

## Caste politics of the washermen in Varanasi

Keywords: Politics of caste, Invention of history, Ganga Action Plan, Urban planning

### 1 Introduction

How do marginalised groups cope with their low status in society and exclusion from political decision-making and what strategies do they make use of in order to change this? This paper deals with the washermen (*dhobi*) community in Varanasi and its attempts to participate in an internationally funded development project planned in the framework of the Ganga Action Plan (GAP). In this context, the construction of inner-city washing places (*dhobi ghats*) has been agreed upon to provide washermen an alternative from washing at the Ganga River. However, this process has been anything than straightforward and the paper attempts to show how the struggle of the washermen to be heard as citizens of the Indian state anchors around a process of inventing history and the enshrinement of the saintly figure of St. Gadge. This is done in order to raise political awareness and mobilise the community for collective action directed at gaining direct influence on the city planning project. The case study identifies the community's dependence on the city administration (*Nagar Nigam*) as well as internal leadership conflicts as major obstacles for achieving this goal. More generally, an attempt is made to place the problems faced by the washermen community in Varanasi in the larger context of Akhil Gupta's (2012) work on national poverty alleviation policies of the Indian state.

#### 1.1 The *dhobi* community in Varanasi

About 15,000-20,000 washermen live in the region of the Varanasi municipality and belong to the community of the *Kannujiya*, a sub-caste of the *dhobi*<sup>15</sup> (Schütte 2003, 98). In the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh the community is officially categorised as 'scheduled caste'. This term integrates many of the former *dalit*-communities or groups of 'untouchable'-castes. According to an orthodox Hindu perspective these groups are 'polluted' because of their daily contact with 'impure' materials (Mendelsohn and Vicziany 2000). In the case of the *dhobi* community that contact exists through their traditional occupation of washing and ironing of cloths. Even though the *dhobi* are today less exposed to forms of open discrimination because of their low caste status, they are still vulnerable due to their limited income opportunities. This goes along with a low level of job diversification as well as their high dependency on the contested resources water and public space. As a strategy to deal with this social and economic vulnerability the washermen community has established complex forms of social and spatial networking structures that date back to precolonial times (Schütte 2003).

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<sup>15</sup> In the following we use the term *dhobi* or washermen when referring to the local sub-caste '*Kannaujiya*'.

## 1.2 The Ganga Action Plan

The *dhobi* community experienced a drastic change in their everyday labour activities through implementation of the Ganga Action Plan, a programme launched by the Central Indian Government in 1985 in order to control and reduce the pollution load of the Ganga. Different sources for the pollution were identified; inter alia the washing of the clothes by the *dhobi* as ‘non-point pollution’. Consequently, the measures of the plan included the eviction of the *dhobi* from the Ganga *ghats*, the steps leading down to the River Ganga many of which are traditionally used for the washing activity of the *dhobi* (Das and Tamminga 2012). This forceful eviction endangered the livelihoods of the *dhobi* and led to collective forms of resistance and the foundation of political self-organisation by the *dhobi*. For the first time, they expressed their needs and demands beyond their own caste boundaries and directed their demands to a broader audience. The struggle for their right to wash at the Ganga led to an agreement with the city administration. It allowed the *dhobi* to continue washing at the Ganga as long as the Nagar Nigam does not provide an adequate alternative. In early response to the *dhobi*’s claim, the Nagar Nigam constructed two inner-city *ghats* until the year 1990 that however were not adequately constructed and insufficient for the accommodation of the numerous washermen in the city. As their demands were not fully fulfilled, the *dhobi* continued their struggle for the construction of inner-city *ghats* and meanwhile established their continued right to maintain washing activities at the Ganga.

