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MARGINALITY, IDENTITY AND POLITICISATION
OF THE BHANGI COMMUNITY, DELHI.

A Thesis

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for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

by

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CHAPTER 9

Religion

9.1. LEVELS OF HINDUISM

Religion, to the anthropologist, is the totality of a society's beliefs and practices concerning the supernatural. Hinduism is discernible at two planes, whether in towns or in villages. One is the ultimate literary Hinduism going back to the Vedas, commentaries on Vedas, later Sanskrit texts and the higher gods and goddesses of Hinduism. The other is the popular Hinduism, abounding in local deities that have no mention in the Sanskrit traditions. Both levels of Hinduism have their own complexes of beliefs and rituals. McKim Marriot has called these two levels of Hinduism as the Great Tradition and Little Tradition. Mandelbaum has termed them as Transcendental complex and Pragmatic complex of religion. Both aspects of religion are popularly considered to be complementary. The higher gods are invoked in life cycle ceremonies, their power affects all and they are believed to sustain the social order. Local deities, sometimes under slightly different local names, are worshipped as they are believed to give protection against disease and other misfortunes. There are also ghosts and spirits. These supernatural entities cause and cure illness and other calamities.

These two religious systems exist in peaceful co-existence, thanks to Hinduism's tolerance. The higher universalistic gods are worshipped by all but more so by the higher castes who, until quite recent times had the monopoly of literacy to understand the ancient texts, whether in Sanskrit or the translations in vernaculars. The lower castes found religious solace

in local deities whose tradition was verbal, and ritual simple and uncomplicated. The lower castes are aware of the universalistic gods, if only for the reason that until recent history, these castes were excluded, from the temples of these gods. The untouchables were understood to be permanently polluted and therefore excluded from the sanctums of these gods which could not be entered even by the Brahmin priest before he had undergone the prescribed purity rituals. Looked at another way, 'Social' arrangements of rank and distance, privilege of birth and caste could be sustained if the Brahmins and other high castes paid homage to super Brahmins, the transcendental gods. Presented thus, rank and privilege would appear to the underprivileged God-ordained. While for reasons given above, the universal gods are worshipped more by the higher castes and the lesser deities by the lower, the demarcation is not absolute. Lower castes regard the higher gods as their gods. The upper castes, especially the women, make vows and offerings to the local deities, even consult the Shamans who are usually, but not always, from the low castes. The deities have thus provided a meeting ground for the upper and the lower castes. But the contact, in religious terms, is short and temporary. For all practical purposes, the two levels of Hindu society have remained socially segregated.

There are different views about the culture and life style of untouchables. According to Berreman, they are thought to be lazy, unreliable, dishonest, easy going, improvident, sullen, devoted to music, liquor and sex. They develop these characteristics just to escape from the consequences of their

caste identity and birth ascribed oppression. (Berreman 1972; 172).

Others regard the 'untouchables' having their own culture systems. Their cultural system is sometimes described as 'little tradition' containing elements of a pre-Aryan and non-Brahminic value system. (Cohn 1955) According to others, the cultural system of untouchables stands in its own right, but distinct from the dominant Brahmanic culture (Miller 1966).

9.2. LOWER CASTE PROTEST

Whatever the theories about the cultural tradition of the untouchables, one thing is certain that they have suffered exploitation at the hands of the upper castes, both socially and economically. The lower castes did not accept their low economic and social position without protest. Several times they have tried to assert their social and political identity. The anti-Brahmin revolts in Indian history, Buddhism and Jainism, Bhakti movements, the social and political movements of modern times, they all have a common theme - the struggle of these groups to reassert their dignity and equality vis-a-vis the upper castes.

Much has been said about the process of Sanskritization which is defined as:

"the process by which a 'low' Hindu caste, or tribal or other group, changes its customs, ritual, ideology and way of life in the direction of a high and frequently, 'twice born' caste." (Srinivas 1966;6)

This process was adopted by low castes as a means of enhancing status, within the caste hierarchy. Sanskritization never

worked for untouchables, because they were below the ritual barrier.

Bhakti sects led by social reformers and saints like Tukaram, Chokha Mela, Kabir and Raidas in medieval times stressed the social injustices to which the lower strata of Hindu society were subjected. They rejected some elements of the Sanskrit religion, and ceremonial practices of Hinduism like caste-distinctions, idolatory, pilgrimages, vows, fasts. Their fundamental teaching was love, devotion and the equality of all men regardless of their birth or status. Bhakti movements enhanced the self-respect of the low castes. Emulation of upper caste culture was one way for achieving status and dignity. Bhakti sects which existed as a protest against the Sanskrit religion of the twice-born castes were seen by lower castes as the other route to achieve that dignity and self-respect, consequently a few lower castes are followers of Raidas, Kabir and other Bhakti 'marg' saints. As in case of other movements, Bhakti sects rose and perished leaving the caste system intact.

9.3. RELIGIOUS CONVERSIONS

Large scale conversions of lower castes into non-Hindu religions is another indication of the struggle of these castes for human dignity and self-respect. Conversion is a voluntary change of religion from one faith to another. But conversion under threat (as in the case of Islam) and inducements (as in the case of Christian conversion) is not a change of religion in truth. It is a corruption imposed by the institutions or

individuals. In any conversion movement of lower castes the issue was not only economic, but also one of human dignity and social acceptability. But conversions did not have significant effects on the life of the converts. Caste system has seeped deep into the life of individuals in India. Converts retained their caste distinctions in their new religions. The new religions had their pre-existing status gradations. Islam in India has Ashrafs and non-Ashrafs, the Christians had their divisions: the white missionary, the local upper caste convert and the more numerous lower caste converts. These latter retained their marginal position in the new set up. Their poverty and illiteracy ensured their ignorance of the literary tradition of the new religions. The result was a thin layer of hearsay Islam or Christianity. For all practical purposes, the lower castes continued observing their age-old beliefs and practices.

Hindu religion, threatened by these conversion movements, defended itself. The defence was spearheaded by Arya Samaj. Through 'Shuddhi' or purification, Arya Samaj sought to win back the untouchables who had embraced Islam or Christianity. Hundreds of thousands of untouchables were brought back into the Hindu fold. Bhangis' excursion into Islam had not changed their economic or social position. Delhi's 'Shehri' Bhangis had noted that their caste fellows in the rural areas of Panjab and Western U.P. who had become Christian converts, had not fared any better. Consequently, not many changed their religion from nominal Islam to nominal Christianity. Those who had, were soon won back by Arya Samaj, whose Shuddhi attracted even

the Muslim converts among Bhangis. Islam had pursued the policy of stick and carrot in the service of Allah, the Christian missionaries had more subtle governmental backing and economic inducements. Bhangis returned to Hinduism out of their own free will when they realised that they were Hindus before their conversion to Islam, or more recently, some conversion to Christianity. The upper caste Hindus won them back when they realised that their treatment of untouchables was wrong in every sense of the word. The Bhangis returned to Hinduism as a matter of right because it was the religion of their forefathers, and not because it was the religion of any new masters. Arya Samaj accomplished the Shuddhi mission when Hindus along with the others were a colonial people; and even before Mahatma Gandhi stepped into the field. The Balmiki tradition among the Bhangis which lay covered under the dust of time was revived by Arya Samaj. It was not a new identity but re-discovery of the forgotten identity. The close and inseparable link of the Bhangis with the Hindus was established through Balmiki or Valmiki, the saint of the Bhangis and the author of the Hindu epic Ramayana. Caste Hindus were exhorted to recognise their wrongful attitude towards the Bhangis and the Bhangis were told to give up meat, especially eating of beef, and drinking. The Balmiki identity has produced its own problems in course of time, which were not foreseen earlier in the century.

The religions beliefs and practices of Delhi Bhangis are not very different from those of the average Hindu excepting that among Bhangis Shamanistic practices are commonplace and that they also make vows to the tombs of local Muslim saints and

fakirs. This is the result of their historical experience. Debarred from the Great tradition of Hinduism, they sought religious refuge in Shamanism, local gods and godlings. Their conversion to Islam did not bring about their admission into the social and religious areas of non-Bhangi Muslims. To their earlier culture they added a few elements of Islamic practices. For nearly 50 years now, Delhi Bhangis have remained reverted to Hinduism. Their interpretation of the cosmological characteristics of Hindu religions is like that of the average Hindu. According to them, God is the final cause of everything created. But man is responsible for his own acts. Wealth, children, their education, etc., are determined by Karma and its effect, the fate. The older generation of Bhangi men and women believe that their caste status and dirty occupation is due to bad Karma in past life. The younger generation of Bhangis reject this view of Karma. As an educated Bhangi man put it - "Right from our childhood we are taught to believe that higher castes are our providers and we are born to serve them. I, however, refuse to accept this." Karma and transmigration of soul in support of social realities has often been used by the privileged sections and been accepted by the poor and the exploited. The younger generation Bhangis' rejection of Karma explanation of social system is identical with that of the poor sections of the upper caste younger generation. By Dharma is understood one's duties to others. Moksha is the reward of a righteous and worthwhile life and a person is released from, the bondage of Karma and rebirth.

The educated Bhangis now put great emphasis on Hindu customs. They have stopped eating beef, lay great stress upon vegetarianism and teetotalism. They are involved in 'self-purification', that is, giving up those practices which justified the untouchability of untouchables. Educated Bhangis are highly critical of the Shamanistic religious practices in their caste, involving as they do, animal sacrifice and consumption of liquor. They urge their community to give up these practices as they are indicators of low ritual status and involve extravagance.

There is also the trend towards abandoning meat and liquor which may be seen as an attempt to conform to a general all-India form of Hinduism rather than purely status seeking in the caste system. Such trends can be seen as part of a general cultural shift in India which has the effect of drawing marginal groups into some kind of newly defined modern Hindu mainstream rather than purely status seeking in the caste system. It might be seen as an attempt to conform to a general all-India form of Hinduism which allows respectability combined with reasonable autonomy. The relevance of vegetarianism and teetotalism for attracting the respect of upper castes is a matter of doubt among most Bhangi men and women.

This is evident from the popular poetry and sayings of the Bhangi community. A sample below typifies both the irony of the untouchability and the hypocrisy of the upper castes:-

- a) Why low caste people who eat meat and drink liquor are called untouchables? Many among the high castes

also take meat and drink.

- b) If we are untouchables because we eat left over food, you (the upper castes) should feel ashamed as you give us your left over food.
- c) What are the bad Karma of an untouchables? If we are born just for service, then we can be domestic servants or serve in hotels. (These days many do these jobs) Our service should not be only with brooms and baskets.
- d) We are untouchables because we remove your night soil. If somebody is sick in your house, you (upper castes) also clean the sick person and remove his night soil from the sick bed.
- e) If we are untouchables because of our Karma and because we serve you, you had better serve yourself. We do not want to serve you, as this service labels us untouchable.

(Source of this quotation - Poetry composed by a Bhangi informant, Pandit Mukund Lal.

Lower castes have always resisted in varying degrees, social oppression and have tried to escape from their stigmatised identity. Religious reforms and conversions are aspects of efforts towards emancipation by the oppressed. Untouchables may reject their Hindu (low status) identity and seek radically different one (Conversion to Buddhism). There have been changes in the religious beliefs and practices among the Bhangis. They have tried to seek their new identity within a basically Hindu culture for a respectable way of being Bhangi and a Hindu. They know that religious conversion (to Islam and Christianity) in the past did not make much difference to their almost hopeless life. These religious changes are integrated with their

efforts to escape from their stigmatised identity.

9.4. BHANGI RELIGION

In North India, scavenger or sweeper is known by various names e.g. Mehtar, Chuhra, Lalbeg, Halalkhor, Khakrobe, and, most recently, Balmiki and Harijan. The simple fact that there is no one single accepted name for sweepers, shows the ambiguity of their origin and of their position in contemporary India. Analysis of these names unveils in some cases a slanted attitude of the caste Hindus. Honorific names were given to the sweepers with the idea that they feel proud of their low status in life.

(1) Chuhra is a corruption of Chura meaning beautiful. Chura-Mani is applied to Kalidasa the great Sanskrit poet and dramatist of 4th century A.D. Chura bangles are worn by every bride.

(2) a) Mehtar is a word of Persian origin, which means prince or leader. Mehtar is derived from Mehar. It could be Maht tar which in Persian means Moon saturated or very beautiful.

b) Mehtar could be derived from Mu-attar, the latter in Persian means sweet-smelling. The use of the word for a sweeper is ironical.

c) But according to another theory, the name 'Mehtar' is derived from the Sanskrit 'Meh' which means urine, while 'tar' of Persian origin means saturated. Since this caste's work is with 'night soil' this theory describes the obvious.

If the name is taken in the sense of prince or leader, its application to the caste which is the most abject and despised

in the Hindu community is perhaps partly ironical but all the low castes have honorific titles which are used as a method of address either from ordinary politeness or by those requiring some service on the principle, as the Indians say, that you may call an ass your relation if it serves your purpose.

(3) Bhangi is a Hindi word meaning 'one addicted to drinking Bhang.' Bhang is an intoxicating drug prepared from hemp leaves. Since the word Bhangi in no way denotes their profession, sweepers may have acquired this name due to their once common use of bhang. Local versions give a different interpretation: Bhangi is a name for God.

(4) Lalbeg as the name of the sweeper caste has several interpretations.

(a) Lalbeg was a Turkish saint who exercised a considerable authority in the socio-religious life of the caste. According to my informants the name Lalbeg was given them by the Muslims.

(b) According to Thaliph Joseph (Anthropos Vol 56: 1961 (p. 789)) a Muslim named Lalbeg in Hyderabad Deccan stole a fowl and ate it. In the morning, the fowl started crying in Lalbeg's stomach, saying "Sath Guru Thu" (you are God). Lalbeg went to a Baba (Mendicant) and said, "The fowl I ate after stealing it is making a noise in my stomach, for I have committed a crime. Grant me pardon and I shall become your disciple." In order to be received into the Mehtar caste and initiated as a disciple of the Baba, he had to offer a puja (worship) at the 'chabuttra' (altar) by burning incense. While putting incense in the fire he had to say, 'Tuhi hai ek - Thera

nam ki tek, Khota kare, kare ko thu ki dhek', (you are the one, your name is the shelter. If anyone plays false, you will see him). After the 'puja', Lalbeg was admitted into the Mehtar caste and was made a disciple of the Baba, hence the Mehtars started calling themselves Lalbegs. In this story, the Hyderabad fowl speaks Punjabi so do Lalbeg and the Baba. The city of Hyderabad is about 800 miles South of North India, which was quite a distance in pre-railway days, when this legend is supposed to have developed. An impossible distance ensured the tall tale being accepted as a legend.

Lalbegi, a worshipper of Lalbeg who appears to be also called Bala Shah is the mythical high priest of the Chuhras and other castes of similar status. Sir Denzil Ibbetson pointed out that it is highly probable that Bala Shah is Balmiki, the traditional author of Ramayana, and if so, Lalbeg or Bala Shah is merely a Muhammadanised name and title for that Hindu saint. According to Sir Richard Temple the legend goes that Shiva once rubbed his hand on a red stone, Lalbatta, and Lalbeg emerged. Possibly he suggests, Lalbeg is a corruption of Lal Bhikshu, "The red monk". Temple also records a legend which certainly points to the earth god Shiva as the prototype of Lalbeg. "Once the Prophet with Mihtar Ilias and other saints was sitting in God's court. Ilias spat and his spittle fell on the prophets, so the Almighty bade Ilias serve as a sweeper, but he begged that an intercessor for him might be born. Ilias was then himself born into the world as a sweeper, but lived in the hope of forgiveness and one day the Great Saint or Pir gave him his coat to wear. Ilias placed it in a pitcher of earth and when asked by the

Great Saint why he did not wear it replied that he feared to soil it. But the Saint bade him don it and come to him. Ilias was however, unable to open the pitcher and brought it to the Saint who said: "Come out, Lalbeg, quickly." (Lal means "my son"). From the pitcher emerged a fair man wearing Lalbeg "red clothes", i.e. bhekh. Him the Saint designated as the Prophet of sweepers and Ilias took him home, filled his 'huqa' for him and worshipped him. To this day the sweepers 'fill' the pipe for a religious teacher. Lalbeg at once became invisible, because he disapproved of Ilias' beliefs, and the Saint bade him do penance promising that Lalbeg should intercede for him saying that in the first age the ghatmat or vessel worshipped to represent Lalbeg would be golden, in the next of silver, in the third of copper and in the fourth of earth and so the Mehtars or sweepers now worship vessels of earth." (Temple 1882; 290)

(c) Another legend makes Lalbeg the son of a Mughal woman who was barren until at Balmiki's prayer she bore a son.

(d) According to local versions among the sweepers, Lalbeg is wrongly attributed to them. Sweepers believe that Rishi Balmiki is their real Guru.

(5) In ancient traditions of the sweeper caste, confused legends appear about Lalbeg, the tutelary godling of the sweepers and of Bala Shah, their high priest. According to Briggs, - "Lalbeg and Bala Shah belong to later times in India, the traditions of the former going back only about 1000 years. Lalbeg is also called Bhanghi and according to this account is emanation of Balmiki. He used to sweep Bhagwan's (God's) court

room and the Almighty gave him a dress which Balmiki straightway burned in a pit. When asked by the Almighty why he did not wear it, he went to the pit and there he found a boy in the robe. He took the child to Bhagwan who ordered him to bring up the boy who was named Lalbeg." (Briggs 1920; 53)

I do not agree with this rather confused account given by Briggs. Lalbeg is a Muslim name; Bhagwan (God) and Balmiki are Hindu words/names. Why the God of the Hindus should ask a Hindu saint to bring up a child and give a Muslim name to that child is beyond logical understanding. It may be, as Briggs has held, that sweepers in their traditions concerning Lalbeg of Muslim origin connect him with Balmiki..... that these associations cannot be later than AD 1000, when Muslim influence began to be felt in Northern India..... that the Balmiki element in these stories must have been carried over from earliest traditions of these sweepers. It must be borne in mind that converts to Islam and later on converts to Christianity, were largely from the downtrodden low castes. As to Balmiki himself, the classical tradition is that he was the author of the Epic Ramayana, author not in the sense of literary creation, but rather the one who wrote an eye-witness account of the events narrated in the Epic. Again, according to classical tradition, Balmiki was the son of Varuna, a Brahmin mendicant. Varuna went to the forest for meditation. Indra, a god in Hindu pantheon got frightened of Varuna's penances. He, therefore, sent an Apsara (a heavenly nymph) to tempt and distract the Brahmin from his meditation. Varuna had seminal discharge and the Apsara collected the semen with her hands and kept it in a pot. Two children named Agasthya and Vashishtha were born. A little of

the semen was left on the ground and on that spot a baby was born who was brought up by a Mehtar (sweeper) woman named Krathni. The child was Valmiki (Balmiki according to sweepers).

Since a Mehtar woman looked after Balmiki, sweepers regard him as their Guru (spiritual preceptor). This story is a pointer to caste pollution in ancient India, in that Balmiki born of a Brahmin father became a Sudra because he was brought up by a Sudra woman. Another story about the ancestry of Balmiki is that he was a robber who waylaid travellers on roads in the forested countryside. This points to Balmiki's origin among the Bhils one of the aboriginal tribes.

Mahatma Gandhi called all untouchables, including sweepers, 'Harijan' or children of God. The more militant among sweepers of Delhi - a small number call this as one more example of upper caste hypocritical, patronizing benevolence.

Three different modes of religious worship can be identified in Bhangi life today. They exist side by side but represent developments which have taken place at different periods in group history.

1. The Polytheistic and Shamanistic religious practices.
2. Religion influenced by Islam and Christianity.
3. Religion influenced by Arya Samaj and emergence of Balmiki Movement.
4. The Balmiki Movement as it is today.

