



Fig. 1: Statue of Dr. Ambedkar in front of Durga Kund Chamar Basti (Polster 2015)

Life as politics in Durga Kund Chamar Basti, Varanasi

Keywords: Varanasi, Chamar, Political organisation, Caste discrimination, Minorities, Social groups

1 Introduction - The Chamar as an untouchable group

The Chamar form the largest caste community amongst India's so-called Dalits¹⁷, also labelled as the untouchables or - in government terminology - scheduled castes. Known under different names and divided into several sub-castes, the Chamar can mainly be found in Northern and Central India. In the federal state of Uttar Pradesh, where the city of Varanasi and the Durga Kund Chamar Basti are located, they also represent the biggest group among Dalits (Ciotti 2006). The term Chamar is derived from the Sanskrit word *chamakara*, which translates to *leather worker* (Singh 1993). In the past the large majority of the Chamar earned their living as tanners, shoemakers and, as the names says, leather workers - professions that were referred to as impure and polluted. Hence, in the Indian caste system the Chamar were depicted as untouchable and stigmatised as an immoral and inferior community. As a result, their access to educational institutions, temples or general government services has been strongly restricted and constitutes a permanent obstacle for an equal participation in Indian society (Ciotti 2006). Suffering from such high levels of discrimination, Dalits have been part of a recent process of political mobilisation to achieve social uplift, while their shared history of experienced discrimination and claims to (constitutional) rights enables them to construct a unified Dalit identity (Kaviraj 1997).

In this continuing process of mobilisation different strategies have been followed by the Dalit communities whereas the Chamar are considered as the most successful and advanced amongst these groups in terms of their integration in educational institutions and government jobs via affirmative action laws (Ciotti 2006). Referring to influential personalities who belong to the Chamar community, such as Saint Ravidas¹⁸ and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) leader Mayawati, certain authors describe the Chamars' outstanding political engagement as one of their secrets of success (Lynch 1969, Indian Mirror 2015, People groups of India 2015). These leaders, representing success in the struggle for equity and against caste discrimination, seemed to have had a major impact on self-esteem and collective identity building processes within the Chamar caste. Also,

¹⁷ In response to insulting labels the term Dalit was chosen by untouchable groups as self-ascription. It is a political term derived from the Sanskrit word *dal*, which means *to split* and should remind of the age-old oppression to which these people are exposed (Dalitchristians 2015). According to the census of 2011 Dalits constitute 201 million people in India, not including the large number of Dalit communities who converted to other religions (IDSN 2015).

¹⁸ Saint Ravidas supposedly lived in the 14th, 15th and 16th century as a shoemaker (Chamar) and is considered as an important leader for the Chamar community. He will be introduced in the subsequent sections.

their effort to promote education¹⁹ has been quite effective (Ciotti 2006, Ramakrishan 2007, Bellwinkel-Schempp 2007).

Against this background the present article aims to reveal in what ways the Chamar can be considered as politically engaged and how they are attempting to improve their status in Indian society. Different strategies and processes of mobilisation are analysed by means of a case study in the Durga Kund Chamar Basti²⁰. The Basti is located in the Southeast of Varanasi, around 500 meters north of the Banaras Hindu University. The Basti harbours around 60 households with nearly 400 inhabitants, out of which 90 percent attribute themselves to the caste of Chamar, while the others belong either to the Brahmin community (upper caste) or to other low- and middle-ranking communities (Fig. 9.1).