While the implementation process of the first phase of the GAP can be described as a ‘*poor top-to-down communication*’ that could neither integrate the needs and suggestions of the affected population groups (Ahmed 1995, 154) nor improve the water quality of the Ganga, the activities of the National Ganga River Basin Authority (NGRBA) try to overcome these shortcomings (Das and Tamminga 2012, 1662). The ‘Japan International Cooperation Agency’ (JICA) assisted the follow-up GAP Phase II Project at Varanasi under NGRBA that specifically aims to ‘*improve water quality and river ecology of the Ganga / Varuna / Assi Rivers*’ and ‘*tackle the non-point sources of pollution to improve the hygienic condition of city and surrounding areas and aesthetics of Ghats*’ (Varanasi Nagar Nigam 2015). While the loan agreements on these projects were signed on March 31<sup>st</sup> in 2005, the implementation process only started in 2011 specifying a completion by the year 2015 when the funds released by JICA ought to be put to their agreed use (N.A. 2011). The implementation is to be realised by the state government and water board of Uttar Pradesh (UP Jal Nigam) and the Varanasi Nagar Nigam. Apart from institutional development components and ‘sewerage components’ the project also includes ‘non sewerage components’ that are directed and planned by the Nagar Nigam. That specific part of the plan is directly related to the *dhobi* community as these ‘non sewerage components’ include the construction and renovation of nine inner-city *dhobi ghats* planned to accommodate all washing activities in future (Varanasi Nagar Nigam 2015).

## 2 Research framework

### 2.1 The *dhobi*'s role in the planning process

The long history of protest against the displacement from the Ganga *ghats* and the successful struggle for the construction of the official inner-city *ghats* show their importance for the *dhobi* community. The aim of fieldwork was to find out which challenges and major problems the *dhobi* themselves identified in the process of the construction and implementation process of these *ghats*. While checking the status of the implementation process of the planned inner-city *ghats*, it became apparent that most parts of the construction work are under delay. As the money has been already allocated by JICA the question emerged why the construction does not progress. Accordingly, it was sought to gain a deeper understanding of the power relations between the *dhobi* as a marginalised group and the public institution of the Nagar Nigam. Therefore, the focus was directed on the *dhobi*'s perception and evaluation of their own influence on the planning and construction process of the inner-city *ghats*. Moreover, it was aimed to learn more about the community's perspective on the relationship to the city administration as the second phase of the GAP tried to alter the top-down approach of the first phase of the GAP. A second issue of interest were the strategies used by the *dhobi* to gain influence on the planning process.

Schütte (2003) has emphasised the role of the complex network systems maintained by the *dhobi* community which highly contributed to a process that ultimately led to a successful protest and an increased politicisation of the washermen as a group. Looking at the new JICA-financed city planning project of the inner-city *ghats*, it was aimed to assess how these networks of the *dhobi* are used in order to influence the direction of the project and how challenges of exclusion from participation in the planning process were dealt with. In this regard, strategies evolved by the *dhobi* in the course of the prolonged delay of the construction process were analysed.

### 2.2 The politics of caste

In India, strategies of *dalits* that aim to participate in politics are often related to the caste system. Although the caste system is officially abolished it still has enduring discriminative effects especially on lower castes. Nevertheless, there exist remarkable efforts of these groups to challenge the restrictions and disadvantages which are inflicted on them by the caste hierarchy. This process can be dated back to the 20<sup>th</sup> century and has been termed as 'politics of caste' (Rudolph and Rudolph 1969). In the wake of a growing *dalit* consciousness many groups started developing strategies in order to participate in politics and thus revise their position in society (Skoda 2014). One of these strategies which can enhance a politicisation and mobilisation of the caste has been referred to as 'invention of history' (Narayan 2004) and can be seen as a '*vehicle of social, religious and political protest against the inequitable distribution of power and wealth in this social order*' (Schaller 1996, 116).

As Narayan has elaborated, *dalit* groups in India were - and still are - often historically marginalised due to lack of documentation. '*This has inspired them to invent their own*

*traditional myths, associations and memories in accordance with their new political aspiration'* (Narayan 2004, 196-97). Often these invented narratives are personalised and connected with saints, socio-religious reformers or nationalist freedom fighters whose origins lie in the own caste (Narayan 2004, 197). This strategy can be observed e.g. in the case of the *chamar* (leather workers) and their worship of the Guru Ravidas (Cohn 1958, Schaller 1996, Nunes Muniz and Polster in this volume) or in that of the *pasi* (pig tenders) and their narration of the anti-colonial freedom fighter Uda Devi (Narayan 2004).