9.5. THE POLYTHEISTIC RELIGIOUS PRACTICES

The polytheistic mode of Bhangi religion consists of a variety of gods and mother goddesses of the Little Tradition of Hinduism. Bhangis worship various local regional deities, of whom one is Bhairon. BHAIRON or Bhairava (the terrible one) is a deity of ambiguous personality. According to orthodox mythology, Bhairon is the same as Shiva. He is also Kali's attendant. He is a second rate deity of a stout black figure with a bottle of liquor in his hand. His followers eat meat and take alcoholic drinks. That does not mean that all non-vegetarian alcohol drinkers are followers of Bhairon. Bhairon worshippers or some of them besmear themselves with oil and red powder and go about the bazars of the North Indian cities, begging and singing in praise of Bhairon. Every big town has Bhairon's shrine. 'As a village deity Bhairon appears in several forms, for example, Bhut Bhairon drives away evil spirits, while Kal Bhairon frightens death itself. When a person is very ill, a vow may be made that after recovery a goat of one colour and without any blemish will be sacrificed to Bhairon.' (Rose 1919; 317)

Mother goddess complex:- Bhangis worship various mother goddesses. Masani is one of them. She is propitiated to protect children from a debilitating disease of children known locally as Masan. It is a liver affliction brought about by malarial fevers, intestinal infection. It is also known as Sokra or emaciation in Panjab. There is a temple of goddess Masani in Gurgaon town, which is visited by pilgrims from Panjab, Haryana and contiguous districts of Uttar Pradesh.

A fair is held at this temple on the four Mandays in March (the month of Chet, according to Hindu calendar).

There are two versions about the origin of Masani temple. The very ancient one is that the wife of Dronacharya, the guru of Pandavas and Kurvas, knew of a medicine for the cure of small-pox. This temple was built in her memory. But according to the relatively recent tradition, there was a shrine to the goddess Devi Masani, in village Keshopur near Delhi. But about 300 years ago the goddess appeared in a dream to Singha, a rich Jat of Gurgaon, directed him build a temple for her in his own village and to appropriate the offerings made by the devotees. (Gurgaon then was only a village, 'gaon' means village). "A visit to it is an antidote to smallpox and women from great distances flock to it with their children to obtain this benefit." (Rose 1919;116) In this respect Masani is another form of Sitala or Shitala, the female coolness incarnate.

It is a small temple. The image of the goddess is of bronze and is about a foot high. There are few 'dharamshalas' or inns for the pilgrims, which were built by rich charitable persons. These days most pilgrims make a day trip.

Bhangis make a pilgrimage on the fourth Monday of Chet, this last Monday being reserved for Bhangis and other low castes, as other castes would not worship alongside Bhangis. Bhangis go to Gurgaon to worship Devi/Mata Masani in order to fulfil special vows, like the marriage of a son, birth of a son, or the Mundan or haircut ceremony of the male child. Masani Devi

is not worshipped in the month of August when the rainy season is at its peak, as it is believed that goddesses like the mortals enjoy swings at that time of the year. The deities are personal gods of the devotees and are almost human. Like the mortals, the Devi, too, enjoys the swing in monsoon weather or, may be, the custom dates back from pre-railway days, when the August monsoon flooded 'Kacha' roads and rivulets. The Bhangi families used to go in bullock-carts to Gurgaon and stay there for three days. Now only a small number of pilgrims stay there for more than a day or two. Most of them return the same evening, especially those from Delhi and places near Gurgaon. Railways and buses have made the journey quicker but overcrowded. Men and beasts needed rest in the days of bullock-carts; the rest and leisure at Gurgaon or, for that matter, at any place of pilgrimage, prolonged the religious mood. A pilgrimage on foot had even higher religious merit. Bhangis used to pitch tents for the three days stay. The camping site was called Bister or the bed. Before setting out for Gurgaon on the fourth Monday, the family gives communal feast to the Biradri. The feast is usually given on the Saturday preceding the Monday on which they go to Gurgaon. The reason for the feast given on Saturday is that they can have rest on Sunday before the journey ahead - and also recover from the hangover from alcoholic drinks which are part of the feast. The feast is called RatJaga (to keep awake all night). The Shaman's role is interspersed with songs in praise of Devi. (The high castes have Jagrata which is also all night singing or invocation to Devi. But the high caste Jagrata has no place for Shaman and certainly none for drinking.)

Ratjaga feast is given if the family is going for the Mundan of the child. Mundan is usually for the male child on completion of his 1st or 5th year. The maternal grandparents and, if they are not alive, the maternal uncle of the Mundan child undertake the expenditure on the occasion. They bring clothes for their daughter (Mundan boy's mother), son-in-law, their children and the daughter's parents-in-law. The married off daughters of the household (Mundan boy's father's married sisters) also bring clothes for the child. They in return, receive gifts and/or cash in monetary value in excess of what they may have spent. This custom is similar to that of high caste Hindus that gifts from married off daughters and sisters should be repaid. The family may invite its married daughters, sisters and their husbands to accompany to Gurgaon if the family are able to afford it.

Bhangis believe that Mata Masani should be propitiated with animal sacrifice. Traditionally, a pig was sacrificed. However when during Moghul times Delhi's Bhangis were dependent on Muslims, the Bhangis in deference to the feelings of the dominant Muslims, stopped eating pork. As to the pig sacrifice at Mata Masani's temple, the pig's ear was cut and with its blood a mark (Tikka) was made on the idol's forehead. The sacrificed pig was given to someone who had no objection against taking pork. With the withering away of Muslim influence, pork eating among Delhi Bhangis became less restricted. At present the older generation observe taboo against pork while some among the younger generation do not. This leads to

inevitable clash which is resolved by cooking pork in utensils set apart for the purpose.

There is another mother-goddess temple in Gurgaon. Devi Lalita is worshipped there. She does not demand animal sacrifice. Instead Bhangis worship her with flowers, coconut, cooked vegetarian (pucca) food. Offerings include dress for the Devi - Lehnga, Kurta and Chunni - after the traditional local saroterial fashion. Food offered to Devi is then shared with relations and friends. This food or Prashad imparts the Devi's blessing to the recipient.

Kalka:- Some Bhangi families are devoted to mother goddess Kalka or Kali, the Terrible. The temple is situated at Kalkaji, in South Delhi and is visited by other Hindus too. There is no separate day for worship by Bhangis, as at Mata Masani temple in Gurgaon. The visit is in fulfillment of a vow when special wishes like the birth of a male child, marriage of children, etc, are granted. Goddess Kali, black in appearance, blood dripping from her tongue, and wearing a hideous looking necklace of human skulls, demands sacrifice of buffaloes and goats. "In earlier days human sacrifice was often her only propitiation, and as late as 1866, during the terrible famine human heads decked with flowers were found before the altar of Kali." (Caine 1898; 337) The frenzied worship of Kali leading sometimes to human sacrifice was a Bengal phenomenon. Only goats are sacrificed to Delhi's goddess Kalka, and that too by lower castes. The goat should be spotlessly black. The slaughter is done by a Muslim butcher

who usually feeds the goat before its killing. He reads the Quranic Kalma and tells the goat, "your days have ended.... I am not to be blamed." The Muslim butcher is not told that the sacrifice is meant for an idol. It needs to be said that whereas the pig to be sacrificed to goddess Masani at Gurgaon is slaughtered in the outer compound of the temple, no slaughter of goats takes place in the compound of Kalka temple in Delhi. The Muslim butcher slaughters the goat at his abattoir, which is a small enclosure. From the butcher, the Bhangis take the slaughtered goat's head, hooves and blood to the temple for the worship ceremony. An earthenware lamp is lighted. Sweets and sugar balls are distributed as Prasad. A feast is given to the Biradri where the sacrificed goat's meat is consumed.

After the marriage of a son, the newly wed couple are taken to the temple of the goddess. Their veils are tied with a knot (symbolic of marriage ties) and they make ceremonial rounds of the temple.

Maha Mai:- Bhangis worship goddess Maha Mai or Sitala, the smallpox goddess. "She that loves the cool in consequence of the fever which accompanies smallpox, the major dreadful infant disease of India at that time. Smallpox is believed to be under her control. Sitala has other names "Mata", "Jag Rani" (The queen of the earth), "Phaphole Wali" (She of the vescicle), "Kalejewali" (She who attacks the liver). Some call her Maha Mai (The Great Mother). The titles for the deities of terror are common to all the mythologies." (H.A. Rose P. 357)

The temple or rather shrine of Maha Mai is situated in Shahdara, across the Yamuna river, East of Delhi city. This temple is exclusively for the Bhangis and was built with their own contributions. The temple priest is of Bhangi caste. The temple affairs are looked after by a managing committee, elected from among the caste choudharies or caste elders. The cash offerings belong to the priests and other offerings belong to the managing committee. The office of the priest is inherited, but should a son be unwilling to become a priest, a disciple will be chosen for the purpose by the priest. In the month of October, on the festival of Dusehra, a fair is held at this temple on the 6th Naurata. (Nauratas are 8 in number and are the days sacred to Mata. Nauratas occur twice in the year in October and March to coincide with autumn and spring. Upper caste Hindus too, celebrate Nauratas.) Bhangis give animal sacrifice to Maha Mai on the 5th Naurata. The sacrifice is in fulfilment of a vow. High caste Hindus, on the contrary, observe Nauratas as vegetarian days. One wonders if animal sacrifice to these goddesses by the Bhangis (and caste Rajputs in Rajasthan) was made under the influence of Middle Eastern, Jewish-Christian, Muslim religions. But Hindus or darker Hindus, had Tantric rites that included animal slaughter and sacrifice.

Seru Lala:- Near Masani's temple in Gurgaon is a shrine of god Seru Lala who is believed to have been a follower of goddess Masani. Bhangis worship him after the worship of Masani. An offering of wooden toys and clothes is made to Seru Lala. The deity is believed to protect children from diseases and to bring harmony in the household.

Kalva Pawan or Paun:- Kalva Pawan is a male deity who is worshipped along with deities of mother goddess complex. He has no temple but is believed to be 'chela' or a male disciple of Mata Masani. A Bhangi Bhagat (Shaman) who gets possessed by Masani, will be possessed also by Kalva Pawan, either before or after possession by Masani.

Kesar Mal Bawri:- Another male deity is Kesar Mal Bawri, who is worshipped with Laddoo or sugared balls made with gram flour, Halwa (a pudding), and the inevitable liquor. There are two legends about Kesar Mal Bawri: According to one, there were five Bawri brothers: Kesar Mal, Sabal Singh, Jeet Mal, Nahar Singh and, Hari Singh. These five brothers had come from Rajasthan and were camping in the main street of Chandni Chowk, when the soldiers of Moghul king Aurangzeb killed them. Since then Bhangis have worshipped Kesar Mal Bawri the eldest of the brothers alongwith the others.

According to the other legend, there were five Bawri brothers. One of them Sabal Singh was engaged to be married. His elder brother's wife taunted him that as he was doing no gainful employment he will not be able to obtain Jewellery for his wife. Sabal Singh Bawri did not like the comment and decided to steal Jewellery from the Jeweller's market in Chandni Chowk. He crossed the Yamuna river (He used to live across the river, somewhere in Uttar Pradesh). While crossing the river he told the boatman that he will give half the share of stolen goods to him. On his way to Chandni Chowk he was killed by Aurangzeb's soldiers. Since then the Bhangis have worshipped

him and his brothers. This is a rather strange legend of worshipping a thief by the hard-working Bhangis. The first legend looks more plausible, centres as it does, on Kesar Mal Bawri, the eldest brother. Perhaps the five Bawri brothers from Rajasthan were guerilla fighters, who were killed by the Moghul soldiers. The Bhangis disposed off their bodies and then secretly started worshipping them.

Kesar Mal Bawri is widely worshipped among the Bhangis. He has no temple. A place is selected in the corner of the house, cleaned and then an earthenware lamp is lit in his memory. The worship is with Halwa, liquor etc. An informant told me that his younger brother was thin and sickly and was not responding to medicines. A Bhagat was consulted who told them that they had forgotten their vow of worshipping Kesar Mal Bawri. The Bhagat told them to fulfil the vow, which they did and the sickly brother started recovering thereafter. Kesar Mal Bawri is believed to protect people from diseases.

The informant's illiterate father had no faith in Shamans and would not let his ailing son be 'treated' by the Bhagat. It was after his death that the Shaman was consulted by the family. The new head of the family, my informant, has secondary school education. He now has full faith in the healing power of Kesar Mal Bawri - and in the role of the Bhagat.

9.6. SHAMANISM

Shamanism is a religious phenomenon experienced and expressed by the Shaman who falls into an ecstatic state either volun-

tarily or under the influence of a supernatural power. He is believed to have the ability to communicate with the spirit world or acts as their medium and to have the power to cure the sick when the illness is caused by malevolent spirits.

The word Shaman is derived from Tanguso - Manchurian word 'Saman' which means 'he who knows'. It entered European scientific terminology through the Russian language. Shamanism is not restricted to central Asia but has existed in many parts of the world, among North Eastern Europeans, American Indians, Polynesians, as well as Zoroastrians and Hebrews. There the Shamans are known by other names. In North India, the Shaman is called Bhagat, which means a worshipper e.g. Ram Bhagat is a worshipper of Rama. In Shamanistic context, Bhagat is the person who worships and communicates with deities and spirits.

Every Bhangi 'mohalla' or neighbourhood has a Bhagat or two. However, a person is free to consult any Bhagat, even outside of his own neighbourhood. Unlike Jajmani relationships which continue over a long period, even from generation to generation, there are no long-standing mutual obligations between a Bhagat and his client. Consultation with a Bhagat is ad hoc and payment is made on per consultation basis. Consultation involves both the diagnosis of the trouble and its alleviation. The advice procedure is like this: The client(s) sit facing the Bhagat who then holds a ceremonial for his deity. This involves singing prayers and the beating of a drum. The Bhagat starts going into a trance with shaking and trembling

of his body. This means the spirit of the deity has started pervading him. Shortly, he becomes relatively quiescent indicative of his possession by the spirit. At this point the clients are restive to hear the deity speak. The deity, acting through the Bhagat, identifies by name those who are present for the consultation, including some unknown to Bhagat. The spirit then tells what the problem of the individual client is, the cause of the problem, which may be an offence to a deity, effect of a spell, evil eye, even offence to an ancestor. The offences to a deity are of various kinds, e.g. failure to fulfil a vow, desecration of the deity's idol or or the material structure of its shrine. The susceptibility to desecration and the resultant offence is in inverse proportion to the deity's place in the pantheon. Desecration of a Muslim Pir's tomb (Mazaar) or urination under a tree which was the abode of a spirit could produce the same consequences for a person. A good way of keeping clean the environs of shady tree in a hot country! For the same reason it is forbidden to cut the branches of a shady tree. Desecration may happen unknowingly: for example, the client may spit or urinate near the hitherto unknown haunt of the offended spirit, or the long-forgotten 'jagah' or place of the deity. If the trouble of the client is chronic and the remedy suggested by the Bhagat cures him, the client may build a small shrine to the deity. Depending on the superstition prevailing in the neighbourhood the newly discovered place may receive general recognition. Persons suffering from similar ailments start coming to seek diagnosis from the Bhagat. Every time there is a cure, the reputation of the Bhagat and

that of the deity increases.

The Bhagat, possessed by his deity, identifies the source of the trouble and suggests the remedy which is a combination of worship and offering to the offended deity. For witchcraft and evil eye there are counter measures. The advice of the Bhagat is not binding on the client. However, the client, harassed by a seemingly incurable disease or other intractable problem, will not easily ignore the advice. There is always the fear that the deity that has given the advice through the Bhagat might take offence to this disregard.

Music has an important role in Shamanistic practices, that is, music of "primitive" kind produced mainly by percussion instruments and jingling of bells. It is believed to help establish communication with the supernatural. A Bhagat has three to four musicians who are of Bhangi caste. The musical instruments are 'dholak' which is a large two-sided drum, 'dhamru' or a much smaller drum, (The drum players are called as 'Dharubaj') a brass bell and, a harmonium. This latter is a modern addition. The team of musicians are known as 'Sevaiye' or 'Sevak', that is, those who serve. The music and the ceremonial produce the right atmosphere. The small drum player (sometimes there are more than one) sings in honour of the deity. The music and singing is slow in the beginning but gathers tempo and it is at this point that the spirit or deity takes possession of the Bhagat. He can move and speak but only under the control of the spirit possessing him. His mannerism is determined by the kind of spirit under whose influence he is. If the deity is a mother goddess, the Bhagat

will start acting with his tongue out, a characteristic of mother goddess complex, especially Kali or Kalka. His assistants will put a veil over his head. Sometimes, after the mother goddess has left him, Kalwa Pawn, the male deity (a subordinate of mother goddess complex; see above) will take possession of the Bhagat, the latter's tongue will be drawn in and he will act like a male. A Bhagat may invoke the spirit of any of his favourite deities, to possess him, to diagnose the cause of a client's troubles and recommend remedies.

For the solution of the ordinary problems of his clients the Bhagat need not hold full sessions with his team of musicians. He uses his knowledge of the sort of persons he deals with, his commonsense and his reputation for access to the supernatural. In case of more serious problems, like barrenness, the client may try more than one Bhagat. Sometimes the Bhagats hold joint sessions which are in the nature of competitions. Each Bhagat will challenge the others to match his supernatural powers. This contest is called Akhara, literally, arena for wrestlers. The contest is not only between the Bhagats but, by implication, also between their favourite deities. The Akhara is held to influence the sceptics and to win over the opponent's clients. It is the trade fair of the Bhagats.

The instrument players have an important role in the Bhagat's sessions. Like the Bhagat, the musician, too, either follows his father in the profession or, is admitted into it. In both cases, he learns to play the instrument. These artists are known by their titles. The highest title is that of "Ustaad"

(Master teacher) and the next one is "Khalifa". These titles are hereditary. On the death of an Ustad or Khalifa, his son will succeed to the title. The successor is usually selected and trained by his father in his lifetime. The succession ceremony is quite elaborate. The new Ustad/Khalifa invites the Biradri of Ustaads and Khalifas to a feast of food and drinks. He presents them a large clay vessel full of 'pulao' or cooked sugared rice, coloured yellow, and some cash. This present is called "Rasvana". A leading 'Ustaad' ties a turban around the head of the host. This part of the ceremony signifies that the deceased father's title has passed to the son. When the party intends to leave after the feast, the newly titled host stands and politely sees them off. He offers them some money, in token of fares and refreshments on the way back. These days the offered amount is 20 to 30 rupees for all the guests. This custom is known as Rasta-Batai, literally showing the way.

While most Bhangi musicians attached to a Bhagat are hereditary, some are new-comers. A new-comer with requisite musical ability and willingness to serve the Bhagat's deity, will find an Ustad who is willing to accept him as his pupil. The Ustad will tie a thread around his student's wrist. This ceremony is called "Kalva Bandhan", literally, to tie up the wrist. The student offers his teacher cloth material and turban as a mark of respect, and sweets. The teacher, in turn, gives sweets to the student. Exchange of sweets is considered an auspicious start to any important work.

It is the deities, particularly mother goddesses who possess the Bhagats. However, in order to have more power of a supernatural kind, perhaps somewhat of an extraordinary kind, a Bhagat may obtain control over the spirits. This requires 'Siddhis' or contemplation of a special kind. For this purpose the Bhagat visits a cremation ground or burial place. This he has to do within three days of the death (cremation/burial takes place on the day a person passes away). It is believed that the spirit of the dead remains near the cremation/burial place for three days but after that period it travels to its heavenly abode. Should the Bhagat fail to complete 'Siddhi' within three days, he has to continue for a longer period. Does it signify that the Bhagat can recall the spirit already travelling heavenward? Another condition for 'Siddhi' to succeed is that the Bhagat should have a clear picture of the deceased in his mind when doing 'Siddhi'. This means that he should have seen the deceased when he was alive. Lastly, he has to make sure that no other person has been there before him for the purpose of 'Siddhi'. Siddhi involves secret ritual and chanting of formulae which the Bhagats call 'mantras'.

