by activists in the Dalit movement in rural as well as urban contexts of the movement. However, unevenness in the claim emerges when exploring the notion of rights in Hindu cosmology and the ways in which the term *adhikaar* is articulated by members of the YACM in Meu.

Michelutti’s (2008) analysis of the ‘vernacularisation of democracy’ illustrates how processes that are neither ‘traditional’ nor ‘modern’ can represent the way in which ordinary people internalise socio-cultural values and practices. Hence, the usage of the term *adhikaar* does not necessarily imply that rural Dalit communities belong to a subaltern sphere which is ‘non-modern’ or ‘*gemeinschaft*’ – autonomous and alienated from the state and civil society - because rural Dalit communities have significant relationality and obligations with these. Subramanian (2009) argues that historicity coupled with ‘provinciality’ (Chakraborty cited in Subramanian 2009) makes it possible to trace existing trajectories of claim-making that go beyond territorial and political boundaries that may otherwise seem fixed. The idiom of rights as *adhikaar* in the discourses of the youth in the YACM shows how boundaries between the past and the present and between sectarian and secular ideologies intersect.

The assertion in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 that Human Rights are inalienable and universal is historically seen as a fairly new institution ratified by post world-war international treaties (Nayar in Gearty & Tomkins 1996). Although deviations are evident throughout the western and the non-western worlds, this assertion is generally upheld in the rights of citizens in functioning democracies and is taken for granted as applicable in all circumstances. However, it is a notion that is a result of the western Enlightenment which places the onus of rights-claiming on the individual and views all individuals as inherently equal in spite of differences such as age, gender or race (ibid 1996: 186-189). While differences are secondary to the western notion of rights, for the young men in the YACM, differences in levels of education influence the ability to know one's rights and in effect to "have rights" or "demand rights". The difference implies that newer notions of rights-claiming are associated with the secular sphere and articulated through an idiom of education or knowledge (*jaankaari*) as enabling something that did not previously exist and only exists partially in the present.

Neither here nor there

An important aspect related to education and the status of these young men in everyday village life is that, they find themselves subjugated to parochial norms upheld in the village by elders and the caste *panchayat* and at the same time are unable to actually feel the benefits of the kinds of 'modernity' that they envisioned would be an outcome of formal education.

In response to ethnographies that show young men as violent as a result of their exclusion from salaried work (Hansen 1996) or as defaulting on 'tradition' because of the impossibility of gaining white-collar employment, Jeffrey et al (2008: 62) argue that "there is a common narrative of educational value - or public culture - in which the educated unemployed imagine themselves as civilised and respectable *educated people*". They argue that young men stressed their connection to symbols of what they think is 'modern' rather than emphasising a traditional cultural style. They show how "the notion of 'being educated' can become a vehicle for young people to communicate their sense of the modern" (ibid). While such envisioning may be possible for those young men in UP who articulate what they may conceive of as

‘modern’, such notions are not necessarily accentuated in the discourses of the young men in Meu. The narrative of educational value as a civilising attribute may be relevant in the context of Meu, but it is not a precursor of non-farm employment or ‘modernity’ as such.

Osella and Osella (2000) show in their ethnography of ex-untouchable mobility in south India that caste, class, age and other aspects of a person’s social position have a bearing on the kinds of strategies that are available to them when they finish school. They argue that young men are in an ambivalent position in regard to “hegemonic masculinities” because of being educated and yet unable to assume male breadwinner roles through non-farm employment (ibid 2007). In contrast to this, Jeffrey et al. (2008: 21) argue that young Dalit men in north India respond to unemployment or under-employment by investing in “hegemonic visions of ‘educated’ and ‘civilised’ manhood”. It is, however, unclear how such an investment replaces the desire for employment on a par with achieved education. The notion they describe alludes to an imagination of the self as an alternative to despair (because opportunities are non-existent or beyond their reach). The notion is questionably hegemonic because it may be juxtaposed to other notions, taking into account the diffused nature of the position of upwardly-mobile ‘lower castes’. An exploration of the ambivalence felt by young men who are educated and yet unable to actualise the perceived benefits of education can be illustrated through V. S. Naipaul’s character Ferdinand in “A Bend in the River”. Ferdinand has strong sentiments about his African identity. This causes personal turmoil as he tries to fashion himself into an educated, genteel youth attending the lycée. Naipaul illustrates Ferdinand’s frustrations in a mould of personal character building which is embedded in contradictory social and political influences that unravel his projections of self time and again and lead him to experiment with others.

The youth in Meu may have more in common with Naipaul’s Ferdinand than the young men in UP because their imagination of self seems less clear cut in terms of ‘visions of educated and ‘civilised’ manhood’ as those alluded to in UP. This difference may have to do with closer proximity to agricultural livelihoods in Chhattisgarh’s paddy-growing districts in comparison to faster urbanisation in UP and greater politicisation of Dalit castes there. Rural Satnami young men seem more

insecure about the ‘civilising’ attributes of education because they reckon it is far inferior to that in towns and cities. They assert themselves through being the organisers of events in their community and this positions them as visible protagonists towards the older generation and other castes in the village. As organisers they project a sense of autonomy and the ability to reject ostracising at a ritual level. Education is important to claiming ‘rights’ but it is not the only element that constitutes their roles in the YACM. It is their personal engagement with events in their community and their criticism of the level of education in the village that underlies their agency in YACM.

In a conversation about urban life versus village life, one member of the YACM said:

...I like the village best. In the city there is even more of this kind of ‘feeling’ (he uses the English word and is alluding to feelings of alienation and caste discrimination)... that is why I prefer the village and I have always lived in the village since I was a child. So, I like the village...

Another added that:

... in the city, the *punjivad* (wealthy) make a lot of ‘feeling’ (feelings of discrimination). If I want to make friends, there are only a few of my caste there. I can’t make friends with those of other castes. Whenever we want to make progress in something we realise how alone we are. It is necessary to be earning well to be able to survive in the city. And it gets very lonely. There is no one to support one. People of the same caste even don’t support each other... Look, in college we were seven guys living together, from the same *samaj* (caste). Some of them were wealthy - police officers’ sons and so on... but still, they didn’t support. And often, we didn’t recognise people from our *samaj* in the city. Many hide their surnames so that people will not ‘*het*’ (bear animosity towards/shun) them. For example, my surname is Tondon and there, one can write Tandia or something and start believing one is like a Sharma or a Brahmin. And this I cannot understand. I am not familiar with all that. And, I don’t recognise people from other *zilas* (districts). So, living in the city for me is not ‘*suitable*’ [English word used].

And another member taking part in the conversation said:

...in the village, there is peace. Our *samaj* is here. People living in the village know what hard work is. Hard-working people live a plain life (*mehnnati log saada jeevan jite hai*)... this is best (*ye hi acchhaa hai*).

Their attitudes are contradictory and ambivalent. On the one hand, the village is deemed restrictive; on the other, they valorise village life. They show that the village is still seen as a more desirable place to be in terms of social positioning within one's own community. Upwardly-mobile Satnami youth in the YACM feel more stable and secure in everyday village life than in urban settings. Village life is more predictable and their position as 'key social animators' in the village community gives them a sense of achievement even if it does not enable the same kind of social mobility associated with salaried employment such as in a government job (*sarkari naukari*). Thus, paradoxically, the village is at once limiting and enabling for the young men of the YACM. On the other hand, anonymity in urban life and lack of social capital and networks are identified as isolating factors that offset the notion that urban life is less riddled by caste hierarchies.

Another marked difference between the older and younger generations in the village is the new way in which the younger generation asserts its independence through 'stylish' dressing and consumption of 'modern' clothing such as jeans and gadgets such as mobile phones with earphones and the latest music and cinema releases on CD and DVD. Osella and Osella observe that "young [Izhava] unmarried men spend cash freely on the ephemeral and personal pleasures of fashion and cinema" (1999: 991). However, these patterns of consumption are more accessible for semi-urban or urban young men than rural ones. By cultivating such patterns, rural young men link their lifestyle to that in towns and cities. In Meu, changing patterns of consumption do not yield any real shifts in restrictive caste norms and practices, as can be observed among the Izhava ex-untouchable community in Kerala (ibid: 992). Consumption of certain types of clothes, for example jeans rather than tailor-made trousers and expensive gadgets such as mobile phones, excludes those who are poorer and cannot afford these items.

The similarity to urban practices of consumption of such goods has an important part to play in linking life in the village to that outside. It is also constitutive of what is deemed as ‘civilising’, and, on the other hand, carries connotations of rebelliousness and assertion of autonomy. Social differentiation that results from this kind of consumption can be observed more sharply in semi-urban areas in the periphery of industrial townships or mining areas. Access to such goods is limited in the village and less widespread in rural Chhattisgarh. People from the villages in Chhattisgarh mainly purchase personal accessories at village *melas* (fairs), which do not have the range or quality of goods available in towns and cities. Social differentiation in terms of consumption is evident between those who have regular secondary incomes from non-farm employment outside the village and those without. Some of the young men in the YACM had gadgets or clothes that others in the group did not have, but this did not seem to play a significant role in differentiating them. The purchase of such items was sporadic and inconsistent, and the novelty of such items was shared within the group.

Concluding remarks

The YACM is a ‘pioneer’ grass-roots group in Meu and its emphasis on education and awareness of one’s rights is in contrast to older generation Satnamis. There are two aspects to the intergenerational differences: firstly, the way in which the young men of the YACM draw upon Ambedkarite discourses and organise their association around his ideas about education and rights is new; and secondly, the youth in the YACM belong not only to an increasingly educated generation in the village, they are also disillusioned by the poor quality of village education. There has been a significant shift away from considering education as inaccessible for ‘untouchable’ castes or that ‘untouchable’ castes are unworthy of it. However, the problem that the young people in Meu face is that they are unable to actualise themselves in a ‘modern’ sense through formal education because they are restricted by traditional caste norms upheld by the elders in the village, and they are unable to gain non-farm employment subsequent to high school or college level education.

As a grass-roots association, and as part of one of the first and largest generation of educated Satnamis, the members of the YACM want to bring about changes in the village through awareness and checks and balances. Despite this, the association has not yet registered itself with the authorities and therefore does not have official power in the village. However, significantly, the association plays a greater part in the Satnami *para* as organisers of Hindu and patriotic festivals than the older generation, and asserts new forms of autonomy through Ambedkarite discourses. Their association marks a subtle change in the ways in which the Satnamis can formulate a notion of rights which draws upon the experiences of schooling and literacy. By invoking Ambedkarite discourses the group of young men engage in a secular sphere of rights-claiming that is not restricted to traditional conceptualisations of rights in the context of the hierarchical positioning of castes in Hindu cosmology.

Chapter 5

Dalit Social Movements: the YACM and DMM in Chhattisgarh

The first section of this chapter will question whether or not the Dalit movement in India can be viewed as a 'new' social movement. Some scholars in India have described the movement as similar to global social movements that are not based around class politics. However, closer analysis of the positioning of the actors who started the newer NGO-based activist Dalit movement raises questions as to what extent the movement hinges on social mobility and class. Existing typologies such as 'autonomous anti-caste movements' contrast the present movement with Hindu Reform movements, but the section that follows shows how none of these typologies fit the YACM in Meu. On the other hand, the DMM can be seen as falling more neatly into the bracket of 'autonomous anti-caste movements'.

This raises the issue of how activists in networked, urban movements obscure ground realities and represent rural areas as if they are inaccessible and disconnected from urban forms of debate and activism. Significantly, urban forms of activism most often showcase spectacular incidences of violence or protest to draw attention to issues such as caste discrimination. The mundane, everyday forms of discrimination in everyday village life are thus obscured. The final section looks at the political backdrop in Chhattisgarh and examines why mainstream political channels are not sought by Dalit activists in neither urban nor rural Chhattisgarh. The relative lack of power wielded by the BSP in Chhattisgarh is a reason not only for the absence of similar forms of political patronage in Chhattisgarh such as the '*naye neta*' (new politicians) in Uttar Pradesh, but also for a lack of organic representation of Satnamis in the state government.

The Contemporary Dalit Movement: A 'New' Social Movement?

New social movements theorists (Della Porta and Diani 1999; Johnston and Klandermans 1995; Nash 2005) show that since the 1960s, social movements, protest

actions and political organisations that were unaligned with major political parties or trade unions began emerging, and these have increasingly become a permanent component of western democracies. By 1968, movements also raised questions relating to the ways in which social and political participation was changing. These movements were widespread mass mobilisations and were different from erstwhile mobilisations in the 1930s in the West, which were sometimes anti-democratic in nature (such as far-right-leaning fascist movements). In contrast, actors engaged in the new conflicts were young men, women and new professional groups, and these new participants could not just be characterised in terms of the mainstream political divisions of the industrialised societies. It became even less appropriate to view these actors solely in terms of the class conflicts that constituted the principal component of social cleavages (Della Porta and Diani 1999: 3-23).

At first, social scientists theorised that the social movements came about because society had changed very rapidly and people felt at a loss, isolated and fragmented in their relationships, and fundamentally deprived. The emphasis here is on deprivation and resulting conflict. Later, the Chicago School claimed that basing social movements on rootlessness, deprivation or social crisis reduces revolt to an agglomeration of individual behaviours and fails to acknowledge the dynamics of multifarious feelings at the micro level that give rise to macro phenomena. Thus, it is argued by Johnston and Klandermans (1995) and Della Porta and Diani (1999) that attention was shifted to social movements as engines of change, primarily in relation to value systems. The emphasis on change meant that social movements could become part of a normal functioning society and became an expression for wider processes of transformation. Consequently, it is argued that new social movements attempt to change existing norms by actors who were not involved in the same way in older movements; and that these movements attack and create new social values rather than merely focusing on class-based mobilisations. The impetus for such movements is reached when traditional norms no longer succeed in providing a satisfactory structure for behaviour and the individual is forced to challenge the social order through various forms of non-conformity (ibid).

One of the reasons why ‘new’ social movements differ from traditional movements is because of the method by which marginalised groups in society redefine their claims

of exploitation and oppression (Pai 2002: 14). In terms of the Dalit movement, it is argued that these movements are mainly interested in social transformation and gaining social justice (Shah 1990: 20-21). This aspect is not new, but the actors that are now involved are different from those represented in caste associations, political parties or Hindu reform movements. The rise of the Dalit movement has drawn its impetus from the increasing number of Dalits who have gained formal education and become part of the burgeoning middle-classes in the 1990s. Oommen (2004: 245) argues that the demand for equality and social justice for Dalits in India has been made through the agency of the Indian Constitution. However, the Constitutional promise was undermined by the dominant landed elite for several decades post-independence as the voices of those entrenched in traditionally vested interests (feudalists) rendered the voices of those who were underprivileged inaudible. The situation only began to change after the emergence of large numbers of educated and socially engaged Dalits and a bourgeoisie within Dalit groups.

Some scholars have argued that the contemporary Dalit movement is a 'new' social movement based not only on the types of actors involved as activists in these movements; but also the kinds of issues on which they campaign (Shah 1990, 2001; Jodhka 2001). These increasingly relate to social values rather than only material concerns. In western societies, 'new' social movements are perceived as post-class and postmodern. 'New' social movement theorists have argued that such movements cannot be examined using Marxian theories since these cannot account for the emergence of non-class identities. They have also suggested that the emergence of these movements demonstrate the failure of political liberalism as they develop among those who are discontent with the projects of modernisation (Oommen 2004: 233). This failure of the policies of liberalism is demonstrated through the inequalities that result from modernisation projects. These movements challenge the linear trajectory of development which is central to the 'positivist orthodoxy' of development projects.¹⁴³ The rise of the Dalit movement in India can be seen as a result of disillusionment with the state's efforts to provide welfare. This disillusionment stems from the fact that benefits have not always evenly percolated

¹⁴³ For the debate on 'modernisation theory' see Leys (2006), Arce and Long (2000), Gardner and Lewis (1996); and Marcus and Fischer (1999) who discuss the demise of 'grand theories' in favour of a 'jeweller's eye' view on socio-political phenomena as is possible through the anthropological tool of ethnography.

down to the masses most in need of upliftment (Jodhka 2001, Ray & Katzenstein 2005). All of these authors argue that class analysis alone cannot explain the emergence of and political forms of these movements.

Omvedt (1994: 13-14) on the other hand, argues that the Dalit movement can be viewed as 'value-oriented' or 'anti-systemic'. It belongs in the same category as feminist, labour, environmental and rights movements that are directed against the culture of capitalism. Her argument that interpreting the Dalit movement in terms of 'class' leads to the Marxist view that these movements are generally progressive because they have a working class and poor peasant-agricultural labourer base is problematic. The problem with this view is that the majority of Dalit activists come from socially upwardly mobile backgrounds and the growing Dalit middle classes. One could argue that they are 'creamy layer' Dalits and not necessarily representative of the poor peasant and agricultural labourer bases as Omvedt claims. Significantly, for the most part, the network of urban and rural NGOs and activists that form the advocacy base of the Dalit movement are made up of relatively highly educated and socially mobile men and women. Since its inception, the movement has been reaching out towards national and international networks that are further away from rural areas. Those rural young men and women who become activists in the movement are characteristically better educated and more socially upwardly mobile than their peers. The ways in which the Dalit movement constructs notions of emancipation eludes the kinds of idioms and practices found in rural communities of Dalits such as the Satnami in Meu that are enmeshed in distinctly localised hierarchies. The assertion of grass-roots actors in Meu, which arises in everyday forms of opposition to caste oppression, is articulated in ways that are disconnected from mainstream Dalit NGOs and activists that belong in the 'creamy layer' of urbanised Dalits. Social mobility, however, links differently positioned actors in the Dalit movement and underlies activism.

The demand for social justice by actors such as those in the DMM and the YACM shows that on the one hand, the contemporary Dalit movement can be called a 'new' social movement because of its emphasis on demanding ideological change in society to alleviate caste oppression. On the other hand, the Dalit movement is in large part the outcome of an increase in Dalit inclusion in the growing Indian middle class.

Urban, educated, upwardly mobile Dalits are most commonly the ones who become activists and members in the Dalit social movement. The intrinsic link to class and social positioning of these activists poses questions about the extent to which the movement is only related to changing values of hierarchy and caste discrimination in Indian society. This is because social mobility remains at the core of the emergence of the movement itself.

Trajectory of the contemporary Dalit Movement

The foundations of the 'new' Dalit movement can be found in the thinking of social reformers such as Phule, Periyar and Ambedkar, who denounced the caste system as irrational and exploitative. They opposed both traditional religion-based ideologies, developed primarily by Brahmins, that hark back to sacred texts such as the *Manusmriti*, and those by 'upper-caste' social reformers including Rammohan Roy and Gandhi (Omvedt 1994: 22). These social reformers were supporters of the Hindu reformist movement called the Arya Samaj and Gandhi's welfare activities through the Harijan Sevak Sangh. The Arya Samaj emphasised purification (*shuddhi*) and wanted a reconversion to Hinduism and the incorporation of 'untouchables' into the Hindu fold through purification (Guptoo 1993: 287). These reform movements did not help to eradicate untouchability; in fact, it can be argued that in effect they perpetuated caste hierarchies. The 'Hindu caste-reform' tradition can be seen as 'integrative' in its approach because it tries to 'integrate' 'untouchables' into the Hindu fold while the 'autonomous anti-caste' tradition (Omvedt 1994: 112-113) aims to separate 'untouchables' from Hindu religion and caste because of the view that Hinduism is the source of the caste system and caste oppression.¹⁴⁴ Omvedt (1994: 113) argues that in the 1930s the hostility of non-Brahmins towards Brahmin-dominated Congress nationalism was waning, but the opposite process occurred with Dalit assertion for autonomy. Newly-educated Dalit youth began demanding self-respect or *manuski*¹⁴⁵ and they condemned dependence on Brahmin politicians and

¹⁴⁴ For a critique of this framework, see Mendelsohn & Viczizny (1998: 103) who argue that it is doubtful that a clear division between the two 'traditions' existed as early as the 1920s, and claim that it was actually events in 1930-1932 that 'drove a firm wedge between the leaders'. Secondly, they find that the classification of the movements into either those that seek 'autonomy from' or 'integration with' Hinduism does not entirely cover all the varieties of 'untouchable' movements that have occurred over the last three-quarters of a century.

¹⁴⁵ The word *manuski* translates from Marathi as 'humanness'. Ambedkar frequently used this word in his writing (Jaffrelot 2005: 92).

fully rejected Brahminic ideology, leading to the rise of an 'autonomous anti-caste' tradition.

By the 1920s,¹⁴⁶ in south India, ex-untouchable castes such as the Nadars and Ezhavas had dissociated themselves from their traditional occupations of toddy-tapping, and organised themselves in caste associations such as the Mahimai and Uravinmural respectively in order to strengthen unity amongst them. The Nadars, who belonged to these associations that sprang up alongside the anti-Brahmin movements¹⁴⁷ of the 19th century in Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu, succeeded in registering themselves as Nadar-Kshatriyas in the 1921 Census (Shah et al 2006: 33). Gorringe argues that the proliferation of caste associations in the late 19th century¹⁴⁸ can be understood through the structural changes taking place at the time which allowed individuals to exercise more choice in their lives (2005: 91). He draws attention to the 'agency, ideas and actions' of individuals rather than the instrumental outcome of power struggles between the Indian elite and the colonial state; and he links this to the increasing intrusion of the state into people's lives (ibid: 93).