Aiming to create an image of themselves as respectable citizens these narratives are used to reinterpret the caste's role in society and to point out its contributions to the making of the Indian nation. Most of the time these narratives are accompanied by traditions and customs which target to support and emphasise political aspirations (Narayan 2004, 196-200). As Schütte (2003) has pointed out, the invention of history and the enshrinement of the saintly figure St. Gadge are of high importance in the case of the *dhobi* community in Varanasi concerning their expression of political claims and the strengthening of social cohesion and self-respect among community members. Therefore, it is an important question in how far the invention of history can be seen as a strategy to actively influence city planning, safeguarding the community's livelihood and increase their self-determination.

This invention of history among the *dhobi* in Varanasi has been channelled through the intricate mechanisms that keep the traditional network structures of the *dhobi* working to ensure social self-organisation, security, dignity and collective actions (Schütte 2003). The practice of multi-layered caste-*panchayats*<sup>16</sup> contributed significantly to the politicisation of washermen in the last 30 years that started with the exclusion from the Ganga *ghats* in the context of the GAP.

### 2.3 Methods

The arguments laid out in this paper are based on two weeks empirical fieldwork carried out from the 12<sup>th</sup> to 24<sup>th</sup> of February 2015. In a first step all proposed sites of the planned inner-city *ghats* were visited in order to evaluate the implementation status and to gain a better understanding of the locations and surroundings. As the *dhobi*'s traditional washing places are located at the Ganga those places at the urban riverside were also visited to establish initial contacts. In addition, many residential quarters of washermen (*dhobiana*) in different parts of the city were visited. There, interviews were carried out with women, youth and children who are underrepresented at the *ghats*.

Further, detailed open interviews were conducted with three leading personalities of the washermen community. The proceedings of a *panchayat* meeting were documented where members of different *dhobianas* met to discuss important issues around the constructions of *dhobi ghats*. Additionally, the preparation meetings and the festivities of annual the St. Gadge festival were observed.

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<sup>16</sup> Caste council

### 3 Obstacles and strategies in the implementation process

In the following the invention of history shall be discussed as a major strategy of the *dhobi* to influence the planning process. Subsequently, the role of Nagar Nigam and leadership conflicts in the community are evaluated and presented as major obstacles for the timely construction of washing places. Further, it shall be assessed how the traditional networks are used in order to cope with the challenges of internal conflicts and exclusion from participation in the planning process.

#### 3.1 The invention of history

The *dhobi* community in Varanasi actively attempts to confront the city administration and to strengthen the unity of the group. In this context a historical figure of the *dhobi* by the name of St. Gadge plays a central role and is employed for the political mobilisation of the community and the communication of strategies.

Originating from a local sub-caste of the washermen St. Gadge started initiating several social projects in the Indian state of Maharashtra at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These aimed to fight the social exclusion of those who were formerly called the ‘untouchables’. He promoted their social uplift and especially advocated for an improved access to sanitation and education for these groups and demanded the abolition of the stigma of ‘untouchability’. Since then he is known and worshipped by various *dalit* groups in India.

In Varanasi, the saint and his history were initially discovered and introduced to the resident *dhobi*-community by the leader of a political network of the washermen established in 1998 called *Dhobi Kalyan Mahasabha*. Washermen in Varanasi learned about the existence of St. Gadge around the turn of the millennium. This newly-discovered history is not only communicated in form of oral narratives, but also in form of large celebrations, self-published booklets, posters and leaflets that can be found in many *dhobi*-households. This practice of creating

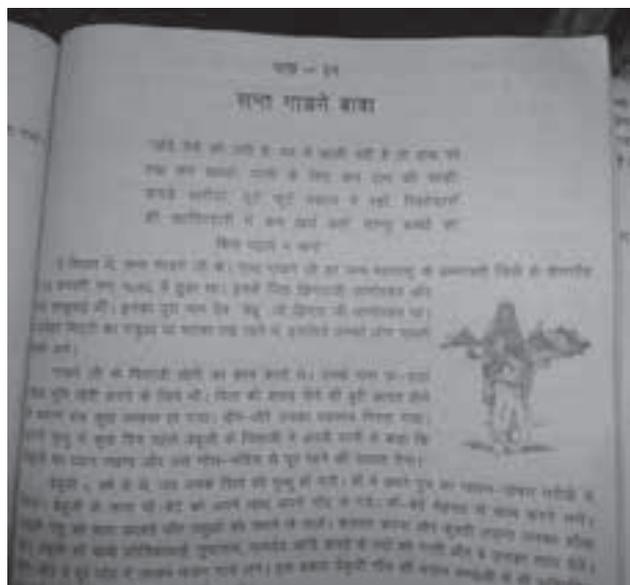


Fig. 7.1: A text in a schoolbook that narrates the history of St. Gadge, (Bunn 2015)