There is no bar to women becoming Bhagats but there are very few of them. It largely remains the domain of men. An informant told me the following story:-

'My daughter used to complain of stomach pain which responded to Ayurvedic treatment and she became all right. I married her off. Her husband's grandfather died a few months previous to the incident recorded in the story. The husband's

grandmother (the informant's daughter's grandmother-in-law) worked as sweeperess in a hospital run by DMC. The old woman said that her deceased husband's spirit had been coming into her and the spirit had directed that my daughter must not be allowed to visit her parent's home. When I heard that my daughter was suffering from stomach pain again, I went to inquire about her health. I wanted to bring her along with me but her in-laws would not let her go. The old woman told me that three ghosts had made their abode in my daughter. Of these, one was a male ghost and the other two were the spirits of women. One of the female spirits was that of a woman whose children never survived. These ghosts were causing stomach pain to my daughter. Because of the spirit of the childless woman my daughter will not be able to conceive. When my daughter pretended that her pain was much less, her in-laws allowed her to come with me. After medical treatment she is much better now and still living with us.'

As the informant did not say that her daughter was pregnant, it was a fair assumption that she was not. Was it the ghost of the childless woman, a barren wife or an impotent husband - that I had no means of finding out. In the latter case, the grandmother-in-law could have invented her claim to supernatural power to cover up her grandson's possible shortcoming. The informant's daughter had suffered from stomach pain both before and after her marriage and both the times she had recovered after medical treatment. Diseases of supernatural origin, by the very definition of the word, are beyond mere medical and human help. In any case, the grandmother-in-law was using

supernatural descriptions which have not changed much over the centuries and which she must have heard from others since her childhood. Her description in this case was overloaded - three spirits, two female and one male, in apparent peaceful co-existence in the body of a young girl! Whatever the merit of the story, it shows that Bhangi community, though still gullible for the methods of the Bhagats, could be becoming critical. The girl's father, of a generation later than that of the old woman, was not ready to accept the supernatural claims of the old woman. However, in the section about the deity Kesar Mai Bawri, the younger generation educated Bhangi was superstitious but his father was not so.

Bhangis' religious beliefs include ancestor worship, black magic and witchcraft, and evil eye. Bhagats have quite a role in these aspects of Bhangis' religion, as also in most of their life cycle ceremonies. Ancestor worship is to be found in most societies, though it is covered over with other names. The annual Shraddha among the Hindus, the Christian and Muslim tombs are a form of ancestor worship. Naming roads and bridges after the departed persons, even commemorative stamps are a form of ancestor worship. Bhangis believe that the living acquire merit by pleasing their forefathers. Their usual mode of ancestor worship is to worship a stone placed in the corner of the house. The offerings to the stone are made in the name of individual ancestors. The stone thus represents a large number of ancestors, or even all of them. If the worship is done properly, the spirits are pleased and they bless the family. If the expected benefits do not materialise, the

worship may have been faulty either in the ceremonial or devotion. The ceremonial is the technical part of any worship and needs an expert, in this case, the Bhagat, whose services may, occasionally, be needed. Sometimes, the family's difficulties may be attributed to an ancestral spirit who was dormant for a long period but now had started demanding attention. It is here that the Bhagat's services are indispensable as only he can see beyond the physical. He identifies the reason why the ancestor's spirit is demanding attention. It could be that the ancestor's spirit is not happy for lack of proper clothes in the world beyond. The Bhagat will advise the family to place on a flat piece of wood five new clothes and other things that were liked by the ancestor and that all these articles should be given to a person for whom the ancestor had a special affinity. Usually, these gifts are given to the ancestor's sister's son. After this, it is believed, the ancestor's spirit works for the well being of the family.

Sometimes, after the death of a Bhagat his spirit may enter the spirit world. It is called "Rehpa" and it manifests itself in the successor Bhagat, who, as said above, is either the son or the disciple of a Bhagat. He takes over the functions of the late Bhagat. The deity's spirit now possesses him and the late Bhagat's spirit as well, if it has entered the spirit world.

Diseases of obscure nature, worldly problems that are seemingly beyond solution, or keep recurring, may be brought about by angry deities or unhappy ancestors. Other causes of ill-health

and adversity are evil eye, witchcraft and black magic. Here, too, the Bhagat's help is in demand. The term evil eye is the translation of what is known as 'Nazar Lagna' in North India. 'Nazar' is more than the harmful effects of an ill-wishing person's gaze. Sometimes, 'Nazar' may be unintended or be caused not by ill-will but genuine admiration. In certain situations a person may be affected by the 'Nazar' of his blood relations, even by his own 'Nazar', that is, if his person or achievements were to induce envy in others and a sense of pride in his own self. The "touchwood" formula in the West, generally, springs from the same idea of the evil eye. In India, the westernised sections chant "touchwood", while denigrating evil eye as superstition! Children and beautiful things attract evil eye. "It is bad manners to admire a child or to comment on its healthy appearance."

(Rose: Page 210) Rose noted the widespread custom, among all castes, of daubing children's faces with a black mark. Blackened pitchers are hung on the front of new houses to catch and contain the evil eye. Some fear of the evil eye remains widespread among all sections of Indian society. Bhangis go to the Bhagats for advice and protection against evil eye, and the Bhagats give them amulets. These are silver lockets worn on the neck or upper arm, containing words in praise of deities (words from Quran, too, during heyday of Muslim influence) or other religious symbols. (Muslims and Christians, too, wear amulets and sportsmen of most nationalities wear amulets for good luck). Other amulets are of an open visible variety, that is, pig's teeth and cowries or small sea shells. These amulets need annual renewal to guarantee their efficacy

and the livelihood of the Bhagat. Amulets and Charms are renewed on the two major festivals, Divali and Holi.

While evil eye could be of any person, witchcraft and black magic are specialist jobs, witchcraft is the domain of women. A person who has to take revenge on somebody will approach the practitioner of the black magic and tell him about his problems and intentions. The sorcerer takes a small clay pot, chants a secret formula and throws up the pot in the air. The pot falls to the ground and breaks up in several pieces. However, it is believed that the pot will hit the person for whom it is aimed. If the person is in the house, the clay pot will call him out and hit him as soon as he steps out. The clay pot with malevolent magical properties is known as sending off the "Muth" or fist. If the intended victim shelters behind shut door and windows, the pot will keep calling his name but will return without hitting him. The Bhangis believe that sorcerers who cause misfortune to others, themselves suffer tragedies and die a miserable death.

In case of illness or Parchhanwan (illness caused by malevolent spirits), eggs, betal leaves, flowers and similar articles are waved round the head of the sick person, three, five or seven times. This dislodges the effect of evil eye, malevolent spirit and the same get transferred to the articles. The ceremony is performed at night and the articles are then immediately taken out of the house, and stealthily placed at a 'Chauraha' or a crossing where four paths meet. This is known as Toona. Any person who accidentally steps on the Toona or

tampers with it, is believed to catch the transferred affliction. (Upper caste Punjabi Hindus believe that Bhangis are immune to Toona, at least when the sweeper sweeps it away from the road. These Hindus have an inexpensive remedy against evil eye: three dried red chillies with stalks intact and a piece of alum is passed round the head of the sick person, a formula is mumbled and the chillies and alum are put on embers. The chillies burn and smoke away the evil eye, the pungent smoke may have fumigative property. The alum loses its water of crystallisation and assumes a new shape which is then matched with the general outline of a known person who is supposed to have cast the evil eye.)

The malevolent spirits require more expensive propitiation, for example, eggs, rice, sugar, clarified butter, sweets are placed in a clay pot which is then passed round the sick person's head and then placed on the 'Chauraha'. These spirits are of different kinds: those who have no male heir are likely to become "Uuts"; the spirits of a person who dies discontented and unwilling to leave his home is dangerous, and so is the spirit of ^a person who commits suicide.

The spirit of a woman dying during or soon after delivery is equally fearsome and is known as 'Churel'. One disease known as "Masan-ki-taklif" or affliction of cremation/burial place is very troublesome. The victim becomes thin and skinny. The remedy is expensive and also requires the personal services of the Bhagat. A he-goat is sacrificed, its head, legs, tail, and liver are put in a "Matka" or large earthenware vessel,

along with eggs, betel leaves, cooked sweetened rice and liquor. The Bhagat and, with his permission, his assistants, take the "Matka" to the cremation ground/graveyard. There he performs Shamanistic ritual, becomes possessed by the deity who drives the evil spirit out from the sick person. Sometimes the Matka is not carried to the cremation ground but is, instead, thrown into Yamuna river. The liver of the he-goat is the single most important item in the sacrifice. The evil spirit which is eating away the liver of the sick person, is baited away with the animal liver. Diseases, their diagnosis and cure in terms of angry deities and ancestors, evil eye, black magic and witchcraft may look unscientific. So would psycho-analysis, faithhealing and the mind over matter techniques.

An educated Bhangi told me about a secret practice which is a remedy against infant mortality. If a woman bears still-born children or her children die soon after birth, a cure is possible. The dying child is placed in a large earthenware vessel - "Matka" - and buried alive at a road crossing. The narrow top of the "Matka" is broken off, lest the dying child if pushed into the "Matka" should start crying on the way to the secret burial and, what is more important, might even die, thus thwarting the strange and ghoulish remedy against infant mortality. This practice is known as "Gathat Karma.... The 'Parchhawan' (shadow or evil influence) that prevented the birth or survival of one woman is transmitted to the woman who unknowingly goes near the secret burial at the road crossing. But another informer told me that he had never heard of this

practice and that it would be murder. My own assessment of the information was that even if the practice was prevalent at one time, the present social climate would be against it. There would be insurmountable logistical difficulties: For miles around Bhangi habitations of Old Delhi there is built up area and any attempt at this type of live burial will be detected, immediately.

In India, among all castes, childless women have sometimes followed strange practices to ensure the birth and survival of the child. Women will do anything to conceive, or, to terminate pregnancy.

The life-cycle ceremonies have a secondary role for the Bhagat, whose access to the supernatural ensures protection against evil spirits and the like. However, the marriage ceremony itself is not performed by the Bhagat. It has gone through several changes. The traditional officiating functionary was a woman of Dom caste, a caste of drummers, considered to be of lower ritual status than that of the Bhangis. Doms have beaten drums at the marriages of caste Hindus too, but the high caste marriage ceremony itself is entirely the prerogative of the Brahmin priest and drums are not beaten during the ceremony. As no Brahmin priest would officiate at Bhangi marriages, the Dom woman appears to have taken over the ceremony, too. Around the sacramental fire, the couple took seven rounds (four to seven rounds for upper caste Hindus) marked by singing and drum-beating by the Dom female. During Moghul times, even after conversion to Islam,

the Bhangis of Delhi stuck to the Hindu marriage ceremony. Muslim "Nikah" was not adopted. My informers told me that the marriage was performed during the night and after the ceremony the clay pot which held the sacramental fire was turned over so that the lingering smell of the incense should not remind the full-fledged Muslims in the area that the Bhangis were only half converts. To this day, the Bhangis hold the marriage ceremony during the night. Another explanation for the custom is that night soil had to be removed in daylight every day, and the Bhangis could not take the day off for the ceremony. The upper caste Hindu marriage ceremony was held during the day. But now the ostentatious 'decorative' electric lights require that the ceremony be held during the night. The times have changed for the Bhangis, too. The Bhangi marriage ceremony is still held at night, but not because of fear of any group or community. The Dom woman's central role has gone. The ceremony is conducted by a Bhangi who is versed in these matters. A few educated and well placed Bhangis have been able to obtain the services of Brahmin priests. An informant commented - "It is the materialistic age." That, however, is only a part explanation. The Brahmin priests have a wide and steady market among the caste Hindus and need not be compelled by economic necessity to seek clientele among the numerically small Bhangi community. The changed social climate and the open-mindedness on the part of the individual Brahmin priest, perhaps, is a better explanation.

As said above, the Bhagat has no central role in the marriage ceremony. But he is consulted for warding off evil influences before the ceremony and for protecting the married couple,

afterwards. Spirits are propitiated. After the marriage, the bridegroom's family may take the couple to Gurgaon or to the local Kalka's temple for thanksgiving, for grant of wish or in fulfillment of a vow. This visit is known "Gath Jore ki Yatra)" or pilgrimage for the marriage tie. The Bhagat and his team of singers lead the procession from the 'bister' or resting place to the deity's temple, all joining in the singing in praise of the deity. When the party is back in the camp, a bottle of alcoholic drink (usually country liquor) is waved around the married couple and then given to the Bhagat and his party, alongwith cash and other gifts.

At the birth of a child particularly of the male child, the Bhagat's services are sought. Animal sacrifice is customary. The Bhangis recently arrived from rural areas sacrifice pig, the urban Bhangis, goat. If it is not possible to offer the sacrifice, a pig/goat made of dough is used for that time, but the sacrifice proper has to be given within two days. The mother cannot have solid food until the animal sacrifice is made. In a corner of the house, the offerings are made in the name of favourite deities and ancestral spirits. The Bhagat invokes his favourite deity to drive away evil spirits from the child. These offerings are later given to the Bhagat.

"Chhati" (literally, sixth) is the sixth week ceremony after the birth. The godling of the well is worshipped and other spirits are properly pleased. Animal sacrifice is given again and the near relations are invited to a feast.

"Mundan" is the head shaving ceremony of the male child and is held at the 1st, 5th or 7th year after the birth. During the Ratjaga which precedes Mundan, the Bhagat and his team keep awake all night, singing and drinking, worshipping deities and spirits. These deities and spirits would possess the Bhagat who then tells the host the favourite food of the possessing deities. While some deities demand meat and chappati, others will be pleased with chicken, or sweetened cooked rice, Halwa (pudding) and Puri (fried chappatis). After Jagrata, the following day, the Bhagat and his team accompany the family to Gurgaon. The first halt there is at Bister or the resting place. From there the Bhagat and his team take the child for Mundan to a barber; the family of the child do not accompany the Bhagat. The Bhagat gets the hair removed, buries the hair near the water pond and brings the child back to the family. Then they carry the child to the temple of Masani, singing in praise of the goddess. After a brief ceremony and offering there, the pilgrims return to the Bister. A bottle of liquor is waved round the shaven head of the child and given to the Bhagat and his team.

9.7. RELIGIOUS PRACTICES OF BHANGIS UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF ISLAM.

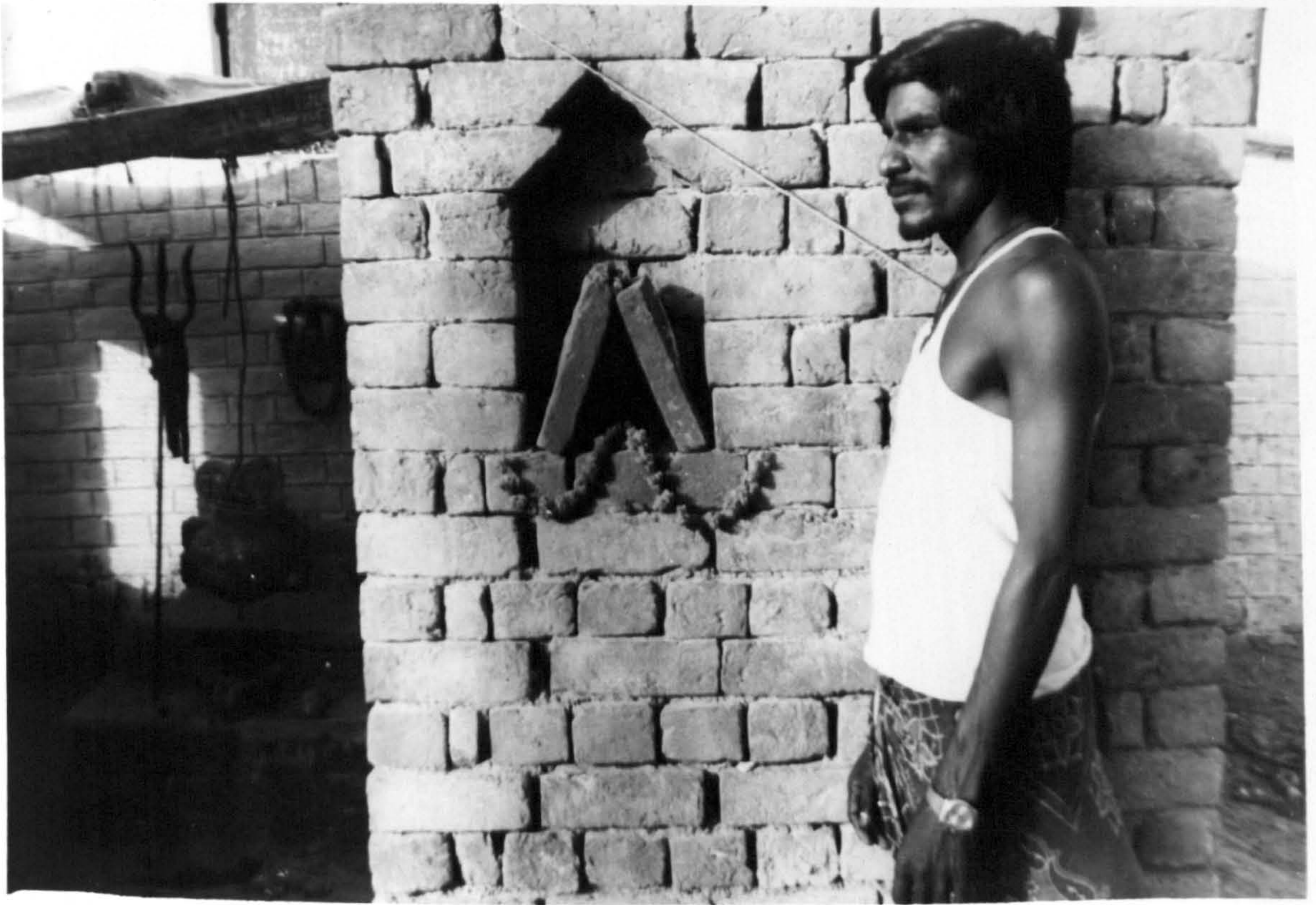
As said earlier, Bhangis of Old Delhi refer to themselves as Shehri (urban) Bhangis and, sometimes, as Shaahi (royal) Bhangis. This does not mean that they worked exclusively for the royal court or even for the Muslims. However, the Bhangis were slowly coming under the influence of Islam. As my informants put it, "The subjects follow the king's religion."

Griswold noted two steps towards conversion to Islam among Bhangis/Chuhras of Panjab: first they adopted Muslim names and later on they consciously converted to Islam. (Griswold 1917; 13). Walker noted that Chuhras "generally adopted the religious tenets of the owners of the village in which they are settled" (Walker 1894; 88).

Islam which stressed the social equality and brotherhood among all Muslims offered no solution to the Bhangis' untouchability even when they converted to Islam. They adopted some of the externals of Islam, viz, Muslim names, Namaz, Ramzaan and burial of the dead. They neither had circumcision (A few cases of circumcision took place among Bhangis who lived very near Jama Masjid or the Great Mosque), nor did they accept Mohammed as their prophet. They were too poor to do Haj at Mecca. They continued celebrating the popular Hindu festivals like Divali, Holi, Rakhi. Marriages continued according to Hindu rites. Conversion to Islam did not raise the social status of the Bhangis. They remained stuck in their caste-ordained work. Muslim society everywhere has its own gradations of social status. The majority of Indian Muslims were converts from Hindus and had brought with them the ideas of caste gradations and an unchanged attitude of untouchability towards Bhangis. The Muslim orthodoxy accepted that without qualm. After all, the notion that every non-Muslim is a Kafir is the worst form of untouchability. The Bhangis, debarred from temples, were also not permitted to enter mosques, no matter how clean a Bhangi may be at the time of congregational prayers. They never proceeded beyond the entrance steps of Muslim religious

places. In Muslim households, as in Hindu households, the Bhangis were shunned and made to feel outcaste. This Muslim untouchability extended even after death. Burial grounds of Bhangis were segregated from those of Muslims.

