

A Caste-coded City: Mobility and Marginalization in the Space Politics of Ahmedabad

Author: *Dyotana Banerjee*

The dissertation examines how caste operates as one of the principal axes of urban political economy of post-liberalization Ahmedabad. It uses an ethnographic study to capture the major shifts and continuities in the cultural and political production of two distinct kinds of pre and post-liberalization Dalit neighbourhoods in Ahmedabad. Highlighting the politics of identity, aspiration, resistance and marginalization in Dalit engagement with the urban spaces of Ahmedabad, the dissertation situates these local forms of spatial politics against the backdrop of urban political economy in post-liberalization India. It argues that greater economic mobility associated with rapid urbanization produces increasingly homogenous and exclusionary spaces in terms of class within caste and vice versa. In Ahmedabad, middle class and working class Dalit identities are articulated, materially and discursively, through a range of socio-cultural dispositions that are embedded within the dominant Hindutva politics of the state. The emergent Dalit politics and spaces draw on and simultaneously reconstitute hegemonic norms of aesthetics, political aspirations and contestations that reveal the complexities of the urban-caste nexus. The dissertation largely draws from the theoretical understanding on spatial reorganization of social relations in the urban political economy by Henry Lefebvre, Manuel Castell and David Harvey.

One of the chapters of the dissertation focuses on how the role of caste is both masked and intensified in the formation of new neighbourhoods in the backdrop of city-remaking projects. What are the mechanisms by which inter-caste (between upper castes and Dalits) and intra-Dalit exclusion get produced in emergent middle-class neighbourhoods? It analyzes the processes that underpin the migration of Dalit communities from Ahmedabad's old industrial centres such as Gomitpur to the emergent neighbourhood of Chandkheda in the city's periphery. The movement of relatively affluent upwardly mobile Dalits from poor Gomitpur to the more 'desirable' Chandkheda, where crores of rupees are being invested in real-estate development of middle-class neighbourhoods is riddled with many contradictions. I argue that the migration to and emergence of an exclusively Dalit middle-class section within the greater region of Chandkheda cannot be understood entirely in terms of 'aspiration', 'assertion' and 'passing' of an underprivileged caste. Economic capital provides the entry ticket for Dalits into Chandkheda, but mobility within the locality remains firmly circumscribed by caste, resulting in residential pockets that are not only exclusively for Dalits but meticulously segregated around Dalit sub-castes.

Another chapter investigates the making and remaking of Dalit working class neighbourhoods in the city. Gomitpur and Dani Limda are two of the many workers' neighbourhoods developed in the industrial belt of Ahmedabad in response to the textile mill industrialization in the early twentieth century. Today Gomitpur and Dani Limda are spaces that are simultaneously inter-communal and Dalit working class where Dalit working class identity is profoundly shaped by its interface with its Muslims residents. This is an increasingly rare occurrence within Ahmedabad's otherwise intensely segregated religion-cohered neighbourhoods. This study critiques the existing academic scholarship that echoes the popular middle class rhetoric of the mill area being a hotbed of communal politics. The existing scholarship on Ahmedabad largely insists on looking at this space through the lens of Hindu-Muslim conflict. This study explores, instead, other crucial aspects of post-mill working class Dalit identity such as - shared feeling of exclusion from the post-liberalization urban imageries of a 'megacity', the tag that

Ahmedabad officially acquired in 2005, Dalit and Muslim economic competition and, a specific space and class based subjectivity rather than a predominantly communal identity.

The final part of the study examines how urban and peri-urban spaces are used to design, perpetrate and normalize caste-based violence by specifically referring to the incident of public flogging of tanners by cow vigilantes in the Una district of Saurashtra in Gujarat in July, 2016. The protest led by Rashtriya Dalit Adhikar Manch (RDAM) (translated as National Dalits rights forum) in response to this incidence of caste violence foregrounds the aspirations, anxieties and assertions of Dalit youth that are closely connected to the urban. This part of the study asks: why did an event of caste atrocity in rural Gujarat trigger protest mobilizations by Dalit-Bahujan youth in urban spaces like never before? How did Jignesh Mevani, an almost novice in politics, become the face of Dalit churning in urban Gujarat and what is his support base like? I argue that RDAM unleashes a sense of a collective or a 'team', as the RDAM members put it, that makes the processes of 'un-hiding' of a new brand of Dalit political self possible, for the aspirational urban Dalit youth. Through its engagement with the urban and digital, the youth seem to position themselves on a Dalit platform that seems, as my ethnographic inquiry reveals, 'cool' and 'attractive' to participate in. The process of 'unhiding' needs to be understood in the context of an often common defence mechanism among urban Dalits against caste discrimination where they change their surnames or hide caste identity under a caste neutral surname.