¹⁴⁶ The 1920s were the decade when the Dalit movement emerged as a conscious and organised force in the region of Vidarbha in Maharashtra where Ambedkar originated from (Omvedt 1994: 105). Although much of the ground for the movement in terms of educational and social activities had already been laid, Omvedt argues that this was the decade that saw a 'qualitative leap forward' for the Dalit movement. It is also the time at which the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) was being established and *kisan sabhas* (farmers associations) were being founded in many areas (ibid). The All India Depressed Classes Conference was held in Nagpur on the 30-31 May 1920 and was presided over by Shahu Chhatrapati of Kolhapur, who was one of the anti-Brahmin maharajas (the other being the Maharaja of Baroda) who had helped launch Ambedkar's political career (Omvedt 1994: 147). See also Mendelsohn and Vicziany (1998: 99-104) for important developments in the Dalit movement during this period. One major event they document is the Viakom *satyagraha* of 1924-25 which was a campaign to open up the road passing a particular temple in Travancore in south India that untouchables had previously been prohibited from entering.

¹⁴⁷ Some of the pioneers of the anti-Brahmin movement are Jotirao Phule, of *mali* (gardener) caste who established the Satya Shodhak Samaj (Society of Truth Seekers) in 1873 in Maharashtra; and E. V. Ramaswami Naicker or 'Periyar' who led the Adi-Dravida movement in south India. See also Jaffrelot (2000: 759), who considers Phule and Ambedkar to be the two most prominent lower caste leaders of their time and sees Phule as a pioneer who brought an alternative value system to the lower castes and avoided 'sanskritisation' as a way out of caste oppression. Phule was also the first to stress the necessity of modern education as a weapon against caste oppression and as a means to bring about changes in people's values about caste (Omvedt 1994: 99).

¹⁴⁸ Hardtmann (2003: 47) argues that the 'autonomous anti-caste' tradition in Dalit movements began taking shape in the 1920s with the proliferation of caste associations that reflected the demands for autonomy among the Scheduled Castes. An example both Hardtmann (2003) and Juergensmeyer (1982: 24) provide is that of the Ad Dharm movements started in the 19th century. Originating in north India, they can be considered precursors of the contemporary Dalit movement because of the emphasis on 'untouchables' being the original inhabitants of India who were subjugated by the invading Aryans, and because these movements made major attempts to break with Hinduism. A corollary to this is the Adi-Dravida movement in south India.

Drawing on Dirks (1989: 43), he asserts that colonial society put in place forms of civil society that have been taken for granted as being traditional. However, he argues that even though the 'gradual breakdown of traditional authority and the opening up of the political and economic spheres may be seen as a process of democratisation, a distinction must be drawn between the social and the political senses of the term' (ibid: 95). In his view, the non-Brahmin movement 'exemplified the increasingly secular orientation of the new organisational forms of caste and religion and a significant legacy of the movement was the implicit assertion that social and ritual hierarchies could be challenged and renegotiated through political and electoral mobilisation' (ibid: 96). Caste associations can be seen as a forerunner of the contemporary Dalit movement as they are a network of various caste associations and bring different groups of *jatis* together under umbrella organisations. In the case of the Dalit movement, common experiences of exclusion brought Scheduled Caste *jatis* (castes) together in these networks.

The difference between the contemporary Dalit movement and the caste associations was that the associations often emphasised a demand for higher status for Scheduled Castes (see '*Sanskritisation*'; Srinivas 1952) with an emphasis on improving the status of their own particular caste in the context of the existing caste hierarchy. It can be argued that those caste associations differ from the Dalit movement of the last few decades in two respects: one concerns the ideologies of the two movements, in that caste associations were not attacking the Hindu caste system as such, but rather attempted to improve their own position within it. In contrast, the 'new' Dalit movements denounce the caste system and demand not just the social and political advancement of 'lower castes', but also the elimination of the caste system itself. The other difference is that caste associations were bounded groups that envisioned betterment for their own caste or sub-caste, while the contemporary Dalit movement unites 'lower castes' or 'untouchables' belonging to various castes and sub-castes through the Dalit identity, and the struggle for rights represents all those castes that are discriminated against on the basis of ritual 'pollution'. However, the movements against caste have generally been seen as reformist by leftist intellectuals in India and have not been fully explored in the light of new social movements theory.

Related to the rise of new social movements in the 1980s and 1990s, the Dalit movement was further sparked by the implementation of the recommendations of the Mandal Commission report in 1990,¹⁴⁹ even though the recommendations focused a great deal more on OBCs rather than on SCs and STs. The heightening of debates around caste and affirmative action policies catalysed the proliferation of discourses on Dalit rights. In post-colonial India, Dalit activism had its impetus in electoral mobilisation, whereas in the 1990s ‘new institutionalisation’ shaped itself by bringing reservation policies and caste to the centre stage of socio-economic reform. This shift from political mobilisation to local activism/government accountability in the Dalit movement focused more attention on the inequities and injustices experienced by ordinary Dalits (Ray & Katzenstein 2005).

Ray et al (2005: 3-5) argue that in the early post-independence years, the ‘master frame’ that activists engaged with required them to attest to issues of class and specifically to issues related to the poor. Approaching the 1980s, when Nehruvian socialism unravelled, social movements in India began responding more strongly to religious nationalism and the neo-liberal agenda of opening up the markets. This shift meant a decrease in the focus on the plight of the poor. The key actors that remained were the state, competitors of the state and the economic elites (ibid). There is a ‘third phase’ in social movement ‘frames’ that covers the period between the 1980s and the present day (ibid: 9). The dominant mode for this period can be seen as “frame multiplication” ‘whereby larger movements with a national presence came to be represented by many smaller groups’ (ibid: 18). The Dalit movement and the women’s movement include many autonomous groups and ‘wings of political parties, unions, rural mass-based organisations and social work organisations within their fold’ (ibid: 18). Social movements in India that address ethnic, language, gender and environmental issues have proliferated in the decades following independence, but many of these movements still remain largely disparate. Even within the umbrella of the Dalit movements, different groups highlight different issues. The unifying factor is the Dalit identity even though its assertion and its meaning is not identical for everyone (Shah 1990 in Gorringer 2005: 27).

¹⁴⁹ See chapter 4.

In the latter part of the 1990s, the all-India social movement of Dalits developed parallel to the rise of political power of the Dalit BSP party in north India. The development of the Dalit social movement was centred around an umbrella organisation, the National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR), which is an advocacy oriented organisation driven by Dalit activists in national as well as international NGOs (Lerche 2008: 239). The NCDHR was formed in 1998 by educated Dalit activists and intellectuals as an internationally linked advocacy group that wanted to put international social and political pressure on the Indian government in order to further its own agenda on the national level (Hardtmann 2003; Lerche 2008). The NCDHR falls within the 'autonomous anti-caste' tradition and it explicitly draws on Ambedkar's thoughts and writings on the elimination of caste discrimination in India by emphasising equality for all citizens through legal and judicial means.¹⁵⁰ The strategy employed by the NCDHR has been labelled as the 'boomerang strategy' (Keck and Sikkink 1998) whereby nationally-based social movements bypass the state and appeal to the international multilateral level of policy and governance to pressure national governments for policy change.

The involvement of different Dalit groups in the movement led by the NCDHR is to a large extent uncoordinated and unrelated because of the urban-rural divide between activists and the differences in their social and economic positioning in the movement as well as in larger society. The links that exist within the network are still in the process of being formed in many parts of India and in Chhattisgarh. The new NGOs and activist networks in Chhattisgarh and elsewhere have only existed for a few years. Although some structures for mobilisation, such as the setting up of NGOs that can receive funding for their activities and the use of Internet websites for communication between different actors in the movement have emerged, the proximity between actors and the streamlining of their efforts are still largely in the preliminary stages.

¹⁵⁰ The 1950 Indian Constitution abolishes untouchability in Article 17 (see Galanter 1963: 550-53 for details of this Article) and prohibits specific caste discrimination in Articles 15 (2), 23, 25 and 29 (2). Anti-untouchability legislation was passed in 1955 (Untouchability Offences Act), 1976 (Protection of Civil Rights Act) and 1989, when the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe (Prevention of Atrocities) Act was passed (Mendelsohn & Vicziany 1998: 120; Lerche 2008: 244). See also Narula (1999: 208-271) for details of the above-mentioned acts. (Narula's report also highlights the problems of the implementation of these laws at grass-roots level and accounts for injustices against 'untouchables' in rural India.)

The YACM in Meu

The YACM members' emphasis on education as a means to social mobility and access to rights is an outcome of everyday forms of caste discrimination in the microcosm of the village. The registers of opposition occur in, and emerge from, a time in village life when there are growing intergenerational differences between the younger literate generation and the older illiterate generation, and when urban notions of citizenship, class and consumption are further from village life. The spatial and temporal distance¹⁵¹ between the different actors in the Dalit movements of Chhattisgarh is illustrated by the distinctly marginal position of the members of the YACM in relation to urbanised rural and other activists in the DMM, whose networks stretch beyond state and national boundaries.

Spatially, the distance between urban and rural India is visible not only on maps that show few large concentrated cities and towns with vast unmarked spaces in between, but the infrastructure linking the two is often inadequate or non-existent. However, the differences of sociality in terms of family norms, marriage, and salience of tradition and caste restrictions ideologically construct temporal differences between urban and rural India. Rural India remains 'backward' in relation to industrialised towns and cities, which are seen as 'modern' in the view of rural people. The general assumption among the members of the YACM is that they will catch up with modernity in towns and cities through education and employment outside the village.

Conceptualisations of rights and the discourses of actors in the YACM and the DMM are conceived through the symbol of Ambedkar and the invocation of secular dimensions of rights as citizens; however, the aspects of these symbols that are given prominence are distinctive. Whereas Ambedkar's emphasis on education as a means to rise above caste discrimination and veneration of him as '*mahapurush*' (great man) is important for the YACM, for the DMM it is 'constitutional' Ambedkar and socio-legal institutions that play an instrumental part in the alleviation of caste discrimination. For both groups, social mobility paves the way to opposing caste oppression, although the ways in which the spatially and temporally disconnected actors in the YACM and DMM gain social mobility are uneven because of embedded

¹⁵¹ See also Subramanian (2009).

social, economic and political disparities. The trajectories of the two groups are dissimilar because the members of the YACM in Meu juxtapose their sectarian and caste identity with newer notions of citizenship and rights, and their practices combine the denunciation of caste in religious as well as secular spheres.¹⁵² The DMM on the other hand focuses on secular methods of denunciation of caste that take a point of departure in the separation of Dalit rights from Hindu notions of caste reform.

The positioning of the YACM and the DMM as rural and urban respectively implies that the two groups have varied issues and strategies. The rural group engages with forms of social activity that are assertive acts designed to appropriate public spaces in the village. They employ the idioms of education (*jaankaari*) and rights (*adhikaar*) as a means of transcending caste oppression. The urban activists, on the other hand, are far more involved with fact-finding reports related to caste atrocities that they disseminate on the internet to create awareness within larger national and trans-national networks of activism. Both may fall under the umbrella of larger Dalit movements; however, the DMM does so more directly than the YACM in the village. The spatio-temporal positioning of different actors within the Dalit movement in rural and urban Chhattisgarh reflects the way in which experiences of untouchability are more embedded in everyday village life than in urban areas.

In everyday life in Meu, the young men of the YACM and others in the village often spoke of antagonism towards the Brahmins. This is a sentiment that strongly resonates with Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) discourses rather than essentially reflecting the ground reality in everyday village life. In a previous chapter, I described how the Satnamis are actually more antagonistic towards 'clean' OBC castes in the village rather than towards absentee Brahmin landlords. This is due to the fact that the Brahmins are less visible in everyday village life compared to earlier times when they were still living in the village. The reason why the Satnamis feel the kinds of antagonism described above towards them is, as one of the YACM youth put it:

¹⁵² There is no explicit separation in these two spheres in the practices of the group, but the insertion of Ambedkarite discourses in the repertoire of activities of the group shows that secular notions of citizenship and rights permeate the sense of what the group stands for even when they organise Hindu religious festivals.

The Sahus are “in touch” with the Brahmins. And they are still doing servitude/slavery (*gulami*) for the Brahmins. The Satnamis have risen above this *gulami*. The Satnamis are *swatantra* (free/independent) – they do not do *gulami* for the upper castes any more. We don’t care if we don’t eat with those upper castes. But, the Sahus still do *begari*¹⁵³ (free labour) for the Brahmins. And that is why they have to keep a distance from us. The Brahmins have got them ‘wound around their little finger’ (*ungli me lapet ke rakha hai*) [he showed by gesturing a circular movement around the little finger of his other hand]. So the Brahmins say: ‘*Arre, ye to gande hai, achhut hai- inke beech me kyon jaana? Inka khaan-pan achchaa nahi hai*’ (hey, they [Satnamis] are dirty, untouchable, why mix with them? Their eating and drinking is not good). And the Sahus are taken in by this - ‘*unki baat me aa jaate hai*’. The Brahmins like to keep people ‘*lapete hue*’ (wound around - close to them in patronage) and the Sahus are too afraid [of repercussions], so they remain close to the Brahmins and practise *chua-chhut* (untouchability) towards us. It’s all a *dikhawa* (show/pretence) because we [Satnamis] are after all *swatantra*.

The proximity of OBC ‘clean’ castes to Brahmins is described by this informant in a symbolic sense, rather than in a way that necessarily reflects everyday relations in the village. The kinds of Brahmin patronage that he claims Sahus are ‘entwined’ in is in relation to Satnamis positioning vis-à-vis those castes that maintain distance on the pretext of ritual pollution. In that sense, the separation of the Satnamis from the ‘clean’ castes in rural Chhattisgarh is in sharper relief. The onus of distancing is placed on Brahmin notions of pollution that the OBC castes enact in order to claim higher status.

Young people in Meu claim that older generations are more conscious of caste norms and that young people are less complacent about the ways in which ‘distancing’ is practised in the village. This is partly because it is usually community elders who take

¹⁵³ *Begari* connotes unpaid wage labour, like bonded labour, as opposed to *rojgari*, which is paid labour. The notion that the Sahus are still employed by the Brahmins in this way implies that the young man is emphasising that the Satnamis have opted out of such patron-client relations with ‘upper castes’; and that the Sahus have not resisted patronage in the same way. In everyday village life, all agricultural labourers are paid wages in rupees and at times in sacks of paddy, and bonded labour is no longer prevalent in Meu, but older generations could recall such conditions in the past.

part in the meetings of the caste *panchayats*¹⁵⁴ in which caste norms relating to commensality and endogamy are endorsed, and breaking those norms is sanctioned. Secondly, young people say that they experience lax rules concerning commensality and cross-caste interaction when studying in colleges outside the village or while working at brick kilns over the summer months (more about this in Chapters 2 and 4). They explain that they have been exposed to and are aware of discourses on rights to a greater extent than older generations. Like the newly-educated young Dalits mentioned above, they have appropriated these discourses in a way that older illiterate generations do not (this is discussed in more detail in Chapter 4).

It can be argued that, to some extent, the youth in the YACM follow the ‘autonomous anti-caste’ tradition because of their emphasis (in their own discourses about untouchability) on egalitarian values derived from Ambedkarite discourses that reject Hindu ideologies of caste and demand equality for Dalits while denouncing the caste system. This stance, however, is only partially true in an empirical sense, because members of the YACM are involved in activities such as the organisation of mainstream Hindu festivals in the village.¹⁵⁵ These activities can be seen as a means to appropriate Hindu culture and render the young men involved in the YACM ‘key social animators’ in the Satnami *para* in the village. They therefore combine Ambedkarite discourses and mainstream Hindu practices in their repertoire of activities.

The ways in which the Satnamis in Meu carry out various strategies to rid themselves of caste oppression correlate to the kinds of caste discriminatory practices one can observe in everyday village life. These practices have been described in preceding chapters. The criticism of those practices is most succinct in the discourses that emanate from the Dalit movements and BSP propaganda. These discourses are learned by the members of the YACM and are a vehicle for social mobility as well as a means of capturing public spaces in everyday village life. While these discourses are ‘secular’ or political, the celebration of Hindu festivals by members of the YACM permeates the social and cultural spaces in everyday village life. While fact-finding missions are the kind of activity that DMM activists find relevant to their methods of

¹⁵⁴ See Chapter 2.

¹⁵⁵ And, because they exclude Mehars in a way similar to Sahu’s exclusion of Satnamis.

fighting caste discrimination, the members of the YACM engage in activities more closely related to the appropriation of social and cultural spaces within the village as a means of undermining their lowly position in the caste hierarchy.

Activists in the Dalit Mukti Morcha (DMM) in Chhattisgarh

On the other hand, activists in the DMM move about between villages and frequent cities such as Raipur, where the DMM has its headquarters, and Bilaspur, where the High Court is located. Most of the DMM activists also go to other towns and cities for conferences, 'exposures' and other Dalit movement-related activities. One of them, Durga Jha, has even been to China for a convention on Asian Women's Rights. This is in contrast to the youth in the YACM, who mainly stay in the village. Only a few are educated in larger nearby villages and some gain experience of living in towns and cities as wage labourers. The degree of social and spatial mobility of rural and urban activists in the DMM is far greater than that of the young men in the YACM.

Gudu Lahre is a Satnami activist in the DMM. His trajectory into activism has two aspects that are common to most other young men involved in the Dalit social movement in Chhattisgarh: his family has supplementary income from mining besides that from wage labour and agriculture; and secondly, he is educated. He was born in Bihar in 1973 in the part which lies in present-day Jharkhand. He grew up in Dhanbad in relative prosperity away from the paddy fields of Chhattisgarh where his father was employed in coal mining and his mother worked in catering for the mine workers. Gudu is the oldest of five siblings and was educated in secondary school in Dhanbad in Jharkhand and attended college in Chhattisgarh (then Madhya Pradesh) from 1990-92. In 1992, Gudu's mother died of cancer and the family returned to their paternal village called Pakaria in Janjgir-Champa district. The family thus took up farming their 10 acres of land in Pakaria (which in Chhattisgarh is a sizeable holding). Gudu was unmarried at the time, and his mother's death grieved him greatly. In an interview, Gudu said,

I was unmarried at the time when my mother died. I felt very lonely and withdrew from others. At that time, I felt inspired to get involved in social work. I wanted to help those who needed help. Without any real guidance I

started making observations and doing field work. I began addressing issues that were related to atrocities. I was not systematic at the time. I had not been trained in fact-finding. At the time, I didn't know much about Human Rights. Slowly, I got to know of many cases of Dalit atrocities, but I did not know how to follow them up or what I could do to help.

The move back to the village as an educated young man led Gudu to become aware of the problems and atrocities perpetrated against the Satnamis in Chhattisgarh. One particular incident was the rape of a Satnami woman, which had led to a protest or *dharna* organised by members of the DS4¹⁵⁶ (Dalit Shoshit Seva Sangarsh Samiti) which Gudu joined. In 1999 he attended a two-day protest or *dharna* organised by the DS4 in relation to the rape (DS4 was a forerunner of the BSP and was led in Chhattisgarh by Dauram Ratnakar at the time). Subsequent to joining DS4, Gudu became more interested in grass-roots movements and investigations into atrocities against Dalits in Chhattisgarh.

On a visit to Gudu Lahre's home in his village, I met Gudu's wife and children and several other members of his household. The village house lies in a prominent area in the Satnami *para* adjoining a square with a large tree at the centre. This area is an important meeting spot for the men in the Satnami *para* and the proximity to Gudu's house meant that this area seemed almost in elongation to the house itself. Gudu's house was often frequented by other activists, journalists, teachers, members of the *panchayat* and other officials. At the entrance of the house, a space where a few chairs were placed seemed to be a permanent "living room" where meetings could take place. Guests like myself were made to sit there and plied with tea and snacks. A small coffee table with a table cloth decorated with fringes of lace, the type one would find in middle-class homes in Bilaspur had newspapers strewn on it. The house was made of bricks and rooms inside were painted in different colours. The contents of

¹⁵⁶ 'Dalit Shoshit Samaj Sangharsh Samiti' (which roughly translates as Dalit Association Against Caste Oppression) or DS4 was formed as a mass platform by Kanshi Ram in 1981 and was meant as a synonym for '*bahujan samaj*' or 'majority society' which was envisioned as being the target group of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP). The organisation BAMCEF (the predecessor of the BSP) rallied for the formation of DS4 with the slogan '*Thakur, Brahmin, Bania Chod, Baki Sab Hai DS4*' which translates as 'leaving out the main 'upper castes' of Thakur, Brahmin and Bania, what remains is DS4'. DS4 was not technically a political party, but was formed to seek mobilisation of a larger body of Dalits, backward castes or classes and minorities. Party workers in DS4 are active at grass-roots level, disseminating BSP discourses (Bose 2008: 57-61).

these rooms included a bed with a Formica bed-rest, an electric cooler, several chairs and tables and the kitchen was equipped with a gas stove. All these gadgets and furniture in Gudu's home were more middle-class than those found in ordinary Satnami homes. Newspapers, books and publications, posters of Ambedkar and banners from the protests carried out by the DMM could also be found in his home. Gudu is clearly more upwardly mobile than the young men in YACM; and years spent with the DMM and his trips to different towns and cities where he has seen and experienced middle-class homes, offices and way of life has touched his home and life in the village.