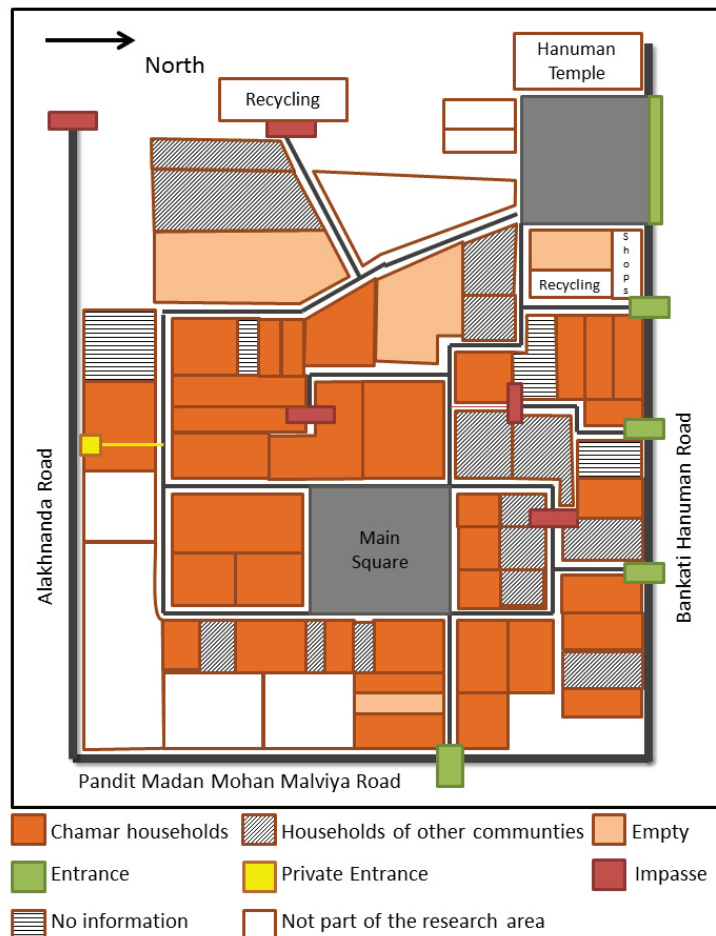


Fig. 9.1: Mapping and population structure of the Durga Kund Chamar Basti. Recycling means collection and processing of waste (Source: own design)

Five small entrances not accessible by car connect the Basti with the surrounding city. The enclosed and private character is underlined by the small alleys leading to the main square, where daily community life takes place. The differences in the housing situation seem to indicate the inhabitants' unequal financial status. While some households live in multi-storeyed ornate houses shared with only a few family members, others inhabit simple tiny shanties with their large family.

In order to gain a first overview a mapping of the area was conducted. The individual households were identified and interviewed using a standardised household survey. Subsequently, ten open qualitative interviews were realised with different representatives and inhabitants of the Durga Kund Basti. Also, the leader and volunteers of the famous Ravidas temple located in Seer Goverdhan Pur in southern Varanasi were interviewed. Observations during fieldwork provided useful information and led to important conclusions for this article. In the following section a conceptual framework will be introduced that

¹⁹ In the context of this article the term *education* is understood as formal education acquired within educational institutions.

²⁰ The term Basti is used by the inhabitants when referring to their neighbourhood. However, as a lower government official explained, some people use the term as synonym to slum area.

helps to interpret the empirical findings in the context of discourses about development, identity and social (non-) movements.

2 Life as politics

“Economic globalization in India has directly benefited only a small slice of the urban population” (Gidwani 2006, 12), and the Chamar have mainly not been part of it. Samuel Huntington (1968) identifies the poor as a possible threat to an existing order or as a destabilising force. Others propose ideas of the passive poor, of people that are only preoccupied with survival and are not able to articulate themselves in a political arena (Lewis 1966). In this article a different point of view shall prevail. What Huntington (1968) and Lewis (1966) identify as “the poor” are in reality very heterogeneous groups of individuals having many more attributes than being poor. The act of reducing people to one attribute, such as poor or underdeveloped, belittles them and defines them as “the others” who are victimised and not able to articulate themselves or to produce anything of value (Esteva 2010). A more appropriate expression is the term subaltern, or in this context urban subaltern. This is a political term referring to the *“politics of the people”* (Guha 1982, 4). It is affiliated to the anti-elitist “history from below” approaches (e.g. Thompson 1963) and has been widely examined through the subaltern studies project that *“began in 1982 as a series of interventions in some debates specific to the writing of modern Indian history”* (Chakrabarty 2000, 467). More specifically, the urban subalterns are people living on the margins of urban society who mainly lack the institutionalised political and economic power to enforce their claims or demands. Nonetheless they cannot be considered poor or apolitical per se, but do rather possess a very distinct kind of political power, which is to be described in the following paragraphs (Ghandour-Demiri 2013).

