Fig. I: Collectibles gathered during the daily routine are carried away by hand-driven carts (Möckel 2015)

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Livelihood security strategies of the *dom* sweeper in Varanasi

1 Introduction

Whenever state institutions fail to provide security for people's livelihoods they are forced to come up with alternative strategies themselves. In India, welfare state institutions face the challenges of an omnipresent hierarchical social order that is based on the marginalisation of great parts of society. Although there have been political attempts to undermine the role of caste, the vast majority of *dalits* ('broken' people) continues to be marginalised socially, politically and economically. Affirmative action programmes (e.g. reservations) started in the 1950's but often failed to adequately identify those in need of state support. These programmes generally only benefited a small portion among the hundreds of millions of *dalits* (de Zwart 2000, 14; Sheth 2006, 1094).

It is non-state institutions that have emerged in response to the lacking welfare-promotion by the state, especially since the 1990s with the onset of economic liberalisation policies in India (United Nations Research Institute for Social Development 2010). In addition to civil society organisations (CSOs) especially faith based organisations (FBOs) and local faith communities have increasingly become important players in the context of development politics. A survey by the UN Research Institute for Social Development from 2010 suggests that FBOs in South Asia '*play an important role in people's daily strategies of survival by being in and of themselves repertoires of social networks and connections*' (United Nations Research Institutefor Social Development 2010, 10). In this article it is aimed to assess the livelihood security strategies of a sweeper community in Varanasi, a social group that is assigned with the stigma of untouchability. A number of strategies have been identified that are leveraged by the group in question, but it appears that conversion to Christianity is the most striking one.

It will be shown that the results of this study match the assumptions made in literature about the adopted role of local faith communities as non-state welfare promoters. The article seeks to explain how a certain Christian community actually succeeded to provide the assets for improved livelihoods of its converted members.

In the first section an overview of the official attempts aiming at equalising 'backward castes' is given, followed by an explanation of why these policies of affirmative action have largely failed. After introducing the study group as a caste in the second section, the third part analyses the different livelihood strategies among sweepers' households.

The examined possibilities for safeguarding livelihood assets are not equally promising. It will be shown that education and (social) networks have a rather limited scope in terms of securing households' livelihoods. A more important provision of security is generated through wage labour; however it is lacking a function for social advancement. Hence, the article seeks to illuminate factors and processes that restrict these security sources and result in the success of religious conversion in the study area.

2 Policies on 'backward castes'

In order to support deprived groups the Indian Constitution provides reservations of 27% of government jobs and educational institution placements to so-called scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and other backwards classes (de Zwart 2000, 235 , Gupta 2005, 417). Half of India's population belongs to these 'socially and educationally backward classes'. After India's independence these affirmative action policies were implemented to address the needs of groups defined in such manner. However, obtaining information necessary at the individual level to implement these policies correctly was too expensive for the government. As a result it addressed the affirmative action to lower castes as a general category because "*in India economic backwardness is often a result and not the cause of social evil. [And] to combat this evil, therefore affirmative action had to benefit castes*" (de Zwart 2000, 241). The policies of affirmative action address castes as a homogeneous group because information on castes was already available through the many censuses conducted by the British colonial power. Although affirmative action policies are addressed to 'socially and educationally backward classes', these are not officially defined by the government. Only 20% of India's population belongs to the defined category of 'scheduled castes and scheduled tribes'. They are entitled to 15% of the jobs in public institutions and places of higher education.

Therefore 30% of India's population (the approximately 386.6 million people who belong to the 'socially and educationally backward classes' but cannot be further defined) are entitled to affirmative action benefits corresponding to 12% of public service positions and the equivalent number of higher education places. This equates to only thousands of jobs available to employ millions of people. The benefits of affirmative action are therefore spread so thin among the 'socially and educationally backward classes' that most people never experience any effect. Furthermore, the allocated quotas were being consumed by the more powerful among the backward classes which led to subsequent demand for further quotas within existing quotas (de Zwart 2000, 235-245).

