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Madsen, Aase Mygind

Publication date: 2010

Citation for published version (APA):
Madsen, A. M. (2010). Dalits in South India: stuck at the bottom or moving upward? findings from the PhD thesis "Untouchables: stuck at the bottom or moving upward?". (Social Skriftserie; Vol. 10). Århus: Socialrådgiveruddannelsen i Aarhus, VIA University College.

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Dalits in South India - stuck at the bottom or moving upward?

Findings from the PhD thesis “Untouchables - stuck at the bottom or moving upward”

Aase Mygind Madsen
Associate Professor, PhD

Main publications


Aase Mygind Madsen, 2006, Social skriftserie 5, Denmark which Type of Welfare Regime? and Recent Political Changes in Denmark.

Aase Mygind Madsen, 2000, Postmoderne børn og familier i Kontur. 1:2. s. 65-68.


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Aase Mygind Madsen
Associate Professor, PhD, Department of Social Work, Aarhus
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Social skriftserie, Department of Social Work, Aarhus, No. 10, 2010

Cover illustration, excerpt from ”Hippolytos en skæbnefortælling”, made by Evan Rasmussen.

Published and printed by:
VIA University College, Department of Social Work, Aarhus
Jens Chr. Skous Vej 2
DK-8000 Aarhus C

This publication can be ordered by tel: +45 8755 3300 or by email socia@viauc.dk.
It can also be downloaded from the homepage of Department of Social Work, Aarhus.
Price DKK 70 + postage.
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Process summary and acknowledgements

In 1990-91 I spent 1½ year in the South Indian state of Karnataka. The Danish Council for Development Research had granted me funds to conduct a comprehensive study of the untouchability issue. In Denmark the project was anchored at Centre for Development Research in Copenhagen, although I resided in Aarhus. In India I was attached to the Institute for Social and Economic Change in Bangalore. As I got pregnant in 1992, I gave up commuting between Aarhus and Copenhagen. After the birth of my daughter, Centre for Gender Research, Aarhus University provided me with writing opportunities. Based on my findings I wrote the thesis “Untouchables-stuck at the bottom or moving upward” for which I obtained a PhD degree in 1996 at the Institute of Political Science, Aarhus University. Since 1996 I have been employed at the Department of Social Work, Aarhus. I have for 14 years taught social policy, sociology and related social science topics, especially at the school’s international social work programme. My current work place and Knowledge Center for Social Work and Social Pedagogy, has provided me some hours to write a summary of my 14 year old PhD thesis, about a topic that has now gained much more international awareness than it had at the time of my study. Since, nowadays untouchables are primarily spoken of as Dalits, I have in this summary changed the word untouchables used in the dissertation to Dalits.

I would like to express my thankfulness for the opportunity to return to this topic, which has meant a lot to my personal life. Many thanks also to Jens Eistrup, Jørgen Dige Pedersen and Kirsten Krogh Jespersen for commenting on earlier versions of this text, to Birgit Planck for providing much more than I could expect of secretarial assistance, to her son, Magnus Planck, for colouring the village maps and to Mark Hording for proof reading.

Chapter 1. Setting the Scene

1.1. What is a Dalit? Knowledge interest and relevance of the study

What is a Dalit? The quick answer is that it is a person belonging to one of the castes below the so called pollution line, constituting the bottom of the hierarchy of the social category ‘caste’. Dalits are considered unclean, polluting and untouchable to members of all castes above the pollution line. Hence, any member of a caste above this line tries to avoid the touch and even the glance of a Dalit. Based on such beliefs, originating from Hindu Mythology, Dalits have experienced violence, discrimination and social exclusion in The Sub Indian Continent on a daily basis for centuries. In Human Rights’ terminology they have been and are still discriminated against on the basis of ‘work and descent’.

In many ways ‘Untouchables’ is a more precise label for the unclean castes than the term Dalits. However, Dalit activists find it condescending and patronizing and within the last two decades the term Dalit has worldwide become more used than untouchable, which is the reason that it is used in this text.

One problem with both labels (see chapter 1.4) is that they signify that we deal with an easily identifiable entity unambiguously and in the same way opposed to all castes above the pollution line. Whereas in reality the term covers many castes, which are as stratified as castes higher in the
caste hierarchy. Another problem with the term Dalit is that it has become the dominant discursive label primarily, as a result of a counter power strategy of Dalit activism.

The activist approach has tended to propagate what is characteristic for those Dalits who perform the most menial jobs, as if these conditions and those characteristics account for everybody who in contemporary India is identified as and identify his- and herself as a Dalit. Historically, all jobs considered dirty like emptying latrines, sweeping streets, removing carcasses and working with leather from dead animals were undertaken by the most ‘unclean’ of the Dalit castes. The stereotypical image of this type of a Dalit was that of a thin, poor looking, insecure and humble person, tacitly carrying out the dirty work and being degradingly treated by upper caste members. Today, however, the word Dalit is also connected with quite contradictory images like that of a Dalit activist, an elite Dalit or a converted Dalit, all deviating from the first stereotypical image of an untouchable and - one should think - not in the same way motivating an upper caste person to keep Dalits at a distance.

The struggle over terminology is important, but the prime concern of this text is to communicate those findings from my study that concerns changes and non changes of socio economic conditions of Dalits, and the impact on Dalit social mobility at village level of different types of interventions. These results might not only be relevant as knowledge about what works in terms of Dalit mobility, but perhaps also for other types of suppressed groups, that for different reasons are prevented from having their share in socio-economic development.

The prime reason that I have decided to publish some of the results of my almost 20 year old fieldwork at this time, is that since the early 1990, the Dalit issue has achieved much more global awareness than it had at the time of my study. Dalit solidarity groups have emerged in many places in the West. They are concerned with problem of Untouchability, described as one of the most severe global human rights problems (IDSN 2008: 3). Sometimes, however, there appears to be a need of exact knowledge both about what in contemporary India continues to comprise obstacles to improvement for Dalits and what has already changed.

When used for the sake of recording, the term Dalit is transformed into the juridical category ‘Scheduled Castes’. Counted as scheduled castes, which are exposed to discrimination on the basis of their impure status, Dalits in India constitute about 15 % of the Indian population, which at the time of my study meant about 140 million people. Juridically and politically, this amount of people, however, is not only recorded as discriminated against, but also on the same grounds recorded as the group illegible for welfare benefits and positive discrimination as compensation for the very same discrimination. Having analysed in chapter 2.1 and 2.2 what mechanisms prevailed as preventing Dalits in the villages from social mobility, chapter 3 reports on consequences of state interventions to the benefit of Dalits in the villages.

1.2. Theoretical positions in Dalit literature

Probably the most well known definition of caste is M.N. Srinivas’ from 1952. He defined caste as a “very small endogamous group, practising a traditional occupation and enjoying a certain cultural, ritual and juridical autonomy” (Srinivas 1952). One thing, however, is to define the smallest entity of the system, another to define and understand the relationship between the entities in the caste system. There are basically two distinctly different interpretations of the position of Dalits in India:
1) that Dalits occupy the bottom of caste hierarchies as a consequence of century old oppression, domination and exploitation by the upper castes, i.e. the country’s own elite.

2) that caste relations are fundamentally harmonious and reciprocal and the placement of caste entities, including Dalits, rather characterised by difference than by stratification.

The first interpretation resembles a conflict oriented structural Marxist perspective, as a theoretical stream in ideological thinking of western origin.

The second main stream of interpretation is represented by what in western ideological thinking would be labelled a conservative, communitarian or a structural functionalistic stream of thinking.

Whereas the conflict oriented theoretical thinking is relatively new to traditional Indian thinking, the system of unity approach goes well with Hindu Mythology. Just like structural functionalism compares the society with a human body, Hinduism sees the social universe as a manifestation in time and space of the ever present main God, Brahma. According to Hinduism’s creation story, four main castes or Varnas were created out of Brahma’s body1 The four main castes were endowed with a particular quality to enact the sacrifices necessary to sustain the universe. The first born were the Brahmins who emerged from the mouth of Brahma. They had the power to speak, and were entitled to effectuate a sacrifice by means of their knowledge of rituals. The next born, were the Kshatriyas who emerged from the arms of Brahma. Kshatriyas were the warriors. They were endowed with martial qualities necessary to protect the universal order. It was their task to offer the oblation at the sacrifice. From the thighs of Brahma came The Vaishyas, who were the third born. Traditionally they were herders and tillers, but in some parts of India they were merchants. They produced the material wealth of the universe and provided the oblation for the sacrifice. The last born were the Shudras, servants, who emerged from the feet of Brahma. Their duty was to serve the other 3 Varnas outside the arena of sacrifice. Since they lacked the sacred thread of the upper three Varnas, they could not enter a sacred area. Members of the four main Varnas together constituted the body of Brahma. Outside Brahma’s auspicious body were the untouchables. Since they had not emerged from the holy body of Brahma, members of the four main Varnas could not accept anything handled by them. Their bodies and minds were considered impure, dull and unfit for initiation, hence there were severe punishments if an untouchable was caught in overhearing recitations by a Brahmin priest. Separation pervaded the whole Varna system, but the distance between the four Varnas and the untouchables was the biggest of them all.

The system preserving part of Hindu Mythology is that although the Varnas are ranked according to order of birth, virtue is to tacitly perform the duties of one’s caste. An untouchable had to accept his destiny as it was the result of little spiritual energy. Hence there was no room for questioning the functions of society.2

The two different interpretations of caste characterized the theoretical literature, I read while I conducted the study. As illustrated in Figure 1, I have systematized the theoretical positions as reductions in the extent to which relations are seen as oppressive.

---

1 The Dalit champion Ambedkar has noticed that Hinduism is the only religion, where groups and not individuals are put at origin of societies (Jafrelot, Christophe 2000: 34).

2 Using Karnataka as a case, Srinivas has argued that this is not totally true anymore. Often members of lower caste do try to imitate the upper castes or they try to imitate the white man’s culture. To illustrate the two types of ambitions he invented the concepts: Sanscritization and westernization.
Figure 1. Discourse period 1: The interpretative spectrum of the caste/untouchability discourses up to approximately 1980

Up to around 1980 most of the oppression oriented contributions were by traditional marxists, who interpreted caste as nothing but a disguise for class and saw Dalits primarily as victims of economic exploitation or suppression. I have called these approaches ‘Economic oppression positions’. Among the authors I have placed here are John Harris, Kathleen Gough and Joan Mencher as they all in their writings emphasized the material aspects of caste relations.

At the other end of the discoursive continuum, caste researchers interpreted caste more or less as harmonious and comprising of reciprocal relations. They typically focused their studies on mutual dependency and difference in what they primarily saw as a static system of unity. I have called these approaches ‘System of unity positions’. Among the authors I have placed here are in other respects very different writers such as Louis Dumont and representatives of American Ethnosociology.

As can be seen I found that some theorists could not unambiguously be placed at either side of the interpretative spectrum. B.R. Ambedkar3 and G. Berreman on the one hand had a clear oppression approach, but strongly argued that the social oppression imbedded in practices of untouchability was much more decisive for the bottom positions of Dalits than economic suppression.