In institutionalised settings people tend to exert pressure on authorities through formal protest, such as going on strike or demonstrating. These actions would correspond to the idea of conventionally organised social movements, like e.g. environmental movements, anti-globalisation movements or workers unions. However, people that lack this kind of institutionalised power (e.g. informal labourers, housewives) and / or are located in very repressive (e.g. Iran) or mostly unresponsive (e.g. India) political settings need to find other ways to express their discontent (Bayat 2012). According to Bayat (2010 and 2012) this happens through so-called social non-movements that emerge in un-articulated ways:

“[...] [N]on-movements represent the collective action of non-collective actors, who are oriented more towards action than being ideologically driven; concerned more with practice than protest [...]. Unlike the conventional forms of activism, which by definition are extraordinary practices, non-movements are merged into, and in fact are part and parcel of the ordinary practices of everyday life” (Bayat 2012, 124).

It is argued that those collective actions are only in exceptional cases collectively organised, but are in general rather individualistic, meaning that their power mostly arises from the sheer number of urban subalterns simultaneously committing small acts of resistance or articulating their claim to rights of certain spaces through direct action

(Bayat 2010). In this sense, every action that challenges the existing order or power structures is to be understood as political (ibid.). To put it in the words of Ananya Roy: “*Subaltern politics is [...] popular politics and popular culture*” (Roy 2011, 226). Gidwani (2006) argues that even though the urban subaltern are literally able to speak, they do not command speech that is powerful enough to actively change policy or resist opposing forces. This is then another reason why the urban subalterns tend to articulate themselves through direct action, rather than political organisation. In fact most of these actions, such as the building of squatter settlements or the occupation of space for subsistence purposes, are very silent and will thus be weaved slowly into official policy. Consequently, when noticed by opposing forces, it will often be too late to revert or stop them (Bayat 2000).

By making the connection to urban space these ordinary life practices of the subalterns become political in the same sense as expressed by David Harvey: “*The way life gets lived in spaces, places and environments [...] is the beginning and end of political action*” (Harvey 2000, 560). Therefore the political actions of the urban subaltern must take place in the public spaces accessible to them. In an urban setting such as Varanasi, these are mainly streets and squares. For many people streets are indispensable assets of subsistence and cultural life (Bayat 2010), but streets are also territories of conflict and struggle over possession. This is true especially when people occupy streets for subsistence purposes and are using these spaces actively, even though they are supposed to use them only in a passive way through walking or driving (Bayat 2012). Additionally, streets serve as arenas where people “*forge collective identities and extend their immediate familiar circles to include also the unknown, the strangers*” (Bayat 2012, 120). Those identities are influenced by space and social practice, e.g. Chamar leatherworkers repairing shoes in the streets, even though unknown to each other, are part of a passive network and share common attributes. The moment they pass by each other on the street, they will recognise one another through instantaneous communications by means of their communalities, such as carrying around their working tools. They most probably will not engage in active communication but are able to recognise their common (marginalised) position from experience (cf. Bayat 2012). In those spaces communities arise that are able to realise their goals through direct action, without feeling the need or seeing the opportunity to engage in formal politics or form a political group (Dear and Dahmann 2008). Groups that share common identities, spaces or social practice are more likely to unite in moments of retreat or when a common threat arises. In those cases the passive networks might turn into active networks and the formal organisation of a social movement commences (Bayat 2010).

