Mobilizing the Marginalized

ETHNIC PARTIES WITHOUT ETHNIC MOVEMENTS

Amit Ahuja

Mobilizing the Marginalized

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In the loving memory of my father, whose steps I sense beside me every day of my life, and to the Ladies Ahuja—Mom, Anu, and Jane—who are the wonder women in my life.

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PREFACE

Writing on caste inequality in India, Myron Weiner observed, "Perhaps no other major society in recent history has known inequalities so gross, so long preserved, or so ideologically well entrenched."[1] Dalits, a name people formerly known as the untouchables give themselves, are the world's largest and longest discriminated group. They number more than 200 million and have been treated as outcastes for two millennia.[2] Dalits are among India's most marginalized citizens.

Humiliation has defined Dalits' relationship with the rest of Indian society. In some parts of India, members of untouchable castes were forced to string a broom around their waists to sweep over the ground they had polluted by merely walking on it. Others were required to hang an earthen pot around their necks so that their spit should not fall on the ground and pollute a caste Hindu who may unknowingly tread over it. In other parts of India, even the shadow of an untouchable was deemed polluting and, thus, untouchables were not allowed to use public paths and streets. Many untouchables were compelled to wear black bracelets to identify themselves. The caste system is a multilayered, hierarchical social order, in which members of every caste except the Dalits enjoys the privilege of kicking others ranked below them. Historically, as a people at the bottom of the caste pyramid, Dalits have been obliged to bow to the abuse heaped at

[1] See Myron Weiner, "The Struggle for Equality: Caste in Indian Politics," in Atul Kohli, ed., *The Success of India's Democracy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 194.

[2] This system was codified in one well-known text, the *Manusmriti* ("Laws of Manu"), dated ca. 200 B.C.E.–200 C.E. More recently, scientists have used genetic evidence to trace the strict intragroup marriage practices associated with the caste system to at least 100 C.E. and possibly as early as 4200 C.E. SeePriya Moorjani, Kumarasamy Thangaraj, Nick Patterson, Mark Lipson, Po-Ru Loh, Priyasamy Govindaraj, Bonnie Berger, David Reich, and Lalji Singh, "Genetic Evidence for Recent Population Mixture in India," *The American Journal of Human Genetics*, vol. 93, no. 3 (2013), pp. 422–438.

them by everyone else. Untouchability has been the most powerful mechanism to enforce the exclusion of Dalits from the rest of society.

The Constitution of India outlawed the practice of untouchability in 1950; however, it and subsequent laws that punish the practice have been enforced only weakly. Although the practice of untouchability has declined gradually in the public domain in India, a recent countrywide study finds that it is still widely practiced in the private domain. Untouchability and its accompanying stigma have spawned a pattern of segregation—the Dalit/non-Dalit division—that is visible across housing settlements, marriage ties, employment, and everyday social interactions. Interactions between Dalits and non-Dalits are socially policed through the implicit and explicit threats of social boycotts, ostracism, and violence. Beyond the experience of untouchability, Dalits then also live under the threat of intimidation, violence, and social humiliation. This oppression is especially acute in rural areas, where most Dalits continue to live, and from where the worst acts of caste-based atrocities are still reported. This is not to say that time has stood still when it comes to exclusion of Dalits and their domination by other groups. Change has been slow to arrive, but materially, socially, and politically, the lives of Dalits have improved over the past seven decades of Indian independence. Yet, Dalits remain some of the most marginalized citizens of India.

While writing this book, I strove to see the world from the vantage point of Dalits. The India I grew up in hardly offered much preparation; the stories of Dalits, in principle Indian citizens like me, did not make it into my high school textbooks. There were no school trips to museums or memorials that commemorated Dalit struggles against oppression. Neither were Dalits present in the undergraduate economics curriculum of the University of Delhi in the 1990s. Later, in preparation for this project, secondary accounts and socioeconomic statistics on Dalits were helpful, but they gave me only a limited sense of the context that shapes Dalit politics. For this reason, I visited hundreds of Dalit localities in villages, towns, and cities across four of India's largest states that had experienced Dalit assertion—Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Maharashtra, and Tamil Nadu—and spoke to countless Dalits myself.