The most significant about the second discoursive period (see figure 2 below) is that hardly any authors wrote from within an economic oppression position. In its place, the position taken 50 years earlier by B.R. Ambedkar, that untouchability comprises of many more social aspects than class studies usually admit, has gained momentum – not least as the theoretical foundation for the many Dalit organizations that came forward during this period. My point is that this position, which I have placed furthest to the left in figure 2 increasingly, has influenced politics, not least in the West,

3 In his later writings, Ambedkar became clearer in condemning the whole Hindu System as oppressive to Dalits.
where Dalit solidarity groups have emerged in many countries and the Dalit issue has been taken up by human rights organization in both the United Nations and the European Union.

**Figure 2. Discourse period 2: The interpretative spectrum of the caste/untouchability discourse between approximately 1980 and approximately 1990**

As can be seen in figure 2, my assessment is that whereas contributors to the oppression perspective have changed focus from economic to social oppression, representatives of American ethnosociology still write about caste without an eye to oppression, a position which also is taken by most writers writing from within a postmodern position.

**1.2.2. Towards my own focus on economic and social oppression**

My approach to the study of caste relations in the villages was primarily informed by writings that I placed to the left of the two interpretative spectres of figure 1 and 2. My hypothesis was that Dalits were placed at the bottom of the village hierarchy due to a combination of economic and social oppression. Dalits were dependent on upper castes for work and credit and socially excluded due to practices of untouchability.

The marxist approach to economic oppression in a village setting characterised by both traditional feudal and modern capitalistic exploitation techniques is rather well known, whereas the ideas behind social oppression imbedded in practises of untouchability are less well known to a western audience. Hence, a few words on how some of the theoretical writings on practices untouchability explain the phenomena.

J. Kristeva (who probably would not see herself as a writer on social oppression) has in some of her writings been occupied with the concept and phenomena of pollution. In *Power of Horror. An Essay of Abjection* she distinguishes between two types of polluting objects: menstrual and excremental pollution. Menstrual blood symbolizes dangers from within the identity. Excremental pollution symbolizes external dangers to identity. According to Kristeva that explains the milder polluting value attached to menstruating women and the permanent polluting value attached to being a Dalit. Since Dalits (or Untouchables) primarily symbolize external pollution, their mere existence posed a threat both to the bodily purity of high caste people and to the entire society.
Ritual purity is/was combined with the social order in the sense that purity of castes correlates with an elaborated hereditary division of labour between the castes. The work performed by each caste shows the relatively pure status of that caste. Especially sweepers, scavengers and night men performed labour corresponding to the excretory functions of the body, hence they are/were permanently associated with defilement. But many other occupations were/are considered polluting and for that reason kept away from castes above the pollution line. “When secular filth becomes sacred defilement” Kristeva has argued “societies tend to become hierarchical and to abject to filth”. In sociological terms that means individuals connected with defilement must stay isolated or segregated from others.

Kristeva’s description and explanation of Indian’s preoccupation with pollution fits Ambedkar’s understanding of how untouchables are socially oppressed - and according to him, this oppression is uniquely Indian. “Elsewhere” he wrote “persons can be treated as impure, but in India a whole section of the country’s own people is treated as impure and forced to live in quarters of their own” As Kristeva, he also emphasizes that unlike impurity arising from delivery, menstruation or death, the impurity of Dalits (Untouchables ) is permanent. Hindus, who touch them, can become pure by undergoing purificatory ceremonies, but nothing can make an Untouchable pure. As he says in one of his famous quotations “Untouchables are born impure, they are impure when they live, they die the death of the impure and they give birth to children who are born with the stigma of untouchability. .It is a case of permanent, hereditary stain which nothing can cleanse” (Ambedkar 1990: 266).

1.3. Methodology, selection of villages and field work methods

Methodology
The three main questions I aimed at answering through my fieldwork were:

1) What was the position of Dalits in the village hierarchies and to what extent did economic and/or social oppression account for that position?
2) What kind of changes had taken place by which drivers of change?
3) What was the feedback on theory from the findings?

As mentioned there are many attempts at explaining village life from an economic exploitation perspective, whereas it is less common to find studies that focus on consequences of social oppression. It is even more seldom to encounter studies that try to do both, and further aim at assessing which of the two has contributed most to leaving Dalits at the bottom of the socioeconomic hierarchy. By choosing both perspectives I placed myself to the left of the interpretative spectres of the two discourse periods. That, however, did not mean that I completely ignored those types of theoretical contributions I have placed to the right of the interpretative spectres. All through the study it was a key premise that the Dalit problem could perhaps also be understood in another way. In any case the idea was not to try and establish a bipolar identification of one group being suppressed by another group of suppressors. Although one can identify only one pollution line and people are placed either above or below it, it is obvious that the issue is not about two clearly defined antagonistic groups as in class studies. What is at stake is a descending scale of contempt and privileges, which also unfolds itself internally among the Dalit castes. Moreover in the studied villages, it was not a simple problematique of high castes against Dalits. As chapter 1.4 will further disclose, those categorised as dominant – or upper castes - in the villages actually rank rather low in the classical caste hierarchy.
None of the Dalits in the study held occupations that were directly related to what Kristeva speaks of as excretory functions of the body. However, it was obvious that the Dalits, as Ambedkar writes, were forced to live in quarters of their own and that this had to do with images of them as being in some sense impure and polluting.

I operationalised ‘social oppression’ as hereditary practises of untouchability by looking at the prevalence of the following indicators:

- endogamy
- spatial segregation
- prohibition of entry
- other types of prohibitions
- atrocities

Whereas it is easy to observe that segregation is a consequence of practises of untouchability, it is more difficult to operationalise and see the outcome of ‘economic oppression’. My path into the extent to which economic relations blocked socioeconomic mobility of Dalits was to look at the prevalence of the following indicators:

- feudal work relations (bonded labour, sharecropping and to some extent ‘Jajmani relations’)
- agricultural wage labour
- non agricultural occupation

Finally, in the case of Dalits who could not be considered at the bottom, I tried to apply a kind of backward looking approach into what had caused the reasonably good socioeconomic position of some of the Dalits. Primarily by listening to the life stories of Dalits I organised these data as impact of the following agents of change:

- the state sector:
  - preferential treatment of Dalits
  - implementation of welfare schemes
  - other types of legislation
- foreign aid
- civil society activities
- other agents of change

My journey from theory to empirical evidence and back again was neither deductive nor totally inductive, but supposedly ‘abductive’. I tried to let the data guide the analysis and as Dorothy Smith recommends be open to how the terrain under analysis was put together - rather than theorize in advance of discovery. (Smith, Dorothy: 63).

**Selection of villages**

Map 1 shows the location of the 5 studied villages.
I used three criteria for selecting the first 3 villages. The first criterion was that there were a high number of Dalits, so that numerical insignificance could be ruled out as a cause of low status. This information was obtained from The District Census Handbook. The second criterion was proximity to a big centre, partly because economic development was believed to spur improvements for the Dalits, partly because I wanted to study the impact of different state-provided services, which are normally biased in favour of areas easily accessible to bureaucrats and technicians (Guhan, S. 1990: 319-320). The last criterion was that proximity to Bangalore also made the villages easier accessible to me.
Yamare and Gopasandra were the first two villages to be selected. Gopasandra was chosen because although very close to Yamare, it in every respect was more backward.

Settahalli was chosen partly because I wanted to study a village from the relatively well studied region Mandya, partly because I had heard that this village had an exceptionally high percentage of educated Dalits and Dalits organised in The Dalitha Sanghasa Samities (D.S.S.). The D.S.S. was at that time by far the strongest Dalit movement in the area.

Before the study of the three first villages was finished, I was recommended by members of D.S.S. to study Junnasandra. Although only 10 kilometers from the modern city of Bangalore, there had recently been both atrocities and murders of Dalits, committed by the local dominant upper caste farmers. For that reason many of the Dalits in the village had become strong supporters of the Dalit movement.

Finally at a late stage of my stay in Karnataka, I decided to study the Bangalore North village, Savukanahalli. I had visited Savukanahalli during the first two weeks of my stay together with a local, primarily Dutch funded NGO called Praxis. The NGO had a Marxist approach to its activities, which among other things implied focussing on Dalits, not as Dalits, but as agricultural labourers as the poorest in the village. I realised that if I also made a thorough study of this village, I could get an insight into the work of an NGO in Savukanahalli as compared to the work of Dalit Sanghasa Samiti in Junnasandra - as well as insight into the application of a class versus a caste approach to village problems of poverty.

Field work methods - The collected data

My primary material comprised of 700 questionnaires with answers that could be coded as 200 variables. Moreover I conducted 70 interviews with villagers and different types of Dalits or non Dalit experts on the Dalit issue. I also collected a considerable amount of poems and documentary material most of which made available by members of D.S.S. in Karnataka, with which I over the 1½ year established a very good relationship.

In all the villages a census of all the Dalit and non Dalit households was made. Then approximately 10 heads of households were selected for in-depth interviews. Those selected for interviews were either, personalities such as the village chairman, Dalit leaders, some who were particularly rich, politically active or in another way exceptional. All the heads of households were then interviewed for a 15 pages long questionnaire. The reason that I wanted answers to the questionnaire from all heads of households, was that I found it difficult to decide the criteria for selecting a representative sample. For good and bad it left me with a tremendous amount of data later to be coded, processed and analysed. The first part of the questionnaire comprised questions meant to reveal economic performance, economic dependency and reception of welfare schemes. The second part was meant to reveal information on caste relations, especially practises of untouchability. The third part had questions concerning organisational issues, like which party the household voted for at the last election. It also comprised questions about attitudes towards the practise of untouchability, the karma doctrine, which they saw as the most influential in the village, who they regarded as the most important champion of the Dalits and towards controversial topics like the Mandal Commission Report and attitudes in the Babri Masjid controversy. The last part of the questionnaire concerned

4 Interviewing everybody for the questionnaire was clearly an unusual thing to do in the very often segregated villages, where people from one caste mostly had no idea of what went on in the other part. Upper caste people did not visit the Dalit colony (ies) and Dalits did not visit the upper caste quarters.
questions on the preference of entertainment, family Gods, favourite film, music and the like, but these answers were not used in my PhD dissertation. To complete the interviews for the questionnaire in a reasonably gentle way, all respondents were finally asked whether certain people had been especially helpful to them and what their main ambition for the future was. Depending on the talkativeness of the respondents the interviews lasted between 1 and 3 hours. As we stayed in the villages for long periods and could continue to revisit people, the percentage of people who responded was close to 100%. Finally, the village material comprised of 40 diaries, a kind of log book written by myself and my 3 assistants.

Part of my documentary material was 70 transcribed interviews and many types of observations. The interviews from the villages were all conducted in Kannada and followed the structure of the questionnaire so that they also contributed a filled out questionnaire. All recorded interviews were translated into a 40 page long written text. The other type of interviews were elite interviews recorded in English and with people like V.P. Singh, former prime minister of India, various national and state ministers, members of the national Parliament from Karnataka, members of Karnataka’s Legislative Assembly, bureaucrats, Commission Chairpersons etc. All of whom were either themselves Dalits or worked for their upward mobility. Dalits, who had converted into Christianity, Islam or Buddhism, and many Dalit activists and poets, were also interviewed. Finally, we often stopped when we encountered interesting people or events like a group of female Dalit sweepers on strike from the north of Karnataka in Cubbon Park, members of the Raiya Sangha making a sit down blockade of the traffic on the road from Bangalore to Mysore, groups of Dalit silk reeilers, sweepers at hotels etc.