awareness among disadvantaged groups through booklets and the textual celebration of hero-figures is congruent

with wider strategies that emerged in Indian *dalit*-politics since the 1980s (Narayan 2001). Today, the history of the *dhobi*-saint is widely known and very popular among the community and his presence has become part of everyday-life. Even the children already know the stories of the deeds carried out by St. Gadge as they are re-narrated in

schoolbooks too (Fig. 7.1). The history of St. Gadge introduces hitherto neglected forms of social and political behaviour and can be used effectively to communicate strategies to members of the washermen community. This includes a strong focus on formal education and the attendant hope for a gradual liberation from washing as the sole economic basis which is a major goal for many *dhobi* families in their quest for social upward mobility.

The figure of St. Gadge is highly politicised. The notion of a saint belonging to the group of washermen provides pride and a new sense of self-esteem to community members. Many *dhobi* assert that their newly discovered spiritual leader had influenced other important Indian personalities such as Dr. Ambedkar or Mahatma Gandhi. In doing so, they refer to their caste's contribution to Indian independence and nation-making.

The popularity of St. Gadge and its present ubiquity in everyday-life as well as the new self-respect that it provides become an important basis on which further political action can be facilitated, as it has further established a strong sense of unity among washermen. St. Gadge's political significance is also crucial in regard to the negotiations with the city administration about the construction of inner-city *ghats*. This especially became apparent in the annual birthday festival held in the honour of the *dhobi* saint on every February 23<sup>rd</sup>. A large number of washermen were involved in the preparation of the festival that is accurately planned in special committees.

In the celebration of 2015 several hundred washermen participated in the festivities. The event started with a public demonstration through the city of Varanasi and was accompanied by music, performances and the public display of larger-than-life depictions of St. Gadge. The *dhobi* youth headed the procession and swept the streets, referring to Prime Minister Narendra Modi who has launched the 'Clean India' media campaign in October 2014 and swept pavements himself in Delhi in a media-effective manner. After the march a big celebration was held close to the Ganga in the area of Chetsingh Ghat and a large number of speeches were delivered. Among the speakers were not only community members, but also a lawyer and religious supporters who expressed their discontent with the city administration and demanded the quick completion of the inner-city *ghats*. *Dhobi* used the festival to confront the city administration through publicly articulating their demands with high visibility in the city and the public demonstration of their unity.

The reference to Modi's 'Clean India' campaign has been employed with the goal to change their image as major polluters of the Ganga and emphasise instead their interest in a clean river. This is an attempt to reverse their image from 'polluters' to 'saviours' of the Ganga. Instead of accepting the role that was imposed on them by the city administration in the implementation of the GAP they call attention to the fact that they do important work for the city society by cleaning the laundry of public institutions. *Dhobi* also formed an alliance with the popular religious leader Swami Avimukteshwaranand Saraswati who has dedicated his life work towards the preservation of the Ganga. He is aware of the fact that the *dhobi*'s contribution to the pollution of the Ganga is of minimal extent. As the *dhobi* seek to present themselves as 'saviours' for the Ganga, they share a common aim with Swami Avimukteshwaranand Saraswati. He gives religious credibility to their protest and their demands for a proper construction of the inner-city *ghats*. *Dhobi*

thus self-confidently demand support for their work in the urban society of Varanasi from the city administration.



Fig. 7.2: Location and implementation progress of the inner-city ghats in Varanasi (Source: own design, based on World Street Map, Environmental Systems Research Institute, 2015)

The *dhobi* community possesses vital network structures on which the washermen can rely in safeguarding their livelihood. The successful invention of history commemorated in the

annual the festival of St. Gadge is an effective instrument to strengthen the community's unity and to raise increased social and political consciousness among the washermen. A collective protest against the city administration stabilises, intensifies and keeps vivid the social and political network structures. The unreliability of the city administration, the enduring police controls and the lessons learned from the initial phase of the GAP with its successful protest marches have confirmed the opinion that a rapid mobilisation for protest and resistance is necessary and essential for safeguarding the basis of the community's livelihoods. Indeed, the interviews conducted revealed a high sense of political consciousness and decisiveness to mobilise and protest against the city administration in case it will again try to evict the washermen from the Ganga without providing alternative washing places.