These days there is, not even one Bhangi professing Islam. Arya Samaj brought them back into the Hindu fold. They discarded their identification with Lal Beg in favour of Balmiki, but their belief in the power of Lal Beg persists, at least among the older generation. There is no permanent shrine of Lal Beg. Two bricks are placed against each other, the top ends meeting in an inverted V, to represent Lal Beg. A fowl is sacrificed and its meat is cooked with rice; "Halwa" may also be prepared. The food is known as Murshadki-Karahi or, Disciple's pan/food prepared in a pan. Liquor is consumed. Lal Beg's worship takes place on the festivals of Diwali and Holi. It is obligatory only in fulfilment of a vow. It is no longer a general customary worship, Lal Beg's place has been taken over by Balmiki. But certain Muslim pirs and fakirs are still worshipped by the older generation. They are mostly of local origin or local domicile. A few belong to the neighbouring states. Their fame might have spread to the capital city or their fame been brought and kept alive by the Bhangis (or others) who emigrated to Delhi in the past centuries. The fakirs were non-conformists in a limited sense and also humanitarians and thus had a special appeal to the downtrodden, the outcastes. That the lower castes could be wrested from Hinduism and converted to Islam may have motivated quite a few of these pirs. As faith healers and miraculous assurers of



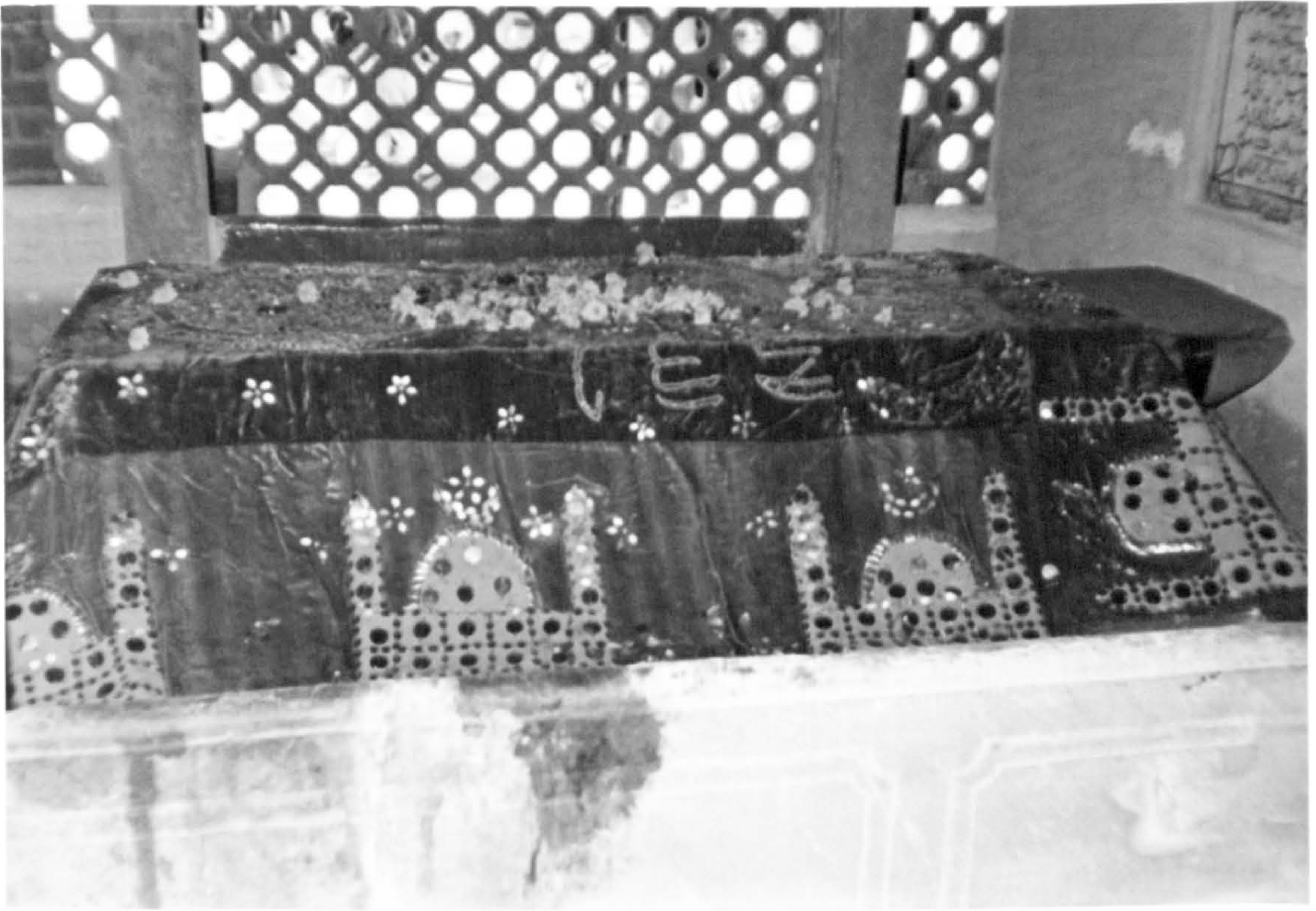
1. Lalbeg's worship.

2. Sayyid worship.

sons, the pirs may have attracted sections of Bhangis, as indeed, even some high caste Hindus, but only for those limited purposes.

The most famous of the local Muslim saints, certainly in terms of patronage by the rich, was Khwaja Nizamudin Aualia, whose 'durgah' or tomb is situated on Lodhi Road in New Delhi. Born in 1238, at Badaun in Uttar Pradesh, Nizamudin's ancestry was traceable to Prophet Mohammed. His grandparents came to India from Bukhara in the 12th century. Nizamudin was a disciple of Baba Farid of Pakpattan (a small town in Pakistan). Nizamudin's 'durgah' like the tomb of other Muslim saints, is worshipped on Thursdays, when earthenware lamps are lit¹.

Bhure Miyan's 'mazhar' or tomb is at the back wall of Delhi's Red Fort. Here, too, Bhangis are seen on Thursdays and even on Divali and Holi, the festivals of Hindus. The caretaker does not mind receiving these offerings on non-Muslim festivals. The so-called cultural synthesis between Hinduism and Islam here provides a few more coppers to the caretaker. Here, as elsewhere, the offerings by Bhangis are placed on the ground, in a corner separate from the general public. In the present time, this segregation, wherever it exists, is self-imposed by the Bhangis and reflects their long-established habit born of open social oppression in the past. Near Jama Masjid is the grave of Naneh Mian or the Little One. The mode of worship is the usual one. Another "mazhar" or small tomb in Jama Masjid area is that of Sarmast Sahib. According to legend he was a person who, indifferent to the material world, remained



1. Naneh Miyan near Jama Masjid.

2. Sayyid Shrines in Bhangi Colonies.

absorbed in his inner self. Hence the name Sarmast Sahib. According to one story, when Jama Masjid was under construction, one of its walls would not keep straight. Emperor Shah Jahan told the architect that if he failed in his job, he would be put to death. The worried architect had heard about Sarmast Sahib who used to wander in the vicinity in a state of spiritual dizziness, his nose running. The royal architect offered food to Sarmast Sahib and told him his problem. Sarmast Sahib stood with his back to the wall, supporting it with his shoulders, until the wall was completed. The Mogul emperor baffled by the power of Sarmast Sahib got him killed. But another story is that Sarmast Sahib died a natural death and was buried near Jama Masjid in recognition of his spiritual help in the construction of the mosque. The latter story is more plausible.

In the neighbouring state of Haryana is the 'Mazhar' of Kallundur Sahib. Bhangis visit the place in fulfilment of a vow after the birth of the grandson. Thus the vow is made by the grandparents. 'Sehra' or garland of flowers, 'patasha' or puffed sugar balls, or sugar-coated puffed rice are placed on the ground at a respectable distance from the tomb, the keeper returns most of the offerings but retains the offering of 'chaddar' or cotton sheet. Kallundurs are the Muslim equivalent of Hindu Bairagis.

Small shrines of Sayyids are to be seen in every Bhangi neighbourhood. Sayyids, as the name signifies, are of Muslim origin. They are malevolent and, if displeased, can cause

illness. They are worshipped on Thursdays to ensure the well being of children and the adults. Among the Thursday crowd are seen Muslims and a few high caste Hindus.

The shrine of Miran Pir or Miyan Pir of Amroha in Uttar Pradesh is visited by the Bhangis when vows of marriage of children, or birth of male children are granted. Bhangis who worship Miran Pir do not sacrifice pig and avoid commensal relations with Bhangis who eat pork. Goats and fowls are used for sacrifices. William Crooke who has recorded the legend of Miran Pir calls him also Miyan Pir or the Old Gentleman. The legend, however, reads like a tale from the Arabian Nights. Miyan Pir finds an old lamp, lights it, a Jinn appears who on the Pir's bidding brings him "the daughter of the king of Rum." The usual thing happened. Miran was so pleased with her that he made the Jinn bring her every "night". So much for the "old gentleman" of Amroha.

While very few Bhangis go to Amroha, about 30 percent of the Delhi Bhangis visit the grave of Zahar Pir near Dadrewa in Rajasthan. They don yellow coloured clothes for the pilgrimage and, on return throw a feast to the Biradri. The enlightened and the educated Bhangis grumble about the wasteful religious practices of the superstitions. Zahar Pir is also known as Gugga. The cult of Gugga is another name for snake worship which used to be quite widespread in North India. Gugga's disciples who were both Hindus and Muslim 'jogis' used to take offerings from households in the month of August, when snakes are flooded out of their holes by the monsoon rains and seek

shelter inside houses. According to Rose a small share of the offerings collected was given to Chuhras (Rose 1:90 1919) Gugga Pir was believed to protect people from snake bite and other harmful creatures.

Those of the Delhi Bhangis who converted to Islam did so under stress of circumstances. They remained on the outer boundary of Islam, excluded from mosques and shrines of Muslim pirs. Their religion remained Hindu idolatory, mostly of local deities. To this was added Muslim idolatory, that is, the worship of Muslim shrines.

With the establishment of the British rule, some Delhi Bhangis felt freer and gradually reverted to their old Hindu religion. Even before the Arya Samaj movement took hold among them, a few Bhangis of Delhi were telling the census enumerators that they were Hindus.

9.8. CONVERSIONS TO CHRISTIANITY.

In the late nineteenth century, there were large scale conversions of lower castes to Christianity. The converts came in caste groups rather than as individuals. "The decision to become Christian was usually a group decision and actual conversion generally followed kinship lines." (Webster 1976:18) These decisions were prompted by the harsh material circumstances. The famines that stalked North India at the turn of the century "had most harshly stricken that most vulnerable section of society, the untouchables. They were desperately looking for some improvement in their conditions, and India

was becoming more acutely aware of the great problem in the lowest strata: the Brahma and Prarthana Samajas started relief work in the late nineties. But again it was the Christian missionaries who were primarily and actively concerned and this led to mass conversions." (Jordens 1977; 152) Missionaries had powerful backing from church funds in USA and Britain. They had been active in Panjab since 1834, when the American Presbyterian Mission established itself at Ludhiana from where this Mission spread its activities westward to Rawalpindi and eastward to Ambala and northwestern U.P. The Church Missionary Society followed in 1854, and the Church of Scotland in 1855. These Christian missions had powerful support in the top echelons of the Panjab administration. The general poverty of the lower castes, their untouchable status, and a series of famines produced conditions for Christian conversion in North India which in the South-East Asian context later came to be known as "rice Christianity."

The lower castes have always tried to improve their lot by making themselves more respectable in the system. Status emulation and sanskritisation are one way of escaping from the stigmatised identity. This, however, has produced limited results. Conversion to another religion has attracted some as a way out from stigmatised status. In U.P. and Panjab, from where Delhi Bhangis originated, Chamars and Chuhras (sweepers) were the two main castes to convert to Christianity. Chamars, traditionally leather workers, were also employed as agricultural workers, while the Chuhras did general menial jobs as well as farm labouring and, in urban areas, sweeping and scavenging. These castes, deprived and exploited, turned

to Christianity the official religion of the new rulers of India. Christian missionaries were the willing intermediaries between the potential converts and the government for various benefits which only the Sarkar could give. Missionaries persuaded the government to set up settlements in the canal colonies of Panjab for the lower caste converts.

By their entry into the Christian faith, the lower castes (no less the upper castes) could have easy access to educational and medical facilities provided by the church, and promise of employment. The zeal of the missionaries in matters material was even more than the zeal in the primary purpose of spreading the gospel. But you cannot pray on an empty stomach. As the saying goes, 'you will intone Roti (chappati or unleavened bread), not Ram' (God's name). The Missions' economic inducement for the lower castes was later adopted by the upper castes, too: in politics, the reservation of seats, and on the material level, job reservation. The appeal and temptation of economic benefit was real for all sections of Indian society, but much more for the poor. However, not all poor came from the low castes. The upper castes had their poor as they have to this day. What caused mass conversion among the low castes and only individual conversions among the high castes was the concept of caste which in its simplest denominator is ascribed social distance between the upper castes and the low castes, particularly the untouchables. This then was the second force working on the lower castes, leading them to adopting Christianity. The notion of equality preached by the missionaries, the idea of abandoning caste

distinctions were attractive to the untouchables who were eager to identify themselves with the religion (Christianity) which did not consider them inferior, as Hindus did openly and Islam in all practical terms. Pandit Harikishan Kaul, the Superintendent of the 1911 census in the Panjab, suggested that the motivation behind lower caste conversion was primarily social and to some extent economic as well. "The depressed classes are in a condition of peculiar social and religious disadvantage and gain most by the Missions. Their status is raised. An untouchable becomes touchable by adopting Christianity. He can receive education and follow better pursuits than his degraded hereditary calling." (Kaul 1912;192) Griswold observed that "the motives which govern the (conversion) movement are mixed. Perhaps the most dominant motive is the general idea of betterment." (Griswold 1915; 34)

The Biradari was mainly instrumental in the lower caste mass conversion to Christianity. Forrester's view is that these caste councils later came into conflict with the church and lost to it. The church's "thorough-going Christian^aisation was impossible because the Biradari retained total control over the lives of its members and would never allow the church to impinge on its powers in such a way as to threaten caste solidarity or encourage individual initiative or independence." (Forrester 1972; 58) The "individual initiative or independence" in missionary Christian terms was the individual convert who had denounced not only his previous religion but also the traditional grouping which was everything from the primary group to the Jajmani trade union. The de-rooted individual's

"initiative and independence" was a fiction because "eventually in most places the church took over most of the functions of the traditional Biradari" (ibid P. 58). The church was no substitute for the Biradari. The Biradari was a local organic growth, composed of all its members who had an equal say in its meetings, and who had the opportunity to become headmen in due course. The church in theory was composed of the congregation of the faithful. But for all practical purposes the local church was the district missionary who was controlled and responsible to his financiers across the seas. Webster, on the contrary, notes the converts' cultural, economic and social continuities with the past (ibid 71); a Chamar or Chuhra could receive Christian baptism, could call himself a Christian, and still remain in good standing of his old Biradari if he participated in its rites of passage and other ceremonies. This dual membership was possible because unlike the high caste Hindu, the Muslim and the Sikh Communities that ejected anyone who accepted Christian baptism, "the low castes drew the line not at baptism but at participation in the ceremonial life of the community" (P. 248). The missions were caught in a dilemma: to keep the new converts behind protective walls of mission compounds or to leave them in continuing contact with fellow castemen in order to attract more converts. The contact with fellow castemen could not be prevented for all time to come. The polythesitic belief, or what Griswold called the top two layers of religious beliefs and practices, were continued. (Griswold 1923; 232) There were cases of Bhagats who had exorcised spirits in the name of Christ (Griswold's account quoted by Webster, 1976; 128). Christian

missionary work could not make any significant progress among the Shehri Bhangis of Delhi. They had converted to Islam during the Moghul rule, nominally Muslims but following the polytheistic Hindu religious practices of their forefathers. Their way of life and social status had not changed. Their acceptance of Islam in the past had not meant Islam accepting them as co-equals with 'upper caste' Muslims. They were wiser by their experience and were reluctant and unwilling to undergo conversion again. As said above, with the coming of the British they gradually got rid of their thin veneer of Islam, the muslim names in particular, as the name is the first and quick indicator of one's religion in the sub-continent. According to 1921 census, the total Chuhra population of Delhi province was 14416 of whom Hindus were 14378, and Muslims, a mere 38. In 1931, the total Chuhra population of Delhi province was 21138, of whom 17905 were Hindus, 345 Muslims, 35 Sikhs and 2853 Christians. In 1931, the Christians were enumerated as a sub-caste of Chuhras. Also, there were separate population figures for Chuhras of Delhi city according to their religions. Out of 7520 Chuhras, 301 were Muslims and 56 were Christians. The 56 Christian Chuhras were less than 1 percent of Delhi's Chuhra population. They all were migrants from rural areas. According to my informants, no one among Shehri Bhangis converted to Christianity. In Delhi province, excluding urban area, the Christian Chuhras were 20 percent of their population. The rural Bhangis were converting to Christianity in caste blocks. They had heard about rural Bhangis in other parts of Panjab receiving agricultural land after conversion to Christianity. The Shehri Bhangis, as said

above, had perforce continued doing scavenging work after their conversion to Islam. They saw little hope in Christianity. They started reverting back to their original religion, Hinduism. The process was set into motion by Arya Samaj, the revivalist Hindu movement founded by Swami Dayanand. The person who worked out the process was the Arya Samajist, Pandit Amin Chand of Lahore.

According to my information there are no Christians left among the Delhi Bhangis today. Gorkhi is an ex-Christian. He is about 60 years old and has worked as a sweeper in DMC since Independence. His father who was a Khansaman or cook of an English Sahib, converted to Christianity. The son's name was Gorkhi Masih; Masih or Christ was voluntarily dropped when the British left. According to Gorkhi, conversion to Christianity did not make any change in their social status, and they continued living in their traditional way.

Asha Rattan (36 years) has been toying with the idea of becoming a Christian for the last ten years. The underlying motive is to give up the Bhangi label. "I have no faith in Christian religion and will never have any. When I convert it will be with the sole purpose of getting rid of my Bhanqi status." He is educated upto matriculation, the family has given up sweeping and scavenging for the last 10 years, having sub-contracted the Mohallas to another Bhangi. Asha Rattan himself suffers from Polio disability and earns his living by polishing furniture and repairing old furniture. His younger brother is a tailor.

There is one Christian Bhangi in Shahdara. He is a migrant from Aligarh and is not Shehri Bhangi. He is a class IV (peon, messenger) central government employee. His name and those of his wife and children are biblical or Anglicised. He denies that he is from the Bhangi caste. However, my informants told me that he is and that his wife is from the "Christian sweeper caste" of Aligarh area.

There may be a few more Christians among the ex-untouchables in Delhi, but if there are, they will not admit to that. Having walked out on Hinduism, they would not relish the idea of returning to what they consider, a lowly position in the caste hierarchy. The upper caste image of the Christian convert has been an unpleasant one.... "a worthless vagabond, who from motives of gain has renounced the religion of his forefathers, and who is now at liberty to do all kinds of abominable things," wrote Rev. J.L. Scott in 1852. (Quoted from Webster 1976; 67) The image² persists to this day and also among Indians living abroad. (Indians here means people from the sub-continent, including the Pakistanis) "She (he) is an Issai (more reproachfully, saai) and is only hiding her (his) low caste origin," would remark the upper caste Indian. Skin colour, features, mannerism would be looked at closely for signs of low caste origin. This upper caste response to an ex-untouchable is now reserved for the Christians among them.

The untouchables received special attention from Christian missionaries. Arya Samaj revivalist movement rose up to meet the challenge of the missionaries. They studied closely the

techniques of the Christian propagandists, met them on their ground, contained them and gradually drove them back.