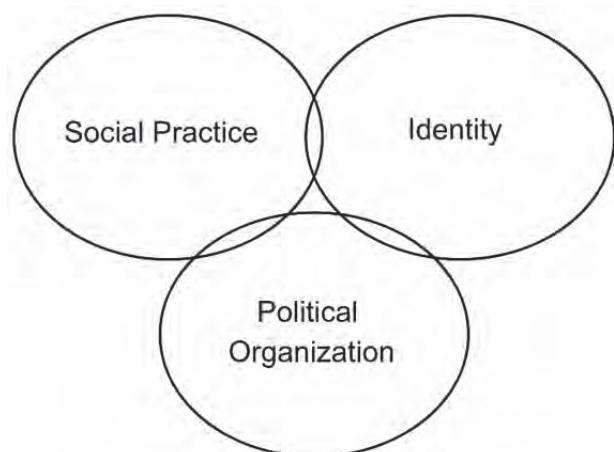


Fig. 9.2: Analytical categories. This three categories do not only overlap but as well influence each other. (Source: own design)

In this article it will be shown to what extent the Chamar of Durga Kund in Varanasi might be identified as a social non-movement and how their collective actions might be described as “life as politics”. It will be assessed how their group identities are forged, how their social practice might be interpreted as political and what role formal political organisation plays in their lives. The relations between those three categories are exemplified in Fig. 9.2. Furthermore it will be shown which strategies are pursued by the Chamar in Durga Kund to overcome social stigmatisation and cast discrimination.

3 Identity

Identity and thus identification as a group is very important for the Chamar in Durga Kund. Many Chamar in Durga Kund are very proud of their heritage and feel that belonging to the Chamar community is their unifying factor. Interestingly enough this feeling ceases when being outside their own living area. The Durga Kund Chamar Basti with only five very small entrances is a very secluded area (Fig. 9.1). This might be traced back to city planning practices that sought to accommodate certain caste groups in their own living spaces, but nowadays people feel that their living area is a safe space. This safe space is constructed

through an inside and an outside. The inside is constituted as a private space, where people communicate freely and interact mainly on the streets or the main square (Fig. 9.3). Many important activities such as group meetings, preparing of food or small scale animal husbandry take place here. The main square is especially important for women and children. It might be described as an extended living room where people engage in common human interactions, and it is also used as a playing ground for the children. The



Fig. 9.3: The main square of Durga Kund Chamar Basti (Nunes Muniz 2015)

The importance of this space was stressed frequently in many interviews. The inside plays a major role in forming group identity and group solidarity. This is in contrast to the outside depicted as unsafe or a space where caste discrimination and social stigmatisation happen. Being part of the inside is compared to being part of a family. At the same time the borders between the inside and the outside are porous and flexible. Members of other castes living inside the area are partly described as outsiders, meanwhile other Chamar living in Varanasi are partly seen as insiders.

Another very important aspect of group identity is the common identification with Saint Ravidas. Saint Ravidas was a Chamar shoemaker living in the 15th Century and is considered among many Chamar in India as a god or guru (Bellwinkel-Schempp 2007). Ravidas is referred to as a humble and god-loving man, who despite all opposition of the ruling Brahmin caste taught his followers about equality and the importance of education. Stories about him often include tricks he played on higher castes and once even Mother Ganga came to his aid, which is a sign of his purity and holiness. His followers often associate him with the fight against caste discrimination (Bellwinkel-Schempp 2007). Varanasi is the

