Emerging Community Identities Among the Factory Workers Among the Factory Workers in Colonial India

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ABSTRACT

In this paper an attempt is made to explore the neighbourhood linkages among the lower caste factory workers in colonial India and the ways in which this acted as an agency to forge a community identity among them. For the purpose of this work theme such as the settlement patterns of the neighbourhoods, the nature of leisure activities and the transformations that some sections of the lower caste factory workers under went as a consequence of upward mobility have been taken up. This paper focuses on the leather workers of Kanpur an industrial town of the United Provinces (Uttar Pradesh), the period of study is the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the initial stages of industrialization.

 Since, industry and commerce led to the concentration of population in the cities and towns. The initial years of industrialization brought with it a grave problem of workers housing.   Kanpur which had become an established centre for cotton and leather goods manufacturing, also experienced a sudden growth in population with the rural labour migrating to the city. Adding to the problem   no consistent attention was paid to the problem of housing. The shift from rural to urban residence brought along with it many changes in the social relationships, association pattern and the way of life of the worker. In the typical Indian the rural

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settings a villager spent his life in a community, which was a small homogenous group. The most noteworthy feature of this village society was the caste and joint family systems, which controlled, molded and defined the social behavior of its various members. For the villagers, birth generally determined the whole course of his, domestic relations, throughout his life what he must eat, drink, marry and give in marriage in accordance with the usages of the social group into which he was born.[1]But the adaptation to the urban living affected the inter personal relations of the migrant workers. The new associations formed outside the workplace, in the neighbourhood, in the market place, liquor shops and recreational activities led to the formation of new social identities.

The character of the urban social relations has been studied by a number of social scientists. Occupation, environment, density of population, heterogeneity of population, social differentiation or satisfaction, mobility and system of interaction are the characteristics, enumerated by Sorokin and Zimmerman, which differentiate the urban world from the rural world.[2] these factors, according to them made significant dents into the social relations and personality structure of the labour. E. P. Thompson, initiated the study of the social aspects concerning the factory workers in his classic work on the English working class.[3] A number of similar works followed in India, Dipesh Chakraborty in his work, Rethinking Working Class History, contested that the urban factory worker was not totally delinked from the rural life, rather their culture was deeply influenced with a pre industrial consciousness [4], similar studies on the migrant labour in the urban settings have been carried out by Nita Kumar[5] and Rajnarayan Chandavarkar [6] in Banaras and Bombay respectively. Nandini Gooputu [7] and Chitra Joshi [8] have focussed on the Kanpur labour.

The Choice Of Neighbourhood :

In the new setup the migrants were able to exercise a choice of residence which was unthinkable in the villages, for those dealing with the leather in particular. In the old rural settings which was strictly tied to the caste, they were forced to reside in settlements away from the main village .In the city a number of factors influenced the choice of neighbourhoods. Pressed by problems like housing,

employment and credit the migrant tended to stick to his friends, caste fellows and relatives for support. Trying to find the security he was used to in the village the migrants frequently lodged with them. The distance from the place of work was another factor which determined the worker's choice of neighbourhood. In the case of Bombay it was noted that in 1937, 90 percent of the city's mill workers lived within 15 minutes walking distance of their place of work.[9] In Kanpur the ahatas (the enclosures where the workers lived) that were in the heart of the city and were in close proximity to the old mills were the most crowded ones. The mechanisms of the labour market also influenced the choice of neighbourhoods by the workers. Most people relied upon their friends and relatives to recommend them to jobbers and supervisors for work. Under such conditions the workers tried to establish social relations with the jobbers outside the workplace and tended to reside near them.

Social Ties and new Bonds :

The neighbourhoods, according to some historians and sociologists were in fact the reconstitution of villages in the urban setting, with the neighbourhood leaders corresponding to the village headman. Lynch Owen in his study of Jatavs of Agra states that "just as one retains an ancestral affiliation to a village, so does the Jatav retain an affiliation to his ancestral household and its neighbourhood.[10] The neighbourhood ties in the city became so strong that people were generally identified by the name of their neighborhood. The relations (bhai band) with the persons of their own neighbourhoods reminded one of the feeling of brotherhood (gaon bhai) in the villages. As residential units the neighbourhoods played an important function in kinship and marriage. "All the people of a neighbourhood came to be related as real or fictive kin. All such relatives were called a bhai band.[11] The neighbourhoods were generally divided into sub-units, thoks of Agra and mohallas of Banaras, and ahatas of Kanpur corresponded to these sub-units.[12] These units were effective means for regulating the social relations, commenality and cooperation and in strengthening the feeling of brotherhood among the residents.

The thoks, mohallas or the ahatas had their own panchayats which decided all types of questions. There was separate open space, where the meetings of these panchayats were held. Like in villages it became a meeting place, where in the free time men gathered to talk, smoke and sleep in the summers. Occasionally, feasts and public entertainments were organized at this place. Each unit had a leader who was the headman, a position passed from father to son. "Besides maintaining peace and order, the headman officiated at weddings and other ceremonies.[13]

In her study of Banaras, Nita Kumar describes a neighbourhood as a complete unit with an official name, its own register at the local police station, and a sardar or a mukhia. Each mohalla had certain features by which it was identified i.e.. "either a temple, mosque or mazar (Muslim shrine), an akhara (gymnasium), a pond or well where several mela (fair) Is held and an old haveli.[14]

During the initial years, the migrants were in constant touch with their village. During this period they remitted money to the family in the villages, as a result of which they were in constant need of money. "It was through the social ties of the neighbourhood that workers helped to tide their friends, and relatives over spells of unemployment by paying their rent or loaning them cash.[15]

Formation Of Neighbourhood Social Ties :

Leisure and political activities contributed to the development of the street and neighbourhood as a social arena resulting in formation of new bonds. Unlike the working pattern in the village, for a factory worker in the cities time was sharply demarcated into two periods, work time and free time. Added to this he also had more opportunities to spend the free time. The street corner, the liquor shops and the akharas (gymnasium) , communal activities like tolibands of Moharram or melas Ganapati or Gukulastami contributed to the formation of social ties among the workers.