9.9. RELIGION INFLUENCED BY ARYA SAMAJ MOVEMENT EMERGENCE OF BALMIKI CULT.

Those of the Delhi Bhangis who had accepted Islam and later Christianity were brought back into the Hindu fold through the efforts of Arya Samaj. The Arya Samaj was founded by Swami Dayanand Saraswati at Bombay in 1875. Its centre of activities was moved to Panjab as Christian missionaries were active there, as also in the adjoining districts of Uttar Pradesh. Dayanand's message had three main elements: (a) call to a revival of Vedic Hinduism; (b) the stress on practical action; (c) the stress on the solidarity and equality of all Hindus (Ursula M. Sharma 1976; 3) These three themes were integrated and were revolutionary in their impact on the then decadent Hindu society fragmented by caste, sects and idolatory. Vedic Hindus recognised classes (Varna) not castes. The latter were a degeneration of the Varna ideal of achieved status, rather than ascribed status. Casteism cut at the solidarity and equality of Hindus. Caste injustices were the harshest on the lower castes who were leaving the ancestral religion and going over to alien religions, Islam and Christianity. Efforts were made towards a casteless society. These were at two levels. One among the high caste Hindus, was for the promotion of inter-caste marriages. It received only a limited acceptance among the Arya Samajists let alone the orthodox Sanatanist Hindus. The second was the rejection of untouchability, the acceptance of lower castes as the essential constituents of

Hindu society. This was more successful to the extent that spread of Christianity among these castes was stopped. The next step was the recovery and reclamation of these lower castes lost to Christianity and Islam. This was done through Shuddhi or ritual purification. 'Shuddhi' or state of purity is necessary for the performance of 'dharma' in Hindu tradition. (All religions have a certain amount of purificatory, cleanliness requirements and special apparel for performance of rites and prayers). 'Dharma' has ritual and social aspects; the need for 'Shuddhi' is peculiarly important in Hinduism. 'Shuddhi' is lost by contact with polluting persons or things. It is restored through purificatory functions.

'Shuddhi' also means the reinstatement of a lapsed Hindu, also of a Hindu who had converted to another religion.

Swami Dayanand recommended 'Shuddhi' for reconversion, but no special ceremony for this purpose. According to his biographers he reconverted only two persons: one Kharak Singh who was born a Sikh, then became a Hindu and later a Christian, was brought back into the Hindu religion (1877). In Dehra Dun he reconverted a born Muslim (1879). (Ghasi Ram 1957; 71, 171) Dayanand died in 1883. For the next ten years or so, Arya Samaj, in collaboration with the Sikhs, continued with Shuddhi ceremonies to reconvert individual Christians and Muslims. In this they secured the co-operation of Sanatanist orthodox Hindus. The orthodox imposed the condition that the newly convert should have a dip in the river Ganga at Haridwar. By 1893, the 'Shuddhi' was being performed according to the Vedic rites, namely, shaving of the head, 'havan', explanation of the

Gayatric 'mantra' and of Arya Samaj principles. At the end the convert distributed 'Sherbet' or sugared herbal scented water to those present.

Shuddhi became a mass conversion movement in the last decade of the nineteenth century. In Panjab, it was directed mainly at outcasted groups, like Rahtias who were Sikh Chamars, the Ods and Meghs. Similar Arya Samaj efforts were directed at the reclamation of lower castes in U.P. and Rajasthan. The ceremony was the same as in the case of individual conversions. In these cases of mass conversion, the hitherto untouchable groups were upgraded and acquired the right to socialise with upper caste Hindus. This right was always limited by the long established attitudes of the caste society. The short ceremony of the Shuddhi underlined the new status of the lower castes. The famine of 1896 hit hard on the low castes. The Christian missionaries who used to herd up the famine orphans had now to contend with Arya Samaj. The Samaj opened new orphanages in Panjab and later extended its operations to Central and Western India. This phase of mass conversion, rather of protection of lower castes from the inroads of Christian mass conversion, owed much to the organising genius of Lala Lajpat Rai.

Purification movement among the Bhangis took the form of Hinduisation through the Balmiki cult. Before that the Bhangis used to identify themselves with Lal Beg, a Muslim saint whom they worshipped in the manner and style typical for worship of Muslim saints. Arya Samaj members who were mostly persons of higher castes, persuaded the Bhangis back into the Hindu consciousness. The campaign was masterminded by Pandit Amin Chand

of Lahore, and its main plank was the Balmiki cult. Pandit Amin Chand started his reform work among the Bhangis of Panjab in Lahore, in 1910. For two years, this Arya Samaji Brahmin lived among the Bhangis, mixing with them, trying to know their ideas and feelings. In 1912, he published his book, "Balmiki Prakash," or The Light of Balmiki, its title reminiscent of Dayanand's "Satyarth Prakash", or the Light of Truth. The book was followed by two others, Balmiki Darshan (Balmiki Philosophy) and Balmiki Sandesh (Balmiki Message). In Delhi, two prominent Bhangi men, Maharaj Khakshah, and Maharaj Khurkan came under the influence of Pandit Amin Chand. They started their reform work in Delhi with the help of the outlook and methodology described in the book "Balmiki Prakash". The 128 page book is divisible in three parts: The traditions of Balmiki the guru of Bhangis, which are an integral part of Hindu beliefs (upto page 55); Sanskar Vidhi or life cycle ceremonies (pages 55-66); Bhajans (pages 67-128). Bhajans or religious songs were popular in those days. Bhajans on pages 67-88 were written by Pandit Amin Chand and the remainder by his admiring disciple, Sadhu Yodha Ram of Multan canton ment. The book which is in the form of question and answers explores the tradition about Balmiki as integral to Hindu tradition. In fact, it opens with an account of Balmiki (Rishi Valmiki) as narrated to a Bhangi by a Rama Bhagat or worshipper of god king Rama. Balmiki or Ratnakar was the tenth son of Rishi Varuna and his wife Chaarshini Devi, and the grandson of god Brahma. The baby Balmiki was carried off by a woman of the Bhil tribe. This was all God's will for the emancipation of the Bhil tribe (page 7). As Bhils were known for their petty crimes, Balmiki was given the same label.

According to another legend, Ratnakar went into deep meditation. Many years passed and he got covered over with layers of dust (Sanskrit: Barmi); hence he came to be known as Balmik. He was not a contemporary of Rama, as falsely claimed by Christian missionaries. He had written Ramayana long before the birth of Rama, in fact, ten thousand years before Rama's birth. Balmiki thus could see in the distant future (Pp 10-12, 16).

Another legend about Balmiki relates to Mahabharata. Pandavas were holding a Yagya or religious ceremony. Balmiki, posing as a Chandala, partook of the feast by mixing all the eatables (Reference to the outcastes who used to put together the left-overs from the food of the high castes... Westernised Indians look askance at anyone who will not self-serve the different items of food in one plate, the various curries and the rest running into one another!) Queen Drupadi who was watching this, concluded that Balmiki who worked in the royal stables was indeed a Chandala. A conch was to blow by itself to announce the successful completion of the Yagya. But it did not blow. Lord Krishna thereupon said that Drupadi should cook for Balmiki and offer him food in all humility. This was done and the Yagya concluded properly. "Balmiki's devotion and humility is really great as it brought down the arrogant Brahmins" (P 7). Balmiki was not a robber or given to eating meat and fish. He was kind to animals. He cursed a hunter who shot down a bird (fantail fly-catcher) that was flying with its female. In his hermitage, the fierce wild animals and cows, goats lived in perfect amity (P 15, Pandit Amin Chand

does not tell if the tigers and other carnivores started eating grass. Perhaps, the Ashram tigers hunted for their food outside the boundary of the hermitage) Even the disciples of Balmiki were persons of supernatural powers. When Bharat and people of Ayodhya accompanying him were on their way to meet Rama, they passed by the cottage of Bhardwaj who was a disciple of Balmiki. Bhardwaj invited the royal procession to have food and to rest after the long journey. With the help of his supernatural powers Bhardwaj procured the royal food and comfort in the middle of the forest (Dayanand had criticised Islam and Christianity for their portrayal of magic and miracles by the prophets. Pandit Amin Chand used the ancient Hindu stories of miracles to impress the Bhangis). There is selective use of the opponent's acts: The Muslims and Christians both have paid respect to Hindu religious books and the Epics. For instance, prince Dara Shikoh and Emperor Shah Jahan got Yog Vashisht translated into Persian. Prof Griffith who made an English translation of Ramayana, highly praised the Epic (P 19).

The supremacy of Balmiki over both Jesus and Mohammed: Balmiki was born in Treta Yug, that is 2165030 years ago (calculated upto 1912, when Pandit Amin Chand wrote his book)..... Jesus was born only 1959 years ago: Mohammed 1340 years and Nanak 450 years back. "Balmiki is the oldest of them all and on the basis of his antiquity alone he is their great pathfinder" (P 8. The Muslim argument was the reverse of that: Mohammed was the last of the prophets and, therefore, the most perfect.) The supremacy of Balmiki over Jesus and Mohammed is shown in another context. In the court of Dharam Raj, Balmiki is one

of the select saints to help assess the sins and virtues of individuals. As Jesus and Mohammed will not be in Dharam Raj's court, the Bhangis who had converted to Islam and Christianity will have nobody to look after them after death. (P 31. Both Islam and Christianity had their own special arrangements for salvation after death. Dayanand had scoffed at these salvations through prophets and intermediaries. But Pandit Amin Chand was speaking to the Bhangis in the style of the Maulvis and Christian missionaries so as to counter the foreign converters).

Balmiki was not the ancestor of Bhangis. He was their religious preceptor (P 21). Bhangis were born as the result of a union between Brahmin females and Shudra males (P 21). This is underlined by the story of Matang Rishi who was a Chandala but through meditation became Rishi, the implication being that a person can change his status through hard work. Bhangis are Hindus and they follow the major principles of Hinduism like belief in Dharma Shastras, belief in Hindu gods and goddesses, Hindu festivals, marriage according to Hindu rites, belief in re-birth and religious rites in the memory of the dead ancestors. Amin Chand recognised that there were Bhangis who followed certain Muslim customs, but that was as a result of their ignorance and poverty and the lack of interest on the part of caste Hindus. The Bhangis continued to be Hindus, as long as they had not formally converted into Islam or Christianity. (P 28). "Lal Beg was a disciple of Balmiki. Those who call themselves Lal Begi are greatly mistaken. You should always call yourself Balmiki" (P 24).

Untouchability was against only those Shudras who had done misdeeds and not towards those who were not involved in bad acts. Examples of good Shudras are taken from Ramayana (Bhilni) to medieval India (Nabha Bhagat, who was a Dom; Daduji, of Teli caste; Kabir, a weaver, Ravidas, a Chamar by caste). Pandit Amin Chand suggested to the untouchables to give up eating beef and dead animals, to stop drinking and gambling, to abandon the elements of Muslim way of life and to keep themselves and their surroundings clean, thus removing causes of untouchability (P 25). Call was also made to stop circumcision and Nikah (Muslim marriage) wherever it existed, and the burial of the dead in favour of cremation. Promise was held of a casteless society, "Even according to our Dharamshastras, all the four Varnas will be united into one in Kaliyug. Brahmins will take meat and liquor and will be greedy and illiterate, whereas Shudras will start behaving like Brahmins once did. Now is the time that things said in the Puranas are coming true. Shudras have started studying Vedas and Brahmins are just doing the opposite. The time indicated has arrived. Hindus have become concerned about untouchability and are working for your improvement." (P 26. The appreciative reference to Puranas needs clarification. In the appendix to Satyarth Prakash, Dayanand condemns "All Tantras, Puranas, Upapuranas, Ramayana by Tulsidass, Rukmani Mangla etc; and all books (of this kind) written in Bhasha." However, he excludes Puranas not written in Bhasha. In "A Statement of My Beliefs," Dayanand states under section 23 - "The Puranas are the Brahmana books, such as Aitreya Brahmana written by the great Rishis like Brahma. They are also called Itihas, Kalpa, Gatha, and Narshansi. The Bhagvat and other books of that sort are not true (real)

Puranas" - Satyarth Prakash, P. 729, 1975 Edition.)

Pandit Amin Chand listed the duties of the followers of "Balmiki Prakash". They should keep this book with proper respect in a clean piece of cloth, should keep themselves and their surroundings clean; should give up beef, liquor, gambling and other bad habits, should call themselves Hindus, Hinduise their names and conduct life cycle ceremonies according to Hindu rites, should educate their children. They should read this book to others and bring them back to the Hindu way of life. Pandit Amin Chand aided and assisted by the Bhangis, Maharaj Khakshah and Maharaj Khurkan, was responsible for spreading the message of "Balmiki Prakash" among the Bhangis of Delhi. They succeeded in building consciousness in the Bhangi caste that they were as much Hindus as any Brahmin and were the spiritual descendants of Maharishi Balmiki or Valmiki, the author of Ramayana, one of the great ancient gurus of Hinduism. Soon conversion to alien religions came to an end and re-conversion of Bhangi Christians and Muslims was started. They set up a committee called Prem Sabha for their reform work among Delhi Bhangis. They took out a paper called "Ruchi Prakash" to propagate their reformist ideas.

Arya Samaj movement became even more effective among the Bhangis of Delhi at a later time. Two Bhangi Arya Samajists, Mahashya Karam Chand and Mahashya Nank Chand, were literate enough to understand Arya Samaj's aims and objectives. They worked in Swami Shradhanand's "Dalit Udhar Sabha" or Committee for the Upliftment of the Depressed. Under this Sabha they used to hold meetings of their caste members and to propagate

the ideas of Arya Samaj's reform movement. They motivated Bhangis towards education in school run by Arya Samaj. By the early 1930's, all those Shehri Bhangis of Delhi who had once been converted to Islam or Christianity became Hindus again. They stopped eating beef. They started cremating the dead. Lal Beg as a reference of identification was abandoned. Before this movement there were no temples in Bhangis' 'bastis'. There used to be a symbolic place in their residential localities where two bricks of Murshad Lal Beg were placed and the place was called 'Thek Ka Mandir'. Every Bhangi 'bastie' had a Thek where elders of the caste would gather to deliberate and decide about caste matters. When Arya Samaj reform movement took hold among the Bhangis, these Theks were replaced by Balmiki temples. Images of Balmiki were installed in these temples. It is not a valid criticism that Arya Samaj failed to convert Bhangis to Vedic Dharm.

That was not its primary aim. The sole purpose of Shuddhi movement was to bring the Bhangis back into the Hindu fold, that of popular Hinduism and to prepare caste Hindus to stop the practice of untouchability. Almost every Bhangi neighbourhood now has a Balmiki temple, built and maintained out of the subscriptions raised by the neighbourhood. Devotees enter the temple after washing their feet and hands, bow their head to the image of Balmiki and worship with flowers and incense, chanting hymns exactly in the manner of the high caste Hindus. Pandit Amin Chand in his book "Balmiki Prakash" had included mantras and hymns to be chanted and sung at life cycle ceremonies. These mantras are like Vedic mantras, but do have the name Balmiki in them. Instead of Dom female performing their marriage vows, any one

in their caste who is well versed in mantras written in Balmiki Prakash can perform the marriage ceremony.

The younger generation of Bhangis puts great emphasis on the Hindu tradition. They strongly deny their link with Lal Beg. However, worship of Lal Beg still continues in most households, as members of older generation think that rejection of Lal Beg as a deity might bring some trouble to the family. But Lal Beg as a form of identification has disappeared. Bhangis have adopted Balmiki as their spiritual ancestor. They are referred as Balmikis, in fact they encourage others to call them Balmikis. But the word Balmiki does not convey the same meaning to the caste Hindu as to the Bhangis. The upper castes, as indeed the census reports since 1915, use Balmiki as a scheduled caste, as synonym for Bhangi. Bhangis, on the contrary, deny that Balmiki is caste or scheduled caste. When the Bhangis call themselves Balmikis they mean followers of Rishi Valmiki and therefore Hindus. For instance, Balmiki's name is used in salutation "Jai Balmiki" in the manner of orthodox Hindu salutation "Jai Ram Ki". Balmiki's picture is to be seen in almost every Bhangi house. Bhangis never exaggerated their claim to higher status with reference to a glorious past, as Jatavs of Agra did, for instance, when they claimed to be Kshat¹ryas (Lynch 1969; 75). Perhaps, claim to higher status through an exalted ancestry is not plausible in the Bhangi case, their position and occupation being the lowest in the caste hierarchy.

They recognise that their traditional occupation and status is low, but emphasise the importance of that function and that other castes, too, should do scavenging as it concerns

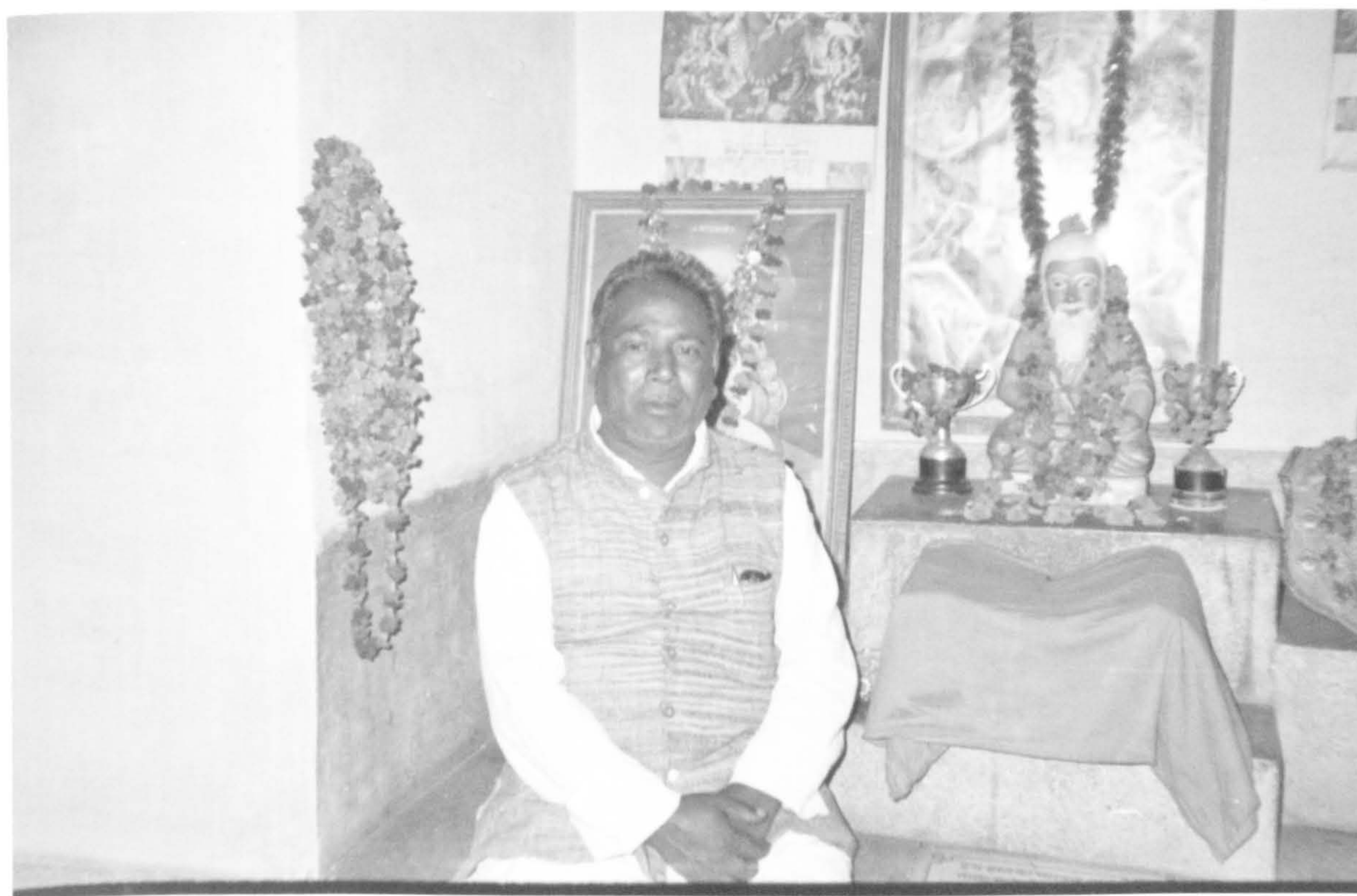


Balmiki temples in Bhangi Colonies.

the health and well-being of all. This brings them face to face with economic reality, namely, until they have large scale mobility to other jobs and professions through education and training, they would not like to weaken their monopoly of scavenging. Identification with Balmiki has two aspects or levels: a very ancient link with Hinduism and; that what matters is achieved status, not the accident of birth. This latter aspect is very important for their morale.

