

Punjabi *dalit* youth: social dynamics of transitions in identity

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This article is based on interviews with young urban *dalits* in the Indian Punjab and Wolverhampton, UK, and aims to chart their experience of caste border crossings in personal relationships. It links their narratives to the larger political economic context of their respective locations. It suggests that, perhaps due to their preoccupation with economic independence, *dalit* youth in Punjab are less concerned about maintaining caste borders in marriage than their counterparts in Wolverhampton. *Dalit* youth in Wolverhampton have experienced caste-related bullying during their schooling that is inexplicable to them given their location in a supposedly casteless society in the United Kingdom, and as a result they seem to be pessimistic about the erosion of caste through crossing caste borders in marriage. Whilst showing reluctance in risking further insult by crossing caste borders in marriage, in their friendships, including sexual relationships, they are willing and able to cross these borders. The paper concludes with a comparison of different explanations and remedies for dealing with caste prejudice in personal relations. It offers the suggestion that the negotiations of *dalit* identity are best understood by locating them in larger religious, immigrant, national contexts on the one hand and within the intra-personal on the other: radical positioning in the overt political domain may go hand in hand with the embracing of fluidity in the personal domain.

Keywords: Punjabi urban youth; *dalit* identity; diaspora; identity negotiation; narratives; caste border crossings

Prologue

‘What’s in it for you?’ asked my chance acquaintance directly addressing me with a challenging look. I had barely sketched the gist of my new research project to this group of three Indian guys I got talking to in a crowded pub. After quick introductions – me saying ‘I teach philosophy at the university’, him saying ‘Oh, I work for a local enterprise’ – I explained that my new project was on *dalit* identity – based upon in-depth interviews and perhaps a limited survey of opinion amongst college students in Punjab and youth (17–29 year olds) in Wolverhampton. They had not heard the term *dalit*, a political term used to refer to the ‘untouchable’ castes in the Indian social context, literally meaning the ‘crushed’ or ‘broken’ people. I wanted to understand how young people dealt with issues of caste

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identity especially when it comes to forming interpersonal relationships. I wanted particularly to track, analyse and understand caste border-crossings involving *dalits*.

Primed with warnings about positioning and transparency in research ethics (Curran and Perceman 2006; Reinharz 1992; Narayan 1997), I moved on to announce 'where I was coming from'. Reciprocally, my 'respondent' told me that he was a Ravidasi, a follower of Guru Ravidas, the revered saint of some 'untouchable' castes. I had asked if he knew of instances of caste border crossings. He did. His sister had married a Jat '*munda*' (an upper-caste Punjabi boy/man), and, given the endogamous family structure of Indian families, Jat men do not normally marry Ravidasi women. Nobody had any problems he told me; 'only the boy's mum', he added. 'At the end of the day every individual is different. She has her own views. But she'll come around', he confidently concluded.

While he talked, I wondered whether I would get to speak to his sister and her disapproving mother-in-law; for their case seems to be typical of modern-day caste border crossings in the diaspora, where changes to the endogamous family structure seem to provoke brooked opposition. But some border crossings are ethically dubious, so to speak. I had in mind the confidential revelation from a female *dalit* student: 'Jat boys will sleep with me, but when it comes to introducing me to their family, they want to know what my caste is'. Upper-caste youth seem to have moved away from strictures of caste segregation in their sexual life, nevertheless upholding it in their social identity. There may be no discernible pattern there, for my current 'respondent' had presented me with a case of a young upper-caste man marrying his Ravidasi sister. What about so-called lower-caste men's attitude to forming liaisons with upper-caste women? I was to find out more.

Caste border crossing is a sensitive topic. Wounds might get opened, anger might erupt and venom flow. Indeed, it has been noted that in the urban setting people are 'not happy to talk about' caste issues in detail (Gorringer 2005, 28). However, in the light of Ambedkar's advocacy of inter-caste marriages as an important solution to the rigid reproduction of caste hierarchies, it is worth studying the aspirations of caste border crossings through personal relationships, in order to measure the extent of such crossings and to ascertain their impact on the social dynamics of identity transitions. The point of the Punjab/Wolverhampton comparison that guides my project is to assess whether living in the United Kingdom, a supposedly casteless society, makes any difference to the aspirations, extent and impact of caste boundary crossings. This article discusses my continuing work on this important and under-researched area: transitions in *dalit* identity in urban settings within a globalized perspective.

Background to research

In *The Negotiation of Personal Identity* (Dhanda 2004), I critically analysed the concept of identity developed by political philosophers, Charles Taylor (1989, 1992) and Richard Rorty (1989), showing the limitations of their philosophical vocabulary in understanding the identity concerns of marginalized and denigrated groups. I criticized both Taylor's account of identity as 'orienting oneself in a moral space' and Rorty's non-foundationalist approach suggesting that identity is a matter of 'play'. I defended the concept of negotiation of identity in the twin sense of 'bargaining for the better' and 'finding one's way'. The core example I used to challenge Taylor and

Rorty was *dalit* identity. I argued that those who live with the burden of pejorative identities cannot articulate their attempt to forge ‘new’ identities by situating themselves in a pre-existing moral space of traditionally defined communities, as Taylor suggests. Their struggles for identity are in large part concerned with *creating* that moral space. Competing accounts, such as Rorty’s idea of identity as ‘play’, are also deficient. They underplay the concern with solidarity that motivates many identity struggles by those who are weak and vulnerable. Rejecting these accounts, I made use of a distinction between moral and practical identity to argue that personal identity is *neither* given *nor* invented but *negotiated*. The elements of personal concern, of an appreciation of limits imposed by structural constraints of various kinds, of the attitude of openness, and the moral dimension of identity are better reflected in my account of identity as negotiation. Further, I argued that the moral identity of a person can be acknowledged only through an acknowledgement of their identity. Personal identity involves both a universal and a particular element. Acknowledging the need for both is essential not just to the philosophical understanding of personal identity, but also to asserting identities in moral conflicts and political disputes.¹ As Iris Young wrote:

Persons are thrown into a world with a given history of sedimented meanings and material landscape, and interaction with others in the social field locates us in terms of given meanings, expected activities, institutional rules, and their consequences. We find ourselves positioned in relations of class, race and nationality, religion, and so on, which are sources of both possibilities of action and constraint. (Young 2000, 100)

Terminology/vocabulary: SC, *dalit*, Chamar?