### **3.2 Status of the implementation process**

As of today, none of the nine planned inner-city *ghats* has been completed yet. The planned areas are evenly distributed across the city and have a varied functional status (Fig. 7.2). The sites of Nadesar and Konia that exist since 1990 provide basic facilities for washing activities but a proper refurbishment is required. Modernisation of Bhavana Pokhari has commenced and in Pandeypur construction of a new *ghat* seems to have started. The proposed sites of Shivpur Talaab, Assi Nala and Sagrah Talaab show no sign of any construction work to be commenced in the near future. In the cases of Benia Bhag and Macchodri there was successful protest of local residents against construction and the sites were abandoned, albeit without providing alternative spaces. Although the money has been provided by JICA the project is far from being accomplished. As explained in the following, the delay can be understood as an indicator for the Nagar Nigam's failure in carrying out its public function. Additionally, leadership conflicts are hindering the *dhobi* to collectively claim their demands.

### **3.3 The role of Nagar Nigam in the construction of *dhobi-ghats***

In the frame of the JICA assisted GAP, the Nagar Nigam has taken on the commitment for realising the 'non sewerage components' or 'pro-poor component' and received funds from JICA. As the components shall contribute to a 'social development' and an improving water quality of the Ganga River the city administration is obligated to construct the nine *dhobi ghats* in a manner that ensures the participation of the affected group (Varanasi Nagar Nigam 2013).

Washermen put responsibility for the delay in constructing or refurbishing the planned *dhobi-ghats* to the city administration. The main obstacles in this process are in particular the issues of the unreliability of agreements, the uneven power-relations shaping the planning process, the scapegoating of the *dhobi* community as Ganga polluters, the seemingly corrupt and non-transparent behaviour of city officials and the abuse of internal conflicts that have occurred in the washermen community over leadership questions (see below).

In the wake of their protest against the GAP in the 1980s the *dhobi* successfully managed to re-establish their right to wash at the Ganga River until the new *ghats* are completely constructed. Nonetheless, official and written agreements were never issued by the city administration. As such, *dhobi* find themselves in a constant 'state of insecurity' as their right to wash at the Ganga *ghats* is not officially secured. Some *dhobi* reported that they were regularly exposed to police controls and sometimes even violence. These incidents reflect the unreliability of the oral agreement with the city administration that is not perceived as legally binding by officials.

The permanent state of insecurity to which the *dhobi* are exposed reveals the uneven power relations between the *dhobi* and the Nagar Nigam. Washermen feel dependent on the city administration's benevolence to construct the inner-city *ghats*. As there was no visible and coherent strategy on the side of Nagar Nigam in spite of the funds for construction having already been allocated many fear a continued procrastination or even complete interruption of the construction process. This would increase the vulnerability of the washermen community as their livelihoods highly depend on the public resources to be allocated by Nagar Nigam. N. Kannaujiya neatly summarised the problem: '*Proper and adequate washing facilities are related to my food. If I can't work at the Ganga or another ghat, what can I do? It's my employment*' (N. Kannaujiya, February 23, 2015). Some *dhobi* feel further threatened through the recent introduction of taxes by the city administration to be paid for using the Ganga-*ghats*: '*Why should we wash here and pay taxes instead of washing at the Ganga for free?*' (S. Kannaujiya, Raja Ghat, February 15, 2015).

Many *dhobi* also accuse the Nagar Nigam for laying the blame on their community for the arbitrary outcome of the city planning project. In the frame of GAP, the washermen understood the city administration's attempt to exclude them from the Ganga as a strategy to detract from the real polluters (e.g. factories) and the poor condition of the city's sewage system. As the weakest actor at the *ghats* they feel misused by the city administration in their need to show successful action in relation to the GAP. Meanwhile, more powerful actors such as factory owners continue their activities and pressing issues such as the modernisation of the city's sewage system are put on hold.