The Balmiki identity has provided a framework within which members of the Bhangi caste have attained group identity. The name even applies to the Bhangi community in the local region. Bhangis of the adjacent districts of the neighbouring states who were once known by their sub-castes such as Helas, Dhanuks, are now called Balmiki. To the larger society, Balmiki is a synonym for Bhangi. Thus the adoption of the name 'Balmiki' has not provided the Bhangis with any escape from their stigmatised identity. However, Balmiki identity has helped in preserving group unity for organised effort in the direction of improved social status. This group unity can be looked at also as separatism from the total community.

Bhangis now have their own temples. The Balmiki temples, priesthood and their own way of celebrations. This sets them apart from their Hindu neighbours, a separation symbolised by a Balmiki temple in every Bhangi neighbourhood. These religious symbols have generated in them separatism instead of integration with the rest of the society. However, the cause of this separatism lies somewhere else and not with the Balmiki temples



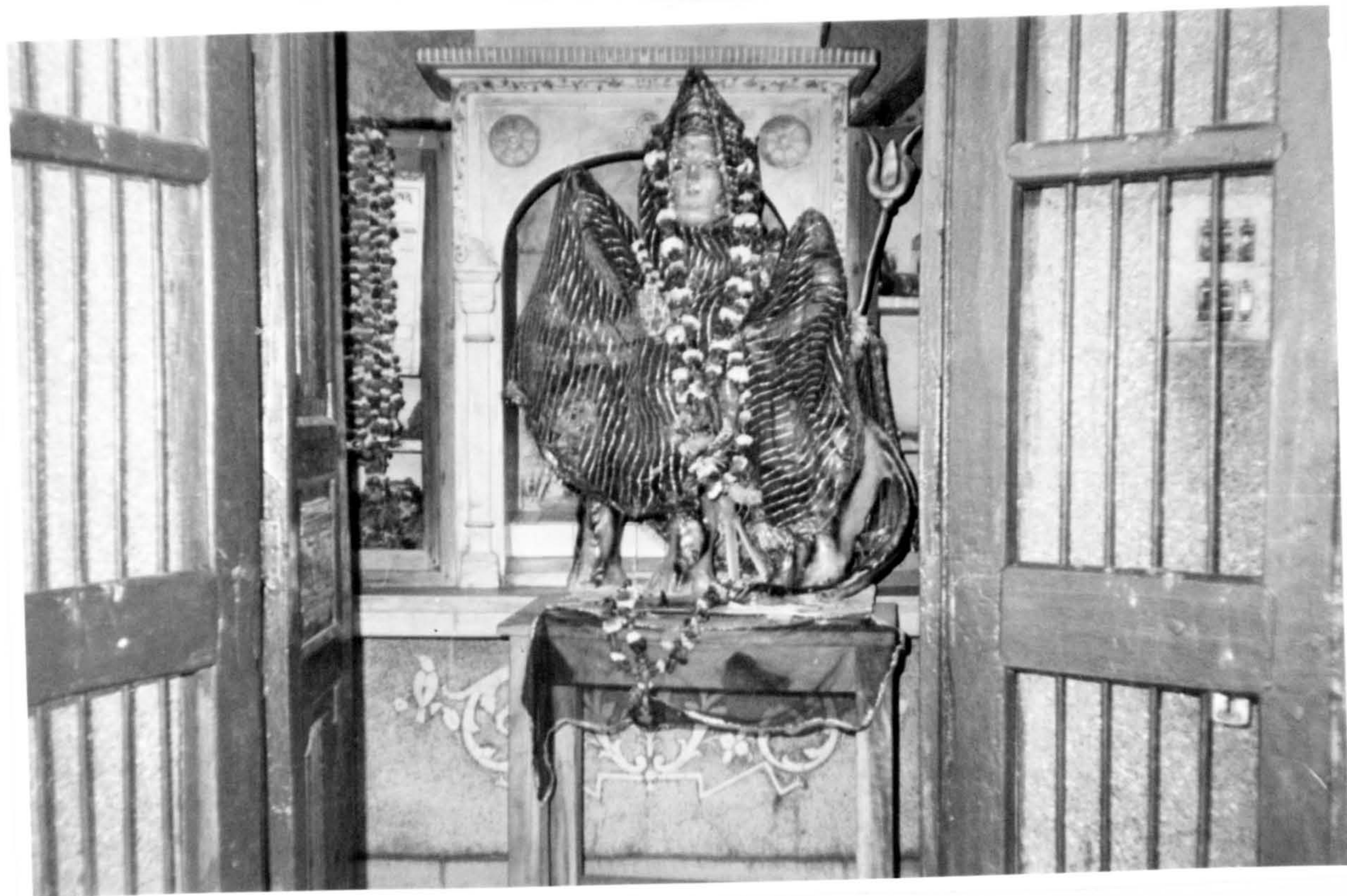
Bhangi priest: Puran Chand Poonam. He is a full-time Corporation sweeper.

which are but bricks and cement. Popular Hinduism is an integration of diverse beliefs and practices with a common core. There is no reason why Balmiki cult should be a hindrance to Hinduism's all-embracing quality, more so as the cult is built round the name of the legendary Valmiki who was the author of Hindu epic Ramayana. The lack of integration with larger society is not caused by Balmiki temples but because of those who are generally associated with those temples, the Bhangis. It all comes down to untouchability. There is something irreducible or inescapable about caste status, that no amount of ideological juggling will alter. Berreman rightly says that caste is very much like race something 'Given' which you cannot alter. (Berreman, G.D. 1979;8)

9.10. IDENTITY DILEMMA

Bhangi intelligentsia is becoming sceptical about the relevance of Balmiki cult as a means of enhancing their dignity and self respect. This gives rise to further identity crisis. A few case histories will be instructive:-

Mr. Balmukand Chauhan - 48 years old, is a graduate of Delhi University. He works as supervisor in Delhi Telephones, earning Rupees 1100 per mensem. He says, "I got my education in extreme poverty. I have intense hatred for those who have relegated us to this lowly position in life. I never consider myself Balmiki. I am a Bhangi and do not hide my caste from others. People will call us Balmiki to our face but Chuhra behind our back. I believe in Vedic Hinduism that recognised classes, not castes. Priestly Brahmins do not know what real Hinduism is. I am a Bhangi and a true Hindu. We should never



Hindu gods and goddesses at Balmiki Temple.

1. Durga mother goddess. 2. Shiva.

convert into other religions like Islam, Christianity or even Buddhism. Death is better than conversion. I invite a Brahmin to perform ceremony in my family. I tell him that I am of Bhangi caste. He takes food at our place because he knows that our family left this occupation a long time ago." This last comment by Chauhan points to the underlying immediate cause of untouchability, namely dirty working conditions for the sanitation workers. It also shows the Bhangis' adherence to Hinduism, rather Vedic Hinduism. --

Mr. Jagdish Parshad Nath - 38 years, is a matriculate and then did 2 year Sanitary Inspector's Course. He works as Sanitary Inspector in Delhi Corporation. He is of the view that Bhangis do not have any link with Balmiki. "It is a political stunt to call us together in the name of Balmiki. Politicians then address our gatherings. Both our caste leaders and the high caste politicians have selfish motives in arranging these Bhangis gatherings. Perhaps we should follow the teachings of the great saints. Dilemma of conversion is only for the lower castes. Upper castes have never thought of conversion to another religion. I am not in favour of conversion."

Mr. Inder Singh Dhingan - 36 years, is an M.A. from Delhi University, currently doing law in evening classes. He is employed as clerk in Delhi Transport Corporation. He says, "The discovery of our link with Balmiki is a recent phenomenon. Before that we were just Mehtars, Lalbegs or Halalkhors. Change of religion is no solution to our problems, as equality between man and man is a mere sham with other religions. I see conversion as a way of jolting caste Hindus into treating

us as their co-equals."

Mr. P.R. Parcha - 39 years old, is an M. Com and is office superintendent with Steel Authority of India. He says, "We have no connection with Balmiki. It is just our group name so that we could gather under a name which is respectful. Our forefathers who adopted Islam or Christianity found no change in their social status. Some among them were taught by Christian missionaries and became literate. For marriage alliances they had to turn to their own community. This is true also of the Buddhist Bhangis. Conversion can only be used as a threat to the Hindu Community."

Mr. S.P. Chandel - 36 years old, M.A. in Hindi, is a Senior Assistant in Central Hindi Directorate. According to him, "We do not have an exclusive link with Balmiki, but I have full faith in Hindu religion. We cannot have equality in other religions. Education will help us in achieving a social status co-equal with the rest of the Hindus. Casteism and upper caste feeling of untouchability towards us will disappear in due course. After establishing myself in a good job, I moved out of the 'basti' environment and built my house in the outer area of East Delhi. I did not tell about my caste to my high caste neighbours, but gradually over a period of years they came to know about it. When I invited them to my house on the birthday of my son, no one from my neighbours came."

Mr. Kabul Singh - 40 years, school teacher, had this to say, "We call ourselves Hindus. But if Hindus do not consider us as Hindus, what should we call ourselves? It is a difficult

situation for us. We might have to convert to another religion, but not to Islam. Muslims and Brahmins can eat together, but not Muslims and Bhangis." The case histories of the educated Bhangis illustrate that they are not fully accepted by others in spite of their Balmiki identity within Hindu culture and their middle class status. Upper caste society is sometimes resentful and sees the middle class non-sweeper Bhangis entering through the reservation backdoor. As to the educated Bhangis, their new and divergent class affiliation does not affect caste solidarity. They start articulating the interests of their community. Their new emerging role will be seen in the chapters on POLITICS and, OCCUPATIONAL MOBILITY.

The illustrations above indicate that the Bhangi intelligentsia is sceptical about its identity as Balmiki. It is highly unlikely that the educated Bhangis will choose another religious path in order to gain self respect and respect of others. Nearly all of them prefer to remain Hindus. Only four educated Bhangi men have become Buddhists and their conversion is not liked much by the Bhangi community in general. It is true that their community has not ex-communicated them but they feel a little isolated at times, especially at religious functions and caste gatherings.

Mr. Bishan Chand Kalyan - 41 years, educated upto Secondary school, works as a clerk in the Delhi Electric Supply undertaking. He says, "When I was a student, social conditions were very oppressive. We dared not open even the municipal water tap if we needed a drink of water. We had to request some one else to turn on the tap... Our caste people who do the dirtiest

work, consider Doms as lower than themselves. They observe untouchability towards Doms and the latter have Jajmani relationships with Bhangis. They used to perform our marriage ceremonies and beat drums. Their role was that of the 'nai' rather than of the priest. Like the 'ilaquas' of Bhangis for scavenging purpose, the Doms had Bhangi neighbourhoods demarcated for these Jajmani relationships with Bhangis. Once on the occasion of a marriage in 1957, in Old Delhi, I took my meal sitting beside a Dom, Hari Shankar Rai, now a famous player of harmonium, but an unknown entity at that time. My caste elders protested, did not eat the communal meal and walked off. They ridiculed me for having defiled myself by eating with a Dom. They nearly excommunicated me. I questioned the caste elders about anybody being lower than Bhangis who remove night soil. I told them that 'if we continued observing untouchability towards Doms, we could not expect caste Hindus to consider us as fellow human beings'.... I see no connection of my caste with Balmiki. The Ramayana, the book written by Balmiki, is in praise of Hindu system. Politicians befool us when they link us with Balmiki. The Ramayana says nothing good about Shudras. Rather the contrary: Rama killed a Shudra who was reading scriptures. I tell my caste people that they worship the killer of their ancestor. But my community would not listen to me. These days Bhangis celebrate Hindu festivals and emulate high caste Hindus, but the stigma of untouchability persists. In order to take revenge on Hindus, we should become Muslims. Even Buddhists cannot fight against Hindus because of the Buddhist philosophy of non-violence. I have only Buddha's idol in my house. I have no faith in Hinduism."

Mr. Ramji Lal 'Manav' - 33 years, has Master's degrees in Philosophy, History and Hindi. He is working as senior Hindi translator in Defence Ministry. (Manav is pseudonym, meaning human being) He says, "I somehow managed my studies under acute financial hardship. My mother is a private scavenger and I helped her in her work till I was studying for the Matriculation. After that I left this work. I used to feel inferiority complex among my upper caste class mates. My study of religion convinces me that there is no connection between my caste and Balmiki. Only Puranic fictitious tales link us with Balmiki. He did nothing for our caste. How can we then be his followers? Hindus have mistreated us and we are justified in having ill feelings towards them as well as against Hindu religion. I do not celebrate Hindu festivals with the exception of Holi as it signifies human love and fellow feeling. My wife observes the annual 'Karva Chauth' fast (This fast is observed by Hindu women for the health and prosperity of their husbands), because she does not have the courage to defy her female relations who are the slaves of Hindu manners and customs. My community condemned me when, in 1968, I became a Buddhist. Religion is needed by the exploited; the rich do not bother about it..... Even Buddhists do not intermarry freely; they will ask about the caste first. Hindu culture has pervaded every aspect of our life..... My parents followed all the rituals on the birth of my children. I do not. Later we agreed not to interfere in each other's life style... If we become Muslims where will the Hindus be? I personally cannot even think of conversion to Islam; reason and sense have no place in Islam. However, I do insist that we should not remain Hindus.

Another Bhangi, a post-graduate and a lawyer, who became a Buddhist a long time ago, wrote several pamphlets. In the one, entitled, "Was Balmiki an Untouchable?" he emphasises - "Bhangi community has no link with Balmiki. It is a deliberate attempt on the part of Hindus, including Mahatma Gandhi and our present leaders, to keep us within the Hindu fold so that we may remain their slaves. Our Bhangi community had its own culture. We used to worship Lal Beg. Pandit Amin Chand who wrote "Balmiki Parkash" misled us when he wrote that Lal Beg was a disciple of Balmiki. When a respectable name was given to us, we began to serve the interests of Hindus. We were manoeuvred away from the Scheduled caste movement, by those who did not want Scheduled castes to manage their own affairs. There is no evidence to suggest that we Bhangis had any connection with Balmiki. Bhangis consider him their Guru, but he has not done anything for our uplift. Bhangis celebrate his 'Jayanti', hold feasts in his name, react strongly if any body calls him a dacoit. But they have not learnt anything from him; they only know how to handle brooms. By adopting Balmiki as their guru, Bhangis cannot become Balmiki, instead they have turned him into a Bhangi. Ramayana is not our religious book. It is the story of a king. Balmiki was the author of this fiction which describes the social set up of a particular period. Ramayana is based on fourfold Varna system and the book depicts a very lowly status of Shudras.... We should be united to leave the Hindu religion and everything connected with it. We should leave this dirty occupation and follow the path shown by Dr. Ambedkar. Only then can we be a strong force with self-respect, self-confidence and social status."

It will not be irrelevant here to mention the conversions to Islam in the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu. During the 35 years from 1945 to 1980, 1500 Harijans became Muslims. But in February 1981, there were mass conversions of Harijans to Islam, when 2598 Harijans became Muslims in Meenakshipuram area of Tamil Nadu. Various explanations were given by the press as well as the sociologists all over India. There was the argument that Harijans were the victims of strict orthodoxy and rigid caste system in South India. They were also harrassed by the police. The other explanation was that Harijans had used conversion as a social and political weapon. The third explanation was that the Muslims of Meenakshipuram were rich and prosperous, having connections with the oil rich countries of Middle East. They induced Harijans to change their religion with a tempting offer of money. The London based Islamic Cultural Centre circulated a report according to which 50 Harijan families were induced to convert to Islam with a grant of Rupees 400,000 for an agricultural project.

The most plausible explanation for these conversions is the allurement of money influencing Tamil Nadu Harijans to change their religion. The monetary bribe does not explain everything. The amount involved was not fabulous. It was only about Rupees 8,000 per Harijan family and a similar amount could not have bought off a non-Harijan poor Hindu. Many of the upper caste Hindus are poorer than an average Harijan but would not think of conversion to Islam or any other religion. The social exclusion of Harijans from the mainstream of Hinduism in South India is the root cause of these conversions. At present Muslims constitute about 10 percent of India's population. Any

rise in Muslim population is seen as a political danger by the Hindus. The Meenakshipuram conversions were seen as a threat to Hindu society. Hindus responded to these conversions by holding Viraat Hindu Sammelan or Great Hindu Conference in various parts of India. The one held in Delhi was on 18th October 1981, at Boat Club. Representatives of Hinduism and its various sects, Arya Samajists, Jains, Sikhs came from all over the country. They were unanimous in declaring that untouchability was never a part of Hinduism, that it was a social evil which should be eradicated. Viraat Hindu Samaj was an organisation under which representatives of all the branches of Hinduism were asked to work together for the Hindu society. Inter-caste dinners were arranged in Harijan neighbourhoods. Food was cooked and served by Harijans and eaten by upper and lower castes together.

The Bhangis had their own conferences in which the educated Bhangis debated the issue of conversion. A majority of them were against conversion. They said that change of religion would not improve their social status.

NOTES

1. A stray Hindu might be seen at the 'durgah'. The tomb of Salim Chisti at Fatehpur Sikri near Agra is renowned since Emperor Akbar's time whose prayer for a son was accepted. In the land of superstitions there is no dearth of clients for numerous saints' past, present and yet to be born.
2. The Hindus extend this image to all ex-Hindus.

CHAPTER 10

10.1. POLITICS

Politics of caste are the politics of lower castes within the larger reality of India. Political means are another way whereby the lower castes have striven to raise their economic and social status. The dilemma for the lower castes has been whether to work along with the upper castes or separate from them, under the banner of scheduled caste parties.

The untouchables, as the name signifies, have been subject to social oppression. In Northern India the untouchables have suffered less than their brethren South of the Vindhayas, the extent of their virtual slavery worsened as one travelled southward. The word pariah - meaning the Tamil Paraiyar outcaste and also vagabond dog of low breed - is of Tamil origin. It is academically debatable whether or not the code of Manu had latter-day additions to it to give 'respectability' to oppression of the untouchables. But the fact remains that for countless centuries the Shudras in general, and the untouchables markedly so, have suffered deeply. The Brahmin, according to (latter day) Manu, was almost like God. (Manu X. 1.13) As to the Shudra, if he mentioned the name and class of the twiceborn contemptuously, "an iron nail ten fingers long shall be thrust red hot into his mouth" (Manu VIII.1.13). These were perhaps extreme examples of formal rules that were rarely, if ever, invoked and applied. The Brahmins, themselves the dependant Purohits of the Kashatriyas and the Vaishyas, who were the real holders of state and economic power, were terms

of reference or theoreticians of social tyranny.

The hold of the birth-ordained Varnashram, or caste, though secure was sometimes challenged. The Buddhist ideal was of a casteless society, but it could not be realised. The Bhakti movement questioned but failed to weaken the hold of orthodoxy on the social position of the low castes. The emergence and development of a sympathetic Indian attitude towards the low castes is the product of modern times, brought about through an accident of history, by the British rule. The British gave India political unity and impartial justice as between the Indians themselves. Under the rule of law, Brahmin and Shudra were equal. Above all, modern education and its spirit of inquiry started a critical look at the social institutions, including caste and its injustices. The British rule and Western education awakened Indians to the need for social reform and political freedom. Social reformation preceded organised political consciousness, the two went together for a time but then precedence was given to political struggle against the alien rule. The social reformers were of the view that foreign rule was the inevitable consequence of the decadent Hindu society, caste-ridden, superstitious and divided against itself. The end of the social ills will lead to the end of alien rule. The Indian politicians recognised this, but insisted that too strong attempts at social reforms will weaken the united front of the orthodox and the progressives against foreign rule. Consequently, the struggle for political freedom overshadowed the need for social reforms. It is remarkable that the British, in response to political struggle for freedom and to thwart it made use of religious and caste

divisions and also of what the British used to call the divisions between the various races of India.