In this article I use the term *dalit* with its literal meaning – ‘the oppressed’ or ‘the crushed’ – as a political term for ex-untouchables. However, it must be noted that it is not yet a common term of self-reference in the United Kingdom. Indeed I encountered a strong objection to its use in the case of one potential respondent, editor of a local newspaper in Wolverhampton, who was so incensed by its use that I had to withdraw my initial request to interview him. In a telephone conversation, he argued that the UK Diaspora cannot call itself *dalit* because British society does not acknowledge caste position. If caste consciousness persists, in his view, the fault lies with those who bring their caste with them to this country.² I have continued to use the term because, in the enlarged sense I intend, it can be used in an inclusive way to encompass any oppressed collectivity and thus facilitate possibilities to form cross-caste, cross-gender, cross-race alliances and political group formations.

In the Indian context, the abbreviations SCs and STs for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes are commonly used. The term ‘*dalit*’ seems to occur more among the politically educated class.³ In the Indian Constitution, SCs and STs are given reservations in elected assemblies, education and government jobs; but, on my reading, they are outside the four-tier Hindu caste system and continue to be treated as ‘untouchables’ in variable ways. There is no consensus on this view of their location in the ‘system’; I have merely stated a position that I have argued for elsewhere (Dhanda 1993).

The Indian Constitution from its inception outlawed ‘untouchability’ and has passed legislation on this basis, the most recent act being: The Scheduled Castes and The Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989. Its implementation has been highly problematic.⁴ It has a very low conviction rate for reasons of backlog

and stringent application criteria. Minimally, a district superintendent of police is required to register cases under this act, special courts cannot directly accept cases, but magistrates have to move courts. That said, during my fieldwork I heard of a college lecturer in Chandigarh invoking the act to bring a case against a colleague for insulting her by a caste name, which led to proceedings against the accused.

The terms SC and ST are not used in the United Kingdom. However, in contrast with the Punjab, caste names are readily accepted and used in self-reference. Thus, for example, I found my respondents referring to themselves as Chamar. An indication of the straightforwardness of the use of caste names lies in the following text message I received from one of my respondents on 21 February 2008:

Jo Boleh sonur paeh Shri Guru Ravidass Maharaj Ki Jai. Lak Lak vadayo on birth anniversary of Shri Guru Ravidass Ji. From———. Proud 2b a cham! [Blessed is the one who hails the name of Shri Guru Ravidass Maharaj. A million congratulations on the birth anniversary of Shri Guru Ravidass Ji. From———. Proud to be a cham!]

I found similar vocal embracing of caste names amongst other respondents too. One *dalit* woman in Wolverhampton reported that students partying to *bhangra* music substitute ‘Chamar’ for ‘Jat’ in the lyrics of popular songs.⁵

Research questions and pilot study

The wider research questions that motivate my enquiry are: Why does the practice of caste hierarchies and caste prejudices persist? What is the contribution of caste endogamy? Following Ambedkar, I assumed that a deepening of inter-caste personal relations through ties of marriage could make a dent in the hold of caste-ism. On this assumption, I want to ask several questions: How prevalent are caste border crossings? Does urbanization lead to greater mixing? Does immigration lead to an appreciable difference in the policing of caste borders? Since existing research on India (Mohanty 2004; Thorat and Aryama 2007) points to regional variations, I also seek to investigate what is the pattern and specific form of caste prejudice in Punjab and (amongst Punjabis in the United Kingdom) in the interpersonal domain?⁶ Research on caste amongst Punjabis reported in the past 15 or so years (Jodhka 2002, 2004; Puri 2003; Kumar and Dagar 2004; Yadav and Sharma 1995; Ram 2004, 2007) does not deal with the inter-personal domain in any depth. In any case, since most research is focused on rural rather than urban Punjabis (in Punjab and the United Kingdom), answers to my questions would have to be gleaned from interviews amongst urban Punjabi *dalits*.⁷ I intended my fieldwork to be a pilot research to establish the need for further research.

I planned to interview 24 young people (17–29 years old), 12 in Punjab and 12 in Wolverhampton, UK. In Punjab, the interviewees were from five different educational institutions (private and state funded) in Ludhiana, Phagwara, Jalandhar and Chandigarh, including students of education, sciences, law and electronic engineering. I used open-ended semi-structured interviews 30–60 minutes long. Where acceptable to the interviewee, I video-recorded the interview, but in every case there was an audio-recording. In Punjab, I also conducted interviews with other analysts and observers, including older *dalit* activists, government officers, educationists and a lawyer, for exchange of views and to generate discussion (11 video-recorded interviews). In Wolverhampton, I had unrecorded conversations with functionaries of the Ambedkar centre and Guru Ravidass temple, and ethnographical non-participant observation of

ceremonies including video-recording over several hours of the celebrations of the birth anniversary of Guru Ravidas ji in February 2008.