3 Sweepers in Varanasi – social status and professional practice

The city of Varanasi attracts millions of pilgrims and national and international tourists each year and is home to approximately 1.3 million people. The waste produced by those masses is ubiquitous and visible in every small lane and street as well as at the riverside of the *Ganga*. The waste management is performed by about 10,000 sweepers belonging to social groups (*dom, mehtar*) considered as polluting and 'untouchable' in the Indian caste hierarchy.

Caste is a concept that sustained communitarian identities over time and defines certain groups as ethnically, culturally and socially distinct from other groups. It also held the various communities together embedded in a wide network of hierarchies. Untouchable groups did not have an assigned role in its system of production and exchange which led to increasing economic deprivation and forced them to live in a situation of moral and social exclusion. The untouchable groups are mostly involved with work perceived as 'unclean', which prevented upward mobility. Nowadays caste has lost some of its meaning as a ritual-status group but survived as a 'community' (Sheth 2006, 1087-1091).

The sweepers in Varanasi still live in close-knit localities called *basti* (Hindi for colony) strictly separated from other castes. Even if caste-members do not work in the sweeping business they tend to remain in the same location. Varanasi as a city is still growing therefore the amount of sweeping work needed will still increase in the future. Nevertheless the demand for sweeping work is not proportional to the population growth of the sweepers so additional sweepers were hired by the city administration (*Nagar Nigam*).

In some towns the authorities have been able to insulate themselves almost entirely from state directives relating to the working conditions of sweepers by increasing the number of temporary employed sweepers as a less protected category of workers. In Varanasi the *Nagar Nigam* serves as the public employer of sweepers and defines the working conditions as laid down in a general way by the state government. The task of a sweeper comprises of sweeping of the city streets and *ghats* and collecting and disposing of garbage, as well as the cleaning of drainages. Each sweeper employed at *Nagar Nigam* is officially responsible for the cleaning of an area of exactly 111,48 square meters and attached to a sub-office which supervises several areas (Chatterjee 1980, 269-284). The size of a cleaning area is the same for men and women employed at *Nagar Nigam* and there is no difference in payment (Chatterjee 1977, 196). It is a pensionable job and permanent employment with the city administration is highly sought after.

As a matter of fact most of the sweepers at *Nagar Nigam* are permanently employed. They are paid monthly and have the rights to clothing supplies every summer and winter, 14 days of 'casual' leave, one month 'privilege' leave, one day off per week, 12 months sickness leave in a lifetime but not more than one and a half months at a time, pension when they retire and for women 42 days maternity leave for up to three children. However, these conditions are not always met on time and weekly holidays are often cancelled when important figures visit the city. A common practice is to pass on the permanent employment to a family member who is not yet permanently employed when someone in possession of a permanent status passes away or retires.

However, many teenage sweepers who enter their working life at *Nagar Nigam* are only temporary employees and hence not entitled to the conditions mentioned above (Chatterjee 1980, 274-275). Sweepers are also employed in banks, universities or other institutions where they may earn a higher salary than municipal sweepers but are not entitled to pensions. It is only in rare cases that a sweeper is promoted to the position of a supervisor in charge of larger city area. This demonstrates that there is no special policy to promote social mobility in relation to supervisor jobs (Chatterjee 1974, 1978-1979). Sweepers who are not employed by the *Nagar Nigam* work in private households where they clean the drains in the garden or inner courtyard or do certain kinds of garden work. It is common for sweepers to work in addition to their municipal job for up to ten private households. Sweepers working in private households do not receive pension or fixed holidays but are generally given leave on festival days (Chatterjee 1980, 276).

Sweepers of one caste reside all over the city in different segregated colonies but are culturally and socially a community. Sweepers from different castes in Varanasi form a professional community with same interests when referring to overall working conditions. Unions are formed that lobby to improve working conditions and ensure that the workers rights are upheld. Due to the high demand for their services in urban areas sweepers have

been able to secure certain legal rights (Chatterjee 1977, 194-200) and have succeed in obtaining a doubling in wage rates, reduction of the working day to seven hours, introduction of a regular weekly holiday, festival days, expansion of the work force and general improvement of conditions in terms of services and special facilities (Chatterjee 1974, 1979). However, it will become apparent that their current working conditions have stagnated when compared to the achievments of the 1970s. In particular, the study group of *dom*-sweeper is lacking adequate working facilities and promotions of security in high degrees.