Despite the rule of law under the British the lower castes continued to suffer from social disabilities in varying degrees. The British, who never forgot the Mutiny, were rather scared of religious susceptibilities of Indians. It was one thing to have stamped out Thuggie and Sati, which were (murder), homicide and suicide under the garb of decadent custom and rotten religion, but an entirely different matter to interfere with the working of Varna. That would have amounted to alien onslaught on what the orthodoxy believed were the vitals of Hindu society and would certainly have produced mass and violent civil unrest. Ultimately, the social regeneration of Indian society was the responsibility of the Indians themselves and enlightened progressive Indian view was advancing in that direction. In the purely administrative sphere, the British remained indifferent except to prevent grosser manifestations of upper caste tyranny over the lower castes. In general, the official policy was to let the Indian society remain locked in internecine strife and, where possible, to use, social divisions for Imperial aims. The result was that the ritual ridden Indian society continued, in varying degrees, the oppression of the low castes.

10.1. POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

The political awakening in India towards the end of the 19th century was confined to the western educated upper and middle classes, all drawn from the upper castes. But it had its repercussions on the lower castes. The politics of freedom

for India also brought about hope of emancipation for the lower castes. Lord Curzon's viceroyalty (1899-1905) heralded many far-reaching administrative reforms, some of which were misconstrued by the Indians. His style of government sometimes challenged the self respect of Indians. The controversial Indian Universities Act 1904, aimed at overhauling the higher education, Inspection of colleges was introduced and official element increased in the management of universities. But Indian politicians who controlled the Senates of the universities saw in this a curtailment of higher education and of their undue influence, and at once became hostile. They drummed up the opposition of educated Indians against Curzon. The partition of Bengal which was for the better administration of a very large province was misunderstood by the Bengalis as a threat to politically conscious elements in the two new provinces. This led to mass agitation which spread all over the country. The mistreatment of Indians in South Africa added to political discontent in India. Frustrated Indian nationalism drew courage from Russo-Japanese war (1904-5) in which Japan, an Asian country, defeated Russia, a European country. Lord Minto who succeeded Lord Curzon as Governor-General of India, decided to contain Indian discontent by superficial political reforms. After the usual protracted exchange of views between the Government of India and the Home Government (the British government represented by Secretary of state for India; Lord Morley was then in control of Indian affairs), the Government of India Act 1909, was passed which introduced communal representation of Muslims, in excess of

their numbers and as counterweight to nationalists. The principle of protection of minorities applied in the case of Muslims in other provinces was not applied to non-Muslim minorities in Panjab. The depressed classes did not find any representation or safeguards under the Government of India Act 1909. They were first recognised in the Government of India Act 1919, and the Regulations made thereunder. The brief background to this Act is as follows. India was politically restive when World War 1914-18 started. The growing nationalism and its terrorist manifestations were based on many 'grievances': insults to Indians in South Africa, denial of citizenship to Indians in Canada and, repression by the government in India. In December 1914, S.P. Sinha, the President of Indian National Congress asked for declaration of British goal in India. The formation of Home Rule League by Annie Besant and Tilak was followed by a pact known as Lucknow Pact between the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League at Lucknow in December 1916. Until a few years before that, Muslim 'loyalty' which was so convenient to Lord Minto had by now almost disappeared due to Balkan war and Turkey's post-war plight. Under the terms of the Lucknow Pact, the Congress had accepted the Muslim League's demand for continuation of communal representation and weightage to the Muslims, in return for the League's support to Congress demand for freedom. Britain's new policy towards India was declared on 20th August, 1917, known as Montague Declaration 1917 after the name of the then Secretary of state for India. Benevolent despotism was discarded and the British goal in India was now responsible government within the British Empire and this goal had to be reached by progressive stages. The strictly political aspects of the

Declaration and the subsequent Montague - Chelmsford Report (Montford Report) and the Government of India Act 1919, are not relevant to this study. Briefly these political reforms were a step forward then, e.g. local self governing bodies like municipalities and district boards; partial responsible government in the provinces known as Dyarchy and; greater association of Indian opinion at the centre. On the communal representation, the Montford Report said that communal electorates perpetuate divisions and are destructive of that feeling of nationality on which alone representative government could be based. "Division by creeds and classes means the creation of political camps organised against each other, and teaches men to think as partisans and not as citizens; and it is difficult to see how the change from this system to national is ever to occur. The British Government is often accused of dividing men in order to govern them. But if it unnecessarily divides them at the very moment when it professes to start them on the road to governing themselves it will find it difficult to meet the charge of being hypocritical or short sighted". (Bannerjee 1946; Vol II: 225)

During November-December 1917, when Montague the Secretary of state for India was in India to study the political situation, various organisations and interests placed their appeals and grievances before them. These included representations from the Untouchables Associations of Madras and Bengal, and the Depressed Classes Mission of Bombay. The Madras Presidency Untouchables Association was particularly militant. This Association, projecting its protest against upper castes on the Brahmins, equated Brahmins with a cobra seeking the

guardianship of young frogs. The British were quick to grasp the opportunity of dividing the political forces into pressure groups, arrayed against one another. The British suddenly recognised the existence of even the untouchables. It is not reasonable to blame the Lucknow Pact of 1919, for this division. The Pact did not make separate provision for Sikhs, Indian Christians, Anglo-Indians and Europeans; for Muslims in Bengal and Panjab where they were in a majority; or for non-Brahmins in Madras, and Marathas in Bombay presidency. Nor did it allow the communal constituencies the enhanced importance as the Montford Reforms later did. But as Congress had shown political opportunism but moral hollowness in recognising Muslim communal representation under the terms of the Lucknow Pact, the British for their own purpose followed that to logical conclusion. It has to be recognised that in 1917, Congress passed a resolution urging upon the people of India to remove all disabilities imposed by custom on the lower strata of society. Speaker after speaker had argued against the unjust social privileges enjoyed by the upper castes who were denying the depressed classes and castes the basic rights of humanity. (Report INC; 128-188)

As to the Act of 1919, it recognised the depressed classes as a political entity. The Central Legislature was now to consist of two houses: Legislative Assembly and Council of State. The total strength of the Legislative Assembly was to be 145 members, of whom 42 were to be nominated by the Governor General (officials 25, non-officials 17) and the rest elected. Of the 17 nominated non-official members, one was from the depressed

classes. In the provincial legislatures, the depressed classes were represented by 4 nominations in Central Provinces, two each in Bihar and Bombay, one each in Bengal and the U.P. In Madras province, ten members were nominated to represent nine depressed classes - in all, 20 nominated members from depressed classes in the provincial legislatures. It was a small beginning, but the existence of depressed classes was now recognised in the political sphere. The British were careful, at this stage, to call them depressed classes, and not castes so as not to be accused of interfering in Varnashram by the orthodox.

The Government of India Act 1919 had provided for a Commission of Inquiry after ten years. Consequently, in November 1927, a Commission consisting of seven members and headed by Sir John Simon visited India, but was boycotted by the nationalists as no Indian was represented on it. But the others including the organisations of the Depressed¹ classes cooperated with the Simon Commission. Sixteen of these associations wanted separate electorates. The memoranda from the various organisations of the depressed classes appraised the Simon Commission about their social misery and economic deprivation. According to M.B. Mullick of a Namasudra of Bengal, an untouchable had to stand outside the post office, throw the money into the post office, whereupon the post cards were thrown to him from a distance. From Madras came the information that medical staff were averse to entering the homes of untouchables. (Printed Appeal Addressed to Sir John Simon by the Sambara Maha Jana Sangham, Madras, 28th May, 1928). The Panjab Adharmi Mandal narrated similar social

atrocities. Exclusion from village wells was commonplace. Dr. Ambedkar, in his memorandum on behalf of the Bahsikrit Hitkarni Sabha (outcaste welfare organisation), opposed nomination, as it excluded depressed classes from choosing their own representatives. He demanded joint electorates with reservation of seats for the depressed classes². This is the system operative in independent India, but at that time it was opposed by the Congress.

The Simon Commission ruled out nomination, for it would not provide the depressed classes any training in politics and because the nominees lacked independence. Separate electorate, according to Commission, was the safest method of securing the election of persons who enjoyed the confidence of the depressed classes. But the Commission did not approve separate electorates as it would require the precise definition of all who were covered by the term, "It means stigmatising each individual voter in the list, and militates against the process which is already beginning, and which needs to be in every way encouraged - that of helping those who are depressed to rise in the social and economic scale" (Report ISC Vol II 1930;66) The Commission recommended joint electorates and reservation of seats for depressed classes, but not on the basis of their full population ratio, but three-quarters of their full population ratio. The number of these reserved seats went up dramatically. As against the total 20 seats in the provincial assemblies under the 1919 Act, the new recommended total was 69, and in the Central Legislative Assembly, the increase was from one to twelve seats. These seats were recommended in the

report of the Indian Central Committee; its report was complementary to that of the Simon Commission. The Indian Central Committee had 8 members, four each from the Indian Legislative Assembly and the Council of State.

The Committee opposed separate electorate for depressed classes on the ground that it will expose them to communist influence! Two Muslim members of the Committee, Nawab Sir Zulfiquar Ali Khan and Dr. Abdullah Suhrawardy, in a minute of dissent warned the Hindus about the fears of the minorities. Muslims practised untouchability towards the lower castes, but here the Muslim representatives were showing a hypocritical sympathy toward depressed classes. It may be recalled that in the pre-Independence negotiations, the Muslim-League questioned the Congress claim to represent scheduled castes (the depressed classes were now scheduled castes - since the Government of India Act 1935) and in the Interim Government Cabinet (1946), the Muslim League in its share of Ministers, included Jogendra Nath Mandal, a scheduled caste person from Bengal. Mandal went to Pakistan but later returned to India, disillusioned.

Another concern at that time was that as the depressed classes were educationally and socially backward it was doubtful if they could immediately provide enough competent members for the legislatures (Report ISC Vol II; 67)

However, those who claimed for separate electorates had some strong arguments on their side. Take for example, the resolution of the United Provinces Adi - Hindu (Depressed Classes)

Leaders' Conference held at Allahabad on 23rd July, 1932. Criticising the Simon Commission's reason for not recommending separate electorates in that it will hinder their political amalgamation with other Hindus, the conference held that the depressed classes were not cohesive but were themselves subdivided into various sub-castes that could not intermarry. Therefore, the depressed classes should first be united into one political unit and then amalgamated with the higher castes. This unification of the depressed classes will be hindered if joint electorate were adopted. A depressed class candidate will look for the support of high caste Hindus who will be numerous and influential in the joint electorate reserved constituencies, and after election he will try to be in good favour of the high castes rather than represent the interest of his own community. (Report IFC Vol II 1932; 279-80)

E.A.H. Blunt (author of Caste System of Northern India 1931) who, as member of the Executive Council of United Provinces Government, presented the Memorandum to Indian Franchise Committee opposed separate electorates for depressed classes. Referring to 12 depressed classes candidates who were elected on Congress ticket in 1930 provincial elections, Blunt observed that "any class which can secure adequate representation through the general electorate requires no special franchise concession." (Report IFC Vol II, 312-17) It is interesting to note that at that time under the Government of India Act 1919, the depressed classes in the United Provinces were entitled to only one reserved seat. The upper caste Hindus in Congress had conceded twelve times what the British

government had permitted to these lower classes.

As sequel to Indian Statutory Commission (Simon Commission) Report was the Indian Franchise Committee Report of 1932, which was assisted by Provincial Franchise Committees, various organisations and spokesmen of the depressed class presented their demands to these committees.

10. 2. SEPARATE ELECTORATES FOR DEPRESSED CLASSES

The ferment started among the depressed classes by the Simon Commission, the Indian Franchise Committee and the Indian Central Committee, culminated in the Round Table Conferences held at London³. Rao Bahadur Srinivasan from Madras and Dr. Ambedkar were the spokesmen for the depressed classes, the latter himself was one of them. Gandhi, a caste Hindu, had done much for the untouchables. Controversy arose between Ambedkar and Gandhi regarding safeguards for depressed classes. The Communal Award of Ramsay McDonald, the British Prime Minister, gave it a heavy jolt. Gandhi undertook fast unto death unless separate electorate for depressed classes provided in the Communal Award was withdrawn. Poona Pact between Ambedkar and Rajgopalachari resolved the controversy and ended the fast.

Both Ambedkar and Gandhi worked for the downtrodden section of Hindu society, but their approach was different, perhaps not that different in the ultimate analysis. The main work of the R.T.C. was done in the Federal structure committee and the Minorities Committee. In the first R.T. Conference

Ambedkar submitted a scheme to the Minorities sub-committee to be included in a future constitution of India; the scheme was for the political safeguards for the protection of depressed classes. (See: Ambedkar 1946; 315-317) Also, R.T. Conference 12 November 1930 - 19 January 1931, Proceedings of Sub-Committees Vol III, pp 73-89; RTC Second Session, Proceedings of Federal Committee and Minorities Committee Vol II, p 966)

Gandhi denied that he was opposed to the political representation of the depressed classes. "What I have said, and what I must repeat, is that I am opposed to their special representation. I am convinced that it can do them no good, and may do much harm; but the Congress is wedded to adult franchise. Therefore, millions of them can be placed on the voters' roll. It is impossible to conceive that, with untouchability fast disappearing, nominees of these voters can be boycotted by the voters; but what these people need more than election to the legislatures is protection from social and religious persecution custom, which is often more powerful than law⁴, and has brought them to a degradation of which every thinking Hindu has need to feel ashamed and to do penance. I should, therefore have the most drastic legislation⁵ rendering criminal all the special persecution to which these fellow-countrymen of mine are subjected by the so-called superior classes. Thank God, the conscience of Hindus has been stirred, and untouchability will soon be a relic of our sinful past." (RTC second session, Proceedings Vol III P 1349) Gandhi conceded the claims of Muslims and sikhs for separate electorate but not for depressed classes. He had strong moral reasons for this - "We do not want on our register and on our census untouchables classified as a separate

class. Sikhs may remain as such in perpetuity, so may Mohammedans, so may Europeans⁶. Will untouchables remain untouchables in perpetuity? I would rather that Hindus died than that untouchability lived. Therefore, with all my regard for Dr. Ambedkar, and for his desire to see untouchables uplifted, with all my regard for his ability, I must say in all humility that here the great wrong under which he has laboured and perhaps the bitter experience that he has undergone have for the moment warped his judgement. It hurts me to have to say this but I would be untrue to the cause of the untouchables, which is as dear to me as life itself, if I did not say it. I will not bargain away their rights for the kingdom of the whole world (ibid pp 1301- 1305).

This stand taken by Gandhi was criticised on grounds of practical politics. This is what Subhash Chandra Bose wrote - "Dr. Ambedkar the nominated representative of the depressed classes, wanted to come to an agreement with the Mahatma whereby a certain number of seats would be reserved in the legislatures for the depressed classes on the basis of a common electorate for all sections of Hindus. At that time the Mahatma would not think of any such compromise..... if settlement had been made with Dr. Ambedkar the terms would have been much better than the terms of Poona Pact⁷ concluded in September, 1932, after the historic fast of the Mahatma." (Bose 1964; 22)

As the parties to the Round Table Conference could not agree among themselves, the British government announced its award - the Communal Award⁸ also known as Ramsay Macdonald Award, after the name of the Prime Minister - on 16th August 1932. The

provision relating to the depressed classes was that 'members of the depressed classes qualified to vote will vote in a general constituency⁹. In view of the fact that for a considerable period it would be unlikely, by these means alone, to secure adequate representation in the legislatures, a number of special seats will be assigned to them..... These seats will be filled by election from special constituencies in which only members of the depressed classes voters will be entitled to vote.'

Excepting Madras where these constituencies were to cover the whole of the province, they were to be formed in selected areas where the depressed classes were most numerous. This system of election was to be operative for a maximum period of 20 years. Ramsay Macdonald said, "We felt it our duty to safeguard what we believed to be the right of the depressed classes to a fair proportion of representation in the legislature. We were equally careful to do nothing that would split off their community from the Hindu world." The 'splitting off' part of the statement was hypocritical. The Award devised a method of election of depressed classes candidates by only the depressed classes voters. Their nominal inclusion in the list of general voters, or their 'second voting' in the general constituency, was at best a one way arrangement. It had all the potential of gradually alienating them from the general voters i.e. the Hindus. It was separate electorate in every sense of the word except in name. It may be recalled that Simon Commission had rejected separate electorate for depressed classes as it would prevent their political amalgamation with caste Hindus. This amalgamation was precisely what had frightened the depressed classes leaders and spokesmen. (See above, the Resolution by U.P. Adi-Hindu Leaders' Conference, 23 July 1932). And this was what changed Ambedkar's anti-

separate electorate opinion at the first Round Table Conference to pro separate electorate, subsequently. The same thing happened again. The Poona Pact was denounced by Ambedkar as a trap. Demonstrations by depressed classes were held against Congress and Gandhi. From now onwards Ambedkar and Congress parted their ways and Ambedkar started his Scheduled Caste Federation in opposition to the Harijan Sevak Sangh. (At the first session of the All India Scheduled Caste Federation held at Nagpur in 1942, the demand for separate electorate was reiterated). It must be remembered that SCF was a political party of the S. castes, by the S. castes and for the S. castes. The Harijan Sewak Sangh was a social organisation of the Congress party for the campaign against untouchability.

Ambedkar feared that under joint electorates only yesmen of upper castes will be elected. This, in the view of J.R. Kamble, was the cause of Ambedkar's defeat in the general election of 1952 (Bombay North Constituency) and again in a by-election in 1954 (Bhandara near Nagpur). According to Kamble, Ambedkar was defeated because the upper castes were prejudiced against him. (Kamble 1979; 161-62) It has to be remembered that these alleged prejudices could not necessarily have been upper caste prejudices against a scheduled caste candidate (Dr. Ambedkar) Ambedkar was defeated by fellow caste men, who were Congress candidates. True, that in these reserved constituencies, all voters irrespective of upper/lower caste category are eligible to vote and, as such, the upper caste voters are in a majority. But voting is on party lines not on caste lines as all the candidates are from scheduled castes. It may be that one particular scheduled caste candidate is relatively more acceptable as

a person to the upper caste voters, but it is conjectural that the criterion for acceptability is yesmanship, unless the voters were willing to reveal their voting behaviour. There is the other section of the voters, the scheduled caste voters. Did they all, or nearly all, vote for one particular scheduled caste candidate - in the above case for Ambedkar but were swamped by the anti-Ambedkar votes of the upper caste voters? Here, too, the confidentiality of polling prevents the analysis of upper/lower caste voting. For the 1954 by-election, Ambedkar had formed alliance with Socialists, his fellow candidate in Bhandare double-member constituency¹⁰ was Ashok Mehta. The upper caste voters who voted for Ashok Mehta apparently did not vote for Ambedkar because of his anti-Nehru stance. He was trying to play politics of balance of power by interposing his party between Congress and other opposition parties, in this case the Socialists. This was unacceptable to the majority of the voters, the caste Hindus who while willingly agreeing to give positive discrimination for Scheduled castes could not be at the mercy of political scheming of Ambedkar's Scheduled Caste Federation. Lastly, while an element of casteism has a bearing on Indian politics, the politics of separatism, be they separate electorate or autonomy to states, have become unacceptable. Nor should it be presumed that scheduled caste voters must axiomatically vote for a particular scheduled caste candidate or, even a scheduled caste party.