Gudu Lahre is a well known person in Pamgarh which is the Block and *Tehsil* level village ten kilometres north-west of Meu. Block offices such as that of the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and Sub-Divisional Officer (SDO), and those belonging to various other government departments, such as the Land Registry and Rural Health Care, are located in Pamgarh. It also has a police station and a Magistrates' Office and an adjoining court, which was inaugurated in 2007. Gudu is a frequent visitor to these offices, where he comes to collect documents on behalf of villagers whom he supports in his capacity as a social activist. He also has close ties with lawyers in the Magistrates' Office and keeps himself abreast of Block and *Tehsil* level politics through networks he has in Pamgarh. He has the look and air of a social worker and typically dresses in *khadi* (thick hand spun cotton) *kurta* (long shirt) and trousers and carries a cloth bag slung over his shoulder. He is not interested in scouting for political *chelas* (sycophants) and characteristically carries a sheaf of papers and files of cases of villagers who need him to help them with official matters. His tone and manner is soft, factual and unpretentious. Everyone knows that he is neither a politician ('*neta*') nor the 'politician type'. Gudu has a good reputation among the official circles in Pamgarh. He often organises *bethak* (discussion meetings) in Pamgarh on behalf of the DMM, and the venue is usually a government-owned community building called the 'Satnam Bhavan,' which can be used for such meetings. Gudu is a new type of social worker or activist because he does not link his activities with politicians from any party or at any level. The distance from mainstream politics is further analysed below in the context of Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) politics which have created an environment for political opportunism in north India that is not prevalent in the same way in relation to the BSP in Chhattisgarh.



Gudu Lahre (to the left of the other two men)

In 2000, Gudu met Goldy George and became part of the Dalit Study Circle established by him in Raipur. In his meeting with Goldy George, Gudu felt that ‘their wavelengths met,’ and he wanted to become a full-time activist working for Dalit rights in Chhattisgarh. At the time, the Dalit Study Circle had sixteen members and was involved in organising cultural events to promote Dalit culture. In ’97-’98, a festival was held in Beldi, the hometown of another activist, Shobha Ram. And in 2002-’03 they organised the Dalit Kala Mela or Dalit Art Fair in Abhanpur. The group engaged in fact-finding of atrocities against Dalits and began using the Internet as a medium to disseminate their reports. In December 2004, the core group of members in the Dalit Study Circle formed the Dalit Mukti Morcha or the DMM in Chhattisgarh, with Goldy and his wife Durga Jha at the helm of the organisation.

The DMM is an offshoot of the Dalit Study Circle which was started by Goldy George in Raipur in June 2004 (two years before I started my fieldwork). When I met Goldy for the first time, he introduced himself and said:

I am a person from Kerala, I should ideally go and set up something there. In Chhattisgarh I had a group of ten youngsters and I thought, set them up with some fellowships... build up the culture of changing leadership... The work of the movement can only go on if there is leadership and people take on that leadership.

Goldy George was born and brought up in Raipur but graduated from Madurai Kaviraj University in Tamil Nadu. He is from a relatively well-off family and is neither a rural person nor a son-of-the-soil in Chhattisgarh. He is from a Christian Dalit caste in Kerala and is married to a Brahmin woman who is also from urban Chhattisgarh. Although their work with the DMM has taken Goldy and his wife Durga Jha to villages in the four districts¹⁵⁷ in which they operate, neither of them has ever lived in a village. They have the dress and demeanour of urban people and speak Hindi, English and Chhattisgarhi. They are the only two activists in the DMM group who can speak English, although Durga Jha is not as fluent as her husband. Both of them have been actively involved in workshops and training set up by larger Dalit organisations such as the National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR) and National Conference of Dalit Organisations (NACDOR). They have succeeded in acquiring funding for the group from these and other larger NGOs. They are often the ones who make speeches to gatherings in rural areas. They were more involved in compiling fact-finding reports on cases of atrocities in the villages in the early years of the DMM. In the last few years, that role has been taken over by Gudu Lahre to a much greater extent.

The DMM's activists such as Gudu Lahre who come from villages in Chhattisgarh represent the socially upwardly mobile, educated male youth who, for instance, make up the YACM in Meu. However, Gudu is an exception because he links the urban activists to rural issues and atrocities related to caste oppression. Neither the DMM nor Gudu had any interest in involving young men, such as those in the YACM, in fact-finding missions or any other activities of the DMM. Gudu explained that educated activists like him have access to a motorbike and a mobile phone as well as more income from secondary sources other than from agriculture. This enables him to

¹⁵⁷ The four districts are Raipur, Janjgir-Champa, Mahasamoud and Bilaspur.

become involved in activism that entails compiling fact-finding reports of atrocities and participating in trainings and ‘exposures’ throughout the country. On the other hand, the young men in Meu cannot afford to take part in such activities. The activities of the activists in the DMM are outwardly directed towards national and international NGOs and advocacy groups that can facilitate funding, whereas the activities of the YACM relate to asserting autonomy in everyday village life. This disjuncture between the two groups is further analysed in the next chapter.

Activism through fact-finding in cases of caste atrocity

The members of both the YACM and the DMM are involved in actions and discourses that can potentially position them as belonging in the rubric of ‘new’ social movements that fall under the ‘autonomous anti-caste’ trajectory of Dalit movements in India. However, I will argue below that the importance of social mobility to the rise of the ‘new’ Dalit social movement in India is intrinsically linked to the growing Dalit middle classes that have taken up the Dalit cause on behalf of urban as well as rural Dalits. Rural Dalit activists are not as well represented in the movement as urban, upwardly mobile, educated male Dalit activists in the movement, and the kinds of activities that are most visible are those carried out by the urban educated members of Dalit movements across India.

The DMM mainly engages in fact-finding in cases of caste atrocities which are published on Internet websites¹⁵⁸ and which link various advocacy movements in India and abroad. The writing of these reports is instrumental to the new forms of Dalit activism that have taken shape since the formation of pan-Indian networks such as the NCDHR. However, these acts of compiling and publishing reports by educated urbanised Dalit activists through fact-finding ‘missions’ raises two questions: firstly, how do these reports correspond to everyday life in rural communities and the kinds of caste oppression there? And, secondly, how does this kind of activism fall short of representing the kinds of actors in situations of everyday forms of caste discrimination that are not as dramatic as those in cases of caste atrocities?

¹⁵⁸ An example of such a website can be found on the following link (for a list of links, see bibliography) <http://www.countercurrents.org/dalit-george230804.htm>

Caste atrocities in rural Chhattisgarh occur when a tension point is reached that results in acts of extreme violence perpetrated by the 'upper castes' on the Satnamis. The underlying reasons for these kinds of conflicts are often entrenched in personal grievances between the conflicting parties in relation to economic transactions or transgression of caste-based norms in relation to commensality or marriage. It can often also be the case that the 'upper castes' feel threatened by the social, political or economic advancement of Satnami households, and thus, in order to enforce the status quo of 'upper-caste' supremacy, threats and violence are employed to 'beat down' Satnami communities to 'keep them in the right place' (*apni jagha mein*) – that is, at the bottom of the village caste hierarchy. However, it is important to note that not long ago in Chhattisgarh the Satnamis were feared as a militant caste that could defend as well as offend. In some villages, it is not uncommon to find Satnami *gaonthias* (large landowners that hire wage labour) or a Satnami *sarpanc*. This is especially the case where proportionate or larger Satnami communities are to be found. It is in villages where Satnamis are the minority, or where organisations such as the Shiv Sena or Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) have particular strongholds with active members ready to display their martial arts, that the incidence of caste atrocities increases (see also Brass 1997: 27). Thus, reports of caste atrocities capture caste oppression in its most violent form. In the reconstruction of the acts of violence, activists are able to capitalise on interpretations, explanations and the context of the violence in a format that speaks to an audience that is far removed from the site of such violence. The mobilisation of advocacy networks spawned through these kinds of reports on the Internet feeds into the manufacturing of slogans and statistics that do not always reflect the contradictions and everyday context of caste oppression in village life.

The production of such reports by educated activists positions them at the point of linkage between interest groups unacquainted with village communities but does not bring into view the ordinary, less dramatic forms of everyday caste discrimination experienced by people in the villages and their own ways of responding to it. Shah (2010: 31) argues that city-based Jharkhandi activists that simultaneously transverse the worlds of urban networks of journalists, scholars and NGOs and the district's rural areas with a mastery of rural dialects and familiarity with the ways of getting to remote villages are the ones whose views and discourses are heard and taken for

granted as being representative of entire local communities. In villages, too, it is the rural elite that come forward when outsiders ask questions and the poorest majority remain unseen and unheard. Furthermore, urban activists reiterate discourses spun from encounters with NGOs, scholars and activists in global metropolises at social forums and conferences far removed from the realities of localised everyday rural life. These activists are well-meaning, but in exerting discourses manufactured far from the rural communities, they are in danger of constituting a language of rights that may barely capture the everyday concerns of the people they represent.

Hardiman (1987) shows that the ‘history’ written by ‘colonial anthropologists’ wanted to give credit for movements that led to betterment in the conditions of the *adivasis* by inculcating bans on alcohol in ‘upper-caste’ elites who considered the movements of the *adivasis* as backward or superstitious. Hardiman challenges this view and calls for a focus on writing a history of the *adivasis* in which they are the subject (ibid: 10) so as to understand the ‘consciousness that informed actions taken by the subaltern classes on their own, independently of any elite initiative’. He argues that the aspiration for a better life grew from daily experience and self-assertion that were brought about by the actions of the *adivasis* themselves. These kinds of representations by outsiders or others of the rural peoples’ own ways of opposing oppression can inadvertently be replicated by well-meaning urban activists in the present scenario.

In terms of the Dalit movement in Chhattisgarh, members of the DMM like Goldy George become the first point of contact when researching the presence and networks of Dalit activism in the region. However, a longer stay in rural areas reveals that youth associations, such as the YACM, are not present in the activist networks visible in towns like Bilaspur or Raipur. The DMM’s production of fact-finding reports on caste atrocities provides evidence of caste discrimination that relates to violent incidences of caste oppression. While these reports capture underlying tensions, inequalities and injustices, they direct attention to gross acts of caste violence which are poignant and shocking. However, in most of rural Chhattisgarh, it is not these kinds of violent encounters that characterise the varieties of caste oppression prevalent in everyday village life. On the contrary, it is the more subtle forms of

embedded discriminatory practices that irk the Satnamis and other 'untouchable' castes at the bottom of village society.

Questioning these kinds of injunctions on greater cross-caste interactions is possible in urban areas, where anonymity and increased class consciousness reduces the importance of caste (if not the rule of caste endogamy). In contrast, questioning caste inequalities in village life becomes possible at the point where changes in the levels of education catalyse social mobility, though in practice structures of caste hierarchy remain unchanged. It is in this everyday scenario that caste oppression persists though it does not often culminate in violent incidents, such as those documented in reports of caste atrocities.

The notion of 'seva' in activism

Dalit activists in Chhattisgarh are a new type of social worker because they do not belong to in the cadres of government-employed workers that are either in municipality work or developmental work, such as primary health care. They are a voluntary force that works to bring about ideological change and are largely unpaid. The fact that people in social movements in various societies belong to social movements and receive no remuneration shows that the kinds of work associated with social movements is voluntarily done to emphasise peoples' belief in bringing about change in society through the common will. This is also consistent with social movements being in the realm of civil society, where citizens impose checks and balances on the state, market and religious authorities. However, activists that devote their time to activities related to the movement such as those of the DMM can only do so with some form of remuneration to cover costs related to transportation, communication and subsistence while on the road. This poses questions as to the kinds of merit such social work earns in Indian society. How is it different to political work?

Theoretically, renunciators are the only truly autonomous people in traditional Indian society because renunciation enables breaking free from worldliness, one's kin and caste. However, the problem lies in determining who is a real renouncer and to what extent he or she is free of worldliness, and in establishing to what extent this is

necessary to be considered a true renouncer. Similarly, the merit gained through *seva*, or the act of doing good in a social or spiritual context, is dependent on whether it is done publicly or in secret (Mayer 1981). To gauge the level of merit in a selfless act depends on whether the act brings individual merit (*punya*) or reputation (*nam*), and these two must not co-exist to gain merit from true *seva*. In the context of acts carried out for any form of remuneration in political or social work, although one may work conscientiously the fact that one is remunerated means that there is a vested interest in the acts performed. Even doing selfless acts for reputation annuls benefits such as *punya*. A teacher (*guru*) who imparts learning to his disciple (*chela*) would only be doing *seva* if he expects nothing in return. Similarly, political work that earns merit can only be done by a renouncer or *sanyasi* who shows benign concern in an impersonal way and does not establish any vertical relationships while doing so. The analogy drawn by Mayer is to the giving of gifts ‘secretly’ as *daan*, which are sacrifices and actions carried out without thought of recompense.¹⁵⁹

There are therefore varying degrees of *seva* in different careers, and it is by doing acts to improve the conditions of other human beings that activists in the DMM are driven towards their goal. In doing so, activists like Gudu Lahre draw a contrast between what they are doing and the work of politicians. It is not uncommon to find local brokers of political power in the role of facilitators that are go-betweens for villagers in cases related to the police, law courts or the state. Such actors are analysed below in the context of the increasing power of the BSP in UP. However, the activists in the DMM do not position themselves as those types of political brokers. Conversely, they consider small-time local politicians to be corrupt, and mainstream politics is not considered a channel for mobilisation against caste discrimination in Chhattisgarh.

Political Background: Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and politics in Chhattisgarh

Political Dalit movements such as that of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and its discourses permeate everyday village life to a greater extent than the activities and discourses of the Dalit social movement led by urban and rural based Dalit activists. The BSP is highly visible in print and television media and belongs in a sphere of

¹⁵⁹ The key point is that *seva* is part of the same complex of ideas as *daan*, sacrifice and renunciation.

electoral mobilisation that everyone in villages has access to. Lynch (1969 in Jaffrelot 2000: 765) points out that for the Chamars who converted to being Jatavs, ‘political participation’ became a ‘functional alternative’ to *sanskritisation*, and they tried to achieve social mobility through accessing power in that way. Mainstream political party participation has become increasingly influential in everyday village life, not only through the workings of *Panchayati Raj*,¹⁶⁰ but also because of the increasing emphasis on caste-determined voting-blocs, a strategy which has been favoured by the BSP.

Around election time, it is not uncommon to observe political candidates relentlessly campaigning for votes in rural Chhattisgarh. They have more money than Dalit activists to spend on these activities and use many forms of persuasion including gifts of alcohol, snacks and small sums of money, to lure voters. Even insignificant political power is used instrumentally to extract bribes from ‘naïve’ and ‘helpless’ villagers for small favours in their dealings with state administration, courts or the police. The resources with which political candidates operate in rural areas is unmatched by Dalit social movement activists because of fundamental differences in their social and political aims, the funding they have access to and the kinds of power they represent. Although BSP discourses are relevant to the ways in which Ambedkar’s ideas are disseminated in rural Chhattisgarh, the party has no political power in the state. It is within this context of mainstream politics that the YACM and DMM operate.

The rise of the Dalit political party, the Bahujan Samaj Party, in the 1980s in the populous¹⁶¹ northern state of Uttar Pradesh is often seen as a landmark development in the contemporary Dalit movement in India (Pai 2002; Jaffrelot 1998, 2000a, 2000b).

¹⁶⁰ In 1992, the 73rd amendment to the Indian Constitution granted constitutional status to *Panchayati Raj*. *Panchayati Raj* is an institutional arrangement that supports the decentralisation of power and responsibility to local levels through elective bodies at the village, block and district levels. It is a system of government linking small villages (*gram sabha* - village councils) to the Union government and Lok Sabha (Lower House of Parliament). It is a mechanism for decentralising political power by enabling local participation in planning and implementation of local development programmes. It evolves from a faith in the power and capability of people to self-govern. It supports the economic liberalisation programmes being implemented by the GOI by giving rights of management of resources to user groups. Seats for the SC and ST are reserved in proportion to their population, and one third of the total number of seats at every level has been reserved for women (www.iris.umd.edu). The tenure of the *panchayat* is five years (see also Strulik in Gellner (ed.) 2010: 104-105).

¹⁶¹ Uttar Pradesh is the most populous state in India and the most populous sub-national entity in the world with an estimated population of approximately 200 million.

Pai (2002: 21) points out that the BSP was chiefly interested in *replacing* the ‘upper castes’ in positions of political power and that its main goal was the *political* empowerment of Dalits. But she argues that even though the BSP “describes itself as an *Ambedkarite* Party, its ideology is based upon the speeches and ideas of Kanshi Ram”¹⁶² (ibid: 22). The BSP’s ideology is thus that state power can be used for ‘social engineering’ through various developmental schemes for Dalits, rather than a revolution based upon the mobilisation and destruction of existing inequalities ‘from below’. The Dalits had hoped that the BSP would undertake grass-roots mobilisations, create awareness and introduce reformatory changes. But with its roots in the Backward and Minority Communities Employment Federation (BAMCEF) founded by Kashi Ram, the BSP came to speak for the middle classes and attracted upwardly mobile Dalits, for whom “voting is a matter of social prestige” and who view “supporting the BSP as an extension of their cultural identity” (ibid: 18-21).

The party emphasised Dalit political power rather than poverty and oppression, and in doing so moved away from the Nehruvian and Congress emphasis on poverty alleviation (Ray et al 2005). At the grass-roots level, however, the BSP has played a significant role in influencing Dalit assertiveness, and this can be seen in a proliferation of smaller associations in rural areas led by newly-educated young Dalit men emphasising “separate identity and self-respect; and widespread dissemination of the ideas and writings of Ambedkar” (ibid: 19-20).

Unlike in other states in India, political rivalry in Chhattisgarh continues between the Congress and the BJP, with a lack of home-grown political parties that represent new social groups. An organic political base is practically non-existent (Berthet 2008: 328) and representation of Tribal and Dalit communities, for instance, has been greatly side-tracked by the dominance of the two mainstream national political parties. The BSP, stronger in north India, recently lost the two seats – out of a total of 90 in the

¹⁶² Kanshi Ram was born in 1934 to a lower-middle-class Sikh family that had converted from the Chamar caste. His father was in the army, and thus Kanshi Ram could benefit from government education and graduated with a BSc degree. He was a member of the Republican Party of India (RPI) started by Ambedkar and found Ambedkar’s vision for the party limiting as it focused primarily on Dalits. He was inspired by Jyotirao Phule’s concept of ‘*bahujan samaj*,’ and in 1976 he formed the Backward and Minority Communities Employees Federation (BAMCEF), which later broadened its base with the formation of the organisation Dalit Shoshit Samaj Sangharsh Samiti (DS4). These led eventually to the formation of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) with Mayawati as one of the most prominent leaders (Bose 2008: 28-33).

Chhattisgarh state Assembly - that it had gained in the 2003 elections. Dauram Ratnakar has been a frontrunner of the BSP in Chhattisgarh and has been particularly active in the Janjgir-Champa district where Kanshi Ram (founding figure of the BSP) visited Pamgarh in the 1980s and 1990s to set up DS4 (Dalit Soshit Samaj Sangharsh Samiti) in the district. However, in the last few years, Dauram Ratnakar and the BSP's presence in the district has diminished. The politics of Chhattisgarh, both before and after its formation, has been dominated by 'upper-caste' north Indians such as the Shuklas¹⁶³ and then Raman Singh (the present chief minister). Leaders that represent populations of SCs and STs belonging to the Congress Party, such as Ajit Jogi and Pyarelal Thakur, have been overshadowed by BJP politicians.

Satnamis and politics in Chhattisgarh: lack of representation

The Satnamis are mainly to be found in the rice-growing plains areas around Raipur, which is an area geographically and politically distinct from the forested areas in the north and south of Chhattisgarh that have high ratios of tribal communities and the presence of Naxalites. The two areas have distinct political economies and histories. The plains area largely fell under the British Central Provinces and Berar, which were relatively late entrants under British rule as compared to other regions in peninsula India (Berthet 2008: 2). At the same time, the tribal areas fell under various princely and feudatory states. Ironically, the majority of people in these areas voted for the BJP in the 2003 elections, rather than favouring the Congress party, whose candidate Ajit Jogi claims tribal identity.¹⁶⁴ The only other main figure in the Congress party is Mahendra Karma, an MLA in the Dantewara district in the south, who has played a major role in the recruitment and management of a state led counter-insurgency movement against the Naxalites called Salwa Judum, which has led to civil-war-like disruption in Naxal-ridden areas of Chhattisgarh. The involvement of this MLA with

¹⁶³ The Shuklas are Kanyakubja Brahmins who moved to the region in the late nineteenth century. They had in effect established a political dynasty with R. S. Shukla at its head and his sons Shyamacharan (S.C) and Vidyacharan (V.C) Shukla as his political descendents (Louise Tillin's seminar paper on "Politics in a New State: Chhattisgarh").

¹⁶⁴ An explanation for the BJP's uncanny popularity among tribal communities is that the Hindu right-wing organisation RSS had been increasing its presence in these areas through organisations such as the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram in tribal areas and a prominent leader of the BJP, Dilip Singh Judeo, led 'reconversion' campaigns amongst Christian tribal communities, which he described as 'homecoming'. Another issue is the validity of Ajit Jogi's claims to a tribal identity (Louise Tillin's seminar paper on "Politics in a New State: Chhattisgarh").

Salwa Judum gives the impression that the Congress party is in agreement with BJP policies.