Unlike other 'untouchable' groups such as the *chamar*-caste, the *dom*-sweepers in Varanasi have struggled to find their place in post-Independence India. They were never keen to adapt the behaviour of higher castes in a process of 'sanskritisation' or attempted to claim a higher status in the caste hierarchy. Among the *dom* divorces are permitted, as is the remarriage of widows, the eating of pork meat and drinking of alcohol. Sweepers are not likely to leave their traditional occupation in order to gain a higher social status because of the high benefits that come along with their work. Until very recently there were no endeavours to escape their untouchable status through religious conversion as was the case among many *dalit* groupings in post-independence India (Chatterjee 1974, 1978 , Schaller 1996, 95). However, the recent mass-conversions to Christianity that occurred among the *dom* only during the last three years may not be explained by solely escaping untouchability but are likely motivated by other reasons that are further examined over the following.

4 Methodology

The research conducted for this study aimed to assess livelihood strategies pursued at the household level. The analysis established different types of strategies and revealed the obstacles people face in their quest for social and professional advancement.

The research-approach made use of both qualitative and quantitative methods with a major focus on interviews with household members of the *basti*. Altogether 25 open interviews were conducted with men and women aged from 28 to 60 years. In addition a questionnaire-based household survey was conducted with all 84 households of the neighbourhood. In combination with the information of the interviews a social mapping of the study area was carried out in order to visualise the social and professional structure of the *basti* (Fig. 8.1).

5 Livelihood security strategies among the *dom* of *Durga Kund*

The research area of the *basti Durga Kund* is situated in southern Varanasi and was established as a *dom*-settlement about 80 years ago. The expression *dom* refers to their caste affiliation which in Varanasi is traditionally related to the burning of the dead at the *Ganga*. Today the *dom* who control activities at the burning *ghats* are transformed into a caste group of its own. *Dom*-sweepers have switched to sweeping after the municipal corporation *Nagar Nigam* had introduced a quota for this profession. The area of the *dom-basti* covers about 4,480 square meters and accommodates 541 inhabitants in 87 households (Fig. 8.1).
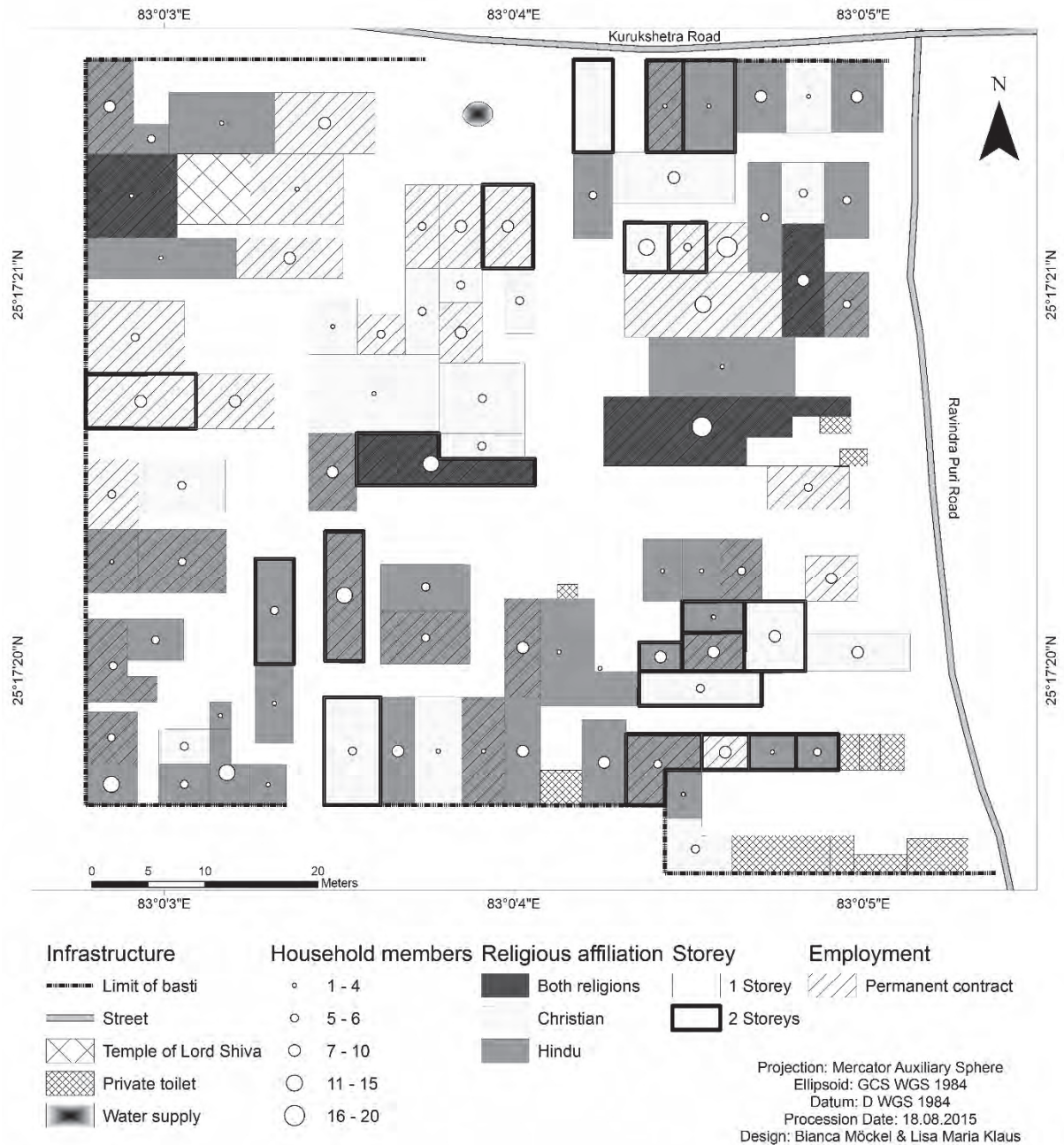
Fig. 8.1: Sweepers basti, Durga Kund