Finally, I brought home stacks of poems, reports, articles, archive material on Court cases and other types of documentary material mostly made available by members of Dalit Sanghasa Samiti. As this text is specifically concerned with reporting on socioeconomic changes and non changes, a considerable part of my primary data is not used in this context.

1.4. Defining Dalit – what is the proper label?

In my thesis, I identified 6 different labels that more or less cover the same group of people as Dalits, namely untouchables, scheduled castes, Harijans, outcastes and ex-untouchables. Like the other labels Dalit does not designate a caste, but a name for all impure castes. The even broader caste category ‘The Backward Castes’, which also has different names is the common denominator of Dalits plus some low castes. All the labels are social constructs and it is relatively easy to identify the different interests and perspectives, they represent. For instance the British invented the concept ‘scheduled castes’, because in order to compensate the people they saw as victims of untouchability, they first needed to record them or to make a schedule over them. Gandhi invented the label: ‘Harijan’, meaning God’s children, to express his view that change should not come from the struggle of Dalits, but from a better treatment of Dalits by upper caste members.

As mentioned the label ‘Dalit’ is the preferred label for the Dalit movement, as well as the label preferred in the contemporary discourse of Dalit Solidarity groups in the West.
As mentioned several times there is not one caste called Dalits\(^5\). Like ‘scheduled castes’, untouchables, harijans etc. ‘Dalit’ is a term for a member of all the castes below purity line, at least this is how it is usually understood. Contrary to the other labels, however, the word ‘Dalit’ in reality is more fluent. According to most translations, it means ground down, downtrodden, oppressed. It was first used in journalistic writings in 1931 to connote the Untouchables. Later it was used in the early 1970s, when the Dalit Panthers, a group of young activists and writers from Bombay, started to fight injustices of untouchability (Michael, S.M.: 33). Since then it has gained momentum. Rajashekhkar traces its meaning to Hebrew, where it means ‘broken’. Also B.R. Ambedkhar used the term ‘broken’ in his alternative thesis on the origin of untouchability. Ambedkar’s main point was that the root cause of untouchability lied in a superior society’s contempt and hatred to an inferior society of ‘broken men’, coupled with a close economic dependency of the inferior society on the superior one. Today ‘Dalit’ reflects both approaches: a rejection of the very idea of pollution or impurity or untouchability and a movement working for equality. However, exactly because it implies the more loose condition of simply being underprivileged and deprived of basic rights, and refer to people who are suppressed on account of their lowly birth (Ibid:16), doubts may arise whether the term can include castes above the purity line.

Another complication in terms of defining Dalit as one entity, and distinguishing the group from castes higher in the hierarchy, is that the caste system in South India is less rigid, or differently constructed, than in the North. According to most observers, the caste system is linked to the Aryan invasion of India approximately 1500 years B.C. Dravidians, the original inhabitants of India, withdrew to South India and only slowly adopted the caste system.

Unlike North India there are very few castes that belong to the Brahmin, Khastrya and Vaishya Varnas in South India. Both the dominant farming castes: the Vokkaliga and Lingayats and the Reddies in the Bangalore area belong to the Shudra Varna, the lowest in the hierarchy, just above the purity line. According to some caste researches this ‘short vertical line’, combined with the relatively low number of Brahmans comparatively to North India, has reduced the distance between the upper and the lower Varnas. Whether it has also reduced the distance between the Shudra farmers and the untouchables in the villages is a matter of disagreement among researchers.

Sociologists and anthropologists that do not interpret caste relations as oppressive argue that villages, at least in the part of Karnataka that formerly was the Princely State of Mysore, are exceptionally peaceful. They argue that this could be due to the shorter vertical line and less distance between Shudras and Dalits. Oppression oriented studies, on the contrary, argue that the distance between the Shudra dominant farming castes and the Dalits is as big as elsewhere, and that villages only appear peaceful because the Dalits do not protest.

Another problem which western Dalit solidarity groups do not seem to be occupied with is that even though all Dalit castes are considered below the purity line, they are internally as stratified as the castes above the purity line. In South India, Dalits are often characterised as either right handed or left handed Dalits. The left handed, who undertake the most polluting jobs, are usually very much looked down upon by members of the right handed Dalits. No Dalits in the villages I studied called themselves ‘Dalits’. A few named themselves as Harijans or S.C.s (the abbreviation for scheduled castes), but the most usual answer was: “I am an A.K.”

\(^5\) Even people who know India do not always know this. At The European South Asia Conference in Manchester in 2008, I heard a participant in a literary panel ask ‘Is there a caste called Dalit?’.
abbreviation for Adi Karnatakas. Of the five villages I studied in dept only Savukanahalli had left handed Dalits, namely Madigas. The famous British anthropologist, Thurstone, wrote in the early 20th Century:

“Madigas are the great leather-working caste of the Telugu country\(^6\). They live in hamlets at a respectable distance from the villages of the caste people, by whom they are greatly despised. Their habits are squalid in the extreme, and the odor of a Madiga hamlet is revolting. They perform all the lowest kinds of services for the caste people, especially bearing burdens and working in leather. They take charge of the ox and the buffalo, remove the skin and tan and eat the loathsome carcase, which makes them specially despised and renders their touch polluting.” (Thurstone, E. 1909: 308).

The majority of Dalits in my study, the Adi Karnatakas, have a totally different look and are apparently less despised by members of upper castes. According to Upadhyay, 40 years back Adi Karnatakas (meaning ‘the original inhabitants of Karnataka’) were called Holeyars (Upadhyay, H.C., 1991). Karnataka State Gazetteer writes ‘Holeyar’ is derived from ‘hole’, which means both ‘pollution’ and ‘field’ referring to their main occupation as untouchable field workers. Elsewhere distinctions are made between Holeyars and Adikarnatas, but both clearly belong to the right-handed section of the Dalits, also called the Balagis (the word for ‘right’ in Kannada).

Apart from the subdivision between right and left handed Dalits, the Adi Karnatakas in the 5 villages differed among themselves, in terms of the traditional hereditary service functions (locally called Jajmani functions) as Neeraganties, Talwars and Thoties. Traditionally Thoties were those Dalits who did the menial jobs, whereas Talwars were learned book keepers and Neeraganties distributed water for irrigation. That the Neeraganti job in some villages was done by other caste groups could be an indication that there is less distance between at least this group of Dalits, and the low castes as elsewhere in India. Another illustration of this perhaps was the fact that one of the ‘low castes’, the Tigalis in Yamare, did not mind doing business with Dalits or even work for them.

In spite of the fact that the locally dominant farmers belonged to the Shudra Varna, for the sake of simplicity, I chose to categorise these farmers as ‘upper castes’. Figure 3 below illustrates which castes in the studied villages, I categorized as upper castes, low castes and Dalits.

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\(^6\) Telegu is the official language of Andhra Pradesh.
Figure 3. My classification of castes in upper castes, low castes and Dalits in the studied villages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Upper castes</th>
<th>Lower castes</th>
<th>Dalits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Yamare</strong></td>
<td>Brahmins</td>
<td>Thigalas</td>
<td>Adi Karnatakas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reddies</td>
<td>Gonigas</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Acharyas</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Bhovis</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Gopasandra</strong></td>
<td>Reddies</td>
<td>Banajigas</td>
<td>Adi Karnatakas</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Acharyas</td>
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<td>Bajantris</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Baste</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Junnasandra</strong></td>
<td>Reddies</td>
<td>Gonigas</td>
<td>Adi Karnatakas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lingayats</td>
<td>Bajantris</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Settahalli</strong></td>
<td>Urs</td>
<td>Kurbas</td>
<td>Adi Karnatakas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Acharyas</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Savakanahalli</strong></td>
<td>Brahmin</td>
<td>Kurbas</td>
<td>Adi Karnatakas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Vokkaliga</td>
<td>Nayaks</td>
<td>Malas Madigas</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Acharyas</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Bajantris</td>
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<td>Edigas</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1.5. Where in India: Profile of the studied villages

As mentioned, one reason that I wanted to study caste in Karnataka was that unlike other places in India the issue of caste was very visible here. That however, did not make things less complicated. At the time of my study Karnataka had approximately 38 million inhabitants. The state was created in 1956 when the Princely State of Mysore merged with parts of Hyderabad Presidency, Bombay Presidency, Madras Presidency and Coorg. What was created was a new postcolonial state, called Mysore, until Devraj Urs in 1973 changed its name to Karnataka.

Karnataka is the home of classic anthropological village studies by M.N. Srinivas (1952, 1962, 1966, 1967 and 1974) and T. Scarlett Epstein (1962, 1973), and macro social and political studies of the state structure by Atul Kohli (1987) and James Manor (1989). Also R.K. Narayan (the novelist) often referred to as India’s Graham Greene, like Srinivas, himself a Brahmin, drew inspiration from the Mysore surroundings to his peculiar characters in his world famous novels. All these studies depict Karnataka as an unusual peaceful, democratic and cohesive Indian state. Almost as a model state for India, not least due to the interpretation of social relationships at the village level as very cohesive. Besides the argument that Karnataka is cohesive at the village level, Manor argues that the history of the state of Karnataka, especially the former Princely State of Mysore, is a story of a benevolent welfare state. It provided both welfare schemes to its citizens and also encouraged, sometimes even co-opted many social movements, including the many Backward Class movements.
campaigning for more benefits in the 20. Century. A last explanation to the apparent peacefulness of the state is that Karnataka/Mysore has not had many discontinuities or ruptures in its social history. In spite of changing governments there has been a remarkable continuity of state policies.

Of the villages I studied, **Settahalli** was the only one placed at the core of what once was the enlightened Princely State of Mysore. Although chosen because rumours said that several Dalit activists lived there, it did appear exactly as peaceful and beautiful as one imagines the villages Epstein and Srinivas have written about. Canal water from the K.R.S. dam had turned the area into a fertile region, where depending on the season, sugar cane or rice fields dominated the rural scenery. The famous, nicely decorated Mandya carts were seen everywhere in the region. They were either placed near the houses in the villages or loaded with sugar cane and steadily pulled by buffaloes or bullocks in small convoys on their way to one of the cooperative sugar factories or sweet-smelling jaggery distilleries found everywhere in Mandya District.

**Photo 1. Mandya cart loaded with sugar cane**

Most of the villages looked well kept, orderly and prosperous without being showy. Many houses were of red brick and had red tile roofs. There was hay on the curved and often asphalted village streets. Banyan and coconut trees flanked the roads. There were schools, ‘hotels’, temples and often cooperative societies in the villages. Busses ran frequently. The area indeed looked very peaceful, public service functioned - and Settahalli was no exception.

The three villages **Yamare, Gopasandra and Junnasandra** are at the most 30 km from the boundaries of Bangalore. Yamare and Gopasandra are situated in Anekal Taluk, which in 1986 was incorporated into Bangalore Urban District. Due to uncertainty as to whether the area should be included into Bangalore Municipal Corporation no elections had been held since 1987 in the Taluk. The former Panchayat chairman had no formal power, leaving the villages in a political power vacuum.