The plains areas in contrast have a high proportion of OBC and SC populations. The Sahus (Telis) and Kurmis are the largest OBC castes followed by the Yadavs; and the Satnamis are the largest SC caste followed by Gana (or Ganda), who were until recently bonded-labourers in villages on the banks of the Mahanadi River in Mahasamund district. A prominent Kurmi (OBC) politician Khubchand Bhagel left the Congress party in the 1940s and set up the Chhattisgarh Mahasabha (Berthet 2008). His involvement in mainstream politics thus declined, and although there is resentment among OBCs concerning the stronghold that Brahmin lineages have in Chhattisgarh politics, they have been unable to compete. In stark contrast to the northern state of Uttar Pradesh, the BSP has only made small inroads into the Dalit (predominantly Satnami) communities in Chhattisgarh. In the 2003 election, they won two seats, one fewer than in 1998. In the recent elections in 2008, they did not win any.

In Meu, particularly among the members of the YACM, there are conflicting views about the extent to which the BSP is representative of the Satnami community. There is a degree of awareness that the BSP and Mayawati have risen to power in Uttar Pradesh and members of the YACM were mainly in favour of the BSP, considering it to be the party that 'fights for Dalit rights'. However, they spoke of the BSP in relation to politics outside Chhattisgarh and as being far removed from everyday village life. The youth in the YACM subscribe to BSP rhetoric rather than, for instance, Hindu nationalist ideology and are aware of political mobilisation as a powerful mechanism in the fight for Dalit rights. However, they are fairly sceptical of political parties and associate mainstream politics with corruption. On the one hand, they see political representation from their own community as a means to gain access to development funding. On the other hand, because of widespread corruption in the cadres of elected representatives, they are despondent about electoral and party politics.

Mayawati's power and popularity was commented on by one informant, who said:

Mayawati fights for our rights. The BSP fights for the suppressed classes and those who are backward. The people who are oppressed and are Scheduled Castes are also represented by the BSP. I hope that Mayawati will become Prime Minister of India.

Another informant said:

BSP and Mayawati have fought for Dalit rights. They are the party for Scheduled Castes and OBCs. They can make it possible for 'backward' people to get reservations.

These views about the BSP and Mayawati are generated by party propaganda which is disseminated by political campaigning and at rallies held by BSP candidates and party workers in rural Chhattisgarh. The views are unsubstantiated by any real evidence, and since BSP losses in the recent elections allegations of corruption against Mayawati have re-emerged. These allegations are not new; controversies about her spending, especially on statues of Ambedkar and other symbols of Dalit identity and power, have appeared in the media throughout the last few years. However, Mayawati did gain an unprecedented reputation for advancing development schemes for the Dalits in Uttar Pradesh (Jaffrelot 1998: 47-49; Jeffreys et al 2008: 1370).

Others in the YACM held the view that the BSP is as corrupt as any other political party and expressed disillusionment at the commitment of politicians who 'eat up money' and do not deliver on their campaign promises. In one informant's words:

BSP is like any other political party - they are all corrupt and eat up money. They do not do any development (*vikas*) for us in the village.

The disillusionment with party politics is captured in the following statements where one of my informants alludes to the practice of voting for one's own caste, which is a widespread phenomenon in India and a mechanism shrewdly used by the BSP to canvass for votes in north India:

I will vote for any party that has a Satnami candidate. I think it is best to support our own *samaj* (community) rather than a party. If the BSP has a Satnami candidate, I'll give them my vote. If *Bajpa* (BJP) also has a Satnami candidate and he is even better than the one the BSP have, then I'll give my vote to *Bajpa*. Only a candidate from our *samaj* will help in bringing *vikas* (development) to us.

Among the members of the YACM, the discourse on social change is dominated by allusions to Ambedkar rather than the BSP. For them, Ambedkar symbolises the struggle for rights on an ideological level that they perceive as relevant to everyday village life. One of the main aspects of Ambedkar's strategy for defending the 'lower castes' against caste oppression is education, and this is reiterated in his slogan '*shiksha, sangathan, sangharsh*' ('educate, organise, and agitate'). The members of the YACM emphasise that education is a means of overcoming caste oppression by equating education to awareness (*jankaari*), awakening (*jaagriti*) and development (*vikas*). Knowledge of current politics is seen as having *jaankari* but is not the same as engaging in mainstream politics. The members of the YACM are interested in social mobility through education and non-farm employment in order to gain material empowerment and higher social status. They do not seek empowerment through direct engagement with mainstream political parties in order to gain higher status. They have aspirations of reclaiming spaces in the cultural life of the village and social mobility through education and non-farm employment. In contrast to older generations, awareness of caste identity and political rights among the members of the YACM has heightened their sensitivity towards forms of discriminatory practices. They are less complacent about untouchability and the oppressive ways of the 'clean' castes in the village and are more sharply aware of and disillusioned by the gap between what is and what ought to be.

Not 'Naye neta' – new politicians

The YACM in Meu and activists in the DMM can be described as organic intellectuals (Gramsci 1971) that do not position themselves as political brokers in village administration (*panchayat*) or in their dealings with lawyers or victims of caste-related violence. Patron-clientalism is as rife in Meu as in other parts of rural

India; however, the Satnamis in Meo are not organised in the kinds of parallel systems of patronage found in Uttar Pradesh that are described below. Activists in the DMM meticulously explained that the role and the mission of the DMM is to bring awareness of rights to rural communities, as well as to represent NGOs working against discriminatory caste practices. The reluctance to be associated with politics is reflected in the DMM, when Gudu Lahre (mentioned earlier) often criticised Goldy (a founding member of the DMM) if he sounded like a politician in his speeches, and censured other activists if they behaved in a manner similar to local politicians. Gudu Lahre talked disparagingly about activists who flaunt their connections or become small-time power brokers for village people in need of help with administrative or legal procedures.

A different scenario is illustrated through increasing political awareness among marginalised groups and Dalits catalysed by the rise of Dalit politics and the Bahujan Samaj Party in UP (Jeffery et al. 2008: 1373-1383). Young Dalit men in UP have similar trajectories to some of the young men in the DMM and YACM in Chhattisgarh as they are similarly educated, often in small towns or cities away from their villages; and their families also have supplementary income from non-farm employment. However, unlike the young men in the YACM and the activists in the DMM, this emerging group of rural politically engaged, educated young Dalit men in UP is promoting a different agenda. Some of them have been enrolled in DS4¹⁶⁵ in UP and the position of these young Dalit men in their own peer group and community is that of '*neta*', or colloquially, 'politician'. As new Dalit politicians (*naye neta*) they attempt to engage with state institutions in a way which is a result of altered local-level political dynamics in Uttar Pradesh.¹⁶⁶ They act as intermediaries or political

¹⁶⁵ In 1976, Kanshi Ram formed the Backward and Minority Communities Employees Federation (BAMCEF) which later broadened its base with the formation of the organisation Dalit Shoshit Samaj Sangharsh Samiti (DS4). These eventually became the BSP with Mayawati as one of the most prominent leaders (Bose 2008).

¹⁶⁶ The '*naye neta*' that Jeffery et al. (2008) describe are 'self-styled' 'new politicians' that have emerged from poorer castes in UP. These include Dalits and MBCs (Most Backward Castes) who have a lower status than Hindu 'intermediate castes' including OBCs, Jats and Yadavs who have increasingly become a rural elite in UP with growing influence on state institutions (ibid: 1368). Besides these castes, around 20% of UP's population comprises 'upper-caste' Hindus, such as Brahmins and Thakurs, who are substantial landowners and dominate government-salaried employment in local bureaucracies. The rise of the BSP in UP was catalysed by direct antagonism between the lower and upper rungs of the caste hierarchy there. The kinds of political agency wielded by the '*naye netas*' in UP is a result of capitalising on the political environment in UP, where figures like Mayawati have endorsed 'patronage politics' (ibid: 1370). The influence of mainstream politics

fixers to help friends or relatives gain favours from state officials. However, these 'link men' accomplish contradictory and piecemeal advancement for the Chamar community by favouring only some factions of the community or their own kin. Some of them are keen to take up official posts in village *panchayats* through their involvement in politics of patronage (ibid).

The influence of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) on subaltern and local-level politics in Uttar Pradesh is unique to that state and is far more pervasive than in Chhattisgarh. The YACM and DMM are not politically affiliated to any mainstream political parties, although they claim that the BSP is the party that represents their interests. In Chhattisgarh, political representation of the Satnamis at higher political levels lacks an organic base. In this state, politics is dominated by the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and 'upper castes' that have generally held power in the state since its formation in 2000. However, at the local level, power in village *panchayats* is divided between the Satnamis and Other Backward Classes (OBC).¹⁶⁷ In some villages, where there is a large Satnami population, it is not unusual that the *panchayat* is led by a Satnami headman (*sarpanc*), as is the case in Meu. The kinds of *neya neta* described in Uttar Pradesh can also be found in rural Chhattisgarh, but they are of all castes and can be linked to other political parties, such as the BJP and Congress.

Concluding remarks

The pan-Indian Dalit Movement in India has been described as a 'new' social movement by some scholars (Shah 1990, Jodhka 2001, Pai 2002). The problem with calling the Dalit movement a 'new' social movement lies in the intrinsic relation to class of those educated and upwardly mobile Dalit activists that are largely visible in towns and cities and constitute the movement. Those 'creamy layer' Dalits do not always represent the millions of rural Dalits who live far removed from Internet technologies and who do not have access to the social or legal infrastructure that activists employ in cases related to atrocities. Often, educated upwardly mobile Dalit

and the tactics employed by powerful figures like Mayawati have driven a culture of local-level politics that has encouraged actors such as '*neya netas*' to become brokers between the state and their communities.

¹⁶⁷These castes rank lower than 'upper castes' in the 'twice-born', 'clean' caste hierarchy and include castes such as Sahu (Teli), Rawat, Kashyap, Kurmi, Panika, Kevat, Dhimar, Dhobi and Thawait in rural Chhattisgarh.

activists become the link between outsiders such as the media and researchers and rural communities. By forging such links, well-meaning activists can sometimes obscure ground realities and instead highlight those cases where caste discrimination ends in violence or an atrocity.

Activists in the DMM in Chhattisgarh maintain a distance from mainstream politics and are not interested in becoming small-time local power brokers, like those described in UP. The phenomenon of *naye neta* in UP is an outcome of increased patronage politics in UP which has been encouraged by the BSP, which has gained power in that state. The BSP, however, has no political power in Chhattisgarh. The activists in the DMM are a new type of social activist. They do not engage in activism for the sole purpose of remuneration and they do not seek political power. This does not mean that they do not aspire to advance in their personal or professional goals in relation to being activists. However, the network of activists in the DMM is scant and those activists frequenting the village did not find the youth of the YACM to be relevant to the work of the movement.

The YACM, on the other hand, does not fit neatly into 'new' social movement typologies and remains disconnected from the world of urbanised activism. Their method of opposing caste discrimination combines strategies that are both traditional and secular, formulated in a highly localised manner, without being outwardly oriented in the same way as urban Dalit activists. The members of the YACM neither seek mainstream political channels for rights claiming, nor do they try to become small time political power brokers like the *naye neta* in UP. The notion of *seva* (self-less service) underlies the motivation for activism among the activists of the DMM. In contrast, the role of the group in Meu is that of 'key social animators'. They do not actively engage in issues related to caste atrocities but rather engage with ways to use their resourcefulness in asserting Satnami autonomy through events in the Satnami *para*. The audience for the YACM is the older generation of Satnamis in Meu and the people in their community. The assertion of this kind of autonomy not only defies ostracism from other castes but also shows a greater level of self-esteem among them. It indicates that they do not passively accept a lowly position in the caste hierarchy. For the DMM, the interest groups are urban NGOs, national as well as international, and the mechanisms for fighting caste oppression are linked more directly with

advocacy and providing victims of caste atrocities with resources through Dalit activist networks.

Chapter 6

Activities of the YACM and the DMM

This chapter focuses on the activities of the YACM and the DMM, and compares the ways in which the YACM in the village is more ‘inwardly’ oriented in its activities, which mainly relate to the Satnami *para* and everyday life in the village, whereas the DMM’s activities link urbanised activists to the larger Dalit movement which is pan-Indian. Through an analysis of the activities of the two it becomes clearer that mainstream political channels are not an interesting medium for claiming rights for either group. Politics and rights considered in a spatiotemporal context highlight the ways in which socially mobile activists engage in a realm of civil society as yet inaccessible to village youth, to the extent that there is hardly any transformative impact on everyday village life.¹⁶⁸ Thus, the alternative mechanisms employed by the two groups at differing spatiotemporal nodes of the Dalit social movement shows disjuncture between the two.

The ways in which activists in the DMM in Chhattisgarh use the public, social and political spaces available to them are markedly different than those of the YACM in Meu. The DMM has a wider scope and different interests in comparison to the YACM. The DMM is an offshoot of the wider Dalit social movement, which was established all over the country from 1998 onwards (Hardtmann 2003, Gorringer 2005). The use of the Internet and other media and networking among activists trained in the discourses of the movement by organisations such as the National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR), the Dalit Foundation (DF) and the National Conference of Dalit Organisations (NACDOR) are the ways in which the DMM sustains its links to the larger movement.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁸ Partha Chatterjee (2008: 57) argues that while the middle classes in India are a largely civil society, rural populations do not relate to the organs of the state in the same way and ‘nor do government agencies treat them as proper citizens belonging to civil society’. However, this is a subject of heated debate and it would be incorrect to assume that rural people cannot be considered as citizens or as part of civil society because their engagement with discourses as shown in this study positions them as emerging actors in Indian civil society.

¹⁶⁹ The National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR), Dalit Foundation (DF) and National Conference of Dalit Organisations (NACDOR) are NGOs that were formed as an outcome of the Dalits’ participation in the UN Convention for the Elimination of Racial [and Caste] Discrimination held in Durban in 2001.

Analysing public events

Considerations of place and space are of importance in understanding the social, economic and political positioning of different caste communities in an Indian village. Material as well as public spaces define economic disparities and social separation between the different castes. Probable acquisition of land through militancy by the forefathers of the Satnamis now living in Meu could be one of the most important elements in the transformation of their identity from Chamar to Satnami. Ownership of land, however small in area, is a source of self-sufficiency throughout rural India. The Satnamis in Meu constantly emphasised their self-sufficiency through the idiom of ownership and livelihood through cultivating their own plots of land. They also associated landlessness with practices of bonded labour in the past. In conversations about Naxalites in other parts of Chhattisgarh, villagers pointed out the lack of ownership of land as a related cause for their militant uprising. Land is seen as a hallmark of security for farmers even though they may be poor. It was not uncommon for a Satnami man to assert that

...if I desperately need the money to marry my daughter, I can sell my small piece of land... it is a security for me and my family.

Land for cultivation is not the only material space that is important in the everyday lives of villagers. Dalits all over India, in the past – and still on occasion today - are denied ownership of land *and* access to particular spaces within the village¹⁷⁰ as well as public places, such as temples. The inferiority of Dalit communities is highlighted through their exclusion from such spaces. The very fact that Dalit communities live in segregation in most Indian villages is testimony to the sensitivity of spatial and territorial separation between the ‘clean’ castes and ‘untouchables’.

Gorringe (2005: 178) remarks that ‘few areas in India constitute public space in any meaningful sense since space has usually been hierarchically patterned’. Ownership or control of land and public resources are sources of power and status. The denial of these can be a result of lowliness; or social exclusion as a result of disobeying moral

¹⁷⁰ As shown in an earlier chapter, the Satnamis in Meu are not allowed to use the same areas on the edges of the village ponds as those used by the ‘clean’ castes while bathing and washing clothes.

codes or caste norms in the village. For example, an inter-caste marriage may eventually be accepted, but the errant couple may have to leave the village or live in exile outside it. In some cases Dalits are hounded out of the village and threatened with violence.

Public events in the village are those moments that metaphorically delineate the spaces in which respective caste communities in the village represent themselves, are recognised and communicate with each other. While, theoretically, public spaces can be egalitarian, in the village existing inequalities are exacerbated at public events, and during such events people's private feelings about caste differences are clearly manifested. Similarly, public spaces and events are key sites for culturally determined boundaries between men and women in the village. Men are predominantly visible in these spaces and events, while women attend them in a limited way. Organising public events falls into the realm of men's activities simply because it is men who are permitted to gather spontaneously or otherwise in the streets or in tea stalls, whereas women may work, shop or collect fuel, but do not linger unnecessarily or meet others in the same way. Their movements are more restricted than those of men. While 'lower-caste' and Satnami women who are farmers and wage labourers may have greater autonomy than their 'upper-caste' counterparts because they leave the hearth and earn wages, they are not exempt from the kinds of restrictions that follow general notions of propriety and good conduct for women in the village.

Buechler (1980: 8-9) has argued that public events organise both 'the signifiers of meaning and the referents of meaning'. They make indigenous phenomena and their lived worlds perceptible for external observers and Handelman (1990) argues that 'for the ethnographer, public events are privileged points of penetration into other social and cultural universes' (ibid: 9). Drawing on Durkheim, he asserts that public events can be seen as a reflection of collective understandings or principles of social structure (ibid: 16). Gluckman (1962) and Ortner (1978) (cited in Handelman 1990) on the other hand, have argued that public events can be a window onto problems that are embedded in the social relationships or the way of life of a community. Public

events can be seen as a vehicle for popular expression in the public sphere where they become a focal point for emerging popular and vernacular spheres of participation.¹⁷¹

The public sphere in the context of the village is more autonomous than the conventional, institutional ('Habermasian') public sphere in western societies (Jaoul 2007: 174). Freitag (1989: 134 cited in Jaoul 2007) associates the realm of public activities with 'public arenas' based on popular participation and values of community that are in contrast to western notions of the 'public sphere' that are accessible through individualistic principles of citizenship. The public sphere is often ideally understood as a universal, abstract realm in which citizens can exchange opinions and values; however, in the rural Indian context, caste (as race and class do in the west) continues to 'determine levels of access to and recognition within 'public spaces'' (Gorringe 2005: 49). Guptoo (2001 cited in Jaoul 2007) argues that public space appropriated for vernacular expressions of autonomy became accessible for poor communities through their urge to defy exclusion and assert their presence. Public events staged by Dalits in Uttar Pradesh were thus 'vehicles of contestation from below' (ibid: 21). The increase in incomes in emerging middle-class Dalit communities had aided the organisation of public events through monetary endorsements, which was not formerly possible on the same scale or for the same kinds of events. Though this mostly pertains to communities in urban areas, a similar pattern can also be observed as emerging in rural areas.

The appropriation of Hindu icons, rituals and ceremonies in the festivities carried out in the Satnami *para* and participation in these celebrations is a means for Satnamis to assert their higher status within village society. The banning of Hindu icons by Guru Ghasi Das in the past and the denunciation of Hindu ritual authority by the appointment of Satnami ritual functionaries such as the *bhandari* and the *sathedar* did not help Satnamis achieve a higher social status in the village caste hierarchy. It enabled them to assert separation and self-sufficiency, but as leadership in the sect unravelled and social subordination remained, the Satnamis in contemporary rural Chhattisgarh began to appropriate the cultural and political spaces of the 'clean' Hindu castes to defy their subordination in the caste hierarchy.

¹⁷¹ See also Lucia Michellutti (2009).

In a history of Dalit processions in the late colonial period, Jaoul (2007) highlights the ways in which ‘untouchables’ appropriated symbolic means of enacting positions of power or prestige through public expressions at the *Melas* (village fairs) and Hindu religious festivals in which they were otherwise denied participation. Through participation, for example, in the *Kumbha Mela* which is a very large gathering of ascetics by the banks of the river Ganges, individual ascetics from ‘untouchable’ castes could gain exposure, patronage and prestige. In the 1920s, during the rise of caste Mahasabhas, the Melas became privileged sites for political mobilisation. Adi-Hindus¹⁷² took part in the Kumbha Mela of 1928 where several ‘untouchable’ devotional (*bhakti*) sects had convened and where ‘untouchable’ saints were carried on elephants, an honour reserved for orthodox Hindus. Public prominence and honour in this manner was provocative because ‘untouchables’ had been excluded from Brahmanical norms and ritual sacred spaces. Through such public exposure, ‘untouchable’ saints turned these symbols into rebellion and a new identity of assertiveness (Jaoul 2007: 177).

In the second half of the nineteenth century, Guru Ghasi Das’ patrilineal descendent Balak Das, (the second guru of the Satnamis, and one of Guru Ghasi Das’ sons) who was in possession of the *gaddi* (or ‘throne’ of the guru) at the time, outraged ‘upper castes’ by riding on an elephant. In a 1881 census (Census of the Central Provinces 1881, II, p. 38) it is noted that “the present guru spent his time managing his own temporal concerns, and in making a sort of progress (tours) through the country, receiving presents, offerings, and homage from all, but enlightening none” (Dube 1998: 59). Reconstitution of Hindu sacred rituals in the Satnami calendar was already occurring when Balakdas institutionalised the practice of an annual *puja* of the *guru* on *Dashera* (Hindu religious festival) (ibid: 58).

During the colonial period, leaders of sects were seen in ‘festive processions’ bearing ‘weapons, banners, and accoutrements of royal authority’ (Jaoul 2007: 177). These were symbolic means of enacting sovereignty and similar observations were made by

¹⁷² ‘Adi’ denotes ‘original’ and is similar to Adi-Dravidar in South India which literally means ‘original Dravidian’ which was adopted by ‘untouchable’ groups in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (primarily by the Paraiyar castes) as a means of improving their social status (Gorringe 2005: 56).