In the urban neighbourhood the workers generally congregated at the local tea stall after work, which soon became the focal point of neighbourhood gossip.

Carrying on with the old village traditions though, the stall owner was often a Brahmin so that the food prepared by him was acceptable to all castes.   The tea stalls in the main bazaars, away from residential areas for those who did not want their caste fellows with whom they were associating, were more popular. The market became the centre of communication in the city which, besides purely commercial function, performed latent functions. Lynch notes that, "It is specially so far the Jatavs who meet friends there in tea, sweets or wine shops and after passing few minutes gossiping on the street.[16] The majority of the relationships took place in the secrecy of hotels

The anonymity provided by the city life also contributed to many evils. The predominantly male population in the city had an adverse effect on the moral principles of the workers without the restraining influences of the family and with no fixed home, young men in the city sought diversion in drinks, drugs and the bazaar. The culture of the bazaar soon was associated with sexual promiscuity. Moolganj, the main centre for prostitution was also located in the Central Bazaar.[17] At the junctions of several major roads, at the heart of' the bazaar the mandi zone was a central place for workers and labourers to congregated every day. The menacing nature of the area was believed to be aggravated since drinking and gambling opportunity and prostitute quarters were close at hand.[18]

Many of the workers absented from work and were found dead drunk on weekends, and on noondays the manufacturers often hunted them out from their dens. The Chamars were also notorious for their excessive use of narcotic drugs and immoral activities. In his evidence before the Indian Industrial Commission, 1916, L.P. Watson of Cooper Allen (first private leather concern in Kanpur) attested that this habit of drinking among workers resulted in frequent absenteeism and stated that the workers had to be brought back to work on the day after he got pay.[19]It was a major reason for the low economic status of Chamars, having spent their money on drinks and gambling ,they were forced to take credit to tide over the economic difficulties. Here the linkages formed in the urban neighbourhoods played an important role.

Akharas (local gymnasiums generally used for exercise and wrestling) were also a popular place for recreational activities. Nita Kumar in her study of artisans of Banaras gives a vivid description of the akharas .Every neighbourhood generally had an akhara, the arena or pit for wrestling, or the space marked for exercising and weight lifting. In Kanpur too there were several municipal akharas in the labour welfare centres of the city besides the private ones.Each akhara had three essential aspects,- the arena, the well and the place to rest. The inevitable presence of shrine, temple and trees shows that the akharas were not merely gymnasiums. They were places of ritual as well as social intercourse, of menial discipline as well as physical training. But akharas were not associated with physical culture or self-defense alone. These social centres became the focal point of political and communal activities. The men trained here had considerable potential for political mobilization and frequently provided a basis for neighbourhood action. The gymnasiums were supposed to be the domain of the unemployed hooligan.[20]Membership was open to all, but in terms of actual membership, akharas were "typically Hindu or Muslim depending on the population of the locality.

Social association and assertion

Over the period of time the neighbourhood became important arena for the social organization and political organization of the factory workers. During the early years the migrations were influenced by caste and village connections as a result the migrants entered into a number of new associations, to find work, credit and housing. The associations formed in the neighbourhood helped in the organization of religious festivals and the activities of the akharas.

The leather workers who had to face caste discrimination in the villages had no respite in the cities. The segregation of the villages was replicated in the urban neighborhoods. In their case the social associations formed outside the workplace provided them a new confidence. The new locales and slightly better economic status and opportunities of growth provided by the cities, encouraged them to take a new path and to some extent assert their identity. Though a Chamar was a

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strict Hindu and extremely religious he was never included in the religion practiced by the upper caste Hindus. As a result he, followed his own practices which were based on the worship of nature gods and primitive notions of animism. Briggs describes the religious practices of the Chamars as, "The whole range of primitive praying, from the worship of the fetish and totem to the adoration of the scarcely known higher Gods, is present in the religious life of the Chamar.[21]Besides these there was the anti-social, anti- religious use of charms and black magic which was commonly practised by these people. This was contrary to the Vedic religion practised by the Hindus. Being denied admission to the Hindu shrines, and avoided by the Brahmins, the Chamars and the other untouchables built their own temples in many places. They employed their own people –the Chamarwa Brahmins as priests and astrologers; these Brahmins served certain sub-castes of' Chamars performing their wedding ceremonies; because of this practice these Brahmins were looked upon by other Brahmins as polluted. Factory work introduced the chamar to a new way of city 'life where the rigid caste rules of purity and pollution were being replaced by a new set of relations based on mutual cooperation. The city not only provided economic security to them it also provided a new identity to them. It was soon realised by the chamars that the factory work could raise their economic status but it could not ensure a corresponding rise in their social status. To climb up the social ladder the lower-castes all over the country were trying to imbibe the customs and traditions of' the upper castes. A process termed as sanskitisation. To gain acceptance the chamars, gave up practices considered offensive by the upper castes, like beef eating. The practices like the dowry system, the increasing role of Brahmins priests in all ceremonies, which the upper-castes were giving up were readily imbibed by the chamars. They also adopted titles of upper castes a number of them adopted the Arya Samaj as a way to gain acceptance by caste hindus. The efforts did not have the expected results. Realising that it was not possible to achieve social acceptance within the Hindu fold the Chamars sort out alternate methods to carve out a new identity.

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