Location: Punjab

The significance of the interview narratives would be lost without locating them in a general picture of the political economy of Punjab. First, it is noteworthy that Punjab has the largest concentration of SCs amongst Indian States. Of its total population of 24,358,999, SCs form 28.85%. However, when differentiated into rural and urban populations the SC population varies from 15.79% (urban Ludhiana) to 45.78% (rural Jalandhar). Table 1 presents the distribution of the rural and urban SC population as a percentage of the total rural and urban population in some of Punjab's districts. It is significant that while Punjab as a whole is being urbanized, the SC population has an increased concentration in rural Punjab (see Tables 2 and 3).

It is interesting to note from a gender perspective the growth in the literacy rate of the SC female population of the state: the highest growth of all groups shown in Table 4. It has been observed that the drop-out rate of SC students in primary school is high, but if they get to secondary school the retention rate of SC girls is better than that of upper castes (Yadav and Sharma 1995).

In government jobs, *dalits* are over-represented in Class IV employees, and under-represented in Class I, II and III.⁸ In an interview, a senior Indian Administrative Service officer revealed that *dalit* officers, even those in higher positions, face caste-motivated obstacles to promotions set up by their evaluators who misuse the mechanism of progress report writing (Kundal 2008). Conscientious *dalit* officers are accused of being partial to *dalits*, when all that they are doing is directing effort to improve the position of the worst off. In another interview, a retired chief engineer revealed that a common mechanism of containing the influence of *dalit* officers is to give them relatively 'unimportant assignments'. 'Such tactics are used against most SCs', he said (Jakhu 2008). There is internal differentiation between SCs, up to 38 castes. There is a common perception that the 'upper' SCs have cornered most reserved jobs. A rare occurrence is that of *dalit* entrepreneurs in Jalandhar producing sports goods and medical instruments. According to Yadav and Sharma (1995), *Ad Dharmis* – a reformist religious sect of ex-untouchables – are in the forefront of this entrepreneurship.⁹

Increased concentration in rural Punjab, the increase in the literacy rate and the freeze on jobs combine to form a potent combination of heightened aspirations and reduced satisfaction. *Dalits* have the lowest share in ownership of land: 2.34% of the cultivated area. It has been noted that Sikh religious bodies are administratively controlled by upper-caste Jats (80%). *Dalits* form 5% of the administrators but are largely confined to menial jobs or to read sacred text and do religious singing (*Kirtan*). The question of control over the administration of sacred institutions has led to bloody contests such as the one in Talhan village (Jodhka 2004). I would suggest that instead of taking such incidents simplistically as assertions of identity, it is perhaps better to understand them as eruptions of a structurally skewed distribution of disadvantages and privileges. Identity assertion may be seen as a mode of mobilization used by *dalits* but it would be a mistake to see it as their end.

Segregation in localities continues to be a feature of urban life in Punjab, as Lahori Ram Balley – a 78-year-old *dalit* social activist who has contested local and

Table 1. SC population as a percentage of the total population in rural and urban Punjab in selected districts (2001 census).

| District | Total rural (% of total district) | Total urban (% of total district) | Total district (100%) | SC rural (% of total rural) | SC urban (% of total urban) | Total SC (total SC as % of total district) |
|--------------|---|---|-----------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--|
| Amritsar | 1,046,209 (48.5) | 1,110,811 (51.5) | 2,157,020 | 357,163 (34.14) | 232,656 (20.95) | 589,819 (27.34) |
| Jalandhar | 1,030,717 (52.5) | 931,983 (47.5) | 1,962,700 | 471,812 (45.78) | 267,950 (28.75) | 739,762 (37.69) |
| Ludhiana | 1,339,178 (44.0) | 1,693,653 (56.0) | 3,032,831 | 490,502 (36.62) | 267,460 (15.79) | 757,962 (24.99) |
| Nawan Shehar | 506,402 (86.0) | 81,066 (14.0) | 587,468 | 210,727 (41.61) | 26,937 (33.23) | 237,664 (40.46) |
| Muktsar | 578,929 (74.5) | 198,564 (25.5) | 777,493 | 237,790 (41.07) | 55,749 (28.08) | 293,539 (37.75) |

Note: Percentage calculations of the SC share of disaggregated rural and urban populations in the selected districts are the author's own.
Sources: *Statistical Abstract of Punjab*, 2004, Tables 3.1 and 3.15, showing census data from 2001.

Table 2. Change of the SC population share of the total rural and urban population of Punjab from 1991 to 2001 in selected districts.

| District | 1991 | | | | 2001 | | | | | | | |
|---------------------------|--------------|---|--------------|---|--------------|--|--------------|---|--------------|--|---------------|---|
| | Rural | | Urban | | Rural | | Urban | | Total | | | |
| | Column 1, SC | Column 2, SC as % of total rural population of district | Column 3, SC | Column 4, SC as % of total urban population of district | Column 5, SC | Column 6, SC as % of total district population | Column 7, SC | Column 8, SC as % of total rural population of district | Column 9, SC | Column 10, SC as % of total urban population of district | Column 11, SC | Column 12, SC as % of total district population |
| Jalandhar | 435,801 | 44.52 | 193,397 | 28.85 | 629,198 | 38.15 | 471,812 | 45.78 | 267,950 | 28.75 | 739,762 | 37.69 |
| Nawan Shehar ^a | 186,835 | 39.52 | 20,247 | 34.64 | 207,082 | 38.98 | 210,727 | 41.61 | 26,937 | 33.23 | 237,664 | 40.46 |
| Ludhiana | 417,077 | 35.24 | 177,361 | 14.27 | 594,438 | 24.50 | 490,502 | 36.62 | 267,460 | 15.79 | 757,962 | 24.99 |
| Muktsar | 198,076 | 39.51 | 40,368 | 26.36 | 238,444 | 36.44 | 237,790 | 41.07 | 55,749 | 28.08 | 293,539 | 37.75 |

Note: Calculation of the percentages of the SC population separately for the rural/urban population of the districts in columns 2, 4, 8 and 10 is the author's own. ^aNawan Shehar has been recently renamed Shahid Bhagat Singh Nagar to commemorate the 100th birth anniversary of Bhagat Singh, an Indian revolutionary hanged by the British imperial rulers in 1931.