Livelihood security strategies were analysed on a household level whereby the following attributes emerged as especially important: 1. economic activities (wage labour), 2. human capabilities (mainly education and health) and 3. social networks.

Figure 8.2 illustrates the conceptual framework that was developed during the field research. The centre of the Figure comprises structures that determine the social status of the *dom*-sweeper which is primary shaped by family structure and caste affiliation. However, national, federal and municipal politics as well as the legislation contribute to their standing in society. The green arrows indicate the room for manoeuvre available to sweepers within this social setup. They correspond to the major strategies that are being leveraged in order to establish livelihood security and enable social mobility. Livelihood

security is thus mainly constructed through work activities, education, (social) networks and religious conversion. However, the strategies are limited by various factors as illustrated in the red frame and they are used in very different ways across interviewed households, either individually or in combination.
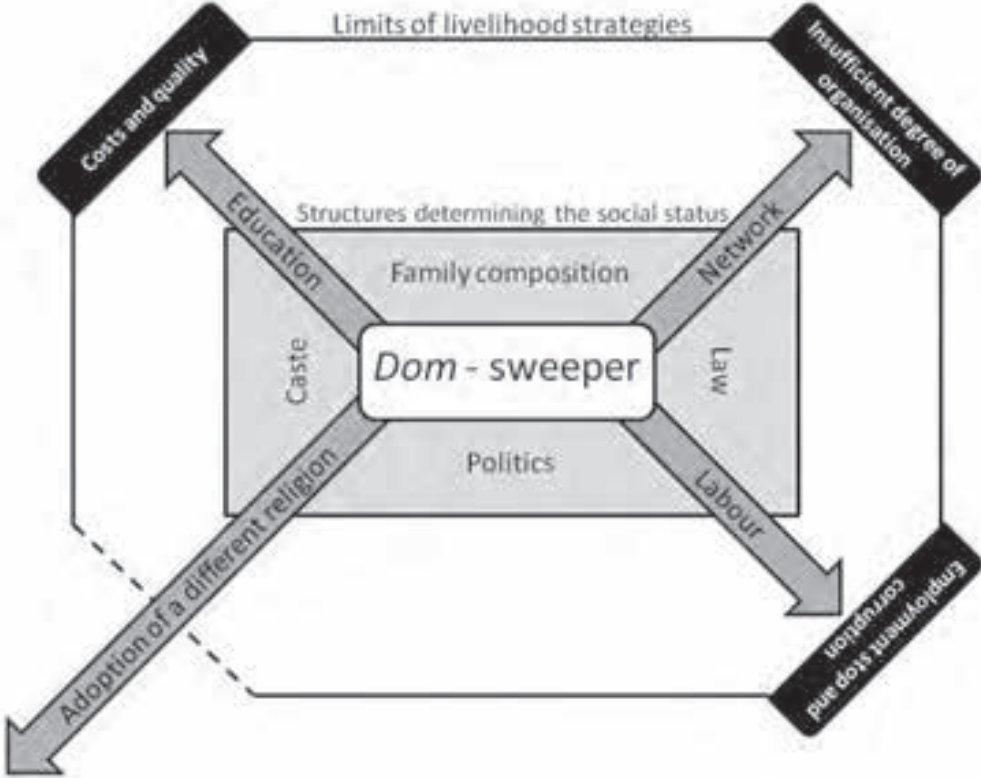