*Dhobi* further criticise the arbitrary policy of Nagar Nigam that claims to fight against the pollution load while in reality the pollution of the Ganga has not diminished since the launch of the GAP. Still, *dhobi* are ready to leave the Ganga once feasible alternatives have been put in place. However, the view prevails that the city administration does not fulfil its function to ensure provision of the infrastructure needed for the *dhobi* to carry out their profession. In doing so, washermen feel deprived of their right to benefit from a development project: '*If you don't like the dhobi, give us another job! [...] If you don't provide us jobs, then please finish the inner-city ghats!*' (S. Kannaujiya, Raja Ghat, February 15, 2015). In this vain, also the missing refurbishment of the three already existing inner-city *ghats* is cause for concern.

Particularly in Konia the state of construction does not sufficiently respond to the essential needs of the *dhobi*. A large part of the structure built in the early 1990s is in bad

shape and is not in use anymore for reasons of safety. In addition, the demand for the construction of sanitation facilities is not fulfilled yet. The concern about the quality of construction also leads to doubts as to the quality of the new washing places. Corruption and missing transparency are identified as important factors for the delay of the construction process. Accusations of corruption on part of the city administration and the contractors prevail but cannot be proved.

The issue of missing transparency in the implementation process is mostly related to dubious land deals. Urban land on which the inner-city *ghats* were supposed to be built originally belonged to the Nagar Nigam. However, some *dhobi* report that before the construction process started parts of these lands were sold to real estate companies which made the progress of construction impossible as land use conflicts have to be resolved before.

These problems and challenges are based on the perceptions of the *dhobi*. They express the feeling that Nagar Nigam fails to fulfil its function and does not keep to its promises towards the construction project. *Dhobi* feel that the city administration does not contribute to the 'social development' of their community through the provision of secure washing places. The assessment of the power relations indicates a missing integration and participation of the *dhobi* in the planning process.

### 3.4 Leadership conflicts

In the wake of increasing politicisation of the washermen community facilitated through the employment of the historical figure of St. Gadge a schism in the community has occurred that is characterised by a conflict about who shall be the most suitable leader. While the initial protest against eviction from the Ganga was carried out unified under the late Laxman Shastri Kannaujiya, the discovery of St. Gadge was facilitated through a party politician belonging to the group of Kannaujiya. This person established a political washermen network in the late 1990s, the '*U.P. Dhobi Kalyan Mahasabha*'. Under his supervision washermen carried out political rallies, posed their demands to wider society and the government and through this found a wide followership among Varanasi *dhobi*.

However, the old leader who showed his competence in the past maintained his followership too, and from the time onwards washermen never again acted with a unified voice. The schism went along the borders of the traditional network structures as defined through the spatial practice of caste *panchayats* (Schütte 2003). Even when the party politician lost most of his followers during the first decade of the new millennium because he could not deliver what was promised there still are a significant number of washermen that keep their solidarity, esp. in the North of Varanasi where the *Kalayan Mahasabha* maintains their office at Nadesar Ghat.

After the passing away of Laxman Shastri his nephew took over and successfully unified a majority of washermen around the issue of the construction of inner city *ghats*. He was also successful in facilitating the communication with the city administration. After this initial success however the current problems in construction have been partly attributed to the new leader. More generally, however, the schism in the washermen community

gives the city administration sufficient reason not to engage in serious negotiations with washermen. The city maintains that *dhobi* shall first solve their leadership issue and sort out their demands.

While followership has shifted, and the annual celebration of St. Gadge nowadays takes place during two different festivities in the North and South of Varanasi respectively, the new leader has disappointed many members in the community with the signature of an agreement with Nagar Nigam in 2014. That signature allows the city administration to collect a monthly tax to be levied for the use of *dhobi-ghats*. As per contract the collected tax funds shall be kept on a community account and used for public expenses around maintenance of the facilities. However, the old *panchayat* structure still channels all communication among washermen but the exact nature of the tax was not conveyed and made public knowledge. This led to a growing frustration about the new leader among many members of the *dhobi* community who do not feel represented and start to question their leaders' legitimation: '*I am not fighting for our leaders. I fight for the dhobi!*' (M. Kannaujiya, Sonapura, February 24, 2015). Moreover, the will is expressed to reunite the community along different lines and boycott all leaders in order to strengthen position of the community in the process of implementation: '*We have to unite against the leaders to reunite!*' (M. Kannaujiya, Sonapura, February 24, 2015).