In one of the first large villages we visited for focus group discussion and interviews in eastern Uttar Pradesh, my research assistant Ramesh and I got lost. A small boy did us the kindness of showing us the way to the Dalit part of the village. After I had gathered the people for the focus group discussion, I discovered that to some of the questions, no responses were forthcoming. There was silence. I was puzzled. But Ramesh picked up on it. He noticed that everyone was looking at the small boy who was still standing around out of curiosity. It turned out he was from a Thakur (a dominant caste) family in the village. Twelve grown-up men and women sat quietly petrified of talking in front of a seven-year-old boy.

Until he left, no one opened his or her mouth. It is one thing to read about subordination, but it is an entirely different proposition to come face to face with it.

During interviews and focus group discussions, Dalits regularly complained about their ill treatment by members of higher-caste groups. For example, Dalits were intimidated and bullied, excluded from village commons and other castes' localities, and shut out of temples and common water sources.

Dalits overall expressed little faith in the laws enacted to protect them from atrocities and to guarantee their rights. One explanation given was that the implementation of these laws remains weak at best. The conviction rates for crimes charged under the different legal provisions created to protect Dalits remain low. Society marginalizes Dalits, and the state often fails them. In these conversations, Dalits sometimes reported that they approached the state administration and the courts for assistance. For most individuals, however, turning to the judicial system was not seen as a viable proposition. Interview subjects frequently pointed out that cases languished in the courts for many years and that the costs of fighting a case were prohibitively high. "Those with land and assets can use courts," said one man, "We cannot." "Going to the police is futile," reported another, "They don't register the complaints and, even when they do, they will not protect us from the reprisals." In poor Dalit localities, people reported that they had no control over the teachers in their schools, they were openly intimidated in police stations, they faced rampant neglect in health centers, and in government offices their petitions got put on the back burner.

We live in the age of anger, as commentators often remind us.[3] Dalits have much to be angry about. They are an electoral minority, albeit a sizable one, so their rage is rarely in a position to topple governments. They do not bomb theaters or highjack planes. Historically denied the opportunity to take up arms against their oppressors, they have seldom joined guerilla groups. Still, theirs is not a two-dimensional story of victimhood. Even under severe constraints, they have developed their own culture and discourse, not to mention political beliefs. They have narrated their stories to themselves and to others. They have discovered their own heroes and celebrated them. Increasingly, they protest, and as enthusiastic voters, they make themselves count as democratic citizens.

The more I came face to face with the disdain and contempt that Dalits are held in, and the fear and humiliation they endure, the more remarkable I found their assertion. Dalits, for me personally, highlighted the possibility of democracy.

[3] See Pankaj Mishra, *Age of Anger: A History of the Present* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017).

Their mobilization signified the redemption of the promise of democracy in a society that remains undemocratic.

What do the marginalized do in the face of dominance? In his remarkable book, *Weapons of the Weak*, James Scott taught us that as vulnerable citizens, the marginalized respond to routine dominance through hidden forms of resistance.[4] They drag their feet, pilfer, evade, gossip, and sabotage. But as I researched my own book, conducted the interviews, and returned to the transcripts later, my faith in that interpretation of the world of the marginalized ebbed away gradually. I found there just is very little freedom in powerlessness, even when it is aided by the crutches of covert resistance. The momentary restoration of self-worth, which is what hidden resistance is about, disappears when social discrimination, or state neglect, or both, are a regular feature of one's life. Beyond a doubt, there has existed a hidden transcript to Dalit resistance; however, over centuries, it did little to rob the caste system of its legitimacy. For that, Dalits had to organize. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, the greatest Dalit civil rights leader and one of India's most formidable intellectuals, was right. Without organization, the weak just do not get taken seriously. Organization is their first weapon. It is the only way they stand any chance of getting a seat at the table. This is what drew me to Dalit mobilization. I wanted to study Dalit movements and parties.

In my conversations and numerous visits to Dalit localities, I discovered much that is common to the experience of being a Dalit across Indian states, and much that is different. Dalit assertion has been expressed socially as well as electorally. It has been sensitive to institutional conditions. In particular, the fragmenting party system over the twenty-five-year period between 1989 and 2014 lowered the threshold for electoral success for Dalit parties and enabled their emergence and survival. But Dalit parties are not the only form of Dalit assertion. In fact, they are not the predominant form. So much of Dalit everyday politics is close to the ground and informal. Early in my research, I viewed Dalit organizations as the primary representations of Dalit social mobilization. It was only after I began to visit Dalit localities and spent time in them that I discovered how Dalit social mobilization is structured. It does not find expression in large formal organizations with manifestos or lists of members. Instead, it is practiced within households and in localities; in stories elders tell children; in the writing and consumption of protest, theater, and music; and during festivals and prayer meetings. It is nurtured by local social entrepreneurs who bolster their own legitimacy by being involved in such activities. This close to the ground, locality-level informal politics has shifted broader social attitudes toward Dalits and their

[4] See James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

political inclusion slowly, often at glacial speed, but as this book will show, over time these effects have been profound.