Fig. 8.2: Conceptual framework (Source: own design)

5.1 Work activities

The general professional structure of the *basti* residents is very homogenous with only 0.5% of surveyed wage earners not employed as a sweeper. There were no gender disparities identified in terms of sweeper work. However, the households' economic situation is heavily influenced by the type of job contract their members hold. The average number of breadwinners per household is two while the average household has six members. The majority of the *dom*-sweepers have temporary contracts at the municipal corporation *Nagar Nigam* (Fig. 8.1). Only 25% of the *dom*-sweepers are employed on a permanent contract at *Nagar Nigam*. However, permanent contracts are unanimously favoured by the *dom* as they result in a salary which is five times higher than those of temporary employed workers. Secondly, permanent employees have health insurance and a right to pension whereas temporary employees can be made redundant at any time and are often forced to work another job on a private basis to secure their family's well-being. As a consequence many sweepers clean private houses or work to clean temples on half-day basis and in addition to sweeping as part-time temporary employees for *Nagar Nigam*. These are unsatisfactory conditions when compared to permanent contract holders' and professional

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advancement is sought in the way of getting a permanent contract. The highest position people of the *basti* hold are supervisors of sweeper teams. Their task is to check the presence of all sweepers in a certain area (usually around 20 persons) and forward complaints to the municipality if there are any.

Research findings suggest that every sweeper is pursuing the ultimate goal of getting a permanent contract. However, there are several factors that prevent most sweepers from realising this objective. Firstly, the *Nagar Nigam* suddenly ceased issuing permanent employment contracts in 2008 due to financial reasons and has stopped converting any temporary contracts to permanent employment. Secondly, bribery is reportedly very widespread within the municipal corporation resulting in employment of so-called 'non-caste sweepers' who apply with fake records, certifying a greater experience. Moreover, even if a person holds a permanent contract the nature of work is potentially health threatening as the vast majority of sweepers still uses basic, self-made equipment for waste collection. They are not provided with proper gloves or masks for the cleaning of drainages and often not even with shovels. Hence, as the source of financial security wage labour plays a crucial role for the creation of livelihood security of the *dom*. Nevertheless, it fails to enable social advancement due to the politics of the city administration and poses a threat the workers' health due to the reportedly precarious work conditions

5.2 Educational strategies

Education represents another strategy aimed at securing household security. Some parents invest into their children's future by sending them to school as long as possible. Most of the interviewees started working as a sweeper already at the age of ten to twelve in order to contribute to household incomes. However, in households whose children attend secondary schools or even universities additional breadwinners are lost. This explains why not many households put too much emphasis on education.