birthplace of Saint Ravidas and many important places are dedicated to him, such as two big temples, a park and a newly built area of *ghats*²¹ in Nagwa directly at the River Ganga in the southern part of Varanasi. His importance for all Chamar in India was mentioned repeatedly during interviews. Saint Ravidas is not only part of a collective Chamar identity but also outsiders connect him directly to their community. In the eyes of the Chamar in Durga Kund this helps to find a higher position and recognition in the hierarchical order of Indian society. However, even though many Chamar in Durga Kund approve of Saint Ravidas as a spiritual leader, most of them would not visit his temple on other occasions than the main festival in his honour, the Ravidas Jayanti. During Ravidas Jayanti, his birthday is celebrated and many thousands of pilgrims come to Varanasi to celebrate his memory. The festival takes place during the first full moon of the Hindu month Magha²² and is celebrated at the Ravidas Temple in Seer Goverdhan Pur, west of Banaras Hindu University. During those festivities his followers engage in singing, prayers and readings of his teachings. The temple community serves communal meals for all the people in need in Varanasi (Bellwinkel-Schempp 2007). Devotion to Saint Ravidas is not contradictory to the worship of other Hindu gods. While other Hindu gods are often consulted for spiritual guidance, Saint Ravidas and his teachings of equality are recurrently referred to as political guidelines. This corresponds to Roy's (2011) idea of subaltern politics being popular culture. Therefore, simply approving of Saint Ravidas teaching appears to be a political decision, challenging the existing social order. Furthermore the yearly pilgrimage of many thousands of people worshipping a Saint that teaches equality and the abolishment of caste discrimination and who is recognised even by members of other castes as a Saint of the Chamar community stands as a symbol for their political struggle for equality. In addition, Saint Ravidas is an example of a new writing of history that includes also the past of the Chamar as subaltern group in Indian history writing. This creation of and insistence on Chamar history is another part of group identity. It is a political statement, contesting the established social order that widely excludes Dalit and Chamar history from the centre of society. The fact that in many prominent locations in Varanasi spaces dedicated to Saint Ravidas were established indicates that the Chamar have been quite successful in their fight for recognition in India.

4 Social practice

Most of the Chamar in Durga Kund do not exercise the traditional caste related profession as leather workers any more. The majority of the male inhabitants nowadays work as labourers; others earn their living as salesmen, rickshaw drivers or in other private occupations. Just one resident remains that still works with leather. The widespread dissociation from the profession as leather worker seems to have different reasons. Replaced by the large scale industrialisation of shoemaking and general leather work in the past the Chamar had to find other occupations, mainly as daily labourers (Fuchs 1976). In addition, the change of profession apparently demonstrates an intentional decision of not

²¹ In Varanasi the main Ghat area stretches over the whole eastern river banks of the Ganga. Ghats are stairs that are used for washing clothes, ritual burning of the dead, animal husbandry, ritual washing, playing cricket or other communal activities.

²² Magha corresponds with the months January/February in the Gregorian calendar.

identifying themselves with an occupation that represents the origin of their discrimination. Therefore, according to Bayat's idea of non-movement, this process can be interpreted as political action with the objective to achieve social uplift and recognition in society.

In line with the teachings of Ravidas a majority of the Durga Kund inhabitants attaches great importance to their children's education. Accordingly most children attend school and youth literacy rates are very high. This is supported by different elected community leaders as well as NGOs that promote the importance of formal education and try to motivate the inhabitants to take care of their children's needs. In consequence just a small amount of the interviewed people indicated not to send their children to school, mostly out of financial reasons. In the generation of parents and grandparents approximately 80 percent of the male inhabitants have at least a primary education whereas the majority of women (60 percent) are illiterate. However, regardless of their degree the women of Durga Kund are usually working as housewives. It is expected that their children will have more prestigious jobs and higher incomes due to their increased levels of education and parents hope to improve their own and their children's living conditions. This strategy has been explained against the background that discrimination nowadays does not solely arise along lines of caste affiliation but also of socio-economic status. Through formal education the Chamar have continuously been seeking to achieve better remunerated jobs. As an example the BSP leader Mayawati was mentioned repeatedly who through higher education could escape the inferior position ascribed to her caste in Indian society.