Both Yamare and Junnasandra are either at or very close to the Sarjapur-Bangalore main road, whereas **Gopasandra** is more interior and in every respect more backward. In order to catch a bus to Bangalore, most villagers in Gopasandra walked app. 2.5 km on a dirt road. Unlike Settahalli,
only 17% of Gopasandras’ area was irrigated. Rice was grown only on the land that could be irrigated. In the remaining 83% of the land, ragi, a low yielding fine-grained millet was the dominant crop\textsuperscript{7}. Normally, ragi was grown in intercropping with pulses like horse gram and local gram and with mustard seeds or jowar (maize). Some Gopasandra farmers with excess land had started to plant eucalyptus and casurine trees, harming the water resources. Finally, quite a few people in Gopasandra were engaged in sericulture.

Although only 5 km away Yamare was in many respects very different from Gopasandra. As the village map reveals it was drastically cut by the asphalted Bangalore-Sarjapur road to the south. Busses, trucks, bikes, mopeds and bicycles passed the village in great numbers on this road every day, cars and bullock carts to a lesser extent. The express bus from Bangalore to Anekal, the Taluk headquarter, passed five to six times a day.

\textsuperscript{7} The villagers were fond of ragi, which was sown in July and harvested from December to February as it can grow with very little rain. We were told that ragi is more nutritious than rice, but literally impossible to procure even in cheap, small town restaurants, because of its low prestige as the poor’s food.
The total area of Yamare was app 50% more than the area of Gopasandra. Of this land, however only app.10% was irrigated. Yamare used to have 2 tanks. In 1991 the biggest of them had totally dried out, because the nearby private Kwality Brick Factory had drilled a huge pit close to it, and because the richest farmers had planted eucalyptus trees and drilled private tanks. Some of the irrigated land in Yamare was used for garden cultivation: tomatoes, cabbage, beans, lady fingers and grapes, probably because the vegetable markets in Dommasandra, Sarjapur and Bangalore were relatively easy to access.

Junnasandra was closest to Bangalore and situated in The Bangalore South Taluk. Unlike the other apparently peaceful villages, Junnasandra was totally conflicted. In 1984 the local big farmer had attacked the Dalit colony. The conflict that had built up over a long period, broke out because an agricultural labourer had refused to work due to a health problem. He was beaten up by the farmer’s men. In a state of drunkenness some Dalit youth the following day shouted at a gang of Reddies from the nearby village Halanayakanahalli, who had to pass the centre of Junnasandra on their way to the bus.

The following day, one of the Dalit boys was beaten up by Reddy youths. Reacting on this infuriated Dalit boys retaliated by throwing stones after Reddies that had to pass the Dalit area on their way to Halanayakanahalli (see map 3). A few hours later, 300-400 men in 4 tractors arrived in the village and beat up all the Dalits, who had not gone to work in the morning. They cut the arms, legs and faces of the Dalits with coconut and harvesting knives. Those who could walk fled the village screaming and after some hours gathered in front of the parliament building in Bangalore, demanding help to the wounded and police protection of their village.
Finally, **Savukanahalli**, was situated in Devanahally Taluk, Bangalore Rural District. Savukanahalli was fairly close to the taluk headquarter, Devanahalli and not far from an asphalted road. It was the largest of the studied villages with 164 households. This village was dryer and in that sense very different, especially from Settahalli. It appeared less cohesive and the Dalit colony more pessimistic and docile than the other villages, even Junnasandra that at least had many well educated and protesting Dalit activists. We did not come across a single engaged Dalit in Savukanahalli. We did not see any traces of welfare provisions from the state of Karnataka. A dairy had been built by German development aid, however only the dominant Vokkaliga farmers benefitted from it, and it certainly did not affect the relative strength of castes in the village. If it did, it was not to the benefit of the Dalits. On the other hand an Indian/Dutch NGO called Praxis worked in the Dalit colony. However, none of the dominant farmers had heard of their activities.

Altogether the 5 studied villages represented very different scenarios. The next chapter will discuss what I found in the villages in terms of social and economic oppression and its implications for Dalit upward mobility.

**Chapter 2. Village findings**

2.1. Social oppression: Prevalence of practices of untouchability in the 5 villages

As mentioned in the chapter on theoretical approaches, practises of untouchability strike at the heart of the Dalit problem. Since it stems from century old institutionalised traditions, it is not surprising that there are several interpretations of it. In accordance with the conflict perspective I have analyzed it as oppressive, as obstacles to ‘freedom of the individual’. The Ambedkar stream of thinking emphasises that social relations, i.e. practises of untouchability are basically suppressive, whereas a Marxist approach emphasises that economic exploitation underpins the social phenomena.

The following pages display what I found in terms of caste based separations of everyday life. I will later engage in the debate on the extent to which these types of caste separations contributed to ‘keeping’ Dalits at the bottom. As mentioned on page 11 I explored the prevalence of social oppression in terms of endogamy, spatial segregation, prohibition of entry into temples, eating places, streets and houses of the castes higher in the hierarchy.

**Endogamy**

The practice of endogamy is the most crucial aspect of caste. If a woman got pregnant with someone from another caste, the whole caste system would collapse. The issue of endogamy touches upon both narrow and broad definitions of untouchability and puts gender to the front of the debate. According to beliefs in India, women are carriers of defilement in situations of menstruation, birth and death. Consequently they are isolated from others during menstruation and after delivery and expected to live in celibacy after the death of their husbands. According to some Indian and western feminists, the deeper reason for seclusion of women in these situations is that their sexuality is considered dangerous. This is further tied to the importance of endogamy for preservation of clean castes. It is through the doctrine of blood that the caste hierarchy is preserved. “The purity of women has a centrality in Brahminical patriarchy, simply because the very purity of caste is contingent upon it” writes Chakrawarti (Chakrawarti, Uma 1993: 579). According to Chakrawarti this notion of women as the pivot point for maintaining the socio-religious hierarchy of caste, also accounts for the pre-puberty marriages in particular of upper caste girls.
Endogamy is exclusive in the sense that it rules out the possibility for a person of either sex to win upward mobility through marriage. That of course does not exclude rape. The consequence of a Dalit woman being raped by an upper caste man is not very problematic, whereas a Dalit man raping a high caste girl is disastrous and most likely will result in killing of both the man and the woman. As far as I could make out, caste related endogamy was practised among all the 700 households in the five villages, sometimes even among subgroups of castes.

In Gopasandra and in Yamare, where all the Dalit heads of households named themselves as Adi Karnatakas (or A.K.s), they further differentiated in terms of their former Jajmani occupations as Neeragantis, Talwars or Thoties. We found that endogamy was practised among the Thoties, considered lowest in the Jajmani hierarchies, whereas Talwars and Neeraganties could exchange brides.

In Yamare we were told that earlier intermarriage between the three Jajmani service specialists was strictly forbidden, but nowadays in both villages only Thoties, the lowest group, married amongst themselves. In Junnasandra where all the Dalits claimed to be descendants from the first family to settle there 150 years ago, Dalits only married among themselves. In Settahalli the 103 Adi Karnataka families were numerically the biggest caste in the village. Unlike Dalits in the villages close to Bangalore only 6 of the Dalit households identified with the old Jajmani labels in Settahalli. All the six were Thoties. The Neeraganti work, which still, due to canal irrigation, was very important in Settahalli, was undertaken by a non Dalit family from another village. Endogamy was practised among the A.K.s, but I was not able to reveal whether there was a subdivision among Thoties and the other Dalit households. Finally, in Savukanahalli a majority of 47 households were Madigas, 4 were Malas and only two households belonged to the Adi Karnataka caste. Whereas both Malas and AKs belonged to the right handed castes, the Madigas were the only families in the study who were described as left handed Dalits. As a precondition for upholding separate caste identifications, intermarriage between the three Dalit sub castes obviously was forbidden.

Spatial segregation

The segregated dwelling pattern of villages is perhaps more than anything else a manifestation that untouchables must be kept out of sight and touch, be rejected and ignored as none existing. Keeping defiling Untouchables out of high caste peoples’ sight, is also the principle behind many types of prohibitions of entry imposed on Untouchables. Dalits are neither allowed to enter the streets of the upper castes, their houses and certainly not the inner parts of them. They cannot enter their temples, cannot use the same bathing ghats, cafés or tea stalls. Since water gets polluted when a Dalit draws water from it, Dalits also cannot use the same wells as the upper castes people. How was spatial segregation represented in the 5 villages?

All the village maps clearly demonstrate that segregated dwelling patterns existed in all the studied villages. Perhaps the consistent physical segregation was the most distinct social similarity between the villages, and the most prominent illustration of social exclusion. All castes lived physically segregated in all five villages. Moreover, Yamare, Gopasandra and Settahalli had not one, but two Dalit colonies: typically the old colony and the new ‘free site’ colony. Apart from Gopasandra the new free site colony was attached to the old one, most often on the other side of a street. In Gopasandra the new free site colony was separated from the old Dalit colony, in a way so that Dalit members who wanted to visit relatives in the new colony had to pass some of the big Reddy farm houses (see map 4).
In Yamare, the different physical structure, with a much more clearly demarcated Reddy street, to some extent, accounted for a very strict prohibition against Dalits passing through the Reddy street. They were both prohibited individually from walking this way to the bus, tea stall, or the dairy or as a group in any type of procession. Not even the most educated and well off Dalits, whose houses were closest to the Reddy Street, chose to use this route. Instead they walked straight to the main road, where there were no established dirt roads or paths. By contrast, there appeared to be a belt of app. 50 meters along the main road where everybody mixed, irrespective of caste. While we conducted the fieldwork in Yamare, a drama group performed in a tent here, and people of all castes waited for the bus or simply walked around.

Also Junnasandra, Setthahalli and Savukanahalli had clearly demarcated caste dwelling areas. Savukanahalli was the most caste segregated village of them all. Not only did Dalits live away from the other castes. Different Dalit castes also lived separately (see map 5). Except for the arrack shop and the Brahmin ‘hotel’, the Dalit colonies were almost like a village of its own. Either one entered the Dalit part, like when I visited with the N.G.O. Praxis, or the Vokkaliga part.
The reason might be that the majority of Dalits in Savakanahalli were left handed Madigas, and thus more despised by members of other castes than the Adi Karnatakas in the other villages. They were less educated, looked poorer, their streets were dirtier and they appeared more slow and extinct than Dalits in the other villages. Until the Marxist oriented N.G.O. Praxis had encouraged them to refuse to undertake unclean work they had performed all the untouchable work in the village, including cattle shed cleaning.

