

Caste, Stigma and Well-being¹

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Background

- ❖ Research examining cultural and psychological dimensions of caste identity in India is strikingly absent.
- ❖ Untouchables ('Dalits')* are largely excluded from full participation in everyday social life (Goffman's stigma).
- ❖ They have poorer health outcomes compared to the general population, and are subject to violent atrocities.
- ❖ The stigma of being an untouchable (Dalit) remains unexplored in the social sciences.

Caste: pollution, stigma & well-being



400 year old Hindu religious practice of Dalits rolling over left over food eaten by Brahmins to cure Dalit skin diseases, Kukke Subramanyeshwara Temple, Karnataka State. (IBN7 Breakfast News, 13 Dec, 2010)

Caste infects the Indian medical profession

.....and crosses species



A garbage dump at the entrance to the field site

Objectives

This research explores three linked questions:

1. What is the nature of stigma associated with being an untouchable?
2. How does stigma change following religious conversion?
3. How does stigma of being an untouchable differ from stigma of severe mental illness?



Pre and post Focus Group discussion at study site in Pune Dalit Vasti

Emerging findings I Stigma of Caste

- ❖ Dalits who have not converted are more deprived in all domains as compared to Dalit Buddhists
- ❖ Dalit Buddhists continue to experience denial of full participation in everyday life but to a lesser extent.
- ❖ Both groups have developed a range of psychological, cultural and political strategies to resist discrimination and contest stigma of Caste.



From ceremony at a Dalit Buddhists' marriage: reaffirming newer caste histories

Methods

Ethnographic observation, focus groups, and a quantitative questionnaire have been deployed to study a select sample of Dalits & Dalit Buddhists living in an urban slum in Pune city, Maharashtra State, India. Analysis aims at unpacking the relationship between untouchability, stigma, and cultural psychological identity.

Buddhist Temple (Vihara) at field site depicting newer caste lineages



Emerging findings II Dalit Buddhists & Newer histories

Refashioning new religious, cultural and political identities by establishing direct vertical lineage with The Buddha through Dr. Ambedkar, and delinking with Hindu Gods

Emerging findings III Dalit conversion to Buddhism: mechanisms

- ❖ Religious conversion is not absolute. It is instrumental, incremental, and additive. Many subjects access all available religious sites in parallel.
- ❖ Conversion to Buddhism is expressed chiefly through political or activist activities rather than as an inner transformation of the psychological 'Self'.

Emerging findings IV

Multiple & Layered Cultural Identities to contest stigma

Dalit cultural identities are dynamic, multiple, malleable, porous in their boundaries, deployed instrumentally or strategically, to leverage returns that maximize their social and cultural status. Conversion in this context could be viewed as the development of a 'layered' self



Dr. Ambedkar & his wife, Savita *

At a Dalit Buddhist festival: Mythmaking is an additional strategy to refashion new histories

Discussion

Emerging findings indicate:

- ❖ Shifts in ritual practices and re-organisation of social spaces & behaviour amongst Dalit Buddhists.
- ❖ Dalit's continue to associate with Hindu rituals for their overall well-being. Dalit Buddhists, however, view Hindu rituals as barriers to accessing modernity.
- ❖ The nature of stigma related to Dalit caste identity include embodied components related to purity and pollution.
- ❖ The authors hypothesize that escape from stigma of caste may involve a shift from somatic to psychological experiences of suffering.
- ❖ The next phase will quantify the association of stigma with caste identity, and compare with stigma related to severe mental illness by deploying an ethnographically derived scale.

Conclusion

This study provides a vital theoretical contribution to the study of well being of socially excluded populations, with potential for a) psychological and social intervention on caste related stigma in India, b) transfer of such insights to other marginalized groups both within India and elsewhere.

Acknowledgments

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*Dalit (Fr. Sanskrit) means 'ground', 'suppressed', 'crushed', or 'broken to pieces'. The term is used in the context of the oppression faced by 'untouchable' castes. Dr Ambedkar, Father of Indian Constitution, and an 'untouchable' himself, is credited with providing a spark for the transformation of hundreds of thousands of Dalits to Buddhism.