This increasing trend of ascribing importance to education can also be attributed to the teachings of certain role models, such as Saint Ravidas but also Dr. Ambedkar. Belonging to the Dalit community, Dr. Ambedkar was an influential politician in the beginning of the 20th century. As a very rigorous fighter against casteism and untouchability in India his actions have affected Dalit's living conditions enormously. The fact that practicing untouchability is officially prohibited provides the political mobilisation of lower castes with a legal foundation and enables them to claim their rights. Dr. Ambedkar promoted education for everybody as a tool for fighting discrimination (Bellwinkel-Schempp 2007). However, in interviews it was asserted that only when there is a high level of education in the whole Indian society discrimination will come to an end. Following this logic it is important for low-caste communities to educate themselves in order to gain proper respect in society. Nevertheless, people from higher castes need to be educated as well to be able to show respect to others.

At this point it is important to emphasise how Chamar have internalised their upward movement from a backward traditional and subordinated position to an educated modern identity. The strong belief in the education paradigm defines literacy and education as the key factor for community development, and as a tool of social mobility that is needed to overcome inequality. In doing so, Chamar themselves accept the idea of their former backwardness. Even though education by no means automatically guarantees social inclusion, uplift mobility or higher chances to obtain employment, people tend to cherish their new educated identities as opposed to those as traditional non-educated leather workers (Ciotti 2006). In this respect the educational discourse in fact creates new

marginalised groups as became apparent during interviews. Chamar still working with leather were referred to in a derogatory way, stating: “*There are still people [of the Chamar caste] who live like animals*”. This new marginalisation also has a spatial aspect inside the Basti where the only person still working with leather does not have direct access to the central places of the Basti. Furthermore, formal education is not evenly spread amongst the Durga Kund Chamar with the effect that the intended homogenising effects of education at the same time create new differences among community members (Ciotti 2006).

Dr. Ambedkar’s idea of converting to other religions does not play an important role in Durga Kund. Whereas several oppressed Dalit groups in India tended to change their religion to Buddhism in order to reject the caste system (Bellwinkel-Schempp 2007, Lynch 1969) the situation in the Chamar Basti is different. Despite a few Christian households²³ that are located at the northern border right next to a sweeper Basti where a lot of people converted to Christianity quite recently all interviewed households describe themselves as Hindu. Even though many people would go to church on Christmas or sometimes even every Sunday, they still consider themselves as Hindu.

Also the concept of sanscritisation is not followed by the Chamar of Durga Kund. According to this strategy, upward mobility can be achieved by emulating middle or upper-class rituals, practices and lifestyles. An example often described in literature is the education of the younger generation for the purpose of performing their religious rituals by themselves instead of depending on Brahmin priests (Ciotti 2006). However, the inhabitants of the Basti are proud to be able to afford the services of a Brahmin to conduct their religious rituals and life-cycle events. Apparently, people do not seem to reject or contest the caste system as such but rather their prevailing individual or collective discrimination, whether as a result of caste affiliation or socio-economic inferiority.

5 Political organisation

It was shown how the Chamar group identity in Durga Kund is forged and how everyday social practices can be considered political in the sense of Roy (2011) and Bayat (2000, 2010 & 2012). Nevertheless formal political organisation is an important part of life in Durga Kund too. In India many Dalit and especially Chamar find official political representation through the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP). The BSP was founded in 1984 by the Dalit Leader Kanshi Ram. Its main goals are the “*Social Transformation and Economic Emancipation of the Bahujan Samaj*” (BSP 2012). The Hindi word Bahujan translates to the “majority of the people” (Chandra 2000) and the BSP defines their voters base as all Dalit or Scheduled Castes (SCs), Other Backward Castes (OBCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs) and other communities, such as Muslims, Sikhs or Christians that together account for over 85% of India’s population (BSP 2012). Even though the BSP tries to include all these communities as a voter base it is predominantly seen as a party of Chamar for Chamar (Chandra 2000). Accordingly, a majority of Chamar in Durga Kund cast their vote to the BSP and describe it as “the Party of our community”. Party leader Mayawati who also belongs to the Chamar