The decision to invest in education is also significantly influenced by the perceived poor quality of government school education and the high and mostly unaffordable financial costs associated with the attendance of private schools. Among surveyed households there were only 16 children attending private schools out of in total 106 who were attending primary school which corresponds to 15%. Reportedly, teachers of government schools are often absent and children are not provided with food as promised. Parents must also be able to afford books and school uniforms after 8th grade which is an additional financial burden for the family. Those parents who send their children to school unanimously claimed that the high costs for education constitute their biggest monthly expense apart from food. Although there ought to be affirmative action programmes that allocate scholarships for *dalit* children there is only one such incidence in the entire *basti*. The relative neglect of education among sweepers also has to do with the fact that being educated is not a decisive asset for obtaining a higher position as a sweeper. Here, work experience is perceived as more helpful than higher education. Consider the case of one of the resident supervisors who went to school only for two years whereas his brother with ten years of schooling only holds a temporary job contract. Such examples are disheartening for many and explain the prevalent critical stance towards education and lead most parents to send their children to work already at an early age. As aiming a high

level of education is a costly undertaking which does not necessarily result in a higher social status education as a capability does not create enough incentives. Investment into education might be worthwhile in the long term but fails to promote security in the present and must therefore be described as a non-strategy of the *dom*.

5.3 Networks

Social networks represent another component for the creation of livelihood security. Generally, the community of the *basti* is perceived as very important and can be seen as a network in itself. For instance children are very often looked after by neighbours when parents are at work. Some respondents stressed that the identification with the *basti* is more important for them than the identification with their professional group. Two elected persons function as community leaders representing the *basti* whenever the community poses demands to the municipality. Requirements for the sweeper settlement at *Durga Kund* are mainly infrastructural and comprise the construction of new sanitation, stones for paving paths and improvement of the electricity supply.

Apart from the informal *basti* network, there are two types of formal networks the *dom*-sweepers are engaged in. Firstly, there is a '*dom*-caste' committee (*panchayat*) meeting irregularly to solve caste related issues like family disputes or wedding issues. Secondly, there is the workers union. In total, 45 sweeper *bastis* are associated within the union that was established in partnership with the municipal corporation in 1959. Of the 10,000 sweepers of Varanasi, around 2,500 appear to be actively engaged in the union. Its main requests address unpaid salaries and the freeze in issuing permanent contracts as well as the absence of wage increase. The provision of cleaning equipment like gloves and proper tools for sweepers is another demand of the union. In spite of their many years of service the majority of the sweepers are not given promotion with a permanent contract by *Nagar Nigam*. Hence, career prospects are another contentious issue between the union and the city administration. However, the realisation of their demands often fails due non-cooperation on the side of *Nagar Nigam*. Reportedly, available vacancies are regularly allocated unofficially through the municipal corporation and the established successor arrangement is often not followed.

While most inhabitants are aware of the work of the *dom*-committee and the union the majority of the *basti*'s dwellers are not actively engaged. The findings from interviews suggest that political organisation is not perceived as a way to improve one's living conditions. However, some sweepers also explained that the low level of education and widespread addiction to alcohol among community members are responsible for the unwillingness to engage socially and politically. Thus, while the community feeling within the *basti* contributes to their inhabitants' social well-being, formal networks do not display a source of social security.

5.4 Religion

The most striking finding during the field research was the high number of religious conversions that took place in the *Durga Kund basti* only very recently. It was found that 44.2% of the households converted to Christianity within the last three years. In terms of population this figure refers to 244 inhabitants in *Durga Kund* that have become Christians.

The newly formed Christian community of the *basti* has established its own church in a nearby building where they rent a room for services and events. The parish comprises of around 120 active members that regularly attend services. The location is decorated modestly but comprises two huge posters depicting a portrait of Jesus and some of the church members.

The priest is a young Indian man residing in close neighbourhood to the *basti*. Although he denied being part of a certain confession or sect, he admitted having been evangelised by Baptists from the US. After giving up his former lifestyle marked by 'petty crime and alcohol problems' and turning to Christianity, he is 'eager to pass his convictions to others'. According to the interviewee the inhabitants of *Durga Kund basti* are known for their blind faith, heavy drinking, gambling and violent quarrels. Those impressions and a personal relation to the neighbourhood determined his decision to start evangelising the *dom*-sweepers.