As mentioned, Settahalli in many respects lived up to the reputation of Mandya villages as peaceful and harmonious looking, however, dwelling was as segregated here as in the other villages. The upper caste Urs main streets which took a sharp turn to the right when entering the village, was flanked by veranda houses with coloured and nicely carved pillars and eaves. At the end of the street was a huge house belonging to the richest Urs joint family in the village. Almost as a fortification this house appeared to close the Urs Street and took much of the immediate attention from the other houses. A small curved road tied the low caste Kurba colony to the Urs Street. Kurba houses behind the Urs Street were equally coloured and well kept, but usually smaller than the Urs houses. The Dalit colony, finally, was a mixed habitation. There were a few nice old Dalit houses, other houses had nice factory made red bricks and wooden window panels. Many of these houses were being extended or under construction. In this part of the village it was very crowded with narrow, seemingly randomly winding lanes. At the end of a right angled Dalit street, however, one found very poor mud houses, with hardly any indoor equipment. This part of the street ended up in a newly allotted ‘free site’, which was not yet inhabited.
Map 6. Setthalli
In all villages members of the different castes stayed in their own hamlets and had as little as possible to do with members of other castes. Members of one caste did not just walk through the streets of another caste. Only in Gopasandra I heard of a Dalit festival procession to the honour of Ganesh, passing the Reddy Street.

**Prohibition of entry**

In the case of either working or making a work arrangement, and on a few other occasions there were exceptions from prohibitions of Dalit individuals entering upper caste houses. In this respect Gopasandra appeared to have the loosest boundaries. Not only did Dalits watch TV in the Reddy houses on occasion, when it was considered of national (common) importance, like the funeral ceremony of Indira and Rajiv Gandhi. Several Dalit children and women also worked daily on Reddy verandas cutting mulberry leaves and feeding silk worms (see photo 7). In Yamare a Dalit man could reach the veranda to make a work arrangement, but not go further into the house of a Reddy family.

In Savukanahalli we once watched a Vokkaliga farmer enter the house of Dalits to make a work arrangement, but never the other way round. To some surprise the most strictly upheld prohibition of entry was practised in Settahalli. The Urs families\(^8\) here were very prejudiced towards the Dalits. Contrary to Gopasandra, the wealthiest Urs silk rearers had constructed separate houses for their Dalit labourers to avoid pollution of their household. The main Urs family even hesitated to show us their house, because as we were told, they knew we had also visited the Dalit colony. The big Urs house was also the only house, where my well educated and nicely dressed Dalit assistant refused to go inside the Urs houses to interview (see map 7).

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\(^8\) Of the farming castes I encountered in the villages, the Urs caste, as belonging to the Khastrya varna, was the highest placed caste in the caste hierarchy. They have contributed many important state politicians and are usually known for their benevolence and enlightenment.
In all the villages there was a total prohibition of Dalit entry into temples belonging to other castes. In Gopasandra there were even separate temples for the Thoti sub-group of Dalits. Eating and drinking with Dalits comprised a special problem. In Yamare there was a small tea stall at the road side (‘free zone’) and as far as we could make out Dalits were not prohibited from using it. Of the other villages only Savukanahalli had a small restaurant/‘hotel’. This hotel had recently been opened by a Brahmin couple from South Canara (Mygind Madsen, Aase 1996: 163). It was placed at the main entry to the village, close to the work fields and also close to the Dalit colonies. The Brahmin couple was isolated in Savukanahalli, but their presence had an integrating impact on social relations. By establishing the ‘hotel’ at that particular place (see map 5), it had become a place where agricultural workers of all caste met for lunch or for a cup of tea or coffee, even the left-handed Madigas came. Although, of course, they had to keep their cups and plates in separate baskets and clean them themselves. Settahalli did not have a public ‘hotel’, but the same procedure of keeping Dalit cups and plates in separate baskets was found in several villages I visited in
‘peaceful’ Mandya, including the village, Wangala, where Scarlet Epstein conducted her famous village studies. There were no ‘hotels’ in Gopasandra, but when I went to the field with a Reddy farmer and three Dalit workers, I observed how the Dalits sat outside the shelter, where lunch prepared by the wife of a Reddy farmer was consumed by others, including myself and my assistant (see photo 2).

Photo 2. Field lunch in a Gopasandra field

As mentioned, the traditional belief is, that water gets polluted if touched by a Dalit. As far as we could make out the separate caste dwelling areas had their own wells, except in Gopasandra where one of the hand pumps were used by both the poorest Reddes (who could not afford private hand pumps) and by the Dalits, apparently without causing much trouble.

Traditionally, other types of prohibitions to Dalits were: prohibitions against wearing sandals and nice garment, women were not allowed to wear sari blouses, prohibitions against riding a bicycle, to sit in front of an upper caste person etc. It also was not allowed to address a Dalit with the respectful ‘apnu’, but by the degrading ‘tum’, usually used when speaking to a child. Only the last two of these old types of prohibitions were practised in the villages, I studied.

The sentiment behind practises of untouchability is deep contempt towards the caste members considered to be polluting. One thing is to take part in institutionalised practice, another is the extent to which sentiments of contempt have internalised in daily thinking. The contempt was normally expressed in the villages as dislikes of ‘those people’ seen as dirty and lazy. As far as I could make out, the greatest contempt towards Dalits in the villages was expressed by members of the only Khastrya Varna in the study, the Urs community in Settahalli. At the same time Settahalli was also the village where Dalits comprised the majority, were best educated and at least some of them were rather assertive.

Contempt was also clearly expressed downwards within the Dalit community, as prejudices from the side of the right handed Dalits, especially the Adi Karnatakas, towards the left handed Dalits.
Some of the caste researchers to the right of the caste discourse continuum, have interpreted this as a Dalit replication of high caste order.

Traditionally, **atrocities** took place in cases of individual or more seldom group violations of prohibitions of different kind. Traditionally, the punishment was meant to remind the offender of his place through practises like forced eating of human excreta or being stripped and forced to parade nakedly in the village streets. Violation of rules of endogamy was torture and killing. Had more people protested, punishment would be killing, raping and burning down huts, with or without open sanctions by village councils. Contemporary atrocities reflect the early stage of a new time. Like in the case of the village, **Junnasandra**, atrocities often involve a provocative action of young male Dalits angry over what they see as unfair treatment. Other atrocities took place if high caste youngsters were provoked by a new assertiveness and demonstration of wealth, such as wearing cowboy pans or arm watches. In the studied villages, apart from Junnasandra which has a long history of atrocities, we did not hear about atrocities against Dalits in the other villages. Maybe because no Dalits violated caste rules about prohibition of entry and endogamy. However, it was quite clear that especially the most educated and organised Dalits were inspired by the atrocities or fights between upper caste gangs elsewhere, and reacted with some kind of assertiveness.

### 2.2. Economic oppression: Prevalence of economic dependency relations between Dalits and members of higher castes

As mentioned on page 11 I explored economic oppression by looking at the prevalence of different types of work relations. Whereas prevalence of practices of untouchability could be seen through many lenses, according to my understanding, the prevalence of economic oppression is best understood through conflict oriented lenses as arrangements through which the employer extracts surplus from the labourer. The studied work relations were bonded labour; sharecropping, Jajmani relationships and wage labour.

In theory a bonded labourer and his family was the property of the farmer. They had to work when, where and with what the farmer told them to. Mostly they were not paid at all and there was no way they could escape their destiny. Bonded labour was abolished in 1974, but still existed to some extent in the 5 villages. A few families worked in the same way as their families had worked for generations, others worked on more temporary terms, but more under bonded labour conditions than under ‘free’ agricultural labourer conditions. Especially in Savukanahalli, many Dalit girls worked in the houses of the Vokkaliga farmers with everything they were ordered to in return for food and shelter. 48 % of the Dalits, a figure which was close to Karnataka and India’s average, reported in our study that presently they were agricultural labourers, but 65 % of them had been bonded labourers earlier in their lives. The few who were still bonded labourers and those agricultural labourers who had once been bonded labourers, clearly were the poorest in the village in terms of annual income and ownership of consumer durables.

Sharecropping, the Indian version of tenancy, according to which the labourer brings all the equipment, cultivate the soil and leave either half, a third or two thirds of the crop to the owner of the land, is usually considered a better arrangement for the worker than bonded labour. Many Dalits in my study called themselves farmers. Some of them had been given ownership rights when sharecropping was officially abolished in 1974, or they still in reality worked as sharecroppers, locally called ‘Vara’ for upper caste farmers. After the reform, Vara continued to be practised in
villages, but increasingly became fixed to the crop rather than to the land to avoid tenant’ claims of property rights. Moreover contracts were mostly verbal. Contracts could also relate to cattle, sheep and goats. Usually it was the poorest Dalits that undertook cow and sheep rearing under Vara conditions. Vara was also practised extensively in sericulture especially in Gopasandra, where the landowners supplied land and irrigation and the tenant a bullock, fertilizer, mulberry plants, eggs and other equipment. At the end of the season, income from sale of cocoons was shared equally between rearer and land owner. Likewise dry land ragi was cultivated under Vara conditions. Dalits who called themselves farmers, but who in reality were sharecroppers had a better economic performance than the agricultural labourers. That was probably because their job represented a higher degree of security, than those who worked as agricultural labourers.

Finally, as already spoken of, I encountered three groups of traditional service specialists, undertaking so called Jajmani functions in all the 5 villages for other caste farmers: Neeraganties, Talwars and Thoties. Of them the Thoties had the worst economic performance.

30 % of the Dalit heads of households said that they were farmers, and although some of them were sharecroppers, there were also Dalits that earned their living from land they owned themselves. That was especially prevalent in Settahalli. 86 % of the Dalits there owned land, a much higher figure than in the other villages, leaving only 14 % of the Dalits landless. Moreover, whereas Dalits in the other villages mostly had 1 acre or less dry land (typically distributed to them as compensation for the abolition of bonded labour, sharecropping or Jajmani relation) in Settahalli 46 % of the Dalits had more than 1 acre wet land. Mandya District, where Settahalli is placed, is known traditionally to have had pockets of affluent Dalits. However the prime reason, that so many Dalits owned land in Settahalli, was the Scheduled Caste Special Component Scheme, which was introduced in Settahalli in 1984. This scheme contained a lift irrigation programme, meant to irrigate 75 acres of dry land for sericulture purposes. As 75 % of the benefits from the scheme were meant to benefit the Dalits, the lift facilities were purposely placed in an area only surrounded by Dalit land. In connection to the lift, four wells had been drilled of which two functioned at the time of my study. There is no doubt that this development project, earmarked for the Dalits, benefitted in particular Dalit land owners. In 1991 the wealthiest of them were in a position to buy up land, primarily from Kurbas, belonging to the low caste group, seldomly from the Urs caste.

Even though many Dalits were not engaged in any traditional economic work relation with the upper castes, most of them still depended on the village farmers. The only ones, who were not in any way economically dependent on the upper caste farmers were the 9 % Dalits, corresponding to 30 heads of households who were employed in non agricultural occupation in the public sector outside the village. The majority of the 30 had by far the best economic conditions, indicating that having ties broken to the upper caste village farmers had a positive impact on socioeconomic mobility.
2.3. Economic conditions of Dalits

Whereas chapter 2.1 and 2.2 referred to data of a relational character, this chapter concentrates on attributional data, such as ownership of land, income and possession of assets. Such data gives information on economic welfare. Whereas possession of assets was easy to check through observations during the interviews, both information on ownership of land and income was relatively unreliable as there were vested interests of different sorts in not informing correctly. However, again I greatly benefitted on the ‘reliability side’ from staying continuously over several months in the villages.