J.J. Lohr. He photographed Balak Das in 1898 (see Dube 1998: 60-61) and the picture depicts the guru seated on a 'throne' flanked by men wielding shields and swords, and wearing militaristic outfits. The *guru*, in fact, was called a *raja-aadmi*, or kingly person, and his regal figure undoubtedly signalled embodiment of power and authority that challenged the status quo of 'upper-caste' authority.

In contemporary Chhattisgarh, the authority of Satnami gurus has transformed from being that of a *guru* of an ideological and religious sect to that of politician because of the gradual slide into party politics since the 1970s (see Babb 1972). The symbolic power of the Satnami gurus and their lineage is limited to particular instances, such as that in Bodsara described in chapter 3. The *gurus* no longer tour rural areas, have any form of authority or actively play the role as unifier of the Satnami community. The Satnamis in Meu consider the present Satnami patrilineal descendent of Guru Ghasi Das, called Vijai Guru, a corrupt politician. In present-day village life, the Satnamis assert their autonomy through the appropriation of Hindu mainstream cultural spaces rather than through adherence to a Satnami *guru* or Satnami tenets.

In Bloch's (1986: 195 cited in Eriksen 2001: 224) analysis of ritual and ritualistic symbolism he argues that these are ambiguous because they represent a social world that is contradictory. In his words, 'the message of ideology cannot be maintained simply as a statement... because it is by its very nature in contradiction with human experience in the world'. In instances of social transformation, rituals that belong in the older social order may be reproduced, but their meaning may change in order to give an impression of legitimacy (Eriksen 2001: 225). In the case of Hindu celebrations in the Satnami *para*, the Satnami youth who are organisers of these events gain legitimacy as 'key social animators'. They use the celebration of Hindu festivals as a means of defying embedded notions of social hierarchies that are symbolically expressed through the celebration of these festivals.

Activities of the YACM

The YACM consists of few more than a dozen young men, mostly unmarried and some more educated than others. They are all friends and have come together in this formalised group essentially as friends wanting to engage in conversation and

activities that bind them to each other as a group and separate them from other youth in the Satnami *para* and in the village. Most young unmarried men in the village ‘hang out’ daily and are only interrupted in this activity by spurts of agricultural labour, mainly during harvest time. Preparation of the fields for sowing, weeding and transplantation occupies men, women and some youth, but harvest time requires everyone to participate in the work. Some of these young men also leave the village for months at a time to earn wages on construction sites in towns and cities, or in other manual jobs. Very few leave forever. Nearly all marry brides in the village, although many brides are found in neighbouring or other villages, and most often the bride is chosen by their parents.

The kinds of daily ‘hanging out’ involve the young men sitting on their haunches under the shade of trees or on the doorstep of a small shop to chat, read a newspaper or to plan events in the *para*. Girls are never seen ‘hanging out’ in this way. Married men also ‘hang out’ in a similar way, but their groups congregate separately. Those men might meet to chew *paan* or smoke *bidis* together. The younger men in the YACM do not smoke, or at least not openly. They are closer to school going age and habits such as these are considered ‘morally inappropriate’ for educated young men. While hanging out in this way, they play different games such as chess, *chal gothi* (a village version of the African game *kalaha*) and a village version of petanque with coins and cards. Occasionally they may even play ludo or snakes and ladders, but those are usually games played by younger children. They do not gamble; that is something that older men do when they ‘hang out’.¹⁷³ The young men also organise cricket matches, and these often involve others, not just those in the YACM, but exclude the young Mehar men. The members of the YACM entertain each other with jokes, anecdotes, songs, rudimentary magic tricks and impromptu friendly wrestling or nudging. Some have bicycles that they take turns on just for fun, not necessarily to go somewhere, and sometimes one of them will bring along a radio for the group to listen to while ‘hanging out’.

In the sweltering heat of the summer months, especially in the afternoons, they nap together. It was not unusual to observe a fair amount of horseplay between them,

¹⁷³ Older men’s gambling may include games such as *satta*.

which involved embracing, linking arms, holding hands, and touching each other on the arms or knees when speaking animatedly. This kind of physical intimacy between these young men was not considered sexual and it is not unusual to observe this phenomenon in other parts of India. There may be many explanations for it ranging from the lack of physical intimacy with the opposite sex to the legitimating of this kind of intimacy within close friendship bonds because the body is not considered off bounds when expressing friendly love. An element of '*masti*'¹⁷⁴ also pervades at times when they feel happy to be together and want to express the joy that they feel in each others' company.

Heuzé (1996: 195) describes similar youth who belong to 'clubs' in the rural and semi-urban areas surrounding the minefields of Dhanbad. These youth are 'formalised manifestations of groups of friends, whose importance has been observed in the territory'. The youth in these clubs are mostly unemployed. According to Heuzé, they 'drink tea, play cards and dream'. The important moments in the activities of these clubs occur when the members get together to organise the celebration of Hindu festivals and *pujas*, much like the YACM. Heuzé remarks that 'on these occasions, the clubs rent loudspeakers and endeavour acoustically to stake out their territory, with a violence which increases every year' (ibid: 196). He links the activities of the youth, who are predominantly male, to mass culture and consumerism. Both of these are manifestations of aspirations of urbanisation and an imitation of the popular culture of towns and cities brought to rural audiences through television, advertising and Bollywood cinema.

The YACM excludes those young men in the Satnami *para* who are not close friends with the existing group. Many of the members are from better-off Satnami families that have larger plots of land or secondary incomes from mining. Leadership in the group involves those who have gained higher education and are interested in pursuing careers as school teachers or *shikhsha karmis*. In broad brush strokes, these members are more interested in grouping together to form stronger bonds and want to be aware

¹⁷⁴ *Masti* is a notion that also conveys sexual horseplay and is often associated with male activities of drinking and partying. However, in Chhattisgarhi, the word *mast* is colloquially used to describe anyone or anything that is fun or positive. Similar notions of *masti* have been observed by Lucia Michelluti in her work with young male wrestlers in Benaras and has also been captured in Rahul Roy's film on male sexuality, '*Majma*', screened as part of the South Asia Seminar Series at LSE in 2009.

of and affect social change more actively than other youth in the *para* and the village. Other groups of friends do exist, but the YACM is one of the most organised groups in Meu. They openly exclude young Mehar men from their group because the Mehars are considered inferior. Their group also excludes the young men of ‘clean’ Hindu castes that would not dream of joining them.

Organising Durga Puja

In July and August, after the dampness of the monsoons, the arrival of the festival season in *sravan*¹⁷⁵ lifts everyone’s spirits. Once the sowing of the paddy fields is done, and small sprouts begin appearing through the muddy water in the fields, workers start preparing for the back-breaking job of transplantation. The desire for a bountiful harvest is on everyone’s minds as they suffer through the soggiess of the fields and ringworm infections in their feet and ankles. As respite, the festival season kicks off with *Janamashtmi* (birth of Lord Krishna), which is celebrated by the Satnamis as well as by all other Hindu castes in the village. The many remaining Hindu festival celebrations stretch into December, and there is something to celebrate almost every two weeks in these months. The *navratri* (nine-nights) festivals, which are marked firstly by Ganes Puja and subsequently by Durga Puja, are major highlights in the cultural calendar of all castes in the village. These two festivals involve the most ostentatious display of deities, fasting and daily rituals of consecration as well as musical and theatrical performances, which make them highly conspicuous and colourful events in the village.

The members of the YACM swung into activity by holding a meeting amongst themselves to calculate the costs related to purchasing materials for the making of an image of a deity, decorations, *prasad* (consecrated fruits used in the rituals) and the fees of the Hindu *pundit* (priest) they planned to recruit to inaugurate the festivities and carry out rituals. As they discussed these matters, they were seated in a circle on the ground, the convenor of the meeting often perched a bit higher up on a rock or fallen tree trunk. The convenor was often a youth named Gautam, and he called out:

¹⁷⁵ See also Flueckiger (1983: 40).

We must all contribute what we can, but at least minimum Rs. 20 per person is required. Otherwise we cannot get on with the arrangements. Is everyone willing?

And he nodded emphatically towards those who usually tended to default either because they would use their money on *pan* instead or were poorer and reluctant to pay up. The question was repeated and some members were asked more deliberately while Gautam took out a small notebook and scribbled various calculations as they talked about what they needed to procure. One of the others said:

Let's get the deity from Seorinarayan this year - it may cost a bit more, but if Nares can help us to bring it in his tractor trailer, we will have such a fine display!

Another asked,

What about hiring loudspeakers from Pamgarh? We don't want cheap ones that crackle when the volume is turned up. Someone ought to test them before bringing them to the *para*.

During these meetings to discuss the arrangements for the festivities, the assistant teachers in the group (*shiksha karmis*) took the dominant roles. Gautam was addressed as '*guruji*' (an honorific title for a teacher) by the others in the group. His role resembled that of a class 'prefect' in school. The others expected him to assess and make final decisions. They looked up to him as being capable and entrusted him with the responsibility of their collective actions. Gautam and a handful of the other *shiksha karmis* were enthusiastic organisers and enjoyed being in a position of resourcefulness and decision making. The way in which they conducted the meetings and delegated tasks carried an air of responsibility learned through activities in school. The resonance with school arrangements while celebrating patriotic festivals was even more pronounced in the organisation of Republic Day in the *para*.

The young men then constructed a stage and canopy where the deity would be placed. They decorated the canopy with colourful fabrics and shapes cut out of Styrofoam.

The goddess Durga is considered to be superior to all other goddesses and village gods and therefore great care was taken in transporting the deity of Durga to the canopy. The canopy under which she was placed was grander than the one used at the time of Ganes Puja. Once the deity was carefully placed on the centre of the stage the rituals could begin. A Hindu *pundit* (priest) recruited from another village carried out the inaugural rituals and subsequent rituals for the following fortnight, until immersion of the deity.¹⁷⁶ Over the entire period, the Hindu *pundit* was lodged at Bhagwat's house, a well-off Satnami and extended kin of my host family. He had brought along his own utensils to cook daily meals of rice, lentils and vegetables as he could not accept the *bhaat* (boiled rice and garnish) prepared in Bhagwat's household.¹⁷⁷ While staying there, he prepared all his own meals separately, with his own provisions, on a clay hearth that had been specially made for him in the yard. The *pundit* relished deep-fried snacks (*pacca* food) offered to him by my host family whenever he came to visit them. In contrast to the expected trepidation a Hindu priest may have in serving 'untouchables', he seemed quite sure that he could make some money through conducting *puja* rituals in the Satnami *para* in Meu without any repercussions in his own village.

¹⁷⁶ The *navratri* festivals culminate with the immersion of the deity in water to 'cool it off'. The statue of Ganes was immersed in a village pond whereas the statue of Durga was immersed in the Mahanadi River.

¹⁷⁷ Boiled foods count as *kacca* and cannot be accepted by those of a higher caste from a lower one. Deep-fried foods on the other hand are *pacca* and can (selectively) be accepted by a higher caste from one that is lower. Although these are fundamental rules that dictate commensality between different castes, contradictory examples can be found in different circumstances.



The canopy for Durga Puja

The young men hung around the construction site while playing loud Bollywood music on loud speakers throughout the day and often late into the night. There were long, frequent interruptions when the power was cut. Satnamis from the *para* came by throughout the day to offer consecrated bananas, cucumbers and coconut to the deity. They admired the effort the young men had made, and it was clear that the young men gained importance during these festivities as the organisers of the event. A few young Satnami men took on the role of the *pundit* in his absence and did the required *aarti* and distributed the pieces of coconut, banana and cucumber that had been consecrated to those who came to worship the deity. The Satnami *bhandari* (priest) did not participate in any of the rituals. The *bhandari*'s son was eager to perform the role of the Hindu *pundit* whenever the *pundit* was absent.

The Satnami *para* residents had showed great pride in the fact that the festivities had been carried out immaculately, in a fashion no less ostentatious than in the other *paras* of the village. Some Satnamis performed longer ceremonies involving *hom* (ritual burning of substances) to take advantage of the presence of the Hindu priest. On the final night before the deity was going to be submerged in the river, musicians

in the Satnami *para* performed *panthi* music and Satnami boys danced *panthi naach* (a Satnami folk dance). These celebrations were more spectacular than any others I observed in the Satnami *para* in the course of my fieldwork.

The festivals also incorporated the notion of being *mast* which people translated for me as ‘merriment’ and being joyful. The consumption of alcohol, playing loud Bollywood music and dancing in the processions during the immersion of the deities was a time for *masti* amongst young men. It is common for Satnamis to celebrate by anointing each other with colours used during the festival of *holi* in spring. There is an atmosphere of carnival-like inversion of the roles of authority in these celebrations, and the Satnamis in Meu did not hold back when performing their processions. The lack of propriety and solemnity for the rituals and *masti* during these festivals can be interpreted as representative of the appropriation of these norms primarily to show that the Satnamis in Meu contest their exclusion from Hindu mainstream society rather than only claiming mainstream Hindu cultural spaces.

Immersing Durga

The final immersion of the deity was carried out with a procession accompanied by a band of musicians, alcohol, and boisterous dancing by men and boys, followed by a narrow procession of women and young girls. The *pundit* also accompanied the YACM youth and other *para* residents to the Mahanadi River, where the deity was one among many being immersed there. His qualms regarding serving Satnamis in religious rituals only became apparent when he made a swift getaway on a motorcycle from the Mahanadi ritual where Durga was being immersed by the entourage from Meu. He fled when he got word that a group from his own village was on their way to the same spot to immerse a deity as well. Even though it is not uncommon today for Hindu priests to commercialise their services and offer them to different caste communities in contrast to the more stringent norms of the past,¹⁷⁸ there is still a sense of breaking a caste boundary in rural Chhattisgarh and fear of ostracism if found out.

¹⁷⁸ See also Fuller (2010: 490-491).

Republic Day 26th January

For this patriotic holiday the schools in Meu all organised '*functions*', consisting of music, dance and theatrical performances. Schoolchildren performed dances and their teachers and headmasters made patriotic speeches. The day started with marches all over the village by the children and subsequent performances in their respective schools went on until late afternoon. The young men from the YACM who were employed as assistant teachers (*siksha karmi*) in these schools enthusiastically took part in the activities and participated in organising, presenting and choreographing the children's performances throughout the day. In the Satnami *para*, members of the YACM had constructed a flagpole and placed a portrait of Ambedkar on top of a table and decorated it with garlands of plastic flowers. All the marching schoolchildren passed by this flagpole, but did not stop or salute it. In the evening, the YACM boys gathered around it and set up a loudspeaker and music system and played loud Bollywood music.

The kind of enthusiasm with which the young assistant teachers and members of the YACM participated in the activities they organised for this event reflects their identity as educated young men and provides them with an opportunity to use skills that they have learned at school. Being the newer generation of educated young men in the Satnami *para*, they continue to enact roles and responsibilities experienced while at school. The institution of schooling has left an impression on them and given them a sense of acting in ways to which they are not inculcated through farming. Articulating one's ideas or being in charge of social activities and celebrations of festivals in the *para* reflect the skills that the frontrunners of the YACM have acquired at school. This reflects their desire to continue to have the possibility of making use of those achievements in the village even though they cannot migrate to towns and actualise themselves through paid employment as educated youth there. Unemployed, unmarried educated youth in the village, as well as those who have completed schooling but are only sporadically employed in wage-labour or farming, recurrently mentioned that they are '*khali*' ('empty' or 'free')¹⁷⁹ and that they spend most of their time roaming around ('*ghum rahe hai*') in the village and in the adjoining fields.

¹⁷⁹ See also Jeffrey et al (2008: 139).

Other younger married members of the YACM would also sometimes hang out in a similar way and occasionally bring a toddler with them.

Most of them do not have regular jobs or other activities that fill their spare time. In contrast, these festivals and events provided them with a sense of purpose and encouraged them to take positions of responsibility. For the days during which the Hindu festivals went on, they maintained the canopies and stayed in them while carrying out the ongoing consecration of the deities. They were fully occupied and engaged with hanging about near the canopies and some slept near the deities to make sure no harm would come to them at night. The festivals provided an activity that involved everyone in the group, though some more than others, and punctuated the otherwise mundane periods of the year that are spent carrying out manual labour in the fields.

Ambedkar Jayanti

The celebration of Ambedkar's birth on 14th April is an important event for nationwide Dalit social and political movements throughout the country. The icon of Ambedkar is a powerful symbol for the Dalit social movement as well the Dalit political party, the BSP. The icon symbolises Dalit rebellion and identity, assertion of Dalit human and legal rights, the unity of 'untouchables' and lower castes and Dalit education. It is the symbol around which much Dalit mobilisation takes place. A statue, portrait or caricature of Ambedkar (occasionally with his slogan 'educate, organise, agitate') is ubiquitous in places with large Dalit communities, in Dalit homes and offices of Dalit NGOs and their publications. It appears in rallies or '*padh yatras*¹⁸⁰ and cycle *yatras* and on Dalit political propaganda such as banners, posters and fliers. It can be found etched or painted on the walls of cemeteries or factories or on the side of tall office buildings and on the back of advertisement hoardings. It is one of the most unambiguously recognisable symbols of the Dalit movement all over India.

¹⁸⁰ *Yatra* can be translated as 'journey'. Political and social activists in India organise public mobilisation through a long march or journey from one significant place to another. Famous examples are Gandhi's '*dandi*' march to protest against taxes levied on salt by the colonial administration and the BJP's *rath* (chariot) *yatra* to Ayodhya in the early 1990s where the alleged Ram Temple is located on the site of the Babri Mosque.

The celebration of the icon of Ambedkar is at its height at Ambedkar Jayanti. It is a day for Dalit activists to make speeches and to hold rallies and other public displays of the movement. In towns and cities, wherever there is a large Dalit population, one invariably passes a gathering around a podium with loudspeakers where a speech in the style of political propaganda will be made by a Dalit activist or politician. Auto-rickshaws or taxis rigged with Ambedkar's picture and his slogans and huge loudspeakers blaring out the significance of Ambedkar to the Dalit struggle for rights and the momentousness of the day marking his birth can be seen and heard in these urban neighbourhoods. DMM activists also hold marches in Raipur and congregate for a special programme of speeches and garlanding of Ambedkar's portrait to mark the day.

Ironically, in Meu, nothing was done to mark Ambedkar Jayanti. This was unexpected because the YACM had spoken about Ambedkar at various times and had a portrait of him that they garlanded during the Republic Day celebrations. More importantly, the significance of Ambedkar *jayanti* to Dalit communities and NGOs is widespread. However, in Meu, the month of April is one of the busiest for weddings (as it is all over rural Chhattisgarh). For the youth of the YACM, if it was not their own wedding that occupied them, there were weddings of a number of family members and friends that did. The Satnami *para* was either abuzz with preparation for these weddings or empty because of the numbers of families away in other villages attending those weddings. Ambedkar *jayanti* passed by like any other day, and members of the YACM were reminded of it only by my asking if anything would happen on that day. The observation that the YACM did not find it necessary to symbolise their commitment to Ambedkarite discourses by marking the *jayanti* in any way shows, firstly, that the appropriation of Hindu cultural spaces in the village is of more importance to the ways in which Satnamis assert their autonomy and, secondly, that their assertion of autonomy is towards the 'clean' castes and older generations in the village. The relevance of their activities speaks more directly to the dynamics of everyday village life, rather than to currents outside and distant from the village. While Ambedkar *jayanti* is of great symbolic significance to the identity of urban middle-class Dalits, it did not seem as important to the identity of the Satnami youth in the YACM who do not call themselves Dalit, but rather Satnami. The next section, which examines the ways in which Satnami identity is celebrated in Meu, shows

another interesting dynamic of the Satnami community vis-à-vis other castes, where the numerical strength of the community plays an important part in the ways in which the symbols of Satnami identity are preserved and communicated.

Guru Ghasi Das Jayanti

The main festival of the Satnamis in Chhattisgarh is Guru Ghasi Das *jayanti*. It is marked by hoisting a new white flag and decorating the flagpole with tinsel and colourful streamers. The flagpole is the *jaith kambh* or ‘victory pole’, and is a ubiquitous symbol of the Satnamis to be found in all Satnami *paras* in villages around Chhattisgarh. The celebrations can also include *panthi naach*, which is Satnami folk dancing accompanied by local musicians and performed predominantly by young men. In Meu, Guru Ghasi Das *jayanti* was overlooked twice in the course of my fieldwork. On the second occasion, the flagpole was decorated on an insignificant day in January, instead of on 18th December, which coincided with when the *bhandari* who is employed in a paper mill in Bilaspur (the nearest city) was back in the village. Loudspeakers were placed in the vicinity of the flagpole, and Bollywood music blared out of them. Apart from this, no dancing or any other greater festivities were organised to mark the *jayanti*. *Panthi naach* was instead performed at the time of Durga Puja.

The Satnamis in Meu are numerically almost as strong as the OBC castes put together. Their numerical strength in the village has meant that they do not feel as overshadowed by ‘clean’ castes as those Satnami communities that constitute a minority in other villages. I was given the explanation that Satnami representation was strong in the village *panchayat* and that the balance of power in the *panchayat* and in everyday village affairs was less problematic than if the community had been smaller. Thus, Satnami elders claimed that they did not feel particularly inclined to assert Satnami-ness through symbolic means such as a celebration of the *jayanti*. Members of the YACM similarly explained that they did not consider the *jayanti* to be as significant as the Hindu festivals.