Sources: *Statistical Abstracts of Punjab*, 1998, Tables 3.1 and 3.14 for 1991 census data. *Statistical Abstracts of Punjab*, 2007, Tables 3.1 and 3.15 for 2001 census data: <http://www.punjab.gov.in/general/abstract/default.asp> (accessed 18 August 2008).

Table 3. Change of the SC population share of the total rural and urban population of Punjab from 1991 to 2001.

| | SC | | | Punjab | | |
|------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|------------|
| | Rural (%) | Urban (%) | Total (%) | Rural (%) | Urban (%) | Total |
| 2001 | 5,318,254 (33.4) | 1,710,469 (20.70) | 7,028,723 (28.85) | 16,096,488 (66.08) | 82,625,511 (33.92) | 24,358,999 |
| 1991 | 4,562,442 (31.93) | 1,180,086 (19.69) | 5,742,528 (28.31) | 14,288,744 (70.45) | 5,993,225 (29.55) | 20,281,969 |

Sources: *Statistical Abstract of Punjab*, 1998, Table 3.14. *Statistical Abstract of Punjab*, 2004, Table 3.15.

Table 4. Change in literacy rate by gender from 1991 to 2001.

| | Percentage of SC population | | | Percentage of Punjab as a whole | | |
|------|-----------------------------|--------|-------|---------------------------------|--------|-------|
| | Total | Female | Male | Total | Female | Male |
| 2001 | 56.22 | 48.25 | 63.38 | 69.7 | 63.4 | 75.2 |
| 1991 | 41.09 | 31.03 | 49.82 | 58.51 | 50.41 | 65.66 |

Sources: *Statistical Abstract of Punjab*, 1998, Tables 3.12 and 3.13. *Statistical Abstract of Punjab*, 2004, Tables 3.13 and 3.14.

parliamentary elections as an independent candidate from Jalandhar – ruefully expressed:

Here where you are sitting is a 99% Schedule Caste locality ... First I used to stay elsewhere. When I saw that I could be attacked I bought land here and made a house. I originally belong to Nawanshehar [...] here people gave me a lot of protection. So ... now I may have one or two odd friends, that's a different matter. Now, I am, a prominent man of the city and, a V.I.P. the administration considers me. OK? But with Hindus and Sikhs I have no fraternity. None at all. None at all. No. [...] An individual maybe ... but as for social mingling there is none. (Balley 2008)¹⁰

Institutional measures of redressing social injustices, such as the policy of reservations for women and SCs in local government, including village panchayats, are in danger of following rather than correcting prevailing prejudices. In my interview with him, Pramod Kumar gave an example of differential justice from his fieldwork on the functioning of panchayats in Punjab. In one village a local panchayat met to hear the case of a *dalit* boy who had allegedly molested an upper-caste girl. He was handed to the police and arrested for his criminal behaviour. The same panchayat met some time later to try a Jat boy who had molested a *dalit* girl. This time the accused was reprimanded and the parents of the girl were also cautioned to keep an eye on her and stop her from 'enticing' the boy. Kumar challengingly commented:

In the first case the law was allowed to take its course. In the second case, it was said that 'non-formal institutions of justice have resolved the conflict'. Now is it a resolution of the conflict or pushing the conflict under the carpet? (Kumar 2008)

It seems that, in some cases, the first awareness of caste identity came through parental instruction about '*saadhe jaat de guru*' (our caste guru), but in most

cases the students reported no awareness until certificates were needed in schools and colleges. All students reported school friendships across caste (including Jats), a finding confirmed by Jodhka (2008). All except one respondent were pro-reservation, the exception being one backward caste woman who emphasized the need for a minimum threshold of marks. The awareness of SC status grows with progress through education, and becomes most acute in job search and marriage. Regarding the form of marriage, most respondents were anti-dowry, and women did not aspire to inherit family property. Most respondents were opposed to the politics of religious place. Most respondents were not part of any *dalit* organization, but in college they looked out for each other. All saw education as the way forward.¹¹ Some expressed commitment to give back to the (*dalit*) community. All desired stable (i.e. government) jobs; the volatility of higher paid private jobs was feared. In relation to intimate caste relations, some gave examples of inter-caste marriages – such as a male Chamar doctor marrying a female Jat doctor, a male Chamar doctor marrying a female Jat nurse, a graduate Chamar woman marrying a male Brahman, an employed upper-caste woman marrying an unemployed SC man. It is noteworthy that *all* of my respondents were open to inter-caste marriages, but *only* with parental consent, which some did not expect readily to get.