Data on education could also have been part of the presentation of welfare data, however, I have decided to present information on education in chapter 3 on interventions.

Apart from Setthalli, where Dalits owned enough land to make a living, Dalits in the other villages either owned very little land or nothing at all. In Gopasandra for instance 63% of the Dalits owned land, but half of them less than 1 acre. Only 6% of the Dalit households owned between 1 and 2.5 acres. All the land owned by Dalits in Gopasandra was dry land. Neither the Dalits nor low caste landowners had access to wet land, whereas half the Reddies owned irrigated land. Both tradition and modernity favoured the Reddies. As revealed in many village studies, the traditional Neeraganti management practices of tank water highly favoured the big landowners, who not only had their land close to the water resources, but also influenced the Neeraganties to allocate a larger amount of water to their fields. The gradual decline in tank water in Gopasandra reinforced the biased access to water in favour of the big farmers. When private wells started to be drilled, only the richest farmers could afford the drilling. In 1991 all the functioning wells in Gopasandra belonged to Reddies. Two families even owned two wells. Moreover the biggest Reddy farmers had started to cultivate the fertile (dried up) tank bed, illegally. At the time of my study, the tank bed by far was the most important place for paddy cultivation in Gopasandra, and the main part of it was cultivated by the three biggest farmers, including two factional leaders. The son of a former leader, who was the first to drill a well and the first to illegally encroach tank land, introduced sericulture 20 years ago after drilling the well. In 1991 more than half of Gopasandra’s households were engaged in silk rearing, and many more in cutting the mulberry leaves and feeding the worms. When irrigated, there were up to six crops of mulberry, and the profit from selling the cocoons was considerably higher than the profit gained from three crops of paddy. The sericulture boom, however, reintroduced sharecropping in Gopasandra and primarily improved the economic position of the owner of the land. The benefit to the Dalit sharecroppers was that at least they had work all year round.

The same pattern repeated itself in the remaining villages. Except for Sellahalli, it was the upper caste Reddy or Vokkaliga farmers who had the biggest plots of land, which was often irrigated, whereas Dalit landowners had small, very seldomly irrigated plots of land.

In terms of income, self informed data on yearly income was not a reliable indicator of wealth and status as most people had an interest in underplaying their actual income in order to benefit from welfare schemes. To compensate for this bias, I compared self-informed information on income with other types of information. For instance, I made out a standard for the cash equivalent of cultivating one acre of different types of crops. Still it was very difficult to cross check information on land. In a few cases I was unable to make an estimate and decided to exclude the information from the data proceedings. Income deriving from work of all household members living at home was included. More than one third of the Dalits and low caste households earned less than what at
the time officially was stipulated as the poverty line, which was 4.800 Rs a year. Only 8% of the upper castes in Gopasandra earned less than 4.800 Rs a year.

In all the villages, the upper castes as a group had the highest income, but there were also poor members of the upper castes earning less than 4.800 Rs in all of the villages. In the village Yamare for instance 94% of the upper caste households earned more than 4.800 Rs and 20% of them more than 25.000 Rs, but 6% earned less than 4.800 Rs as compared to 28% of the Dalits.

As mentioned in comparison with income, possession of assets was rather easy to check by observation. In general, members of the upper castes owned better houses and possessed more consumer goods and agricultural assets than members of the other castes. For example, in Gopasandra 37% of the Reddies owned their own TV set, whereas no Dalits had a TV set. One Dalit factory worker had a moped, whereas 10 Reddies had one. 28 Reddy families had furniture in their houses whereas all others managed with mats only. From the other side of the spectre one Reddy family, 5 low caste households and 10 Dalit families had neither radio, tape recorder, moped, bicycle, wall clocks or watches in their households. In terms of agricultural assets expensive objects such as bullocks, bullock carts, pump sets and on a few occasions a tractor were almost exclusively in the hand of the dominant upper caste farmers. The few exceptions were easily explainable. Those Dalits who worked under a tenancy contract possessed both bullock and plough, because according to the Vara agreement, it was they who should provide that. In the Bangalore area quite a few Dalits also owned a cow, which they had obtained through an Integrated Rural Development Project (IRDP) loan. As observed by others, the Mandya and Mysore area is an interesting mixture of new and old. Almost all farmers use chemical fertilizer and high yielding varieties, whereas the level of mechanization is very low. Very few had tractors, and the locally made simple iron plough was the most important agricultural equipment. In Gopasandra, for instance, 28 Reddy households had an iron plough against only two Dalit households.

Finally according to The District Census Handbook from 1981, all the studied villages were recorded as electrified. However we found that many families had no electricity in their houses. In Gopasandra 46% of the Dalit houses had no electricity, but also a few low caste and Reddy houses had no electricity.

Table 1 reveals that income wise, the non agriculturally occupied in the public sector was the occupational group with the highest income.
Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Below poverty line</th>
<th>Above poverty line</th>
<th>Row total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Up to 2.500 Rs</td>
<td>2.501-4.800 Rs</td>
<td>4.801-10.000 Rs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farmers</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agricultural labourers</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-agriculturally occupied in the public sector</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-agriculturally occupied in the private sector</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artisans</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small business</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pensionsholders and the like</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Priests</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing cases: 29</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

47 % (20 heads of households) of the non-agriculturally occupied heads of households in the public sector earned 25,000 Rs a year or more. In order to have a more reliable wealth and poverty indicator I constructed a wealth and poverty indicator comprising of income and ownership of 5 or more consumer durables. As table 2 shows, it is equally clear that the non-agriculturally occupied in the public sector comprised both the richest and the least poor of the occupational groups.
Table 2

Percentage of heads of households from different occupational groups earning at least 25,000 Rs and owning at least 5 consumer durables. % of row total, absolute figures in brackets

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator of wealth</th>
<th>Indicator of poverty</th>
<th>Total cases</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Earning at least 25,000 Rs and owning at least 5 consumer durables</td>
<td>Earning less than 4,000 Rs and owning no consumer durables</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-agriculturally occupied in the public sector</td>
<td>29 % (12)</td>
<td>5 % (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farmers</td>
<td>4 % (11)</td>
<td>4 % (11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small business</td>
<td>5 % (1)</td>
<td>5 % (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-agriculturally occupied in the private sector</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artisans</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>6 % (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pensionholders or “no work”</td>
<td>4 % (1)</td>
<td>23 % (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agricultural labourers</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>10 % (20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Priests</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing cases: 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total N = 616</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

9 % of the Dalits compared to 4 % of the upper castes and 5 % of the lower castes were non agriculturally occupied in the public sector (Mygind Madsen, Aase 1996: section 2, table 7.1).

The most remarkable result of the quantitative part of the study was that when data were broken down, it became clear, as shown in Table 3, that Yamare had an exceptionally high percentage of Dalits engaged in the non agriculturally public sector. This was both the case, when one compared Dalits in the other villages and when one compared Dalits with upper castes. It also had a relatively higher percentage of Dalits earning 25,000 Rs or more a year (see table 4).
Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Dalit heads of households</th>
<th>Upper caste heads of households</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Yamare</strong></td>
<td>19 % (14)</td>
<td>8 % (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gopasandra</strong></td>
<td>5 % (2)</td>
<td>2 % (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Junnasandra</strong></td>
<td>13 % (7)</td>
<td>29 % (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Settahalli</strong></td>
<td>5 % (5)</td>
<td>3 % (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Savakanahalli</strong></td>
<td>9 % (2)</td>
<td>4 % (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>All villages</strong></td>
<td>9 % (30)</td>
<td>4 % (8)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Dalit heads of households</th>
<th>Upper caste heads of households</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Yamare</strong></td>
<td>14 % (9)</td>
<td>20 % (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gopasandra</strong></td>
<td>-</td>
<td>24 % (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Junnasandra</strong></td>
<td>8 % (5)</td>
<td>7 % (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Settahalli</strong></td>
<td>9 % (9)</td>
<td>20 % (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Savakanahalli</strong></td>
<td>2 % (2)</td>
<td>21 % (10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>All villages</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In absolute figures that meant that there were as many rich Dalits in Yamare as Reddies, a fact that affected social life in the village in different ways. There was also a relatively high percentage of rich Dalits (in income) in Settahalli, but here the Dalits were rich because of the irrigated land they had received by the Special Component Plan Welfare Scheme (see page 34).

Two very important lessons can be drawn from these two findings. In both cases independence from the local upper caste farmers for work and credit clearly had had a positive impact in terms of improving the material conditions for the Dalits. In both cases state supported programmes had been the prime driver of change. In the Settahalli case the Special Component Scheme had been decisive. In Yamare, good Dalit performance must be seen as a consequence of the policy of preferential treatment to education and to jobs in the nationalised big industries in Bangalore and of course the fact that these factories were relatively easy to access from Yamare.

The fact that individual Dalits on the economic dimension in this way could challenge the traditional Reddy elite in Yamare and the Kurbas in Settahalli, however, did not at this stage of developments appear to have changed attitudes and different types of practices of untouchability in the two villages. As mentioned in chapter 2.1 the biggest Urs family in Setthalli only allowed Dalits to enter the silk rearing house through a separate entrance and one of the richest Dalit factory
workers in Yamare did not want to challenge the practise of not passing through the Reddy Street when pulling his motorbike to the asphalted road to Bangalore.

2.4. Dalits – not always at the bottom

Chapter 2.1 revealed that most Dalits at the time of the study were still exposed to social oppression expressed as practises of untouchability, although there were a few rather important exceptions. Chapter 2.2 revealed that in terms of economic oppression, the majority of Dalits depended on upper castes farmers located in the village for work.

But there were significant exceptions. What accounted for these differences and especially what could explain the relative success of Dalits, especially in the economic spheres?

By studying different types of documentary material and especially by listening to the life stories of some of the Dalits that had managed social mobility, it was relatively easy to disclose the drivers of the changes that had taken place to the benefit of the Dalits over the years. The next section will discuss how these changes took place through different types of agents or drivers of change.

Chapter 3. Agents of change – how new social and economic opportunities were created

3.1. Changes by the state sector

As mentioned the most striking evidence of successful Dalits in the study was the 9 non agriculturally occupied Dalit heads of household in Yamare. At the time of the study they had very good jobs as employed technicians in big public enterprises in Bangalore such as Hindustan Aeronautic Limited (HAL), Indian Telephone Industry (ITI), Bharat Earth Movers limited (BEML), New Government Electrical Factory (NGEP) and Madras Engineering Group (MEG). All of these jobs had been obtained through quotas for the Scheduled Castes in public enterprises.

Looking back at the turning points of their life, it was very clear that the most important driving force behind their success was that they had received an education and a job through the Indian system of preferential treatment. Not only had they obtained their jobs through positive discrimination of Dalits in public enterprises, they had also qualified to these jobs through preferential access to the educational system, in this case vocational training programmes.