²³ Those Christians households considered themselves as Christian-Hindus. Their identification with Jesus as one of their spiritual leaders could be influenced by the neighbouring sweeper Basti, where many people quite recently converted to Christianity (cf. Möckel and Klaus 2015, also in this issue). A conversion in order to reject the caste system could not be observed.

caste was a former Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh and the most important promoter of building the Ravidas Park and Ravidas Ghat in Varanasi (Times of India 2009). She was mentioned frequently by the Chamar in Durga Kund when asked about political leadership. This very successful formal political representation symbolised by several electoral victories of the BSP in Uttar Pradesh is a factor that separates the Chamar from other Dalit groups in India that mainly have no formal political embodiment. Nevertheless some Chamar in Durga Kund have stated to be very disappointed with Mayawati and the BSP since in their opinion she has not done enough to change their lives for the better. Only a tiny minority of households stated not to vote at all. This result can be interpreted as a high interest in formal politics or as Benjamin (2008, 724) has put it: *“Moving beyond the ‘patron client’ conception allows us to read this [...] as evidence of a popular political consciousness of how to pressure municipal and state administrations.”*

Other formal means of political organisation can be found outside Durga Kund Basti in form of low to middle government officials. These government officials are consulted when problems arise that cannot be solved inside the community or to assist with official bureaucratic requests such as the issuance of voters ID cards. A lower government official claimed to have upgraded the infrastructure in the Durga Kund area by building public toilets, establishing electricity connections and having plastered the streets. In connection with high voting outcomes this might be interpreted as what Benjamin (2008) calls vote bank politics. Lower Government officials in India tend to secure votes by establishing visible infrastructure projects especially in slum areas to secure re-election or public support in pursuit of higher ambitions. In this context the Chamar in Durga Kund are not to be seen as the passive or exploited part of the political trade, but rather as very active voters who could cast their vote to the highest bidder and if promises are not kept would not re-elect that person.

In addition to this institutionalised political organisation other systems have been established by the community. The group of Chamar in Durga Kund have chosen two leaders on the grounds of age and wisdom and higher education. The installation of these two leaders by the Chamar again shows how much the inhabitants of the research area identify as a group. This group identity manifests in problem solving strategies. While some problems that are considered as private are solved domestically others such as conflicts between neighbours that affect the whole group or parts of it are solved collectively through consultation of the two group leaders. In those matters intrusions from the outside are rejected. Only in cases when problems, like complications with the admission to government schools, arise that cannot be solved from the inside people will seek counsel and help from lower to middle government officials or NGO's. In the sense of Bayat (2010) the rejection of intrusions from the outside must be considered as political because it represents a claim to space considered private and belonging to the community. This is one example as to how group identities manifest in direct political action and self-organisation. As argued before and shown in Fig. 9.4, the community space plays an important role in forging a group identity. The actors inside this space are connected through passive or semi-passive bonds, e.g. family relations. These bonds are activated in moments of retreat and when a common goal or need is identified. For instance on several occasions, e.g. during state-wide elections in 2012, a political group called “Ambedkar Kalyan Manch” was formed and an active social movement emerged among the Chamar. This social movement

has been identified by the Chamar in Durga Kund as a powerful weapon to get attention and fight for their rights. It was mentioned that for a fight to be successful many persons will be needed, suggesting that Chamar would have to reach out to other groups or individuals with similar goals. This whole argument is consistent with Bayats (2010) argument of life as politics. The Chamar in Durga Kund are very political, but not in a sense of active social movements and it is certainly not their only preoccupation, but when they identify the need to fight for their rights or claims, they have the capacity to organise and do so. Nevertheless most of their actions connected to political organisation are rather direct and individualistic and not formally organised.