The costs of crossing caste borders in Punjab: I

Dalit lawyer S.L. Viridi, who is experienced in taking up cases of discrimination against *dalits*, related the following in an interview:

There have been intercaste marriages, 5 or 7 ... There is this local case ... The young man is a *dalit*, he had an intercaste marriage; the young woman is a ... Khatri [upper-caste] ... His father was an officer in the Railways ... there the young man and young woman met and got married ... got protection from the police and high court of every kind. But that family: no one meets them, they didn't accept ... There have been many recent incidents ... of inter-caste marriages ... but of them, in some cases they kill, or break up the marriage ... Now take the incident of Chandigarh, of 1990s/2000. He was a Coach, an officer too, in a good service ... he got involved with a Jamindar [landowner] young woman; he got married. The young woman's brother stopped the family from meeting them ... After a year they approached ... asked forgiveness ... wanted to celebrate marriage anniversary. The programme was arranged in a hotel. Everything happened ... it got celebrated. After that ... the young woman's brother said he wants to go to her house to meet her. He went there and shot the young man ... when the woman, his wife, found out, she committed suicide. The brother had got arrested on the spot. When caught and asked 'Don't you regret that you widowed your sister?' he said, 'I am proud that my sister will not reside with a Chamar' ... This is the situation. In a city like Chandigarh ... this tragedy has happened. (Viridi 2008)

The costs of crossing caste borders in Punjab: II

The following story was narrated by a 22-year-old *dalit* female law student in Phagwara about a neighbour's niece who got involved with an upper-caste Brahman:

The young woman was an SC (graduate) and she lived in Patiala. Ma'am, they got married under the Special Marriage Act. They got married but her parents did not accept, and they stopped interacting with her. Two three months later, the young woman's mother was traveling to Phagwara, the young woman's mother had an

accident and the young woman's mother died 'at the spot'. Ma'am, after that, the young woman was crying a lot ... that 'I want to see my mother', but she was not allowed to see her mother, she was not allowed to see the dead body. Her husband used to subject her to so much 'violence'. They used to beat her up so much, saying that 'you are lowly (*neech*)' 'you are a low-caste girl'. Ma'am she was abandoned. Whatever happened, this tragedy took place within 5-6 months. She was abandoned and now the young woman's family has taken her in ... 'we'll marry her again' [they say].¹²

A unique female assertiveness?

One female respondent, a 22-year-old backward caste category B.Ed. student in Ludhiana, with an older brother less educated than her, had the following to share when I asked her if she expects to inherit any family property:

My parents have never discriminated against me ... nor does my brother, they do more for me than for my brother ... there is inheritance ... it's carried on ... the son gets it. I cherish that. I will get what is in my Karma. I want to make my own destiny. I don't want anything from my parents; my brother lives here, he is the caretaker here; they say sons produce heirs, then inheritance is rightfully theirs, they can have it. I don't care if he gives me or not. Parents have said that if you want this house can be divided into two parts, you live in one and he can live in the other, because I do not want to get married. That is the biggest problem.

Why don't you want to get married?

Just so because in this country one has to live 'under' the male and that I have not learnt to do ... with love, if hand in hand a man gives respect ... to give and get respect is an art, isn't that so? If a person wants respect from us then is it not his duty to give respect to us too? But in today's world it is seen that even in love marriages it is one thing before and another afterwards. Right? The same young woman is taunted afterwards that you could not belong to your parents, how can you belong to me? Is that not so? I do not want to be 'under' such a person ... It's true I will do a job ... every person is surely greedy for money, so with respect both of us will earn ... we'll respect and get respect. This is it. If I do not work, just stay at home, then he will taunt me 'you cannot be content even at home'. He will say so and not let me speak! That is why, on this basis I do not want to get married because I cannot tolerate such subservience. Why should I in these times, when I have been given all facilities; my parents have helped me stand on my feet. I will get a job ... then it doesn't mean, if I work equal to him ... I agree that if I do not get a job then the work that god has given me – a woman's work – cooking *roti* or some other work ... without that I am incomplete. If I cook in the morning before leaving, I earn, bear the household expenses, OK, then it doesn't mean that he should come home and complain. I want respect: I will give respect but I also want respect. In these times one doesn't get such respect; very seldom ... very seldom.

What if you find someone who gives respect?

Then, most welcome (said in English).¹³

Location: Wolverhampton

Information about caste is unavailable in UK population statistics.¹⁴ Most commentators rely on estimates based on membership of various religious organizations. For instance, I was told informally that the Ambedkar centre has a membership of 140 Buddhists, a figure that I have not been able to verify although it is strongly suggestive of the extent of conversion to Buddhism amongst Punjabi *dalits* in Wolverhampton. Comparably, Guru Ravidas temple has a substantially

larger following – as I witnessed first hand in video-recording the celebrations of the birth anniversary of Guru Ravidas in February 2008.¹⁵

In the wider UK context, there is a contest of views between the Hindu Council of UK and the Dalit Solidarity Network. In a report, the Hindu Council of UK insists that ‘Hindus too wish to preserve their core beliefs and identities. How can this not be allowed to extend to who they wish to socialise with or whom they choose as a life partner?’ (Sharma 2008). Further: ‘Dalits have always been an integral part of Hindu society ... The very word “Dalit” is a derogatory epithet for untouchables’. My short response to the Hindu Council of UK view is that their model of assimilation has historical precedents that need to be challenged. Their denial of discrimination is plain obfuscation. Finally, it is disingenuous to defend as freedom of choice the practice of keeping within caste borders.

The desire to cling to upper-caste identity has been uncritically justified even amongst Sikhs. Thus Balbir Grewal, whilst heading the Southall Guru Granth Saab temple, proudly declared her *jat* identity:

My father used to tell me you are born *jat* and you will die a *jat*. Everybody be proud of whatever creed caste they are and I think we should stick to it. It's like roots. How can you plant a tropical plant into a cold country? It has to be in a tropical country otherwise you are lost. We are already lost in this country by eastern and western cultures and if this carries on the time will come nobody will know which background religion or caste they come from.¹⁶

Dalit Solidarity Network UK (2006) recommended that the UK Government officially acknowledge the existence of caste as a form of discrimination and include caste as a ‘special characteristic’ of discrimination in the Single Equality Act. I have my reservations about taking this step.¹⁷ I think that the views of *dalits* in the United Kingdom on the usefulness of such a step must be carefully documented. More research on the perceptions of *dalits* about such a proposed use of the Single Equality Act is needed.