Listening to Dalits also made me recognize that the long-surviving trope of Indian politics that voters vote their caste does not travel well across Indian states. One of the questions I began my research with was: Why do Dalits vote their caste with such regularity? I quickly realized that this was the wrong question to ask, because what was true for Dalits' interest in voting their caste in Uttar Pradesh in northern India was not as true for Dalits in Maharashtra in the West, or Tamil Nadu in the South. In fact, the question that came to guide this book was why Dalits were more interested in voting their caste in some states, but not in others.

Across the states, Dalit habitations were low-income localities, and during my fieldwork, I began to notice that in some states the work on public projects in Dalit localities and neighborhoods stalled and remained incomplete when governments changed, but in other states, despite government alternation, the work was completed. These observations forced me to reconsider the value of electoral solidarity for marginalized groups. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's insistence on organization notwithstanding, group solidarity in elections, as I realized, is a double-edged sword. It lends a marginalized group political presence and a voice, not to mention a sense of efficacy, but at the same time, it can reduce the competition for the support of the group. Elections then become a lottery for the marginalized; if their party wins, the state shows up at their doorstep, but if their party loses, they are shutout of public programs.

Dalit mobilization has produced Dalit presidents, chief ministers, cabinet ministers, and members of parliament and state assemblies. The affirmative action policies and sustained economic expansion since the 1990s have generated a small Dalit urban middle class. The first Dalit Indian Chamber of Commerce was established in Maharashtra in 2005, and commentators have begun to document the rise of Dalit entrepreneurs.[5] At the same time, Dalits have begun to report fewer incidents of discrimination in the public sphere. In light of these changes, I wanted to inquire if upwardly mobile upper-middle-class Dalits were able to escape the shadow of stigma in the private sphere. When I interviewed them, I discovered that many among these Dalits placed their professional, educational, and class identity above their caste identity. But could others look past the Dalit identity? To find out, I studied the treatment of well-to-do, highly educated Dalit grooms by prospective brides belonging to different castes in the urban middle-class marriage market.

[5] See Devesh Kapur, D. Shyam Babu, and Chandra Bhan Prasad, *Defying the Odds: The Rise of Dalit Entrepreneurs* (Gurgaon: Random House India, 2014).

To the marginalized, democracy promises the opportunity to seek equality and inclusion through mobilization. Dalits have tested the democratic promise over the past seven decades in India by mobilizing socially and electorally. Through an in-depth exploration of Dalit mobilization, this book offers a close scrutiny of the opportunities and limitations of democratic assertion of the marginalized.

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Very early in life, my parents instilled in me an ethos—never let blindness come in the way of things you want to accomplish. Dr. Anil Wilson at St. Stephen's College reinforced the same. "Even if you are going to miss the bus," he would say, "make sure you miss it running." So I ran. I wish my father and Dr. Wilson had lived to hold this book in their hands.

ABBREVIATIONS

AIADMK	All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam
BAMCEF	All-India Backward and Minority Communities Employees' Federation
BBM	Bharipa Bahujan Mahasangh
BC	Backward Caste
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
BSP	Bahujan Samaj Party
DMDK	Desiya Murpokku Dravida Kazhagam
DMK	Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam
DPI	Dalit Panthers of India
DS4	Dalit Soshit Samaj Sangharsh Sanghatan
EVR	E. V. Ramaswamy Naikar/"Periyar"
IHDS	India Human Development Survey
INC	Indian National Congress
JD	Janata Dal
JD(U)	Janata Dal (United)
LJP	Lok Janshakti Party
MLA	Member of the Legislative Assembly
NCP	Nationalist Congress Party
NDA	National Democratic Alliance
NES	Indian National Election Studies
OBC	Other Backward Caste
PT	Puthiya Tamilagam
RJD	Rashtriya Janata Dal
RPI	Republican Party of India
RSS	Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh

SC	Scheduled Caste
SCF	Scheduled Caste Federation
SP	Samajwadi Party
ST	Scheduled Tribe
VCK	Viduthalai Chiruthaikal Katchi

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