It was originally the British who developed India’s unique system of positive discrimination or the reservation system as it is usually called in India. The reservation system was initiated in order to balance handicaps in social relations. It had a specific focus on Untouchables and preferential treatment was given to this group in terms of admission to educational institutions, government employment and political representation on the basis of a list drawn by the colonial administration, hence the label ‘scheduled castes’. In South India, and especially in the Princely State of Mysore, the reservation system, even before Independence had been used as means for the (other) Backward Classes to contest Brahmin dominance. On the one hand it has been good for the Dalits, because reservation for long had been a well known and accepted tradition. On the other hand, in many villages it was exactly those farming castes that belonged to the Other Backward Classes (OBCs)
that were the dominant castes in the villages, making it quite easy for them to highjack some of the benefits of the reservation system meant for Dalits.

To almost all villagers the single most important means to achieve upward mobility was **education**. The last question I asked each heads of household was what they wished for the future. An overwhelming majority said that more than anything, they wished that their children would get an education. Our findings could confirm the importance of education for upward mobility. All the Dalits that had managed well economically had more than a higher secondary grade, which was not, however necessarily a ticket to a job. To illustrate the point, Settahalli had most educated Dalits, 16% of the heads of households had completed their higher secondary exams and the figure was considerably higher for the next generation of boys. Many Dalits in Settahalli, however, were unemployed.

A high level of education did not only correlate with better jobs, but also with political affiliation as activists in the Dalit movement. The best educated Dalits lived in Settahalli, Yamare and Junnasandra, but these villages also had many illiterate Dalits. The highest number of illiterate heads of households came from Gopasandra and Savukanahalli, where approximately 80% were illiterate.

The prime reason why so many Dalits in Settahalli had some education proved to be due to the idealistic work of a Christian teacher in Settahalli. When, however, educated Dalits in Yamare had a better economic performance than the larger number of educated Dalits in Settahalli, the reason most probably was, that Yamare Dalits were closer to the many nationalised factories in Bangalore, which employed Dalits according to the prescribed quota.

More regular **welfare schemes**, also had had a considerable positive impact on the economic performance of the Dalits, often the more poor among them. Unlike some critical evaluations of Karnataka’s welfare schemes, my study demonstrated that Dalits had benefitted considerably from several welfare schemes. Some of the Dalits with small plots of land, had received them as compensation for the abolition of Jajmani relations, bonded labour or sharecropping. In all the villages, except Settahalli, about 75% of the Dalits reported that they possessed a green card, enabling them to buy food essentials like rice and flour at a subsidised price in government shops. A substantial number of Dalits in all the villages had had free sites distributed to them, even more had received loans-cum-subsidies for construction of houses under the Janata Housing Scheme as well as under the IRDP scheme. Especially in the Anekal region, some landless Dalits had received a cow under the IRDP scheme. On a community basis the villagers had benefitted from the prescribed 15% allocation of Mandal Panchayat funds to electrify Dalit streets and many individuals had benefitted from the local occupational programme, the Bhagya Joti Scheme. As mentioned on page 34 in Settahalli, an irrigation scheme specifically meant to benefit Dalit farmers had not only benefitted a substantial number of them, but by increasing the productivity and income of land had made it possible for some of them to purchase land from Kurba farmers. A change in power relations unthinkable in terms of land holding in the other villages.

Finally Karnataka’s Ministry of Social Welfare had constructed several hostels in Karnataka which could be used free of cost by Dalit students. Only very few Dalit households in the studied villages had had members of their family enjoying the facilities of free hostels simply because very few had family members attending a higher education. However interviews and informal talks with several first generation upwardly mobile Dalits outside the villages, unambiguously points to free hostels as
the most important lever for their career, often in combination with the fact that an upper caste teacher had made parents aware that this possibility existed.

Welfare schemes are not universally distributed to everyone, hence the role of local leadership in selecting who was eligible for receipt of benefits was important. It is the national legislation that decides that 15% of all elected members to national, state and local parliaments shall be Dalits. According to many studies and confirmed by my own findings quite often, however, these Dalits are in the pockets of local upper caste leaders. The level of corruption and the distribution of political power was very different in the five villages. The three villages in Bangalore South and Anekal Taluk had had their democratic institutions suspended for several years. This however, did not reduce the number of beneficiaries of public welfare schemes. In the case of Yamara and Junnasandra, the lack of formal leadership facilitated the emergence of self-constituted leaders like Dairy –Yellapa in Yamara and the Dalit activists Chaluva Raju and Sushula in Junnasandra, who in different ways and with different motives managed to attract state schemes to villages. In Savukanahalli, the chairman and vice chairman both belonged to a local elite, from whose families leaders had been recruited for generations. They had no real concern for the Dalits. When developments through public welfare schemes irrespective of that had occurred, it was mainly due to different types of external interference in village affairs. Examples were the implementation of the Irrigation Scheme for the Scheduled Castes and the idealistic work of a Christian teacher in Settahalli and to some extent the work of Praxis in Savukanahalli. It was symptomatic that where local Dalit leaders were corrupt, most individual benefit was given to the poorest, mostly politically totally inactive Dalits. None of the Dalits with good jobs in Yamara had benefitted from welfare schemes mediated by Dairy-Yellapa. That was not only because they earned an income, which made them ineligible for most schemes. Especially in Yamara they invested pride in not being beneficiaries of government schemes, partly because they wanted to ‘manage on their own’, partly because they did not want to be identified with Dairy-Yellapa and his associates. Those helped to receive a scheme by Dairy-Yellapa were willing to pay him his customary bribe, and usually did not question their role as clients in relations with upper castes. In other words not receiving a scheme was to display distance to Dairy-Yellapa and his policy of cooperation with the upper castes. In villages where Dalit leadership and local power was different, receipt of benefits was also different.

Other types of legislation had also contributed to socioeconomic improvements for the Dalits. National parliaments and state legislative assemblies have by law abolished Untouchability and forbidden its practise in any form. Legislation has also declared that no citizen must be denied admission to any educational institution maintained by the state or denied receiving aid from state funds on grounds of religion, caste, age or language. In the 1970s the charismatic Dalit Minister for Municipal Administration and Housing in Karnataka, Basappa Basavalingappa, prohibited the practise of untouchable castes carrying night soil by head loads. Basavalingappa ordered house owners to either switch to flushing toilets or clean their toilets on their own. The publicity the proposal received impacted the strength of an alternative discourse on untouchability, but had little effect in terms of abolishing the practises. In the slum of Bangalore, Dalits at the time of my study continued to carry night soil on their heads. Moreover the same untouchable workers were forced by the Municipal Corporation to get into drains, sewer pipes and manholes where they inhaled poisonous gases, causing diseases for which the hospitals did not offer any treatment.

In terms of economic obstacles to upward mobility, Jajmani relations or enforced servitude was abolished in Karnataka in 1961. Tenancy was forbidden in the Land Reforms Act of 1974 and bonded labour in the Bonded Labour Abolition Act in 1976. The 1974 Act also fixed a ceiling of 10
standard acres to be owned by one household. This was linked to the total abolition of tenancy and non-resumption of leased land. The distance between the words of the law and the apparently unhindered continuation of the forbidden practises, however was big in some, but not all places. Land ceiling in many places in reality exceeded 10 acres. A visit to the owner of Quality Brick Factory near Yamare showed how easily land ceiling law could be circumvented. The factory was run by a Reddy father and his three sons. On a tour which the youngest son took us on, he proudly drove us around on the family’s 400 acres of land, surrounding both Yamare and Gopasandra. He did nothing to hide, that officially the land was distributed among family members and local farmers to keep the official records below the ceiling, despite the fact that it was clearly cultivated as one holding.

Like other studies my study revealed that although forbidden, many traditional practises were still very much part of daily life. However, some boundaries were broken by legal abolitions. At least employers commonly did not dare to openly admit that they engaged sharecroppers and bonded labourers. And from the perspective of the labourer, only very few Dalits were totally dependent on the farmers for survival.

### 3.2. Changes stemming from foreign aid

Compared to development projects initiated and financed by the national or state governments and based on Indian legislation, the externally funded projects that happened to have been implemented in two of the villages did not in any substantial way contribute to upward mobility of the Dalits, rather the opposite. In Savukanahalli, a German dairy project only benefitted the richest Vokkaliga farmers. Likewise The Sericulture Programme in Gopasandra, introduced by the World Bank was not only solely taken up by the biggest Reddy farmers, it also reintroduced traditional forms of bonded labour and sharecropping usually seen as exploitative of the labourer. A partly Dutch funded NGO, Praxis, primarily worked among the Dalits in Savukanahalli. It had some success providing alternative loan opportunities to the Madiga bonded labourers. However it could not have had an enormous impact, as the dominant farmers in Savukanahalli had not even heard of Praxis. The only foreign project that indirectly helped some poor Dalits was actually a Danish cattle project, implemented by Mellemfolkeligt Samvirke in the area in 1960s. The intention was to improve the local breed. Now there were so many cows around, often a mixture of the Danish and the traditional cow that poor Dalits often got such a cow as an IRDP loan.

**Photo 3. Dalit with two IRDP cows**
3.3. Changes stemming from private Indian business

There is no doubt that initiatives by the Indian state, have had much more positive impact on economic and social improvements for the Dalits than private business. We came across well articulated Dalits who had a job in a public undertaking, but none in a private enterprise. The only visible impact of a private company was negative to all castes in the concerned villages. Bordering both Gopasandra and Yamare, The Quality Brick Factory had received a 100 years license to remove soil from 80 acres of Common Property land. Together with the rich peasants’ drilling of private bore wells and the increased planting of eucalyptus trees, this had a disastrous impact on the water level in the area.

3.4. Changes by civil society activities

As civil society activity there is no doubt that the Dalit movement has been important to many Dalits in the villages around Bangalore. At the time of my study the main Dalit movement in Karnataka Dalit Sanghas Samities (D.S.S) was very strong. In many of the classic caste studies it is debated whether Dalits have the same or different beliefs and cultural practises than upper castes. With the emergence of D.S.S. there is no doubt that it was an ideology deliberately opposed to Brahmin or Hindu ideology that was preached. First of all the alternative Dalit discourse built on Ambedkars ideas of social justice. The movement obtained the peak of its popularity at the time of my study. They conducted several big rallies and protested through writing and demonstrations against cases of atrocities and humiliating treatment of the Dalits.

Photo 4. D.S.S. demonstration

That the movement reached virtually all remote villages in the state was demonstrated when it launched a rally in celebration of Ambedkars Birth Centenary, April 10, 1991 in Bangalore. App. 200.000 Dalits arrived to the capital in busses and trains from the whole state, and dressed in rags made a magnificent demonstration of a different dignified Dalit culture. The surprised tone of most newspapers, the following morning suggested that if not before, at least that day the Dalit Movement was seen as a force to reckon with. The Dalit movement emerged from the Backward
Classes Movement in South India and was strongly influenced by the Self Respect Movement in Tamil Nadu. From several interviews and conversations with Dalit activists it was also clear that the international youth movement in the late 1960’s influenced many first generation Dalits at universities in Karnataka.