There seems to be an awareness of caste from an early age, mostly connected with religio-social life. All those I interviewed reported experience of caste-related bullying in school, sometimes via exclusion, but mostly through name-calling. They learn about the experiences of their elders – parents or grandparents – and the struggle they had to go through to make a decent life by standing up against caste prejudice. Coupled with this knowledge, their own early experience gets expressed in a reluctance to work in an all-Indian environment for fear of caste discrimination. However, as in Punjab, my respondents showed openness to inter-caste marriages, but expressed reservations about success. I was given examples of inter-caste marriages, such as a male Ravidasi marrying a Gujarati (upper-caste) woman, a Ravidasi woman marrying a Jat man, a Radhaswami (Chamar) woman wanting to marry a Muslim man, and a Chamar woman marrying a Tarkhan man.¹⁸

A unique *dalit* assertiveness?

One 22-year-old male respondent, a humanities graduate in Wolverhampton, said the following: ‘When I call myself a Chamar, I do not think of myself as a lower caste, I think of myself as being born in the religion that Guru Ravidas Maharaj

stood up for'. At a later point in the interview, when asked whether he would get sexually involved with an upper-caste woman/man, he said:

In a ... if it was serious then no. I don't think I would. If it was just fooling around then probably yes ... [laugh] ... that's being honest!

What do you mean by serious?

I mean, if I was thinking long term ... I have often thought ... like ... what if I did want to marry out of caste or religion? I think, it's not as simple as you think ... there's a lot of other people involved: there's family involved, obviously ... if you do marry out of caste it gives them ammunition to blow things out of proportion and if problems do arise it's always over caste ... I know a few people who've married out of caste and religion and even though they've like loved one another, just because of other family members interfering, the issue has always boiled down to the issue of caste. If we marry someone in our own caste the problem doesn't arise in the first place.

Further, when asked whether he would go against his parents' wishes to marry out of caste, he said: 'I owe a lot to my parents, so I wouldn't want to hurt them in that way'.

The costs of crossing caste borders in Wolverhampton

The following story was narrated by a 26-year-old middle-class professional man about an experience his mother had when she worked in a sewing factory, sitting down to eat her lunch during a break with her fellow workers:

I'm not 100% sure how the caste issue came up and my mum, someone said to my mum, 'you're Jat anyway' and my mum turned around and said 'mere mathe te likhe ai mein Jat an?' [Is it written on my forehead that I am a Jat?] and she goes 'I thought you were a Jat, similar as well'. She says 'No, I'm not; it doesn't make any difference, I eat with you and all'. And she refused; she spat the food out! She refused to eat with her! And, luckily for my mum, everyone else on the table, everyone else carried on eating, didn't walk off, you know. But it's quite demeaning, very demeaning for somebody not to kind of, you know – for last year you've been eating my food and all of a sudden it's not good enough for you – um – yah, I know it happened. But my mum's a big enough person to say: 'if you don't like it, don't have it' and carry on kind of thing. It did affect her a while. You could tell it affected her.

When might this have happened?

Oh, it was about 8 years ago.

Gosh, that recent!

It would've been 10 years definitely but I think it was about 8 years.

This respondent had, on the whole, a very positive outlook on the possibility of caste border crossings, although he has married an upper-caste woman and continues to face non-acceptance from his father-in-law. He spoke at length about the efforts he had made to bridge the caste divide between him and his in-laws. His brother-in-law is good to him and his mother-in-law visits too, but his father-in-law did not even make a gesture of acceptance as expected when my respondent had a son. As a result of hurt pride, he does not care to make any further attempts at reconciliation. He even accepted this nonchalance as perhaps stubbornness on his part. When asked whether he thought inter-caste marriages were a solution to ending caste prejudices, he replied: 'Oh, definitely'; but added, 'I think to a certain extent it is more acceptable to marry a *gora* [a white person] than it is to marry a girl of a lower caste or a guy of a lower caste'.

When I asked his opinion about the extent of relationships with black people, he forthrightly noted that it was racist of Asians to accept marriages to white people but not to black people. He also noted the near impossibility of Hindu–Muslim and Sikh–Muslim marital alliances. But he ended on the hopeful note that it was an issue for the next generation – his children – to take up: ‘we can’t just leave it under the rug, so to speak’. Half the work would be done, he said, if we could get rid of the ‘caste issue’.

What do these stories tell us?

My pilot research indicates that the way to understand the experience of caste prejudice, especially the limitations it imposes upon personal relations, is to listen to the narrative within which that experience is related (for instance Moon 2002). As Iris Young writes: ‘Storytelling is often the only vehicle for understanding the particular experiences of those in particular social situations, experiences not shared by those situated differently, but which they must understand in order to do justice’ (Young 2000, 73–74). Young urban *dalits* in the Indian Punjab are negotiating an identity that is open to caste border crossings in personal relations unlike *dalits* in Wolverhampton, who have a greater opportunity to cross caste borders but seem to be more inclined to maintain them. In other words, intentional separatist tendencies in the realm of personal relations may be more evident amongst *dalits* in Wolverhampton than amongst *dalits* in the Punjab. On the other hand, fortuitous romantic mixing is tolerated more in Wolverhampton than in the Punjab. The two contexts are very different even though Punjabi as a mother tongue provides a commonality. The stakes too in crossing or maintaining caste-borders in personal relations are different in both contexts. Some people still pay with their lives for daring to cross the caste border in marriage in the Punjab, whilst in the United Kingdom the worst that can happen is rejection by some members of the family. However, both in Punjab as well as in Wolverhampton, young *dalits* seem to care about not adding to their parents’ burdens by presenting them with unacceptable partners. Young *dalits* in Punjab seem to aspire for greater control over their lives: their economic autonomy seems to be a larger issue than finding success in self-chosen marriages. In the United Kingdom, the dogged persistence of caste-based prejudice, *despite* economic success, seems to have brought ‘identity negotiation’ into sharper relief.