The leadership question was also subject in various *panchayat*-meetings. The talk about a tax discredited the new leader, and the political figure heading the *Kalyan Mahasabha* today only speaks for a minority of washermen. So far there is no solution to this problem, but washermen have decided to call a *panchayat* meeting of all washermen, rural and urban, to discuss this question and come up with an elected leader that will again unify the entire community - be it one of the two contesting persons or a fresh leader who will continue the task of negotiation with the city administration about the construction of new *ghats*.

Although the schism due to leadership conflicts represents a major obstacle in the implementation process the attempts to solve the conflict also shows the capability to cope with it. In this context the traditional network systems play a significant role and may be critical in working towards a reunification. They are used as communication platforms that can be used to discredit leaders abusing their power or neglecting collective decision-making processes.

#### **4 The limits of caste politics**

The implementation of the GAP highly influenced the *dhobi* community in Varanasi during the last 30 years. In order to cope with its impacts the community calls on its vital network structures: traditional and political. As such, the community seems to be ready for a renewed resistance shall the need arise. It is evident that many community members have clear political views about how to deal with the city administration and believe that collective political action is necessary. The invention of history and the figure of St. Gadge can be seen as a vehicle to enhance and strengthen this process and to increase the influence of the community in the planning and construction process of new washing

places and its negotiation power with Nagar Nigam. Further, the traditional network structures help to resolve conflicts that rise in the community and strengthen the position of the *dhobi* in the planning process.

The experience of the washermen of Varanasi resembles the argument put forward by Akhil Gupta (2012) in the context of national poverty alleviation policies. Gupta identifies three major elements embedded in the administrative levels of the nation state (national, provincial and district) that are responsible for the persistence of poverty in India. The first reason is, what Gupta calls, '*the scandal of the state*' (Gupta 2012, 4). By neglecting the fact that poverty and its '*life-denying consequences*' exist in a high manner but are not regarded as a status that requires massive state intervention, the state normalises poverty. Secondly, Gupta objects to the usual explanations for the continuity of poverty such as the exclusion of poor from development projects, democratic policies and cultural citizenship. He argues that instead '*the paradox of the violence of poverty of India*' consists of the persistence of poverty despite the inclusion and participation of the poor in national projects (e.g. elections) (Gupta 2012, 6). Thirdly, Gupta blames bureaucratic action and endemic corruption for the systematic and repeated production of arbitrary outcomes in development or welfare projects. Consequently, the state and his administrative levels fail in their function and are seen as a critical factor for the persistence of poverty that is posed by Gupta as a form of 'structural violence'. As Gupta put it: '*The smooth operation of bureaucracies thereby depends not only on Weberian bureaucrats performing their roles, but also on those people who are the objects of their intervention performing their structurally given roles*' (ibid, 190); i.e. the poor as a population category perform their structural roles of 'being poor' in the day-to-day running of state bureaucracies.

In the context of the project of constructing inner-city *ghats* through development funds in Varanasi, Gupta's work is useful to explain the arbitrary outcomes of the planning process. Instead of accusing single officials at the Nagar Nigam, it is rather the capriciousness of development projects and the way they are carried out that led to the present impasse. The representation of the *dhobi* as main polluters of the Ganga through the GAP and the subsequent endangerment of their wellbeing without providing an alternative were instrumental. Although the *dhobi* successfully protested for the integration of their needs and the second phase of the GAP aimed to overcome the former programmatic shortcomings, the present situation shows quite clearly that the city administration and its bureaucracy fails to fulfil its function to facilitate the construction of new *ghats*. Following the viewpoints of the washermen the Nagar Nigam as a state institution might reasonably be perceived as arbitrary, indifferent and corrupt and can be made responsible for the delay. The community, although being somehow part of the project, faces a structural obstacle that roots in the normalisation and neglect of poverty through the Indian state. In order to tackle this problem the washermen can only rely on their capacity to quickly mobilise all members for protest as they have done repeatedly in the past. They are well aware of the necessity to be 'all-time prepared' and ready to react upon the capricious shifts in the city administrations attitude towards their work at the Ganga.

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