Bellwinkel-Schempp (2002) records the efforts in one of Gandhi’s ‘Harijan’ campaigns that ‘sought to change the heart of orthodox Hindus and welcome

‘untouchables’ into their fold’. In Kanpur, Dalit leaders co-opted by the Congress party were entreated to lead a procession in honour of Ravidas, an ‘untouchable’ saint of whom they were followers. This became a regular festival, and it was the Chamars who largely appropriated the festival as Ravidas hailed from that community too. The ‘upper castes’ in Kanpur felt provoked by the festivities celebrated in close proximity to their living areas and were further annoyed when the Chamars began incorporating the practice of lighting oil lamps as one does on the Hindu festival of Diwali to mark the occasion. These public displays by the Dalit community helped them claim their space in an urban setting and they managed to appropriate a place in the local calendar of festivals. Such manifestations of Dalit celebration that encroach on predominantly Hindu spaces both publicly and symbolically are of significance to the ways in which the Dalits are able to assert their unity, power and rebelliousness.

Similar to the Dalits that Bellwinkel-Schempp described in Kanpur, the Satnamis in Meu seemed more concerned with appropriating mainstream Hindu spaces in the village rather than pursuing the significance of Guru Ghasi Das’ birthday. In other villages around Meu, I heard of and observed greater efforts being made to celebrate 18th December. In those villages, the common denominator was that the Satnami population was smaller than that of the OBCs and it was vital for those communities to assert their Satnami-ness as a strategy of self-preservation. The strength and unity of the Satnamis in Meu is not threatened or challenged by the ‘upper castes’ as it is in villages with proportionally smaller Satnami populations, as was the case in a village called Tundra that I describe later in this chapter.

It was puzzling during my fieldwork to observe that the Satnamis in Meu paid more attention to Hindu festivals and almost entirely neglected their own main festival - Guru Ghasi Das’ birthday - and that the youth in YACM were indifferent to Ambedkar *jayanti* and instead paid more attention to the weddings taking place around that time. On the other hand, however, these observations clarify the strategy of rural Satnamis in Meu in overcoming caste discrimination and ostracism from mainstream Hindu cultural worlds. Their efforts were primarily focused on mainstream Hindu festivals such as Ganes Puja and Durga Puja, as these were public events that proclaimed the Satnamis’ appropriation of mainstream Hindu cultural spaces that the community has been historically denied. Their elaborate celebration of

these festivals and the incorporation of '*masti*' show that the assertion of Satnami autonomy is not only a matter of adopting 'clean' caste Hindu norms as an attempt to claim higher status in the village caste hierarchy (*sanskritisation*), but also a form of opposition and claim making, which is a viable strategy for numerically strong Satnami communities. What is also observable is "Hinduisation" in the context of increasing Hindu nationalism promoted by the BJP and the Shiv Sena. Though none of the Satnamis in Meu were in anyway involved with the Shiv Sena, they were not directly opposed or sufficiently critical of heightened symbols of Hindu nationalism and the general escalation of BJP's power in the state.

Activities of the DMM: 'Bethaks' attended by women in SHGs

A '*bethak*' is a 'sit-down' gathering of people assembled for a meeting or discussion. This was one of the main public events in which the DMM interacted with people from villages and which involved the participation of rural Satnamis. An interesting aspect of these *bethaks*, however, is that they predominantly involved women from Self Help Groups (SHGs).¹⁸¹ In these meetings, women from SHGs in Meu would show up with toddlers and small children for a mandatory monthly gathering which is stipulated in the rules for SHGs. Most of the meetings took place in a public building called 'Satnam Bhawan' which is located in Pamgarh, ten kilometres from Meu. The women gathered here were from Satnami as well as OBC castes from Meu and villages around Meu. The DMM activists did not show up at every SHG meeting of this type, but chose particular meetings that fell close to significant dates that marked Ambedkar Jayanti, Women's Day or a patriotic holiday.

At these meetings, women sat huddled together on rugs spread out on the floor of the large room that was the 'Bhawan'. A microphone was set up at the front of the gathering, where DMM activists and social workers from NGOs would address the

¹⁸¹ As part of the GOI's and Ministry of Rural Development's initiative for poverty alleviation started in the early 2000s, the Self Help Group (SHG) programme's objective is to 'lift and keep *swarozgaries* (self-help families) above the poverty line by organising the rural poor into SHGs through the process of social mobilisation, their training and capacity building and provision of income generating assets' (Corbridge et al 2005: 160-161). The idea behind the formation of SHGs is to 'build self-confidence through community action, establish a large number of micro-enterprises and improve the collective bargaining power of rural poor' (ibid). The groups usually have between ten to twenty members and many of the SHGs in Meu comprise women only. In a report from March 2008, the Rural Development Ministry claims that 2,835,772 SHGs have been formed all over rural India and 82% of these groups consist of women http://rural.nic.in/latest/SHG_federation%2026.05.08.pdf

women. At one such meeting, an excerpt from a speech made by Gudu Lahre¹⁸² went as follows:

Last year, two Satnamis' throats were slit, and many were thrown out of their villages by upper castes. In a village called S, a Satnami man was excluded from being a member of the panchayat. Other incidents have happened in villages P and G. While these things are happening, why are we silently watching and not doing anything about it? Why doesn't our blood boil? The most that ever happens after upper castes do terrible things to people from our *samaj* (caste-community) is that some *manuvadi* [Gudu's word for 'upper-caste'] police officers are transferred. For centuries the *manuvadis* have done things like this to us. We count the *atrocities* (English word used) and then go home. But, today, many of us are postgraduates, and we can ask: why is this happening? The solution does not lie in changing our names or our lifestyles. It lies in '*jaagriti*' and '*jaankari*' (awakening/awareness and knowledge or information). If we are aware of our rights, no one can oppress us. Firstly, we must revere our leader, Baba Saheb Ambedkar. We must have his picture on the walls of our homes. If we stick together, no one can harm us. Not even the Brahmins. When you go to fill water at the hand pumps in your villages, tell others this message. Tell them about Ambedkar and tell them that awareness and education will end our days of oppression.

Throughout this speech by Gudu, the women chatted incessantly. In between sentences, Gudu coaxed them to be quiet and listen. In many parts of the speech, he spoke more loudly and passionately to catch their attention. The women seemed bored with the rhetoric. Some listened to the parts about atrocities in nearby villages and they compared notes with each other about how terrible that was or about what they had already heard. However, generally, they did not pay attention to what was being said. Some of the speeches in these *bethaks* could go on for up to an hour, including many repetitions, and the entire meeting lasted for the most part of a day during which a lot of time was spent waiting for a speaker, who sometimes did not show up. The women enjoyed snacking on the food stuffs provided by the NGO workers

¹⁸² A key DMM activist who frequents villages and who was introduced in the previous chapter.

responsible for the *bethaks* who got the supplies through the Senior Development Officer's (SDO) office at the Block Level.

Most of the women who attended these *bethaks* were middle-aged and illiterate. Younger women are not as easily allowed to venture out to attend such events outside their villages. The women attending were not interested in what Gudu said, but rather listened with partial attention - while tending to their toddlers - to women in the *maitanin* (primary health care) scheme who talked about practical issues such as hygiene and nutrition. In the long breaks between the speakers, I asked women why they had come to attend the meetings. They invariably answered that it was because attending the meetings is mandatory when one is part of a SHG. When I asked OBC caste women what they thought about Gudu's speech they replied:

It is good '*jaankari*' about what is happening. But, we have come to find out about the money for midday meals. All this '*neta-giri*' (political show) is not for us. What can we use it for? There is no *bhed-bhav* (caste discrimination) in our village.

Satnami women on the other hand replied in similar tones only adding that

We have no *len-den* (exchange) with other castes. We all earn from the sweat of our brow and eat the bread we have earned through hard labour. We are all *majdoor* (wage-labourers) and just want our children to be educated and our families to be peaceful and healthy. We did not come to hear political lectures (*bhashan*). But these people always have to make long speeches before they let us go.

Another Satnami woman remarked that

I always get late with kindling the cooking fire in the evening when I attend these *bethaks*. My whole family gets delayed for the evening meal and I have to work late into the night.

The youth in the YACM did not attend any of the *bethaks* held by the DMM, and neither did the DMM activists who frequented Meu make any effort to involve the youth there in any of their activities. In a conversation about neglecting the YACM in Meu, Gudu Lahre said that

...the women in the SHGs can be relied on for attending the *bethaks*.

Repeating the message of the DMM will eventually pay off. It is also good for us to work with other social networks like the *maitanin* (primary health care) programme. Those young men in the village are not committed and are not reliable. They are just doing things as *time pass* because they have nothing better to do...

These comments by Gudu Lahre made it clear that the main interest of DMM activists in rural Chhattisgarh is related to creating legal networks and publishing 'fact-finding' reports in the Dalit Social Movement network rather than engaging with grass-roots actors such as the YACM. The DMM activists chose to selectively disseminate Dalit movement ideology to audiences that are easily accessible such as the women in SHGs. The DMM only has a few rural activists and most of their time is spent dealing with 'atrocities'. A description of one such case follows below.

Fact-finding reports: the Tundra Case

'The majority kind of violence today' according to Mendelsohn and Vicziany (in Gorringer 2005: 133) 'is visited on the Dalits due to their resistance to subordination and claims to social respect, high wages and land.' These instances of violence are increasingly seen as 'qualitatively' different (ibid) from those in the past and have come to be known as 'atrocities' in the lingua-franca of Dalit activism.

The strength of organisations such as the DMM lies in being able to disseminate reports on caste atrocities on the Internet. The ideology of the new 'autonomous anti-caste' movements, under which the DMM falls, is riveted to notions of justice. The importance of fact-finding reports and presenting cases of caste atrocity is that they are transformed from anecdotal evidence into matters dealt with in legal terms and in the language of police First Information Reports (FIR). This is a powerful tool used to

disseminate the magnitude of caste injustices at ground level to interest groups far away.

To be able to create fact-finding reports that will be published on the organisation's website, the activists have to be educated and able to reach the places where atrocities take place. They need to have a motorbike or access to one, and they need to have a mobile phone as well. When something happens, the activists are usually contacted by those people who know of them. Mobile phones are increasingly becoming an important tool in the work of Dalit activists in rural areas. Mobile phones are not only used to get in touch quickly in an emergency or to network with other activists, victims, lawyers or social workers, but also to take pictures. Photographic evidence of violent incidents that show injuries or damage to property has become increasingly common in fact-finding reports. Cameras are unaffordable for rural people and rural activists, but mobile phones with cameras have proliferated in rural areas. Below is a description of an atrocity that took place in a village not far from Meu during the course of my fieldwork. In this case, the activists were present when the police showed up and were persuaded by the victims to pay attention to the FIR as it was being drawn up by the policemen.

In a village called Tundra not far from Meu, an incident referred to by the DMM activists as a caste atrocity occurred on a cold January night. In this village, there are a majority of OBC communities of around four thousand or more people and 'upper-castes' make up around fourteen hundred of the population. The Satnami community in the village only numbers around six hundred people. Several households in the Satnami community in this village have a secondary income from mining. Many of these families had been working in the mines since the 1970s. They had therefore managed to build *pacca* (brick) houses in the village. On my first visit to Tundra, I had mistaken the Satnami *para* to be the *para* of the 'upper castes' because of the number of large brick houses all in neat rows with flagstone paths criss-crossing between them. In most other villages, and in Meu, one usually finds a smattering of brick houses between mud huts in the Satnami *para* and more uniformly *pacca* houses in the Brahmin *para* of the village.

The Satnami community in Tundra was not only doing relatively well in comparison to the Satnamis in other parts of Chhattisgarh, but also in relation to the OBC castes in the village. Shortly prior to the incident, the community had collectively acquired 130 acres of land attached to the village, which they had formerly encroached upon. This led to even greater resentment among the OBC communities in the village, who were already lamenting the success of the Satnami community through their employment in the mines.

On the day of the incident, the Satnamis in the village had observed young men from the 'upper-caste' *paras* of the village purchasing almost all of the kerosene sold in the government ration shops. These young men had formerly threatened the Satnamis on various occasions and were known as trouble-makers in the community. The fears of the Satnamis of the trouble to follow were prescient. That night, the 'upper-caste' *goondas* (vandals) violently attacked Satnami homes in the village and burnt the belongings of those families. Many Satnamis had fled the village that day, heeding the advice of the Satnami men who had had a feeling that there was going to be trouble, and others had barricaded themselves in a few households. Throughout the night the 'upper-caste' *goondas* broke into Satnami homes, emptied them of clothes, furniture, utensils and other personal belongings and made several bonfires of these articles in the Satnami *para*. Since most Satnamis had fled or barricaded themselves, violence was only suffered by the Satnami men who tried to defend their homes, and no one was killed. However, Satnami victims claimed that they were threatened and that their women and girls were threatened as well.

A couple of Satnami men were brave enough to run through paddy fields to a village thirteen kilometres away where they knew a photographer who has a video camera. They asked him to come to their village to film the damage done by the 'upper-caste' *goondas*. In the early morning hours when the attack was abating, some Satnami men called Gudu Lahre on his mobile phone. Gudu arrived in the village five hours later. The police had also arrived in Tundra by then and imposed a curfew under article 144 of the Penal Law, which prohibits more than four people to gather at any point in public spaces. In the aftermath of the incident up to three hundred policemen were deployed in the village. The case was registered in Bhilairgarh Police Station and stated violation of sections 294, 506, 456, 147, 149, 435 and 395 of the Indian Penal

Code (IPC) and section 3 (1) [1-10] of the SC/ST Protection from Atrocities Act. The case reached the court of the First Class Judicial Magistrate in Balodabazar bearing the case number 82/2007 State vs. Jagmohan and 30 others. The case is still pending in the courts. Gudu Lahre played a key role in the recording of the FIRs by policemen that morning. He was with the Satnami victims as they told the police what had happened, and he also took several photographs of the fires and the doors that had been broken into by the *goondas*. The Satnamis demanded the arrest of more than fifty ‘upper-caste’ perpetrators who they believed had participated in the violence and arson the night before. The police made some arrests, but nowhere near as many as the Satnamis had alleged.

The Satnami community in Tundra had never borne the brunt of such a violent attack before. Many decided to claim compensation for their losses and many who had fled their homes returned a few days later to find their homes looted and belongings burnt. The community held several meetings, and Gudu Lahre participated in many of these, giving legal advice and recording the incident as closely as possible in order to publish a report of it. One of the young men in the Satnami community called Yudhister became closely allied to Gudu Lahre and acted as a spokesperson for the Satnami community in Tundra. He later took part in the first Indian People’s Tribunal on Untouchability (IPTU) held in the summer in New Delhi.

This incident is not peculiar to Chhattisgarh or other parts of India. Caste atrocities of this kind occur quite regularly in rural India (see Narula 1999) and the violence can be much worse. In the case of Tundra, there were no rapes or murders, but these are not uncommon. The victims who came to the IPTU related many such cases to the media, NGOs, journalists and retired Supreme Court judges present there. Most of them had cases pending in the courts. In many cases, as in Tundra, perpetrators of the violence or arson were jailed but later released on bail. In Tundra, many perpetrators were protected by the police after having bribed them, and in some cases, for fear of reprisal from powerful ‘upper castes’ in the village, had not been charged at all.

First Indian People's Tribunal on Untouchability (IPTU)

The disconnectedness between so called 'creamy-layer' Dalit activists, who belong in the growing Dalit middle classes in mofussil and city areas, and those who are not as socially mobile in rural-agrarian villages can be analysed by considering the spatio-temporal aspects of pan-Indian Dalit activism, which is part of 'autonomous anti-caste' movements. A key site for the disconnectedness presented itself at the first Indian Peoples' Tribunal against Untouchability in New Delhi in May 2007. This public event brought rural and urban activists as well as victims of caste atrocities face to face with national media and the larger legal and rights apparatus that is overwhelmingly lacking in the rural areas where most of the victims live. The spatiotemporal aspects that are in the foreground there are related to the ways in which 'subaltern' citizens are mobilised as well as marginalised by those state and civil society mechanisms that are both hegemonic as well as instrumental to rights discourses.

In the aftermath of the incident in Tundra, Yudhister, a young Satnami man, had joined the DMM. He was part of the delegation from Chhattisgarh that attended the first Indian People's Tribunal on Untouchability in May 2007. His interests lay in securing compensation for the damage suffered by the Satnami community in Tundra and in establishing a network of lawyers and other well-placed Satnamis to fight that case. Among others, the delegation included Durga Jha (one of the key members of DMM based in Raipur), Shobha Ram (another rural DMM activist), Gudu Lahre and Kunti (a victim of caste atrocity from another village in Chhattisgarh).

The tribunal was organised by the NCDHR and involved several retired Supreme Court judges, NGOs¹⁸³, lawyers, the press, researchers and victims of caste atrocities

¹⁸³ These were mostly Dalit NGOs from the different Indian states and included the Ambedkar Lohia Bichar Manch, Orissa; the Behavioural Science Centre, Gujarat; the Campaign on Human Rights; the Centre For Dalit Rights, Rajasthan; the Centre for Social Justice, Gujarat; the Dalit Stree Shakti, Andhra Pradesh; the Dalit Action Group, Uttar Pradesh; the Dalit Bahujan Front, Andhra Pradesh; the Dalit Bahujan Shramik Union, Andhra Pradesh; the Dalit Dasdatha Virodhi Andolan, Punjab; the Dalit Mannurmai Kutammi, Tamil Nadu; the Dalit Mukti Mission, Bihar; the Dalit Mukti Morcha, Chattisgarh; Development Initiatives, Orissa; the Dynamic Action Group, Uttar Pradesh; Evidence, TN; Garima Abhiyan, Madhya Pradesh; the Human Rights Forum for Dalit Liberation, Tamil Nadu; IDADS, Kerala; the Jogini Vyavastha Vyethireka Sanghtan, Andhra Pradesh; Nari Gunjan, Bihar; Navasarjan, Gujarat; the New Entity for Social Action, Karnataka; Social Watch, Tamil Nadu; the SASY, Tamil Nadu; the Sakshi Human Rights Watch, Andhra Pradesh; Tamil Nadu; the Trumber

from all over India. The tribunal went on for three days. It included panels in several of the rooms of the Indian Social Institute's (ISI) building in South Delhi and meals for all participants. Workshops for the participants on rights and legal aid were held on the last day. Gorringe (2005: 67) notes that "local level activists work their way up the movement hierarchy by engaging in organising activities and making best use of opportunities to address demonstrations and make contacts". Most Dalit activists from all over India attended the Tribunal with exactly these intentions.

Some delegates including the group from Chhattisgarh were put up in a building called the 'Sri Lanka Guesthouse' close to New Delhi Railway Station, and it was far plusher than anything that Yudister or Kunti had ever experienced before. The rooms had ceiling fans and en-suite bathrooms with taps with running hot and cold water – something the majority of the rural people in Chhattisgarh had never come across. The lift in the building had frightened Kunti because she thought people entering the small, windowless room were mysteriously disappearing after the doors had shut. It took a while for people to convince her that the lift was not mysteriously abducting those who entered it, but instead transporting them from one floor to another. In the central yard of the building a large tree shaded some white marble benches. Guesthouse staff constantly told rural delegates not to sit on those benches but rather to sit on the ground around them. These occurrences were reflections of the gap between the reality of the social experiences and positioning of the rural delegates and the urban setting of the tribunal. For Kunti and Yudhister, it was a one-off experience that entailed being in an unfamiliar environment full of overwhelming surprises like the lift.

In Kunti's comments about coming to New Delhi for the tribunal she explained to me that "*chehra kharab ho jata hai*" which literally translates as "one's face gets spoiled" which means one cannot be one's self. The unfamiliar food, traffic on the roads, the

Liberation Movement, Tamil Nadu; Dalit Women Federation, Tamil Nadu; Vicalp, Orissa; Working Peasants Movement, Tamil Nadu; the People's Monitoring Committee, Andhra Pradesh; the Kachra Vahatuk Sangarsh Samiti, Maharashtra; the People's Vigilance Committee on Human Rights, Uttar Pradesh; the Youth for Social Justice, Maharashtra. The national NGOs participating included the ANHAD, the Centre for Budget Governance and Advocacy, the Human Rights Law Network, the Indian Institute of Dalit Studies, the Indian Social Institute, the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights, the NACDOR, the NDF, the Peoples Watch, the Safai Karmachari Andolan, the South Asian People's Initiative, and the Social Equity Audit.

many people she was surrounded by and being lodged on the fourth floor of the guesthouse with a bathroom full of fixtures she had never seen before - and her experience with the lift - had all exasperated her. She was not sure whether her efforts to stand before a room full of strangers and tell them about the case in her village would result in any real outcome. She had been instructed by people in her community and Dalit activists to go along with the delegation and had agreed to it because of the dire situation she and her community were facing in her village. Kunti's case had to do with a longstanding land dispute between the Satnamis and the 'upper-caste' landowners in her village. The Satnamis had been thrown off the land they claimed was theirs and even after taking the conflict to the village *panchayat*, the District Magistrate and the High Court in Bilaspur, the situation had not been resolved. Instead, there had been violent encounters between the Satnamis and the 'upper castes' in that village and the Satnamis were determined to win back their land. But, she said she could not grasp the mechanisms by which anybody in "this big city" could help, since none of them were going to go to her village or provide any other form of assistance.

On the other hand, Yudhister felt more optimistic about whatever outcomes there may be from his participation in the tribunal. It was his first visit to a big city like New Delhi, unlike Kunti who had worked on construction sites in Jammu and Banaras. Yudhister was hopeful that Gudu Lahre and his connections to lawyers and other activists would be a helpful resource in the case made by the Satnamis in Tundra. His eyes were bloodshot in the evenings, and in spite of his exhaustion from the excitement of all that was going on around him, his spirits were high.