The articulating and spread of an alternative caste discourse was of course dependent on political conjunctures. The Dalits who suffered from attacks by the Reddies in Junnasandra would not have achieved so much attention, if there had not been a political climate and media that allowed them to be heard. The hitherto most progressive government in Karnataka led by Prime Minister Devrai Urs in the seventies played a significant role in that context. As mentioned a Dalit, Basava Bassavalingapa was appointed minister of Municipalities and Housing, and apart from forbidden carrying of night soil, he created a lot of furore by scorning idols and pictures of Hindu Gods and goddesses and especially by calling 99 % of the highly elitist Kannada literature for Bhoosa, a waste product that only cows and buffaloes would eat. Basavalingappas straightforwardness made him an easy target for the press, hence the Bhoosa story was published all over the state, infuriating upper caste people. Pictures of Bassavalingappa were burned and high caste students started to attack Dalit students and burn Dalit hostels. Many of the later Dalit leaders told how they were attacked by upper caste students during these years. However, encouraged by the international students movement, Dalit students were no longer easy to terrorise. Actually, the reaction to what many saw as Bassavalingappa’s bold statements, had an enormous unifying impact on Dalit activists and also stimulated those who worked for the spreading of an alternative caste discourse.

In Savukanahalli very few had heard about Dalit Sanghasa Samiti, but in Junnasandra and Settahalli there were many Dalits, seeing themselves as Dalit Sanghasa Samity supporters. In Junnasandra the massacre on Dalits had increased the affiliation to DSS considerably. A very clear picture can be drawn: in all the villages, the politically active Dalits were the most successful and well educated, whereas the economically and caste wise lowest ranking of the Dalits were the least politically active.

The spread of alternative caste stories had an impact, not only in terms of activating Dalits, but also because it helped many to ignore insults and prejudices expressed by upper caste people. This happened for instance in Settahalli, where many Dalit youngsters did not hesitate to ridicule upper caste people.

### 3.5. Other agents of change

Two more sources of economic and social improvements for Dalits were identified in my study. One was the influence of outstanding individuals, especially seen in the idealistic work of the Christian teacher in providing education for Dalit children in Settahalli, but also heard of in other contexts. The following story told by a leading Dalit activist Venkataswamy was not atypical for many first generation upwardly mobile Dalits. “I was the son of an illiterate bonded labourer and myself also worked as a bonded labourer. When I studied in primary school, my parents forced me to discontinue after completing 4th standard and made me work as bonded labourer. But fortunately a teacher belonging to upper castes told my father that he should let me join a Dalit hostel. From then on I studied regularly up to post graduation”. (Interview with Venkataswamy, President of Samantha Sainik Dal).
Finally, during my stay in Karantaka, I found out, that perhaps uniquely in India, there had been small pockets of Dalit affluence in some villages in the former Princely State of Mysore. The reason for these pockets are unknown, but they always existed in villages where right handed Dalits comprised the majority.

Chapter 4. Is it easier to cope with social oppression as practices of untouchability than with economic dependency?

As revealed in chapter 2, most forms of social exclusion based on traditional Hindu beliefs in the impurity of Dalits, prevailed in the 5 villages, although practices of untouchability was forbidden by law. Traditional economic practices like Jajmani, sharecropping and bonded labour relations that used to tie the Dalits to members of higher caste in terms of work and credit were also forbidden. And although not totally abolished, cleavages had emerged in these types of dependency relations, primarily because other work options had emerged.

The study clearly demonstrated that the most educated Dalits and those with the best jobs outside the village, had broken their economic dependency on the upper castes for work and credit. But they were still exposed to practices of untouchability. The poorest Dalits were still economically dependent on the local farmers. The more dependent on local farmers, the more difficulties, it seemed to be.

The wealthiest and best educated Dalits appeared independent, relatively assertive in their manners and politically active, whereas those who were dependent appeared much less assertive.

The loosened economic dependency appeared to spur upward mobility of Dalits more than loosened practices of Untouchability. The technician, Venkatappa was an illustrative case to emphasize this point. Venkatakappa did not want to provoke the Reddies in Yamare by pulling his motor bike through their street on his way to the traffic road connecting Yamare with Bangalore. Hence, every day he chose to pull his bike through the longer and more difficult paths in the Dalit hamlet to the ‘big’ road. The important point, however, is that somehow he did not have to care, because he was extending his house and would soon have his black and white TV set exchanged for a colour TV, something that several of the richest Reddy families in the Reddy street could hardly afford (see photo 5 and 6).

Photo 5. Yamare: A wealthy Dalit technician (Venkatappa) building his new house in the Dalit colony

Photo 6. Yamare: The Reddy Street
Venkatappa appeared to represent the future rather than the Reddy families in extended family houses, becoming too small to house more and more family members.

A contrasting case was a Dalit bonded labour boy from Gopasandra. The boy’s grandfather was heavily indebted to several Reddy farmers, but in particular, to the well informed pleasant ‘chairman’ of the village in whose house his grandson cut mulberry leaves all day long (see photo 7).

**Photo 7. Gopasandra: Dalit bonded labour boy cutting mulberry leaves inside the chairman’s house**

I assess this situation as a break of the traditional social relations, i.e. the practice of untouchability. Compared to Venkatappa in Yamare, there is no doubt that the general situation and overall opportunities of Venkatappa were better than that of the bonded labour boy in Gopasandra. I take this as a support of the conclusion that it is more efficient to upward mobility to have the economic ties broken and leave the social intact - than the other way around.

**Figure 4. Importance of economic versus social ties being broken**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Economic Status</th>
<th>Social Practice Broken</th>
<th>Social Practice Has Not Been Broken</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Economically Dependent</td>
<td>Bonded labour boy in Gopasandra + mobility</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economically Independent</td>
<td>Technician employed in big public sector undertaking + mobility</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
The difference in local economic dependency accounts for a new type of stratification of the Dalits. The most stuck clearly were those with the most hereditary jobs; deeply indebted, stuck in their work relations and usually illiterate. Often the dependency on local farmers had existed through generations, worst off were those who still worked as bonded labourers.

Chapter 5. Main conclusion and feedback on theory

5.1. Main findings

In summarisation the main findings from the study were:

Although the Dalits in general were poorer than members of the upper castes, some of the Dalits had a good economic performance. Especially those engaged in non agricultural occupations in the public sector.

All of them had benefitted from positive discrimination to education and to jobs in nationalised companies.

The economic performance of some of these Dalits was better than that of some members of the upper castes.

All Dalits including those who managed well, were still exposed to the practise of untouchability.

Education appeared to be more important than anything else for upward mobility of Dalits, also in the minds of Dalits themselves.

There is a clear correlation between education and radicality in terms of political attitudes.

Official abolition of Untouchability had little effect. All villages were still very segregated according to caste.

Official abolition of traditional economic relations such as bonded labour, sharecropping and Jajmani occupation had more effect, but there were still cases of Jajmani, bonded labour and sharecropping in the villages.

None of the state benefits aimed at integrating Dalits with other castes. On the contrary especially with the distribution of free sites and Janata house loans a new segregated Dalit hamlet was constructed.

Contempt of Dalits was clearly expressed by many members of the upper caste.

Market forces did not contribute to upward mobility of the Dalits, no jobs were offered to them in private business.

Among the Dalits there was a clear hierarchy – especially between the right-handed and the left-handed Dalits.
The best off among Dalits often managed to get benefits from the reservation system. They were also the most politically active.

Dalits with a low income tended to be favoured in terms of those benefits, which in reality strengthened patriarchal dependency of local farmers.

Foreign development aid without a special Dalit component tended to favour upper caste members only.

The most severe restrictions to entry were found in Settahalli which otherwise had the most well educated Dalits and the most Dalits owning productive wet land.

There are especially two more far reaching consequences of these findings: 1) that Dalits who had obtained a better standard of living, all had their economic ties to upper caste members broken, 2) the state was the most important agent of change in terms of intervening into the traditional dependency ties, and 3) Dalits were themselves internally stratified.

It is very clear from the findings that state initiatives have been the main ice breaker in terms of improvement of Dalit conditions - not the legal abolition of traditional practises - but the actual implementation of measures meant to redress the bottom position of Dalits. Especially the reservation policy securing quotas to Dalits in education and at public work places, had helped Dalits in the villages. The role of the one NGO, I encountered did not have as much impact as the state initiatives. On the other hand, the saving and credit programme it introduced in Savukanahalli, was a better offer than the loans Dalits could obtain by local upper caste farmers. Foreign aid projects that I happened to encounter in the villages did not appear to have sensed the inequality of the villages. At any rate, both the sericulture project started by the World Bank in Gopasandra as well as the German Dairy project in Savukanahalli helped increase inequality, as it unambiguously strengthened the position of better off farmers.

The findings challenge two often heard leftist opinions: that indigenous solutions are better than foreign interventions and that decentralised decisions are better than centralised decisions. In this case it was exactly the opposite. It was the British Colonizers that introduced the reservation system meant to change power relations between upper castes and the Dalits, whom they saw as helplessly stuck at the bottom due to discriminating treatment by upper caste Indians. Likewise Ambedkar, the great champion of the Dalits, got his ideas about equality and justice from travelling to the West. Ambedkar also strongly argued that assistance to the most oppressed should come from the centralized power, as he had no trust in the local dominant elite.

Can the finding be generalized to other places? As mentioned earlier my choice of villages was biased in terms of proximity to the center Bangalore, which offered better work opportunities and better welfare programmes. Especially the conclusion that most progress of Dalits could be related to the reservations policy, cannot be expected to be the same in more remote areas. Whereas, I have come across at least one study which have reached the same conclusion, as regards the city of Mangalore (Pais, Richard, 2007: 336-356).
5.2. Feedback on theory

The findings have been reached by applying a conflict oriented approach to impeding and promoting social mobility. Without it, it would not have stood out so clear, that breaking the economic ties to upper caste farmers for work and credit, was/is so important for Dalit upward mobility. To have such ties broken is also what the Dalit movement agitates for.

As regards the differences in economic versus social orientation among conflict oriented scholars (see figure 1 and 2), my study is more supportive of those who view economic ties (dependency on work and credit) as most impeding for development than of those who view social ties (isolation from upper castes through marriage practices, segregated living, prohibitions of entry etc.) as more impeding.

It can of course be argued that this is a reductionist assessment, as economic dependency in the former closed economy of a village was tied to being an untouchable (the social side). In that sense the separation of the two is of course false, but it has served an analytical purpose to separate the different variables.

Politics and protests are linked to specific knowledge systems and epistemologies. B.R. Ambedkar combined his political work as India’s first Minister of Law and his agitation with his work on constructing a new epistemology of caste. In all his work, it was a key argument that ties to castes higher in the caste hierarchy was suppressive to Dalits at the bottom. In that sense, he was totally opposed to the positions, which in figure 1 and 2 are called ‘the system of unity approaches’. To Ambedkar, Dalits were the nethermost stratum of an organically integrated social body, held together by the world view of Brahmanical Hinduism. Accordingly, the only way forward in terms of practical politics was for the Dalits to have these ties broken, and to start thinking and reflecting differently about their position in society, hence the slogan taken over by The Dalit Movement “educate, organise, agitate”.

54 years after Ambedkar’s death his visions finally appear to materialise. A new school of Dalit sociology is emerging at several Indian universities offering a different representation of knowledge, and simultaneously seeking to endow Dalits and other low castes with a distinct and prestigious identity. With Human Right Groups and Dalit movements working in the same direction, this position is increasingly gaining power over the former discourses on untouchability also outside India.
List of literature


International Dalit Solidarity Network Annual Report 2007