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Clinical Ethnography of Farmer Suicides in Andhra Pradesh, India: Developing a Culturally Sensitive Public Mental Health Framework for Intervention*

2010-2013

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A staggering **2,56,913**, Indian farmers have committed suicide in India from 1990 to 2010. Suicide amongst Indian farmers was 12% of the total suicides in 2010. Andhra Pradesh is one of the five states leading the epidemic of cotton farmers' suicide in India. Large numbers of suicide amongst farmers has a detrimental impact on their health and social fabric. Suicide is identified as a preventable public health problem. There is a paucity of interdisciplinary research to address Indian farmer suicides from an integrated agricultural, medical anthropological and public mental health perspective. Interdisciplinary engagement is urgently needed.

Objectives:

- 1) Profile the social and cultural factors of suicide among cotton farmers including existing policies and interventions
- 2) Elicit local and institutional conceptualization of antecedents and consequences of the suicides to the surviving family and community members
- 3) Inform both agricultural and community mental health policies, and consider integrated culturally sensitive interventions.

Methods:

12 months of clinical ethnographic field work by the first author, including participant observation, focus group discussions, and semi-structured interviews. The study sample includes identified affected and non-affected subjects, and relevant stakeholders including policy planners, bureaucrats, clinicians, and politicians.

Field site: Warangal district, Andhra Pradesh, India.

Cotton, indigenous to India and an important cultural symbol of historical resistance is ironically transformed as a contemporary metaphor for agrarian crisis in rural India . Cotton farming is currently a leading causal factor of suicide among farmers, an important public health problem in India..



What is the connection between Cotton, Distress and Clinic?

Aspirations based on free market propaganda through advertisements of Bt seed companies (A1, A2 & A3) and consequent suffering, failure of agriculture extension services (A4), caste and class based differential access to natural resources (A5), cotton seed & pesticide dealer cum money lender (A6), Alcohol abuse (A7) and absence of mental health services (A8).

Initial findings:

The first phase of this ongoing research was conducted over four months of ethnographic fieldwork (2011-2012). It identified the following emerging themes amongst affected and non-affected cotton farmers:

Marginality: Farmers face both social and spatial marginality which is multilayered and embodies wider hegemonic social structures. Chronic devalued position of farming community within society leads to social suffering, and a behavioral withdrawal that impairs quality of everyday life.

Distress: Psycho social and emotional distress mediates relationship between the social and economic structures of a society. This has an impact on health and well-being.

Trauma: Continuing suicides among farmers lead to collective psychological and social trauma. Trauma represents a negative impact at the collective level i.e., on the social processes, networks, relationships, institutions, functions, practices, capital and resources. This disrupts the social fabric of farmers lives.

Policy implications:

Response to suicides among farmers has been chiefly reactionary. Current national and state policies mainly focus on issuing compensation packages and loan waivers. Such intervention addresses the problem partially. Similarly, community mental health programmes have been unable to effectively address this challenge. Farmers Suicides needs to be understood in a broader socio-ecological context that includes agriculture practices. This ongoing research proposes to enhance existing policy in the field of agriculture and community mental health. It will also contribute to theoretical foundations and applied interventions in the field of cultural psychiatry and clinically applied anthropology, both in India and other low income nations.

Preliminary fieldwork data illustrating a Dalit* farmer's family that identifies a link between cotton farming, mental health morbidity and suicide.

"I don't think all this would have happened if we belonged to some other caste. My brother wouldn't have committed suicide. He wanted to see us in a better position by shifting to agriculture, a more respectable work than our caste work, involving leather and dead animals".

"My father was not willing. But my brothers got ambitious and took land for tenancy. We started growing paddy and shifted to cotton cultivation as everyone else in the village was doing so".

"Water was always a problem as we had to pump water from the canal through the lands of the big farmer from Reddy caste. The Reddys and other upper castes never endorsed our effort to shift from our caste work to agriculture. They even made fun of saying that what we low caste fellows know about agriculture".

"When the crops failed, we had only the private money lender who was accessible and ready to give us loans. We knew the interest rates were high but there was no other source".

"Our loans mounted and my brother started blaming himself for the situation. One day he went to the fields and never came back. His body was found in our fields the next day. He died consuming pesticides. My father who was old could not bear this and he died heartbroken. My brother's wife committed suicide after sometime".