During the panel sessions in the various rooms of the ISI building, the retired Supreme Court judges and an audience of NGO workers, the press and researchers listened to harrowing cases of atrocities from victims who had come from all over India. In some instances, the victims were unable to complete their testimonies while standing at the front of the room with a microphone in hand. Recalling the extreme violence that some of them had experienced led them to start crying or to fall silent

and feel unable to continue standing.¹⁸⁴ The atmosphere during these testimonies was tense, and the heavy silence was occasionally broken by sighs or sobs from those listening. Of the three retired Supreme Court judges who led these panels, two of them listened seriously and with empathetic respect for the victims. One of the judges quickly earned a reputation for impatience and rude interruptions. However, all three repeated throughout the sessions that they were in no position to be able to influence the handling of the legal cases pending in the various High Courts in India and some in the Indian Supreme Court. They had been appointed to listen and convene the sessions, but had no legal authority as all of them were retired.

The tribunal was an attempt by Dalit and Human Rights NGOs to expose victims of caste violence to the media and to create a platform of awareness amongst various NGOs and victims through an exchange of testimonies, experiences and networking within interest groups. The use of tribunals as instruments of arbitration has become increasingly prevalent in the aftermath of atrocities at even the micro-level subsequent to their insertion at the international and global levels ever since the post-world war period¹⁸⁵ when the Brookings Institution and the Carnegie Endowment played a crucial role in their promotion. Ever since then, tribunals of all sizes all over the world¹⁸⁶ have been constituted to re-examine the basic institutions that apply to serious and sensitive conflicts in macro- as well as micro-settings. They attempt to bring to light those issues that may lie at the core of the problems that led to the conflict, and the aims of tribunals are often to re-assess the efficacy of existing institutions and to learn from mistakes made.

¹⁸⁴ One of the cases brought before the tribunal was by a man from Khairlanji in Maharashtra. The man had witnessed the gruesome murder of his wife, daughter and two sons. While recounting the incidents of the atrocity, he swayed and was held by a person standing behind him and he was unable to speak any further. The atrocity had been intensely covered by the media and subsequently published by Navayana, a Dalit publishing group; see Teltumbde, A (2008) Khairlanji: A Strange and Bitter Crop New Delhi: Navayana.

¹⁸⁵ The issuing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was catalysed by the unconscionable atrocities experienced in the Second World War and it is one of the most prominent among other multi-lateral declarations that bear upon legal institutions of nations worldwide. The Nuremberg Trials after WWII have served as a model for tribunals of the last several decades.

¹⁸⁶ In the 1990s, well-known tribunals that dealt with issues of ethnic cleansing in former Yugoslavia and those in relation to the genocide in Rwanda were closely followed by the media, NGOs and human rights groups. Similarly, there are hundreds of smaller, lesser known tribunals that have been set up throughout the world, either within countries or internationally, to deal with varied conflicts and as instruments of judicial arbitration.

Unlike the ‘Truth and Reconciliation’ tribunals held in post-apartheid South Africa¹⁸⁷ where perpetrators were occasionally participants, the IPTU did not include any perpetrators of atrocities against Dalits at all. Neither were any state agencies involved in the tribunal. Apart from spokespersons, such as social reformer and Dalit politician Swami Agnivesh¹⁸⁸ and former Member of Parliament Nirmala Deshpande, who was known as a Gandhian social activist and who has since died, there were no other representatives of State. The latter talked about her meeting with Ambedkar when she was a child, and boasted about probably being the only person in the tribunal to have ever met Ambedkar. Their participation in the tribunal was a bit unconvincing because of the fact that they both belonged to the Hindu Reform tradition rather than the ‘autonomous anti-caste’ tradition (more in chapter 5) in the struggle against untouchability.

Concluding remarks

The members of the YACM in the village focus their attention on organising Hindu festivals in the Satnami *para* that symbolise the appropriation of Hindu mainstream culture in the village. The celebration of these festivals showed the ways in which the social separation between the ‘clean’ castes in Meu and the Satnamis is maintained through non-attendance at these celebrations by villagers in each others’ events. The youth in the YACM act as ‘key social animators’ and enact roles of responsibility learned in school. They challenge Hindu orthodoxy by organising processions that involve alcohol and *masti* and are not deterred from making their events as ostentatious as those in the other *paras* of the village. The celebration of Hindu festivals in the Satnami *para* in this manner supersedes the celebration of Satnami and Dalit festivals and shows that the younger generation in Meu are more concerned with challenging the Hindu status quo and asserting a sense of equality with the ‘clean’ castes in the village, rather than only asserting separation and self-sufficiency through an affirmation of the Satnami identity. They did not get involved with the activities of

¹⁸⁷ See Wilson, R (2001) The Politics of Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa: Legitimising the Post-Apartheid State Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹⁸⁸ Swami Agni is of Bhangi caste and began his political career through his involvement with the Arya Samaj. He characteristically wears ochre robes and a turban. His rhetoric and manner is that of a politician and in his speech, he related the following anecdote in which he asks an ‘upper-caste’ person: “‘Is your mother ‘untouchable’ because she wiped your bottom?’ And the ‘upper-caste’ person answers: ‘The faeces of a child are not the same as that of strangers and adults’, to which the Swami retorted ‘Why? Are there lotuses growing in a child’s faeces?’” This anecdote received animated laughter from the audience and applause.

the DMM, which was not only because DMM activists did not encourage them, but also because the youth in the YACM were mainly concerned with improving their status in the village hierarchy by claiming those spaces in village cultural life that have historically remained the domain of 'clean' castes.

The DMM, on the other hand, makes sporadic contact with rural communities by engaging with women in SHGs and by documenting caste atrocities that occur in villages through 'fact-finding' reports. DMM activists focused their attention on the dissemination of facts related to these atrocities on the Internet and in building networks with lawyers and social workers instead of getting involved with the kinds of activities the YACM organised. The DMM's activities connected victims of caste violence to larger Dalit networks that were convened in the First Indian People's Tribunal on Untouchability. The spatial and social differences in the ways in which the two carry out activities and get involved with issues of untouchability in rural Chhattisgarh are vastly different. The DMM's activities are mainly concerned with caste atrocities, while the YACM, on the other hand, focuses on challenging the authority of 'clean' castes by appropriating the cultural spaces within the village.

Chapter 7

Conclusion

PART I

The group of young Satnami men in the YACM in Meu are distinctly local actors that respond to caste oppression in everyday village life. Unlike networked actors in the pan-Indian Dalit movement, who are mostly urban, upwardly mobile men and women, the young men of the YACM are not involved in activism in the same way as the activists in the DMM. The YACM position themselves as ‘key social animators’ in everyday village life and envision overcoming caste oppression through awareness (*jaankari*) and knowing their rights, which they link to gaining education. The YACM organises events such as Hindu and patriotic festivals in the Satnami ward in the village. In the meetings of the YACM, members discuss the importance of Ambedkar and alleviation from caste oppression which is part of discourses learned from a few young men who bring these to the group from interactions with NGOs, political parties, journalists and academics outside the village. The group is also exposed to radio, television and newspapers in Hindi which several members have access to and are able to read and disseminate to those who are not as literate. The group is therefore fairly well informed about the world outside the village.

Many of its members are also seasonal migrant labourers at brick kilns and on construction sites in various towns and cities all over the country. Some have studied in colleges outside the village. A few belong to households where their parents have been employed in coal mines in the north of Chhattisgarh or in Dhanbad, now part of Jharkhand. These experiences outside the village are recounted by members of the YACM to point out that caste norms, especially in relation to commensality, are less important than in the village. The members spoke of eating *pacca* foods with other castes, and found that away from the vigilance of caste *panchayats* that are still important in village life there was decreasing significance given to upholding norms that separate castes. However, some young men also felt isolated and incapable of meeting the challenges of urban life. Poverty and a lack of social capital made life in

cities difficult for some of these young men, who confessed that they preferred the village to harsh urban conditions.

The kinds of caste discriminatory practices found in everyday village life in Meu have less to do with the predictable Brahmin-‘untouchable’ dichotomy that is ubiquitous throughout India, but rather with antagonism between the Satnamis who are considered ‘ex-untouchable’, and the ‘clean’ castes, which are mainly OBCs. Most castes residing in Meu are lower castes in the traditional Hindu caste hierarchy and Satnamis resent the fact that, although they transformed their identity from Chamar to Satnami a couple of centuries ago, they are still considered ‘untouchable’ or polluted by the so-called ‘clean’ castes in the village. ‘Clean’ castes are similarly economically positioned vis-à-vis Satnamis and are farmers and wage-labourers owning an acre or two of land. The similarity in people’s economic situation and occupation causes resentment among the Satnamis because they consider ‘clean’ castes to be high-handed, and to perpetuate traditional caste norms that position the Satnamis at the bottom of the village caste hierarchy. Almost everyone in the village cultivates paddy, and only a very few castes still practise their traditional occupation. The Mehars are an example of a caste that continues to carry out traditional duties of skinning dead cattle and washing stained linen after childbirth as well as burning the umbilical cords of newborn babies. The Mehars are considered ‘untouchable’ by all castes in Meu, including the Satnamis. There are only seven Mehar households in Meu. Like Satnamis, the Mehars are followers of a sectarian movement led by Ravidas, born in the fifteenth century. However, unlike Satnamis, they did not transform their caste identity through being followers of Ravidas and do not assert the same kind of autonomy. In order to claim a higher status than the Mehars, Satnamis practise forms of distancing towards them similar to the ‘clean’ castes in the village.

The ‘clean’ castes and the Satnamis do not directly confront one another because the Satnamis are as many in number as all the other castes put together in Meu. However, the Satnamis live in segregation and bear the brunt of age-old caste practices such as separation when it comes to commensality, sharing water, bathing and general ‘distancing’ to avoid pollution in everyday life. Cross-caste marriage in Meu whether primary or secondary is exceptional and leads to ostracism by both communities, although the Satnamis more readily allow such couples re-entry into the community. The Satnamis also more candidly practise re-marriage (*churri pehnana*), which

‘clean’ castes consider to be less acceptable. It is not unusual to find Satnami single mothers living in the village, and it is deemed fair for a Satnami couple to part ways if they do not get along. Although women can only have one primary marriage and men several, the practice of secondary marriage is common and is a viable way for women to leave oppressive relationships without being looked down upon in the same way as in ‘upper-caste’ society. The conservativeness among ‘upper castes’ who wish to claim higher social positioning leads those ‘upper-castes’ to condemn secondary marriage, although it is also practised among the OBCs in rural Chhattisgarh.

The Satnamis resent the fact that their Hindu friends unashamedly agree to eat chicken when they come to visit Satnami homes. Such eating is done in secret and never reciprocated by ‘clean’ caste Hindus in the village. The Satnamis also find that although they are invited by the ‘clean’ castes to life-cycle rituals such as weddings and *chattis* (funerals are more caste-bound and Satnamis are not usually invited by other castes on those occasions, and vice-versa), the custom of being given uncooked portions of lentils and rice remains the norm rather than the Satnamis being allowed to consume the fare being served to all other guests. In the household surveys carried out during my fieldwork, most Satnamis said that they had a ritual friend (*mitan* or a *mitanin*), but also admitted that the friend was most often of Satnami caste, whereas there were many examples of ‘clean’ castes that had ritual friends of a caste other than their own. The Satnamis explained that due to the restrictions on consuming food (particularly *kacca* food) and limitations on sharing water or bathing together, the practicalities of going in-and-out (*anaa-janaa*) of each others’ households would not be convenient. Hence, the choice of a ritual friend is most often restricted to a Satnami rather than a person of a ‘clean’ caste.

The Satnamis cope with separation between themselves and other castes in the village by mitigating exchange (*len-den*) with those castes, which is in continuation with an assertion of self-sufficiency gained through the sectarian movement started almost two centuries ago. The movement led by Guru Ghasi Das, a householder and renouncer, was based on the notion of *satnam* and was similar to *bhakti* movements, which denounced the spiritual authority of ‘upper castes’. The movement in Chhattisgarh, however, was fairly militant and the Satnamis not only denounced caste and the authority of Brahmins by appointing their own religious functionaries, but also refused to pay rent and accrued land. By becoming landed peasants, Satnamis

significantly improved their socio-economic status, and in contemporary rural Chhattisgarh the Satnamis are similarly positioned to most other OBC castes that own similar sized plots of land for cultivating paddy. Satnamis in the 18th and 19th centuries were deemed to be able to not just defend their land holdings and their caste but were also considered offensive. Due to the unravelling of leadership in the sect after insertion of the non-patrilineal owner of the seat (*gaddi*) Mini Mata into mainstream politics, the sect lost its spiritual and iconic leadership in the 1970s and the present-day Guru is considered a corrupt politician far removed from the lives of rural Satnamis. A reversion back to Hindu practices and the claim by Satnamis that they are Hindu by faith and Satnami by caste is generally found in rural Chhattisgarh. The Satnamis juxtapose their sectarian identity to their caste identity and assert autonomy through the claim that they are self-sufficient.

The sectarian movement only partially helped the Satnamis to deal with caste oppression because although it provided them with a transformed identity, it did not alter their position in the caste system structurally. The Satnamis were able to substantialise as a caste through the ideology of *satnam* and by having common symbols such as the victory pole (*jaith kambh*) and their own pilgrimage site and calendar of festivals, as well as their own religious functionaries, such as the *bhandari* and the *sathedar* to replace or complement the role of the Hindu *pundit* and barber (*nai*) at life-cycle rituals. In contemporary rural everyday life, separation between castes is maintained strictly in the case of marriage, but the so-called 'clean' castes can more easily visit each others' homes and dine together. The separation between those 'clean' castes and the Satnamis is thrown into sharper relief as those 'clean' castes do not have relations of commensality with the Satnamis, and the Satnamis are made to utilise separate sources of water for drinking and bathing. A partial merger between castes may be more easily evident in urbanised areas where class identity positions people more similarly, even though they belong to different castes. However, caste identity remains more salient in rural Chhattisgarh, and internal heterogeneity within caste groups does not blur the boundaries between castes to the same extent as in urban India.

Satnami militancy in present day Chhattisgarh is unheard of, and the Satnamis are not expected to be rebellious in the same way as in the past. Nowadays, they neither bear weapons nor refuse to pay rent. They are not a lawless, criminal caste as described by

Russell and Hiralal in 1916. The only present-day example of a conflict that resonates with Satnami militancy in the past is in Bodsara, where Satnamis are fighting against a Brahmin landowner who is claiming ownership of one acre of land of which Satnamis claim historic ownership. The Satnamis in Meu did not identify with this case as they did not consider it representative of the present Satnami status and did not condone the violence. In fact, they criticised the descendent of Guru Ghasi Das, Bal Das, who was leading the conflict there, and viewed him as a megalomaniac causing trouble by inciting violence. They did not accept the unlawful claims on the land by the Brahmin owner and said that the case would be dealt with by the courts. The reaction to the Bodsara incident provided evidence that the Satnamis are confident of ownership of land and that, unlike in the past, they are not constantly in a battle to claim ownership. The present scepticism was directed towards the corrupt and faltering judicial system and the exploitative nature of the courts, police and government officials that many rural Satnamis find wearisome.

Inter-generational differences are most pronounced in terms of education. The younger generation is not only able to provide an exegesis of formal procedures related to the state, courts or the police because they are literate, they also envision a different morality and identify with urban and secular notions of rights to a greater extent than the older generation. The Satnami youth that have organised themselves in the YACM draw upon Ambedkarite discourses and organise public events in the Satnami ward. They link the capacity to do so with education. They claim that education provides them with information and awareness in a way that was not accessible to older generations. The way in which they organise events resonates with roles learned through schooling rather than from agricultural labour. The ‘civilising attributes’ of education allows these young men to distance themselves from subservient manual labour and they question caste discrimination by trying to position themselves as ‘key social animators’ that bring awareness to their community. The Satnamis were militant in the past and these young men are no longer militant, but by appropriating mainstream Hindu cultural spaces in the village they defy subordination to ‘clean’ caste ostracism at a ritual level.

The possibility for Satnami social mobility among the younger generation hinges not only upon increasing levels of education but also on newer institutions such as *Harijan Thana*, Right to Information and a growing interface with local governance

which create awareness of the importance of notions of citizenship and rights. While the older generation is wary of the state and legal procedures, the younger generation demands accountability and increasingly identifies with the reservations system as well as the consequences of being educated through school and college. However, they are astutely aware of the shortcomings of rural education and remain ambivalent as to whether they can secure jobs. While they no longer want to live a life of drudgery, it is difficult for rural Satnamis to gain employment outside the village. Their education is inferior to that in urban areas and due to the constraints on social capital and money to pay bribes, most find it impossible to find suitable opportunities in the booming Indian economy.

Although young Satnami men envision improvement and a heightened sense of morality through education, the inherent mechanism of *differences* between castes means that changes in caste identity or social positioning are constantly challenged by the underlying caste hierarchy that will persist as long as all other castes continue practising caste norms. The young men in the YACM aspire to circumvent caste oppression through education and visibility in everyday village life by organising events; at the same time, however, they exclude the Mehars from their activities. Thus, the ways in which they attempt to circumvent caste oppression in the village are offset by traditional norms and practices that retain importance in everyday village life. Village life remains embedded in traditional forms of caste as well as economic and social relations that persist, especially through caste *panchayats*. Caste norms are upheld mainly by elders, and the traditional hierarchy related to age poses serious limitations on how defiant the youth can be towards their elders.

The sanitising aspect of education causes ambivalence among the educationally disparate group of young men in the village. While most young men and teachers in rural schools speak of the kind of morality envisioned through education, which promotes ‘civilised’ behaviour, teetotalism and obedience to one’s elders and so on, these attributes often come across as manufactured discourses. Young men also readily admit to the ‘*tensions*’ education and aspirations of a better income cause and find many examples of educated people who do not cut a picture of high morality. Their disillusionment with the quality of village education is more pronounced in their views about the inadequacy of education in village schools and their inability to

secure jobs outside the village after being educated, rather than only the ‘civilising’ attributes that rural people all over India respond to in a more or less similar way.

The notion of rights as *adhikaar* that is rooted in Hindu cosmology provides an understanding of how rights related to the secular sphere are not perceived as a universal claim to which everyone in the village has equal access. Education catalyses the capacity to access rights, especially those in the secular sphere that illiterate people cannot access in the same way. The word *adhikaar* is often translated as rights, even human rights, in Dalit advocacy movements as well as in academic literature related to the struggle for rights by ‘untouchables’ throughout India. However, a closer reading of the meaning of *adhikaar* in the context of Hindu cosmology reveals that *adhikaar* connotes ‘fitness’ or capacity that is a function of a person’s position vis-à-vis others as well as in larger society as defined by the caste hierarchy in the Hindu context. Thus people are not positioned equally in society and cannot claim an equal position vis-à-vis one another as human beings. Even though people often claim that all human beings are made of the same clay – in other words, human beings are the same - the understanding of *adhikaar* as ‘fitness’ suggests that even though people may be conceived of as being made of the same stuff, they are not equal and cannot claim inherent equality on the basis of being human. This underlying ideology perpetuates traditional notions of caste hierarchy that fix people in a vertical gradation based on inherent purity and pollution. Certain ritual practices (*sadhanas*) that are only accessible in terms of one’s position can improve one’s position or ‘viewpoint’ (*darshana*).

The secular sphere of rights-claiming provides an arena for the educated young men to depart from traditional and ritual spheres of status. It enables them to shed their ascribed caste identity which is fixed in the caste hierarchy. However, the problem persists as they can only partially shed the caste identity because it remains salient in everyday village life. Unlike ‘untouchables’ in semi-urban and urban areas, who are increasingly identifying with class identities to a greater extent than caste identity, which is enabled through social mobility in an industrial context, the same cannot be said about rural areas, where social mobility cannot be as easily linked to class. Education and secondary income from sources other than agriculture blur the salience of caste to some extent, but barely put a dent in village norms related to caste when it comes to endogamy and even commensality between castes.

Hence, claiming a higher status in traditional spaces in everyday village life is of importance in overcoming caste oppression. The youth that have gained confidence through schooling do so by organising Hindu festivals. Hindu festivals such as Durga Puja and reciting the Ramayana at life-cycle rituals are important markers of the ways in which the Satnamis appropriate those practices that enable improvement in their status in Hindu society, which rejects them on the basis of ritual impurity. It is a means to show defiance against ostracism at the ritual level, which the Satnamis carry out in a paradoxical way. The Satnamis are not interested in claiming Hindu religiosity when celebrating these festivals, but in fact enact a parody of the festivals by carrying out festivities as entertainment (*manoranjan*), which include alcohol and *masti*, which give these festivals a carnival-like atmosphere. The Satnamis can assert this kind of autonomy and show their self-sufficiency to a greater degree, especially in those villages where the Satnamis are equal to or larger in number than other 'clean' castes. In villages where Satnamis exist in smaller numbers, public displays of this kind of autonomy are less prevalent because of the fear of retaliation from 'upper castes'.

The village is at once restrictive and enabling for the young men in the YACM. While restrictive caste norms upheld by caste *panchayats* and inferior rural education make village life oppressive, the educated young men in the YACM position themselves as 'key social animators' and are able to prolong friendships from their school days.

They utilise roles learned at school in organising public events and consider themselves informed young people who can interact with authorities that represent the state or local power in the *panchayat* in a way that the illiterate elders cannot.