Explanations and remedies

It was Ambedkar’s view that the very definition of caste as ‘a marriage circle’ indicates there is a constitutive link between endogamy and persistence of caste. He wrote: ‘This critical evaluation of the various characteristics of caste leave no doubt that prohibition, or rather the absence of intermarriage – endogamy, to be concise – is the only one that can be called the essence of caste when rightly understood’ (Ambedkar [1917] 2002, 245). Further, he wrote in ‘Annihilation of Caste’ (reprinted in Rodrigues 2002, 263–305):

There are many castes which allow inter-dining. But it is a common experience that inter-dining has not succeeded in killing the spirit of caste and the consciousness of caste. I am convinced that the real remedy is inter-marriage. Fusion of blood alone can create the feeling of being kith and kin and unless this feeling of kinship, of being

kindred, becomes paramount the separatist feeling – the feeling of being aliens – created by caste will not vanish ... *The real remedy for breaking caste is inter-marriage. Nothing else will serve as the solvent of caste.* (Ambedkar in Rodrigues 2002, 288–289; original emphasis)

This lecture was given to the Jat-Pat Todak Mandal in Lahore in 1936. Ambedkar lauded their purposes but questioned their means. He argued that:

Caste is not a physical object like a wall of bricks or a line of barbed wire which prevents the Hindus from co-mingling and which has, therefore, to be pulled down. Caste is a notion, it is a state of mind. The destruction of caste does therefore mean the destruction of a physical barrier. It means a *notional* change ... Criticizing and ridiculing people for not inter-dining or inter-marrying or occasionally holding inter-castes dinners and celebrating inter-caste marriages, is a futile method of achieving the desired end. The real remedy is to destroy the belief in the sanctity of the Shastras ... (Ambedkar in Rodrigues 2002, 289–290)

A more recent feminist explanation and remedy for challenging caste-ism is offered by Anupama Rao (2003). She argues that sexual control through the policing of intimate sexual relations between castes is crucial to the consolidation of both political and economic caste hegemony. It is necessary to acknowledge that women often exploit other women ‘as the precondition of their own freedoms’ and ‘men are engaged in complicated negotiations of masculinity’. A cautionary note may be added to this feminist position, following Gabriele Dietrich, in that ‘caste as a functioning solidarity network in the form of extended kinship also needs to be understood since it is one of the reasons for the tenacity of caste’ (Dietrich [1992] 2003, 77). On an entirely different register, Prem Chowdhry argues for ‘recovering the inner voices of women’ (2007, 235). Popular perception, she reminds us as Uma Chakravarti has also argued (Chakravarti 2004), is of women as ‘lustful and ensnaring’ regardless of caste. She writes:

[T]here may well be an alternative perception that women have of their social world – a viewpoint that suggests that not only do women accept but also reject caste-bound hierarchies and boundaries. They acquiesce to the social order while seeking to disrupt it. (Chowdhry 2007, 235)

Chowdhry draws out of folk-songs a picture of latent ‘women-centred feelings standing in direct contradiction to the dominant norm of cast[e] endogamy’ (2007, 236). Coveted lovers in upper-caste women’s songs in Haryana are men of lower castes, skilled in some occupation or other. Chowdhry concludes: ‘The identification of the lovers appears to be deliberate and calculated to provoke and challenge the male authority of caste members’. Apparently, the songs of the low-caste women, equally lustful, ‘do not identify their lovers’ (2007, 246).

In Punjabi urban settings, there are similar folk-songs that could usefully be studied to unravel the source of the perception of women as dangerously lustful, corruptible and corrupting, thus legitimizing the policing of caste borders. Indeed, Kumar and Dagar have argued:

Dalits are mobilizing around an exclusive Dalit identity which presupposes intra-group homogeneity and inter-group difference, where control over women is an essential marker to ensure group membership and purity. Sexual violation of upper-caste men with Dalit women has become an unacceptable violation of Dalit dignity. Simultaneously, control over women, through codes of conduct, dress, behaviour have been imposed, as against the earlier indifference. (2004, 278–9)

Interestingly, their research includes queries to Jats and *dalits* about ‘affirming the sexual liaison of dalit women with upper caste men’, but there is no comparable query about sexual liaisons of upper-caste women with *dalit* men! Some part of a possibly convincing story is missing here.

We need to augment argument with narrative, to challenge preconceived stereotypes, to reveal the source of values, priorities, cultural meanings. Some *dalit* youth, acquainted with Ambedkar’s writings, may find no other solution is as convincing as that of conversion to Buddhism.¹⁹ Their intellectual inheritance may constrain their choice. For others, the feminist linking of gender and caste might offer a better explanation of their personal history. They might agree that patriarchy and caste prejudice feed off each other and therefore, for them, a caste-aware feminist response is the best ideological position to take. For the more literary minded, the proposal to unleash possibilities of crossing borders by unlocking hidden desires may prove more liberating. The doctrinaire, the ideological and the literary are all potentially useful in offering partial explanations of ways of crossing caste borders. For me the *political* way can be any or all of them in different combinations in different settings. It is for the narrators of stories, the agents themselves, to find the way that best enlarges the possibility of breaking the hold of structural constraints on them. So I suggest that we locate *dalit* identity negotiations in larger religious/immigrant/national contexts on the one hand and within the intra-personal on the other; radical positioning in the overt political domain may go hand in hand with the embracing of fluidity in the personal domain.

