

The political success of the Dalit movement in North India: A historical perspective

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On 17 June 2015, the [Inequality and Poverty Research Programme](#) of LSE's Department of Anthropology and the Federation of Ambedkarite and Buddhist Organisations UK held a seminar at LSE to commemorate Dr Ambedkar's 124th birth anniversary. The speaker, [Dr Ramnarayan S Rawat](#) from the University of Delaware, drew on his extensive research in UP to discuss the unique strength of the Dalit political struggle in the 20th century. The discussant was [Dr Jens Lerche](#) from SOAS and the event was chaired by LSE's [Dr Alpa Shah](#) who leads the Inequality and Poverty Research Programme. **Sonali Campion** reports on the event.



Until the late 20th century it was assumed that Dalit political activism only began in earnest in the 1970s, and that during the campaign for independence Dalits predominantly supported Congress. However, in a recent talk at LSE, Dr Ram Rawat articulately challenged these assumptions. Drawing on research undertaken for his book *Reconsidering Untouchability: Chamars and Dalit History in North India*, he traced a chain of vibrant Dalit movements in Uttar Pradesh (UP), from the Adi Hindu Mahasabha in the 1920s-1940s to the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) today. At the heart of this sustained activism has been concern among Dalit groups for equality and dignity.

In 1999 the Dalit political commentator Chandra Bhan Prasad argued “The British came too late but left too early”, pointing to both the value of the British emphasis on education in empowering Dalits and the persistence of caste in independent India, despite the constitutional emphasis on secularism. Dr Rawat argued not only that this controversial view is shared by many of the Dalits he has come across in the course of his fieldwork, but also historically. In 1927, the All-India Adi Hindu Conference of Dalit leaders began with a procession of 25,000 “untouchables” carrying flags bearing slogans thanking the British for liberating them from Hindu domination. This conference was reported and discussed extensively in the UP press at the time, and is just one example which illustrates that not all Dalits were fully convinced by the nationalist campaign.

Turning to focus specifically on the Chamar caste's role in creating a powerful movement in north India, Rawat confronted the common misconception around “traditional” caste roles. It is commonly assumed that Chamars relied on leatherwork – a ritually unclean occupation – for their livelihoods. Rawat demonstrated instead that according to 1911 census data, 96% were employed in agriculture, either as occupancy tenants with legal and transferrable rights to land, rent-paying non-occupancy tenants or labourers. They were considered to be among the best cultivators and some even paid revenue to the British as part of the [bhaiachara tenure system](#).

Occupation is significant, because until recently Dalit involvement in early political protests was written off as opportunistic looting and rioting. However, Dr Rawat convincingly argued that the link to the land resulted in engaged participation in political protest. Land was of utmost importance to Chamar livelihoods so they were willing to campaign, and in some cases even die, to protect their land rights. For example, of the 25 peasants who were killed when police fired on protesters in Rae Bareilly in 1921, 18 were Chamars and Pasis, indicating that those regarded as untouchables were more than just a marginal group in the protest.

Nationalist interpretations of Chamar occupations and activities also conceal the Dalit group's contribution to literary activism. In his book, Rawat has sought to highlight the diverse Chamar agendas he has discovered through the narratives that exist from the first half of the twentieth century. Chamar activists were responsible for some of the first caste histories, penned in reaction to colonial narratives and drawing on Puranic sources, popular folklore accounts and colonial ethnographic sources. Rawat referred to texts published between 1910 and 1942, some of which that illustrate claims made by Chamars, for example insisting they were *Suryavanshi Kshatriyas* – Kshatriyas

with solar lineage who had always followed pure Hindu rituals and practices. Other texts placed emphasis on the Dalit claim to be “Adi Hindus”, or original inhabitants of India. The Adi movement was popular from its inception in the early 1920s: for example, in 1922 25,000 Chamars mobilised to welcome the Prince of Wales to Delhi (undermining the Congress boycott of the visit). They presented him with a memorandum which they hoped would shape high-level discussions on political and constitutional rights.

Drawing on this evidence and more, Rawat noted three features of the Adi Hindu Mahasabha politics which have continued to shape Dalit politics in western UP:

1. the claims to Dalits being “original Indians”,
2. the rejection of Hinduism
3. the campaign aimed at the British to recognise their separate political rights

The writings of Adi movement’s leader, Swami Achyutanand, show that he repeatedly asserted that British rule meant liberation for untouchables from Hindu hegemony, and that he saw the Congress movement as continuing to subordinate Dalits. Achyutanand built extensive support by personally visiting Dalit towns and villages, as well as establishing branches of activists in all districts of western and central UP. It was this network that enabled the movement to rally supporters in their thousands for protests in the 1920s and 30s, such as in 1928 when the Adi Mahasabha welcomed the [Simon Commission](#) in Lucknow (at the same time as Nehru was organising a Congress rally against it). By 1937, the group were actively demonstrating against the formation of Congress ministries, for example demanding proportional representation in legislative assemblies, the reservation of government jobs for Dalits and changes to the tenancy Acts. Despite this, a Dalit writer Shankaranand Shastri complained that the elected Congress ministries “did not take a single initiative for the benefit of Dalits” during the two years they were in power.

To finish his presentation, Rawat emphasised that the multiplication and success of Dalit groups in UP since the 1970s must be viewed as the logical conclusion of a century of activism, which began with concerns around access to land. He argued that the nationalist versus colonial narrative, combined with assumptions about “traditional” occupations, has prevented the recognition of Dalit groups as historical subjects. They have been treated as marginal groups, for example, on the fringes of the independence campaign.

In his response, Dr Jens Lerche described *Reconsidering Untouchability* as a “very important book”. In his critique, he celebrated the depth and scope of the book but argued there was potential for expansion of the study. For example, Dr Rawat’s fieldwork focussed on west and central UP. As a specialist in eastern UP, Lerche highlighted that there were different emancipatory trajectories in other parts of north India which contrast with the experiences described and which remain unwritten. Both Lerche and Dr Alpa Shah also asked where the history leaves us today: the BSP has experienced unprecedented growth and success in recent years, but it is also clear that the party has not made much progress in lifting Dalit groups out of poverty. Lerche and Shah both suggested that the historical emphasis on dignity and independence from oppression has resulted in a lesser focus on economic inequality.

Although there will always be scope for further study, Dr Rawat’s treatment of Dalits as serious actors, writing their own histories and mobilising around their own causes, undoubtedly sheds new light on a formative period of Indian history. His meticulous research illustrated the wide range of sources that are available and how they can be woven together to create a rich tapestry, effectively challenging the stereotypes that had largely gone unquestioned until the 1990s.

*Dr Ramnarayan Rawat is Associate Professor at the University of Delaware and Smuts Visiting Fellow in Commonwealth Studies at the University of Cambridge. [Reconsidering Untouchability: Chamars and Dalit History in North India](#) was published in 2011 by Indiana University Press. Dr Rawat is currently working on his second book *A New History of Democracy: Dalit Spaces, Printing, and Practices in North India*.*

Image: BSP campaign chalked on a wall in UP. Credit: flickr/ [Patrik M. Loeff](#) CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

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About the Author

Sonali Champion is Editor of the India at LSE blog. She tweets [@sonalijchampion](#).

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