Although the YACM has not officially registered itself as a *samiti* and does not have any clout in the dealings of the *panchayat*, they equate being educated with awareness and with being less accepting and subservient in terms of caste oppression. They do not directly confront 'upper castes', mainly because caste demography in Meu does not lead to volatile friction between the 'upper castes' and the Satnamis in the way it does in some other villages. In fact, the underlying tensions that do not always cause violence provide the kinds of spaces in which social movements can occur. Had there been a volatile situation in Meu, the likelihood of the existence of an association that carries out various social activities, such as the YACM, would have been lower. On the other hand, the increase in education and growing awareness of the possibilities of

overcoming an oppressive situation through organisation at a social level is essentially the basis for such social movements.

By being in the YACM, the young men assert their masculinity by pervading public spaces in the Satnami ward in the village. This is in contrast to young women, who cannot prolong friendships from school to the same extent because of virilocal marriage. Women, whether married or unmarried, are hardly ever seen 'hanging out'. They only appear in public spaces in the village in relation to chores or working in the fields and usually only attend organised meetings. No women ever attended the meetings of the YACM, and none were involved in organising the events or festivals. The young men who organised the festivals used the spaces where canopies protecting the deities were placed as a space for lying or sitting in close groups, listening to loud Bollywood music, and for general horseplay. They eagerly performed rituals as if they were Hindu functionaries, and it did not matter to anybody in the Satnami *para* that the Hindu pundit was substituted in this way. The young men of the YACM are significantly a group of close friends, and thus the group purposefully does not include any other young men from the Satnami *para* in the village.

One could question what the YACM really achieves as an organised group in the village when it is not officially recognised and barely has anything to do with the authorities or the *panchayat*. Even on the members' own testimony, there is scant evidence that they ever attended any *panchayat* meetings or became involved with cases relating to the police or the state. However, they position themselves as educated young men, and they clearly show that the Satnamis in Meu are able to celebrate Hindu festivals to the same extent as the 'clean' castes. They also attempt to take on the role of village elites by being more educated than the illiterate older generation. The household surveys in Meu showed that the increase in education is fairly even in both the Satnami and the 'clean' caste *paras* of the village. Hence, the Satnami younger generation are in a sense increasingly similarly positioned to the 'clean' castes while they remain in the village.

PART 2

When researching forms of opposition to caste discrimination, it is not unusual to make the acquaintance of educated, networked and visible activists in the Dalit movement who are found in towns and cities. These actors often become a link for

outsiders to the rural areas which are conceived as remote and unreachable. Savvy urban activists become that crucial link because they traverse the world of urban networks of information and activism while simultaneously being well-versed in the languages spoken in the villages. They also know the ways of getting to the villages. They can present readily accessible synopses of the conditions in those rural areas which seem vast and inaccessible to outsiders. However, although well meaning, these actors obscure the nuances of the actual ground reality and most often present outstanding cases and scenarios that represent the issues related to caste discrimination. Groups such as the YACM do not appear on the radar of such actors because the Dalit activists do not maintain links with people that organise themselves in such informal ways.

A number of studies about the Dalit movement in India (Gorringe 2005, Hardtmann 2009) focus on visible actors and networks that are mainly found in towns and cities and that are made up of educated, middle class activists. In fact, many of these networks are readily accessible via the Internet and span not only national networks but also transnational networks of advocacy groups fighting against caste discrimination, under the larger umbrella of the social justice movements that started in the 1960s in civil rights movements in the United States. The linkages in global social justice movements and those in the international and pan-Indian Dalit movements barely touch the association in Meu in any direct way; however, the discourses that the youth in Meu draw upon are the same to some degree as those found in the more formalised activists' networks.

The pre-dominance of middle class actors in the Dalit movement in India who are visible as activists is a result of the movement being driven by middle class Dalit migrants who funded activists in the 1990s to form associations like the DMM and to activate a network that would fight for Dalit rights mainly through judicial means. This group of Dalits were essentially interested in social justice and accountability in the legal system, which should protect the land, livelihood and dignity of Dalits, while at the same time denouncing the caste system and longing to eradicate it. However, it is significant that the driving factor for these types of activists was not just ideological change but proactively constructing support mechanisms to fight injustices legally and through agents of international advocacy. These Dalits had gained confidence through the rise of Dalit political power in UP, where the BSP increasingly gained ground in

the 2000s. The BSP had been founded on the platform of the BAMCEF, which was a union for Dalit workers where some were educated and where it had already been possible for those Dalits to transform their class identities to a greater extent than rural peasants. However, it can be argued that the BSP failed to touch the lives of rural Dalits to a greater extent than any of the other political parties; in Chhattisgarh in particular, it failed to make any inroads at all. However, the message of the BSP and the use of symbols such as Ambedkar have helped provide 'untouchables' and Dalits all over India with a sense of unprecedented political power. Even in rural India, Dalits draw upon the symbolic significance of this Dalit party, which swept to power in UP, as proof that the rise of the Dalits against *manuvad* is happening. At the time of my fieldwork, the Satnamis in Meu were sceptical about the extent to which Mayawati (the BSP frontwoman) would gain through political manoeuvring that included colluding with *manuvad*. They were not surprised when the BSP lost power in the following elections.

An important debate concerning the contemporary Dalit movement is the extent to which it can be called a 'new' social movement. There is a clear cleavage between older Hindu reform movements that wanted to improve the status of 'untouchables' in the caste system by advocating sanitised and orthodox Hindu practices, and the so-called 'autonomous anti-caste' movement that demands alleviation from caste oppression by denouncing Hinduism and the caste hierarchy. The former would mean perpetuating caste hierarchies while demanding greater respect for the lower castes and 'untouchables', which feeds into the opposition to caste started by thinkers like Ambedkar. The movement linked by activists in NGOs in present-day India calls for an end to caste discrimination through accountability and democratic procedures and essentially demands social and legal justice. Thus the two have different points of departure in the struggle for improvement in Dalits' lives.

The movement today could be called a 'new' social movement on the basis of the ideological shift from Hindu reform movements and because the movement now involves youth and professional groups that may not have been involved in the same way earlier. The movement also uses many modern methods for protest and resource mobilisation, which enable inclusion of far greater numbers of actors and types of actors. However, the movement is led and supported largely by urban, upwardly mobile activists who are educated and have access to the Internet. They do not

necessarily represent the millions of rural Dalits who do not know about the existence of the NGOs or the activists fighting for Dalit rights and are neither linked to the Internet nor have access to the kinds of justice that the movement envisions will eradicate caste discrimination throughout India. The class positioning of visible actors in the contemporary Dalit movement cannot be overlooked. Most activists in the contemporary movement are 'creamy layer' Dalits and 'lower' castes that no longer reside in remote villages, many of whom have gained education or jobs through the reservations system.

However, the most important aspect of political and social movement actors and activists far removed from the village is that the symbols for Dalit emancipation are the same as those for the young men in Meu. The importance of Ambedkar and his slogan 'educate, unite, agitate' resonates with the view of the young men in the YACM that education is of key importance in overcoming caste oppression. This slogan and the symbol of Ambedkar, which can be found ubiquitously all over India, is the cement that binds together various activists and interest groups that are part of the Dalit movement in other ways. These newer movements are an off-shoot of the 'autonomous anti-caste' movements started by Phule and Ambedkar. Ambedkar is venerated by all, including the young men in the YACM, as the architect of the Indian Constitution which vows affirmative action policies for Dalits and is the cornerstone of the judicial and secular fight for Dalit rights.

The discourses for Dalit rights and those against caste discrimination have increasingly become human rights-oriented, and this has to do with the strengthening of advocacy networks outside India that have been active in supporting NGOs fighting for Dalit rights in India. An NGO such as the DMM in Raipur is indirectly linked to these larger networks of advocacy and funding. It is funded by an international donor as well as through the Dalit Foundation, which awarded some of the members of the DMM fellowships. In effect, the DMM is outward looking as it is mainly involved in the production of fact-finding reports that get posted on Internet websites. Such reporting brings injustices from remote areas to the attention of urban activists, media, researchers and advocacy networks.

In contrast, the YACM gets left out of these larger networks because they are not included in any way by activists in the DMM that frequent villages in rural areas.

Activists in the DMM consider the YACM to be a group of young men who are sitting idly (*khali bhete hai*) in an intermittent period of their lives before they are married and take on the responsibilities of a family. The activities of the YACM are seen as *timepass* by the activists in the DMM. These activists believe that they, themselves, are more seriously engaged in the matter of caste oppression and the ways in which to effect change. The youth in Meu also often claimed that they are engaged in *timepass*; and in response to questions about what they were doing, they simply said that they were loitering about (*ghoom rahe hai*). Their honest and innocent response to my question is perfectly understandable seen from the vantage point of village life – there is really not much else to do in a rural village which neither has cafes nor cinemas or most other forms of recreation that are easily taken for granted in urban life. The fact that the young men in the village nonetheless utilise their position as educated young men and mobilise resources in ways which help them appropriate cultural spaces in the village marks a departure from the past, when Satnamis could not put on a show of celebrations the way they do now; and it is significant to the ways in which these young men contest their lowly position in the village hierarchy. In contrast to the DMM, they are more ‘inward’ looking and do not forge the kinds of links that the DMM has, and neither do they get involved in fact-finding missions and so on. However, given the chance, it is not implausible that the youth of the YACM would take up the roles of activists in the DMM, if it were feasible.

The activists in the DMM are a new type of quasi-social worker that can be increasingly found in Indian NGOs and social movements. Unlike the social workers employed in government development schemes or in the municipality, these activists do not always work for monetary remuneration. They maintain a distance from mainstream politics and do not want to be recognised as power brokers. They are critical of local power brokers and ‘politician-types’ (*netas*) or people who have sycophants (*chamchas*) trailing behind them. Their methods of activism draw upon newfound avenues, such as technical advances in communication through the Internet, and their discourses are more sharply tuned to highlighting injustice by using the language of law and democratic notions of citizenship and rights. These activists believe that ideological change is possible through demanding accountability and the proper functioning of democratic institutions, and believe that this is fundamental to

citizenship. Hence, many activists claim that activism should not be about money but rather should be driven by individual motivation to influence change.

In the Indian context, selfless service to others or *seva* brings merit when it is done in secret or without the need for recompense. Mayer (1981) draws an analogy to *daan*; the gift is given without the expectation of reciprocity. In a political sense, true *seva* is achieved when no vertical patronage is entailed. In the traditional context, it is renouncers who are the most autonomous people in Hindu society as they have severed kinship, social, caste and economic ties and do not provide any services for monetary recompense, preferring to live off alms or *daan*. For modern-day activists without money it is not feasible to carry out activities that require computers, the Internet, motorbikes, mobile phones and so on. However, some of the activists in the DMM were clearly not in it for the money. They often lamented shortages of money and gave an account of how they had used their own money or the resources of supporters and people in communities that were helped by them to carry out the work of activism.

In contrast to upwardly mobile Dalits in Uttar Pradesh, activists in the DMM and the youth in the YACM did not position themselves as so-called ‘*naye netas*’ or ‘new politicians’ who work as go-betweens in rural or semi-urban areas. The young men in UP are from similar backgrounds with higher education and secondary income from non-agricultural work. They are upwardly mobile and engage in local level politics to improve their position in society. However, as Jeffrey et al (2008) show, these young men end up using their resources or influence as *naye neta* for their own relatives or caste group without effecting broader changes in the inequalities they are against. The *naye neta* in UP are an outcome of patronage politics, encouraged by the BSP, which has gained ground mostly in UP. Many of these young local politicians and power brokers are interested in joining local *panchayats* and are enrolled in DS4. They use their power instrumentally to gain advantages in relation to the reservations system and to seek favour of politicians and the police to advance their own aspirations for social mobility. The result is that change is piecemeal, and the instrumentality of the power relations that these young men effect becomes part of corruption in dealing with the state.

In Chhattisgarh, patron-clientalism is just as rife as in other parts of India. However, the BSP is not prevalent in mainstream politics in the state, and other parties, such as the Congress party and BJP have political sycophants and power brokers such as the *naye neta* to a similar extent. For the Satnamis of Chhattisgarh, to be political brokers for those parties is a route to local power for some people, but more generally there is a lack of an organic political base in the state.

Members of the DMM clearly distance themselves from mainstream politics and criticise corruption and the failure of the state to provide protection for the Satnamis and 'lower' castes. They are wary of the faltering judicial system and spend most of their time and resources exposing the injustices meted out to the Satnamis and the problems related to under-development in the state. Activists in the Dalit movement are essentially pro-democracy and campaign for an accountable and transparent state. Power politics impedes activists in many ways, but they are not interested in utilising the arena of local power politics because they fundamentally believe in advancing the rights of citizens untainted by systems of power and patronage at the local level. Whether all members of the DMM are equally committed to such ideals is difficult to pin down. Most activists in the Dalit movement invariably contradict their ideological stance in certain circumstances or in their personal lives. This is true for all social movements, and in no part of the world is there any ideology that exists completely without contradiction. However, it is remarkable that the activists in DMM have managed to carve out a niche in social activism that succeeds in circumventing mainstream politics, which is difficult to do in a state like Chhattisgarh where the state is quite opaque in its dealings.

In a similar way, the youth in the YACM distance themselves from mainstream politics and do not envision becoming *netas* of any sort. Although they say they want to impose checks and balances on the *panchayat*, at the time of my fieldwork they had not registered as an association and could have no official influence on village-level politics. However, the symbolic significance of the rise of Dalit power in UP influences the self-perception of Dalits, even in Meu, even though the real political power of the BSP is associated to politics in UP, far away from everyday village life. Historically, it proves that 'untouchables' and lower castes can rise up against 'upper castes' in ways that were unimaginable to the generation of elders in Meu. It is not implausible to think that if the BSP were more pervasive in Chhattisgarh, the educated

generation of young Satnami men would be drawn to the meetings of groups such as the DS4 and probably find mainstream political channels appealing as a form of empowerment and as a challenge towards 'upper-caste' power in the state.

The state is visible in everyday village life through the various development schemes that are carried out, rather than through political parties. One of the most pervasive schemes in the village is the midday meal programme that is funded by the government and requires so-called Self-Help Groups (SHG) to organise the implementation of the scheme. It is women, primarily, who join these SHGs and are responsible for purchasing food, cooking it and serving it to primary school children in the government schools. They have to provide accounts and reports at the Block Level every month in order to get further subsidies. The scheme mandatorily requires monthly meetings of the women in the SHGs, and these meetings are often coupled with speeches by health care workers on hygiene and issues related to maternal health. Women gather from several villages at a time, and they are mostly married and bring toddlers with them. The meetings are noisy and lengthy. Several hours go by waiting for all the women to arrive. Then speeches, which often go on for some hours, are made while the women constantly chat and attend to their toddlers. Speeches are regularly interrupted to request the women to stop talking and listen. There are lulls of relative quiet, especially when the information is of interest to the women. After the lengthy speeches, women are given tea and snacks, which is what most of them are eagerly awaiting, and gossiping becomes louder as they quickly slurp their tea and munch on the snacks while preparing to leave the venue and return to their villages where household chores await.

The DMM uses these meetings to disseminate Dalit movement discourses. In choosing to address women in the SHGs, the DMM target an easy audience as these women have to gather every month, as is stipulated in the rules for SHGs. The DMM does not try to gather people for mass dissemination other than to protest or to mark an event such as Ambedkar's birth anniversary. At such events in rural areas the turnout is usually no more than twenty to thirty people. The DMM does not act like a political party and therefore does not campaign for membership. Part of the activities of disseminating the discourses of the Dalit movement is carried out by the Catholic clergy in various dioceses especially in the Mahasamund district which have large numbers of Satnami and other 'lower' caste converts in their parishes. Otherwise, the

DMM does not actively conduct speeches in rural areas. Their speeches are sporadic and the audience is invariably women in SHGs. DMM activists mainly spend their time on fact-finding missions and assisting Dalits with legal cases. The number of activists that are active in the Janjgir-Champa district and that frequent Block Level and other villages is just three. One of them decided to leave the DMM to start his own NGO, which did not happen in the time I was in the field. Another divides his time by working for the Dalit Foundation (DF) and was often away in towns and cities. Thus it is mainly the top leadership in the DMM that show up to make speeches at the gatherings such as the SHG meetings, and because they often start sounding a bit like *netas* that have long-winded social messages, the women in the SHGs hardly pay any attention. They find these speeches repetitive, ineffective and irrelevant to their everyday lives. Most village women admit that the ‘upper castes’ act high-handedly, but most also consider village *panchayats* the first point for arbitration in village disputes. Most women still remain in the shadows of the men who are in larger majority in the *panchayats* and generally more visible in public life in the village.

New recruits to the DMM are often people who have suffered a caste atrocity and have become acquainted with DMM activists who have helped them with police FIR reports and have made connections with a couple of lawyers in Bilaspur that agree to take cases of rural Satnamis brought to them by the DMM activists. One such example was the Tundra case, which was represented by Yudhister, who ended up joining the DMM delegation from Chhattisgarh in the first Indian People’s Tribunal Against Untouchability, held in New Delhi in May 2007. The tribunal was far removed from everyday life in rural Chhattisgarh in many senses. Not only was it the first-time experience for some of the delegates to be put up in a modern multi-storey building, it was also overwhelming for some because of the interaction with the media, judges and middle-class NGO workers who otherwise hardly ever appear in the rural landscape. The tribunal provided evidence of the increased importance of the network and the activities of the ‘new’ Dalit movement in India. It also highlighted the disjuncture between urban and rural India and the prevalence of castes in rural areas that lack access to legal and social resources. The tribunal showcased caste atrocities, as documented by activists in the Dalit movement, which represent greater caste tensions than the kinds of caste discrimination that pervade everyday life in rural areas.

The ethnography in this study shows the emergence of distinctly local actors in rural areas that form informal groups that are not always included in the networks of activism, which are driven by mostly urban activists. The formation of such groups is more widespread throughout rural areas than before, catalysed by increasing literacy and education among the younger generation. The ways in which younger educated Dalits contend with caste discrimination in rural areas are moulded in the context of everyday village life. Such actors are not always included in urban networks of activism, which are often far more visible to the media and researchers. A length of time spent in a rural village revealed the kinds of separation between castes that continues to pervade everyday life, although these tensions do not always culminate in violence. It also revealed the ways in which young, educated, rural Dalit men are able to engage with discourses from the larger Dalit movement as levers for social mobility and opposition to caste discrimination.

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Relevant web-links related to the Dalit Mukti Morcha in Chhattisgarh:

2004:

<http://daga.dhs.org/dalitcircle/blog/2004/12/dalit-mukti-morcha-chhattisgarh.htm>

<http://daga.dhs.org/dalitcircle/blog/2004/11/dalit-world-of-injustice-peacelessness.htm>

<http://daga.dhs.org/dalitcircle/blog/2004/11/free-trade-war-against-dalits-adivasis.htm>

2005:

http://www.google.co.uk/search?q=dalit+mukti+morcha+chhattisgarh&hl=en&gbv=2&rlz=1R2SUNA_enGB332&prmd=ivns&ei=0zTMULrmKPP64QSlmIGwAg&start=10&sa=N

(Press Release: Dalit Mukti Morcha warns against untouchability and caste based discrimination on Dalits in schools)

http://www.google.co.uk/search?q=dalit+mukti+morcha+chhattisgarh&hl=en&gbv=2&rlz=1R2SUNA_enGB332&prmd=ivns&ei=0zTMULrmKPP64QSlmIGwAg&start=10&sa=N

(Memorandum to the State Human Rights Commission: Requesting the urgent intervention of the Commission into the matter of caste based untouchability and discrimination in Bhokludih village within Pithora Block of Mahasamund district, Chhattisgarh.)

2006:

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/chhattisgarh-net/message/2843>

2007:

<http://www.countercurrents.org/george090507.htm>

2010:

http://www.google.co.uk/search?hl=en-GB&source=hp&q=dalit+mukti+morcha+chhattisgarh&gbv=2&rlz=1R2SUNA_enGB332&oq=Dalit+Mukti+&gs_l=heirloom-

hp.1.0.0j0i30.8873.11482.0.14019.12.11.0.0.0.0.491.2016.2-2j3j1.6.0...0.0...1c.1.ZQbxPf6DGhw

(Fact-finding report: “Caste, Untouchability and Discrimination led to the Balaudi incident. Report of the fact finding team. September 2010. A joint fact finding report by Dalit Mukti Morcha and PUCL Chhattisgarh. Karbala Para, Behind State Bank of Indore, G.E. Road, Raipur, Chhattisgarh 492001”)

<http://www.mail-archive.com/zestcaste@yahoogroups.com/msg16704.html>

<http://karthiknavayan.wordpress.com/2010/11/01/report-of-public-meeting-demanding-justice-to-sathyambabu-and-ayeshameera/>

2011:

<http://www.groundreportindia.com/2011/07/dalit-mukti-morcha-condemns-social.html>

<http://www.scribd.com/doc/61062050/Report-of-Social-Boycott-of-Dalit-Women-Sarpanch-pd>

(Fact-Finding Investigation Report: “Social boycott and discrimination against Dalit Woman Sarpanch in Karauvadih Panchayat”)

Relevant local as well as national newspapers / magazines read through the duration of fieldwork (some of these have been referred to in this thesis)

Deshbandhu (Hindi)

The Hitvada

Chhattisgarh (Hindi)

Nav Bharat (Hindi)

Frontline News Magazine

The Hindu

The Times of India

Hindustan Times