Notes

1. For a very insightful account of understanding ‘identity assertions’ whilst linking them to ‘structural relations of privilege and disadvantage’, see Young (2000, chapter 3, 81–120).
2. Later, I was told by attendees at a Castewatch UK conference (30 August 2008, Aston University, Birmingham) where I was one of the invited speakers that the term *dalit* was read as denigrating by others too.
3. In my interview with him (March 2008), the sociologist Surinder Jodhka shared the following experience:
I remember in 1999 ... or 2000 – I was sitting with this person who was senator of Punjab University ... retired IPS officer. And I used the word *dalit*, and he got offended. He said ‘I’ll book you in the –’, he said ‘I’ll register a case against you,’ So I didn’t follow – he said ‘I’m a scheduled caste, I’m not a *dalit*.’ So he perhaps didn’t understand the political connotation that it brings to the identity at the larger Indian level, because they did not use it. So if you look at the late ‘90s, it is virtually missing in Punjab. But after the Talhan incident in 2002, it picks up ... Before that you don’t have an autonomous *dalit* consciousness. So even though you don’t have a *dalit* movement in Punjab, for whatever reasons, you have a new *dalit* consciousness emerging in Punjab, for sure.
4. For a review of constitutional safeguards for *dalits* in India and for reasons to look beyond the State to protect the *dalits* from human rights violations, see Tiwari (2007).
5. Prof Satya Pal Gautam reported in my interview with him in New Delhi on 21 March 2008 that, in Jalandhar, Punjab, he had witnessed a new phenomenon of *dalit* men announcing ‘*Putt Chamaran de*’ (Sons of Chamars) on their motorbikes much like Jats routinely announce ‘*Putt Jatan de*’ (Sons of Jats) on their motorbikes (Gautam 2008).
6. Writing about the participation of *dalits* in business in post-liberalization India, Harriss-White and Vidyarthi (2008) show the ‘regionalisation of dalit incorporation and discrimination’ and make a case for further research ‘examining processes and

relationships, agency and resistance; and research which pays attention to the particularities of economic history and local institutions’.

7. In a recent publication, Judge and Bal (2008) report on a large quantitative survey including some questions about inter-caste marriages that are relevant to my research. However, the source of their data is not always clear, and in places the data they present is not matched with reliable commentary. For example, they say that ‘96 per cent of the urban respondents are of the view that it is possible to end the caste system if intercaste marriages come into practice, most of the rural respondents have showed uncertainty with regard to intercaste marriages’ (Judge and Bal 2008, 53–54). Unfortunately, they misread the data presented in an accompanying table, which suggests that, of all those who say it is possible to end the caste system with inter-caste marriages, 96% are urban and 4% are rural. But if you separately consider the different categories of the urban respondents’ views, only 46% of them think so, *not* 96% as mistakenly interpreted. The remaining 54% of urban respondents are divided amongst other survey categories of those who think it is ‘desirable’ or ‘caste is deep-rooted’ or ‘such marriages do not succeed’ or are ‘undecided’. The difference between rural and urban respondents on whether inter-caste marriages are desirable is small (107/800 urban and 97/800 rural respondents say they are desirable) even as there is a large gap amongst the urban and rural respondents on whether it is ‘possible’ to break the caste system with inter-caste marriages. Quibbles apart, such research is a welcome move in the direction of understanding the resilience of caste. But quantitative research on its own is insufficient and needs to be triangulated with qualitative research.
8. Roughly speaking in the Indian parlance, government employees are ordered in a hierarchy – with the highly skilled and highly paid officers at the apex called Class I, and the unskilled and lowest paid called Class IV; the skilled and semi-skilled form the middle two categories of Class II and Class III employees.
9. For a good overview of the impact of Ad Dharm in Punjab, see Ram (2004).
10. Interview translated from Punjabi by Meena Dhanda.
11. Similar findings about the hope from education despite limited opportunities of translating them into jobs in rural Uttar Pradesh are reported by Jeffery, Jeffery, and Jeffery (2005).
12. Interview translated from Punjabi by Meena Dhanda. Confidentiality does not permit the disclosure of the interviewee’s name.
13. *Ibid.*
14. Singh and Tatla offer a guesstimate that, on the assumption that one-third of Punjabi Sikh migrants to the United Kingdom are *dalits*, and on the further assumption that ‘almost half did not register as Sikhs, that would leave almost 56,000 on the boundaries of the Sikh community’ (2006, 60). One could add to that number Valmiki and Buddhists and Christian *dalits*, and perhaps even some who have turned to the Radhasoami faith.
15. I have yet to establish contact within the Valmiki community in the city. This failure to make a breakthrough is despite making attempts to follow up initial contacts. In one case, after initial conversations with a young married woman who offered to arrange an interview with her husband, a Valmiki, I was later told that her husband did not wish to be interviewed apparently because he had never spoken to anyone on the subject of experience of caste prejudice. I am also aware that a Punjabi congregation meets in the Methodist church in Wolverhampton, providing evidence of a *dalit* Christian community in the city.
16. Cited by Puri (2004).
17. It has been argued that, instead of the focus on caste-based discrimination, a broader framing of discrimination based on ‘work and descent’ may be more feasible in addressing violations of *dalits*’ human rights. See Bob (2007).
18. It is remarkable that in their ethnographic study on Eastern Punjabi transnationalism involving 58 interviews in Newcastle-Upon-Tyne in the United Kingdom and 87 in the Doaba region of Punjab, Taylor, Singh, and Booth (2007) found no examples of mixed caste marriages in either Britain or Punjab.
19. For a sustained argument against liberal politics and for a turn to Buddhism, see Guru (2007).

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