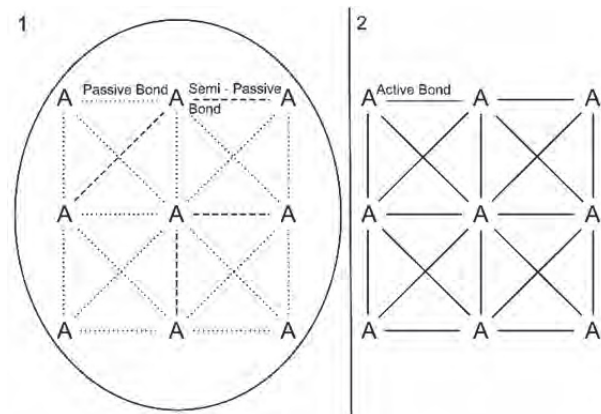


Fig. 9.4: Influence of Space and Identity on possible political organisation in Durga Kund Chamar Basti.
 1: Normal situation: Individuals brought together by space, no organised action is needed
 2: Emergence of a social movement in moments of retreat or when a common goal is identified

(Source: own design, based on Bayat 2010, 23)

6 Conclusion - Life as politics in Durga Kund Chamar Basti

The Chamar of the Durga Kund Basti follow different strategies to overcome hierarchical relations and their inferior position in society. Contrary to the claims of certain literature (e.g. Lynch 1969, Indian Mirror 2015, People groups of India 2015), their mobilisation is not primarily characterised through political involvement and formal organisation. Even though community leaders exist who work as counsellors and representatives of the Basti and communicate the communities' interests and concerns to higher authorities, in general the inhabitants' actions should rather be considered as claim-making actions within the notion of Bayat's social non-movements.

Bayat (2010) argues that those claim making actions are conducted by non-collective rather than collective actors. However, the Durga Kund Chamars are not only united through a shared identity but also their spatially based solidarity, which lets them appear as collective rather than non-collective actors. The process of identity building is therefore influenced by spatial proximity when the Basti is described as a big family where people take care of each other. Yet, it is noticeable that the few inhabitants belonging to another caste (e.g. Brahmin, Yadav, Bania) seem to be less included in the community's living together. A father, belonging to the Brahmin caste, stated for example that he would avoid letting his children play with other youngsters in the Basti because they had bad manners. The shared identity is influenced through the common recognition of Saint Ravidas as an important leader of the Chamar, and intensified by collective practices of worshipping him. This strong identification with Saint Ravidas and his teachings can also be seen as claim-making action to overcome their inferior and inequitable status in society. Even though Dr. Ambedkar does not play an equal important role as a leader he appears to influence the Chamars' direct action. His idea of the importance of education is deeply internalised by the community. The field research has shown that there is a social and

political effort to improve living conditions and status in society. Even though there is no enduring political form of organisation, the inhabitants' actions, intended or unintended, might be interpreted as political and clearly demonstrate their daily struggle for a better life. This does not exclude formal political organisation when a common goal or threat is identified. In that case, the passive or semi-passive bonds become active and the power as a group can be used to insist on their claims and objectives. The common space and group identity play a major role in forming an active social movement.

The dis-attachment from traditional occupations as well as striving for higher education, financial resources and development seem to be the prevalent ideas of how to improve status and living conditions. This reflects a rather common development discourse which characterises underdevelopment as the lack of peoples' effort to improve their situation and neglects the reality of systematic discrimination that is experienced by many marginalised groups in India (Ciotti 2006). Nevertheless, based on the Chamar's perception their actions can be interpreted as a political statement and strategy of challenging hierarchical relations.

The results of this study also respond to the widespread assumption that social development depends on having a directing leadership (Aycan 2002). According to Bayat's idea of non-movements, identity building and emerging social mobilisation through silent claim-making actions supersede this paradigm of leadership as a major necessity.

Finally, this study has illustrated how life itself as politics has helped the Chamar in Durga Kund to improve their status. It was shown to what extent Bayat's concept of social non-movements and life as politics can be applied to another context. Many of his thoughts are reflected in the lives of the Chamar in Durga Kund. Thus this study can also be seen as an important empirical validation of his ideas.

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