Conversions started around three years ago when he began visiting the neighbourhood for the first time. Although the personal reasons cited by *dom* respondents for converting were homogenously described only in a very vague way the data allows some interpretations. When being asked for the reason of their conversion a lot of people named *bhoot-pret* (bad spirits/ the devil) that they were suffering from. These bad spirits have to be understood as physical restrictions (e.g. infertility), addictions (e.g. alcohol) as well as financial difficulties. Commonly these problems are attended to by a local exorcist (*ojha*) belonging to the *dom* community but apparently this person was not able to find a cure. In contrast, both the priest and many other interviewees reported sudden physical and mental improvement after converting to Christianity. The converted sweepers have adopted common Christian rites that are being taught by the priest. These include joint praying within their families, the celebration of Christian festivals and baptisms at the riverside of the Ganga. At the same time the interviewees claimed to have stopped Hindu traditions such as offerings of food and money for the gods.

Although respondents in most cases assigned themselves to one of the two religions, hybrid belief systems are practiced too. Some among the converted respondents take part in Christian rituals (like Sunday services) but likewise continue both cultural and religious Hindu traditions. This refers to the way of dressing, putting on make-up and jewellery or celebrating Hindu festivals such as Shivaratri.

Nearly all of the Christian households started to put Christian symbols on their houses such as painted crosses and pictures of biblical figures decorating the inner walls. However, the style of these decorations strongly resembles the pictures and artefacts of Hindu Gods. Most of the Christian households owned a bible written in Hindi although some were not able to read it. It was further found that the church is providing health promotion for their members. Financial support is reportedly channelled through a foreign umbrella organisation or sect. However the case, the money received from abroad is used for doctors' visits and medical treatment among the church community. The church also serves as a classroom where reading and writing classes take place for children of *Durga Kund* and other nearby *bastis*.

Although no actual proof could be found it is likely that the Christian umbrella organisation is providing financial support for their new church members. The majority of the Christian houses among the *dom* had newly built floors and a lot were freshly renovated (Fig. 8.1). Given the fact that the vast majority of *Durga Kund* inhabitants practice the same profession, the rather obvious greater wealth that quite suddenly appeared among the new Christians supports the argument of support from aboard. All in all, being part of the Christian community indeed seems to be a successful strategy for the *dom*-sweepers to improve their livelihood security, at least on a short-term basis.

6 Christian communities as new welfare promotors?

The results of our study suggest that conversion to Christianity is perceived as a way to solve both personal problems such as health issues but also to overcome caste related stigmatisation. There are less rules and traditions that have to be followed when compared to Hinduism. People stated that the otherwise very costly dowry in marriage negotiations is now voluntary while at the same time inter-caste marriages have now become theoretically possible. Although an end of caste stigmatisation might remain a mere hope that might be bound to fail due to social and political realities, the new religious community is capable of delivering important components of a securer livelihood. It creates a new and religiously defined social network that appears integrative and supportive for its members. Neither the 'caste community' in form of the *panchayat* nor other networks like the workers union enable social cohesion. The religious community however serves as a space for exchanging hopes and worries, finding social and medical support and accessing education. Thus, it manages to close a gap initiated by an absence of public welfare promotion. While these are very recent impressions it remains to be seen whether those features of Christian faith-based communities succeed to establish as a strategy for livelihood security also in a long term, especially when dependent on resource flows from abroad.

Nevertheless, the research findings suggest that faith-based communities have gained increasing significance in development and community politics among the sweeper of Varanasi. Faith-based community development may be characterised as social capital to the extent that it builds on relationships within the community of interest and then expands these relationships to include external individuals, associations, and institutions. When religious institutions join with labour unions, schools, banks, and other enterprises, the chances for transforming the community increase dramatically beyond what typically occurs when 'top-down' planning approaches are imposed by external agencies. Hence, there is a significant multiplier effect for faith-based community development in such contexts (Kemper and Adkins 2005, 95).

In the case of the sweepers more research is needed in order to better understand the structures within the new faith based community. For now it remains unclear who is the actual organisation working in the background, and what the new parishioners are expected to contribute in exchange for the benefit of financial and health support by the church. It also remains an open question if the Christian community is really able to improve people's living conditions in a sustainable way. These questions demand further

inquiry to adequately confirm the success of faith based communities as development promoters among untouchable groups.

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