"I don't do anything. I sometimes drink alcohol as it gives me relief. If we were from any other caste, we could have got loans and support, and we wouldn't have been in this situation."

*Dalit means "oppressed", "crushed." It refers to the oppressed and marginalised caste groups of India, who prefer this political term to Harijans/Untouchables.



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Lessons for Global Health from India

Exclusion and self-exclusion from Supplementary Nutrition Programme* : Brief focussed ethnographies from selected villages of Gujarat - 2012-2013

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I. BACKGROUND

Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) is a recognized driver of Indian Government sponsored programme. It addresses childhood malnutrition, morbidity and pre-school education. This is relevant to the Millennium Development Goals on poverty reduction. Gujarat is a State with high economic growth and high per capita income; yet child nutrition status is poor and has remained stagnant over a period of 13 years. Evidence to date suggests that the ICDS is grossly underutilized in Gujarat despite strong legislative and fiscal support.

II. OBJECTIVES

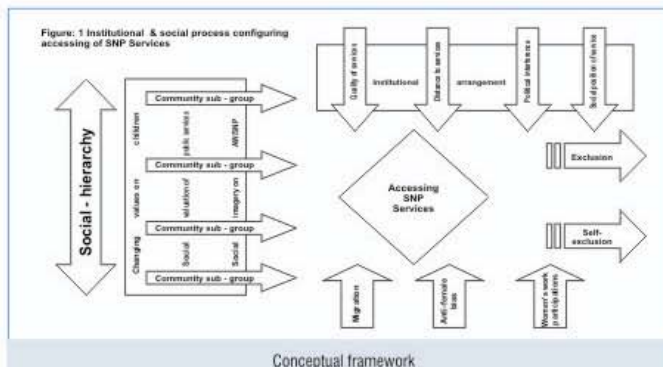
- Capture the social imagery of different socio-economic groups on Supplementary Nutritional Programme (SNP): perceptions of Anganwadi Worker (AWW), Anganwadi Centre (AWC) and SNP services, households availing SNP service, political and administrative processes around selection of AWW, procurement and disbursement of food / rations
- Understand the institutional processes and power dynamics that operate in society leading to differentials in levels of utilisation SNP
- Elicit cultural practices associated with weaning and complementary feeding practices including acceptability of ready-to-cook take-home-rations
- Identify programmatic measures to address low utilisation of SNP services in selected communities
- Inform policy development for improving the utilization of SNP

III. METHODS

Short 12 week long focused ethnographies in four villages of Gujarat State, India. Participant observation combined with informal and unstructured interviews are the principal methods of data collection. Focus group discussions, participatory mapping, census of households with under-six children, and facility survey of AWC are anchored within the ethnography. Two of the four ethnographies have been initiated.



An AWC playground along the main road, unprotected



Lapsi, a sweet from wheat flour usually greasy; is dry, partially cooked and much wasted at an AWC

IV. EMERGING THEMES

AWC viewed by parents as space for day care for children rather than the Supplementary Nutritional Programme activity

Many women are employed as wage labourers. They would like AWC to function as a space for children to be taken care during the day time so that they can be released from the responsibility of child care. Significantly, AWC times were incongruent with the cultural calendar of village life

Safety of children to attend the SNP

Frequently, AWWs are away from the village for meetings or are on reportedly work related assignments. Parents are unsure if their children will be escorted safe to the Centre. Some AWCs are located along a busy highway. Fatal road accidents are common. Unregulated cattle activity en route is also perceived as safety hazard by parents.

Quality and cuisine

Mothers said that same or even better quality of food is available at their home. Fortified take-home-rations are reported to be used for purposes other than human consumption. The preliminary findings of this study reveal that providing micronutrient home delivery without considering local cuisine and food-culture is bound to face stiff resistance from such communities. Fortification and self-targeting strategies from an exclusive nutritional or economic rationale are divorced from their cultural moorings.

Caste and food

Caste still operates as an important determinant of access to power and resources. This has been found to have a major impact on perception, utilization, provision, and self-exclusion from the SNP. These include dynamics of caste matching, caste related social and political capital, and caste based practices around purity and pollution observed in the day to day operationalisation of SNP activity. These issues marginalise the foundation of the SNP.

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