There are scheduled castes and scheduled castes. They did not even in British times recognise Ambedkar as their sole leader. For instance, in 1936, Ambedkar formed his Independent Labour Party, before the 1937 elections to provincial

assemblies, under the Government of India Act 1935. Included in the executive committee of this party were caste Hindus who had worked with Ambedkar in social matters. Ambedkar was not averse to working with caste Hindus as long as they recognised his leadership. In the 1937 elections Ambedkar's party won only ten of the fifteen reserved seats in Bombay (his stronghold) and mere three of the twenty seats in Central Provinces. (his next area of popularity) The majority of the tickets in Bombay went to Mahars, Ambedkar's own caste. There were only two candidates from other castes - one a Mang and the other a Gujrati Scheduled caste. The Mang caste was educationally and economically the most backward, while chambhars, the leather workers had made economic progress. Thus, for their respective reasons, none of these castes had much trust in Ambedkar who was the leader of a different and numerically predominant scheduled caste. They were further alienated by the intent of conversion to another religion on the part of Mahars, made public in 1935 and again in 1936.

In the 1945 elections, the Scheduled Caste Federation, was defeated and the election rout elicited the comment from Sir Stafford Cripps, a member of the Cabinet Mission (March 1946) that as Ambedkar's party was a political non-entity, the Mission could not ensure its special representation in the Constituent Assembly. (Bannerjee and Bose 1946; 108) However, during the first few years of Independence, Ambedkar was co-operative with the larger community, both as chairman of Constitution Drafting committee and as Law Minister. Then he used to advise the scheduled castes to think of the wider material interests. But

shortly before the 1951-52 elections, Ambedkar resigned from the cabinet. His party lost heavily in its stronghold of Bombay. However, in the spring 1957 elections, when the main election issue was linguistic reorganisation of states, the Scheduled Caste Federation made alliance with Samyukta Maharashtra Samiti and the SCF won the majority of the reserved seats. At the next election in 1962, the Republican Party of India (RPI), the successor to SCF, lost again as it could not identify itself with issues that were put in similar or better terms by other political parties. It failed also because it could not identify itself with problems that were also the problems of the larger electorate. Delhi Bhangis did not have to pass through these political phases. By and large they have voted for the Congress party. They believe that Mahatma Gandhi was the first person in modern times who worked for them and the Congress party has continued with Gandhi's policy.

Until the beginning of the 19th century, the scheduled castes largely accepted their lot. Most people accommodate to the realities of power but that does not mean that they accept oppression. Low caste protest was there even in medieval India; various sects protested about the oppressive order. Islam and later on, Christianity attracted sections of low castes. These sections saw religious conversion as a mean to escape from their stigmatised identity, only to discover that their new religions also treated them in the same way.

However, the notion of uplift (higher castes responsibility for the improvement of low castes) was not absent in Indian society.

Hindu reform movements and political awakening during nineteenth century were upper caste affairs. They initiated programmes of welfare and education for the depressed classes and opposed orthodox Hindu practices against untouchables. The protest among low castes is not new. It seems to have been going on for a long time but more recently has plugged into the system of national political parties.

The incorporation of depressed groups into politics was mainly initiated by political parties and resulted in the liberal reservation policy guaranteed by constitution. In the beginning, the scheduled castes' entry into politics was the function of upper caste political elites. Of course Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's mobilization of untouchables also played its part. With the passage of time the lower castes have become more politicised and now demand and get their share of political power and influence.

10. 3. REPRESENTATION OF SCHEDULED CASTES IN LEGISLATURES

The constitution requires reservation of seats in Parliament and state assembly constituencies for scheduled castes and Scheduled Tribes in proportion to their population. The reservation is made under Articles 330, 332 and 334 of the constitution. This reservation was initially for a period of 10 years and subsequently extended by 10 years at a time by amending Article 334 of the constitution in 1959, 1969 and then again in 1980.

Perhaps the framers of the constitution thought that the period of 10 years would be enough for bringing the underprivileged groups at par with the rest of the society. But this was far

too optimistic hope. The aim of these protective measures is that the underprivileged groups become self-reliant with the passage of time.

According to the provision of the delimitation of Parliamentary and Assembly constituencies order 1976, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes were allotted 79 and 40 reserved seats. The state-wise allocation is as follows:-

(SOURCE: Report of the Commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, Part 2, 1977-78, P.1.)
Table 10

Number of seats in Lok Sabha/Legislative Assemblies.

Delimitation order, 1976

Serial No. and name of State/Union Territory	Lok Sabha			Legislative Assembly		
	Total	Sch. Castes	Sch. Tribes	Total	Sch. Castes	Sch. Tribes
1. Andhra Pradesh	42	6	2	294	39	11
2. Assam	14	1	2	126	8	16
3. Bihar	54	8	5	324	46	28
4. Gujrat	26	2	4	182	12	25
5. Haryana	10	2	-	90	17	-
6. Himachal Pradesh	4	1	-	68	15	3
7. Jammu Kashmir	6	-	-	76	6	-
8. Karnatka	28	4	-	224	29	2
9. Kerala	20	2	-	140	12	2
10. Madhya Pradesh	40	6	9	320	42	64
11. Maharashtra	48	3	4	288	17	17
12. Manipur	2	-	1	60	1	19
13. Meghalya	2	-	-	60	-	-
14. Nagaland	1	-	-	60	-	-

Cont.

Serial No. and name of State/Union Territory	Total	Lok Sabha		Legislative Assembly		
		Sch. Castes	Sch. Tribes	Total	Sch Castes	Sch. Tribes
15. Orissa	21	3	5	147	22	34
16. Panjab	13	3	-	177	29	-
17. Rajasthan	25	4	3	200	32	24
18. Sikkim	1	-	-	32	1	-
19. Tamil Nadu	39	7	-	234	42	2
20. Tripura	2	-	1	60	7	17
21. Uttar Pradesh	85	18	-	425	89	1
22. West Bengal	42	8	2	294	59	17
23. Andaman + Nicobar Islands	1	-	-	-	-	-
24. Arunachal Pradesh	2	-	-	30	-	-
25. Chandigarh	1	-	-	-	-	-
26. Dadra + Nagar Haveli	1	-	1	-	-	-
27. Delhi	7	1	-	56	9	-
28. Goa, Daman and Diu	2	-	-	30	1	-
29. Lakshadweep	1	-	1	-	-	-
30. Mizoram	1	-	-	30	-	-
31. Pondicherry	1	-	-	30	5	-
Total	<u>542</u>	<u>79</u>	<u>40</u>	<u>3,997</u>	<u>540</u>	<u>282</u>

In Delhi, these 56 are the Metropolitan Council Constituencies.

Rajya Sabha:- There is no constitutional provision for reservation of seats for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in the Rajya Sabha.

Vidhan Sabhas :- (State Legislative Assemblies)

In accordance with the provision under Article 332 of the constitution and Delimitation order 1976, and the Representation of the People's (Amendment) Act 1980, out of the 3,997 seats in the Vidhan Sabhas in various states and union Territories concerned, 540 and 288 seats were reserved for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes respectively. The statewise allocation of seats in the Lok Sabha and various Vidhan Sabhas may be seen from the chart given on a previous page.

Vidhan Parishads :- (Legislative Councils)

As in the case of Rajya Sabha, there is no constitutional provision for the reservation of seats for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in the state Vidhan Parishads. However states which have Vidhan Parishads do have some Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes members either elected or nominated. (Report SC and ST 1978-79; 10)

Of the Lok Sabha M.P.'s, 22 percent are from the Scheduled Castes and Tribes. With such large representation in legislatures and the political awakening of the Scheduled Castes and Tribes, they could form a single political party. But this is not so. They have divided political loyalties. Dr. Ambedkar's Scheduled Caste Federation and its successor, Republican party failed to unite the Scheduled Castes. After Ambedkar's death, the Republican party had poor leadership and organisation. Due to internal groupism, it could not become a major political force among the Scheduled castes.

Before I discuss the political alignment of Bhangis, it will be relevant to briefly examine the political spectrum in India. India's political system is based on parliamentary democracy and federal structure. Some of the political parties are of all-India character while others are regional parties. The oldest national party is the Indian National Congress formed in 1885, it spearheaded the national independence movement against the British rule in India. In its earlier phase, the party was elite in composition, but from 1920, when it came under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi it started the mass struggle for freedom in which all sections of society participated. For over two decades after Independence in 1947, the Congress ruled the country providing stability and continuity and, until 1964, the broad consensus under Jawaharlal Nehru. But in 1969, Mrs. Gandhi's break from the old Congress started the virtual demise of the Indian National Congress. The group backing Mrs. Gandhi came to be known as the New Congress. In the 1971 mid-term general election Mrs. Gandhi's group won a two-thirds majority and it adopted the name Congress. The old Congress became a constituent of Janata party in 1977. Mrs. Gandhi split away from Congress (New) to form Congress-Indira (Congress I) party. Mr. Jagjivan Ram, the veteran Congress leader, formed Congress for Democracy.

From time to time, the factions within the party had separated from the parent body. The Congress Socialist Party founded in 1934 was a radical group within the Congress. In 1948, it became a separate party but broke up into several factions. After the general election of 1952, these factions were united

under the name of Praja Socialist Party (PSP). Four years later, true to its form, the PSP's leader Dr. Ram Manohar Lohia, formed his own party, Samyukta Socialist Party (SSP). Another old guard Congress leader, C. Rajgopalachari started the Swatantra Party in 1959. This conservative party merged with six regional and national parties and formed Bhartiya Lok Dal (BLD) in 1974. The Dal became a constituent of Janata party in 1977.

Jan Sangh is a conservative nationalist party founded in 1951, by the hardcore of Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh; it proclaims Hinduism as the dominant culture of India. It became a constituent of Janata party in 1977, but after the break up of Janata, the Jan Sangh became the core of the new party, Bhartiya Janata Party.

The Communist Party of India (CPI) was formed in 1924. It follows the Moscow line. It split in 1964, the other faction is Communist Party of India Marxist. (CPI-M). While the CPI supports Congress - I, the CPI-M opposes it.

These are the main all-India political parties and they all claim to espouse the cause of Scheduled Castes.

The Scheduled Castes have been made conscious of their importance by the various political parties who approach them for their support. Contrary to the election laws, the political parties exploit the religious sentiments, caste and linguistic susceptibilities of the voters. This is all the more so in the case of the reserved seats. It is a general observation that caste sentiments do play a part in the selection of candidates and in voting behaviour. While true of the reserved constituencies the

practice is fairly common even when other minority religious groupings are concentrated in constituencies. In the case of reserved constituencies, it is a general practice that other things being equal the candidate should be from the dominant scheduled caste in a particular constituency. Candidates are selected on the basis of their vote getting ability with major caste groups in their constituencies. Some Bhangis have made successful political careers mainly through reserved seats in local municipal bodies and Metropolitan Council. They depend upon upper and middle caste voters. They, however, can confidently rely on their own caste's voters who act as a bloc. Once they win, they are lost into the world of privileges, amenities and influence which is a complete departure from their previous low social status. They are frequently re-elected in the elections. They are incorporated into the political establishment. Such Bhangi elites suffer a dual isolation: They are no longer at the level of their community; rather they tend to cut themselves away from their broader ethnic base and assume an exploitative role vis-a-vis their caste. At the same time, they are not accepted fully by the upper caste fellow politicians. The main body of caste remains in the Basti environment. They will live there as long as socio-economic disparities persist in society in India.

Older Bhangi leaders were less ambitious than the younger leaders. The latter are more politicised, better educated and more aware. Not all of them can be absorbed in the existing reserved seats to legislative career. It is these younger elements who seem to be assuming leadership of Bhangis more recently.

Casteism is denounced by these political parties and yet they covertly appeal to caste factors in electioneering. There has been criticism that scheduled caste/tribe candidates elected on party tickets speak for their parties, rather than for their down-trodden castes and that the corrupt among the scheduled caste/tribe leadership come forward to be willing tools of the political parties dominated by the upper castes (Kamble: P 230) There is no reason to believe that politics in the reserved constituencies are any different from what they are in the general constituencies.

10. 4. POLITICAL ALIGNMENT OF DELHI BHANGIS

Bhangis of Delhi city are by and large staunch supporters of Congress party. They equate Congress party with Mahatma Gandhi who, they believe was the first upper caste politician in modern times to have worked for their welfare. Gandhi had chosen the Bhangi, the scavenger caste of North India, to represent the problem of untouchability, in the country. He said that scavenging was an essential and an honourable occupation. He practised what he proclaimed and his Asharam inmates carried out sanitation work themselves. In late years he lived among Bhangis. In Delhi, he stayed in Panchkuyian Road Bhangi colony. This barrack like single room tenement colony was built by New Delhi Municipal Committee. Gandhi's room was at one end of the tenements. In the middle is a Balmiki temple. In 1969, the Gandhi centenary year, Gandhi Memorial was built near the temple. Delhi Bhangis feel proud that Gandhi lived among them.

Gandhi once said, "I would rejoice to think that we had a sweeper girl of a stout heart, incorruptible and of crystal purity to be



Gandhi Memorial near the Panchkuyian Road Balmiki temple.

our first President..... assisted in the discharge of her duties by person like Pandit Nehru." (Pyarelal 1958: Mahatma Gandhi, the last phase). This has been quoted many times by Bhangis when presenting their demands to present day leaders. Older generation among Bhangis attribute to Congress for improvement in their living and working conditions. As some of them put it - "We can now have drinking water from the public tap like any other person and not poured through a hollow bamboo pipe." The younger generation is becoming more aware politically and socially. They are bitter about the exploitation and oppression under which their community has lived in the long past. They now demand a better deal for themselves from those in power.

Communal parties like Jan Sangh/Bhartiya Janata Party have no following among Bhangis. But that does not mean that candidates of these parties have no chance of winning in reserved constituencies as in these constituencies in Delhi, the higher caste voters greatly outnumber the scheduled caste voters. But in the event of higher caste voters equally divided for the several scheduled caste candidates put up by the parties, the scheduled caste electorate can influence the winning chance of the candidate. For this reason, the political parties contrary to the election laws encourage bloc voting by the scheduled castes, that is by the Delhi Bhangis. On the background of past performance, the Congress party has succeeded in getting a large proportion of the bloc votes of Bhangis.

With the spread of education among the younger Bhangis, a move away from Congress is noticeable. As the reservation policy in legislatures and government employment is accepted by all parties,

the educated Bhangis feel that they should bargain for a better deal. However, during the 2½ years of Janata rule, many anti-reservation organisations came into being in various government departments. Atrocities on Harijans were on the increase and prejudiced elements were working against them. These developments had a sobering effect on Bhangi opinion and rallied them round Congress again.

10.5. LOCAL LEVEL POLITICS OF DELHI

Delhi state elects 7 members of Parliament, of whom one is from the Karol Bagh reserved constituency. This reserved seat has always been represented by a chamar. Bhangis are not in sufficiently large numbers anywhere in Delhi to be considered for party ticket for parliamentary election. However, they do have some say in local affairs through elected representation from their caste. Out of 15 scheduled caste councillors elected for DMC, two are from Bhangi community. When the corporation was established in 1958, the number of councillors was 80, out of whom 12 were to be from scheduled castes. (DMC Act 1957, S.3(5)). At the time of 1967 elections, the number of councillors was raised to 100, of whom 13 were to be from the scheduled castes, this latter number was increased to 15 by the Delimitation Order 1967. The area of Delhi Municipal Corporation has been divided into ten zones and the zones are divided into 100 municipal wards.

Table 11

Serial Number	Zones	No. of Wards	Reserved for S.C.
1.	city	12	-
2.	Civil lines	11	-
3.	Sadar-Paharganj	13	3
4.	Karol Bagh	13	4
5.	West	12	2
6.	Shahdara	12	1
7.	South	9	2
8.	New Delhi	8	2
9.	Najafgarh	5	1
10.	Narela	5	1
		100	15

City Zone:- Bhangis of Old Delhi are mostly concentrated in Katras and bustees in the walled city and the adjoining areas. Bhangis and other scheduled castes live in small pockets spread all over the walled city. They do not form a contiguous grouping large enough to qualify for reserved seat in city zone. The traditional rich businessmen still have their businesses here, but they live further South in the suburban New Delhi. Their Old large city houses are converted into slums. Narrow lanes, overcrowding, numerous cottage industries, unauthorised constructions, illegal stock markets (Satta Bazaar) are typical of the area. Muslims are a dominant section in parts of this zone and communal riots elsewhere in India influence their voting behaviour here. The party machines, in the selection of candidates take into consideration the calculus of caste/community/religion and civic issues get clouded over by other factors.

Sadar - Paharganj Zone:- Sadar and Paharganj were once the suburbs of the walled city, but this area now shows many characteristics of the city zone. In this zone, three municipal wards out of thirteen are reserved for the scheduled castes. The two reserved wards of Basti Julahan and Partap Nagar have weavers and other (non-Bhangi) scheduled castes in majority. In the third reserved ward of Kadam Sharif - Navin Karim, there is a big Bhangi bastees, behind the slaughter house. But the chamar population exceeds that of Bhangis even in this ward. Bhangis live in bastees situated in many unreserved wards of Sadar-Paharganj zone.

Karol Bagh Zone:- Karol Bagh is the scheduled caste reserved parliamentary constituency. The Karol Bagh zone has four reserved wards for scheduled castes out of the total 13 wards. These four are Regarpura, Sat Nagar, Dev Nagar and Baljit Nagar. Delhi's horizontal spatial expansion has been phenomenal during the last 70 years. What were formerly villages and hamlets are now masses of buildings. One of the outcrops of Delhi's ridge is Ananda Parbat. The area between the ridge and Ananda Parbat was and still is known as Karol Bagh. Until about 60 years ago it was scrub and jungle, now a bustling residential commercial area. By the 1930's, Karol Bagh started losing its rural character and after 1947, encroached upon and engulfed surrounding villages of Anand Parbat, Dev Nagar, Shadipur, Regarpura. The original inhabitants did not move away¹¹. They were engaged in vegetable growing, pig rearing, leather tanning and shoe making. Chamar was the predominant caste; others were Khatiks, Lohar, Nai, Chuhra, even a few Kayasthas and Brahmins. There ran a small water course called Jarhallia nala, later called Ganda nala, now

filled up. On one of the main thoroughfares of Karol Bagh - Regarpura is a colony of Bhangis, known as Sau Quarters or Hundred Quarters. Built in 1946, it comprised 100 single-storey one room tenements for unicipal sweepers. Shortage of living space in the Bhangi colonies of the walled city has compelled a few families to move to this area. The area is thus marked by class and caste divisions. Civic problems like poor sanitation and encroachment on public roads have caused ill-feelings between the backward classes and the predominantly upper caste shopkeepers and traders. That is one more reason why these two social groups support different political parties, Congress and Jan Sangh/ Bhartiya Janata Party. The scheduled castes and other backward classes constituting about 40% of the population in this area, mostly vote Congress, while the middle classes in general vote BJP.

Of the four reserved wards, three (Regarpura, Sat Nagar, Dev Nagar) have chamar sub-caste in predominance and the candidates for these reserved wards have been from this caste. The fourth reserved ward of Baljit Nagar has Bhangi electorate more numerous than the rest of the scheduled castes put together. This ward has a Bhangi councillor, Mr. Balbir Singh (a non-Sikh) who was elected on Congress-I ticket at the last municipal election in February, 1983. Bhangis in this ward are migrants from the neighbouring villages.

Shahdara Zone:- East Delhi Parliamentary constituency (nearly $\frac{3}{4}$ million voters) is, for municipal elections, divided into 16 wards of which 4 are on the eastern side of Yamuna and 12 wards across the river. These twelve wards of the trans-Yamuna area



1. Squatter settlements across Yamuna river.

2. Backside of the settlements: Lion is the election symbol of an independent candidate. Open drain democracy.

(Yamuna - paar) constitute Shahdara zone of which Ghonda ward is reserved for scheduled castes. Shahdara zone is made up of the old small town of Shahdara and the surrounding urbanised rural area. The majority of the populace is living in colonies which are unplanned and unauthorized. Some of these colonies have been given approval but the legal formalities are slow in India. During Emergency in 1976, squatter settlements in other parts of metropolitan Delhi were cleared and the inhabitants sent across Yamuna where they set up their jhuggies again. Later they were allotted small plots of land for tenements. East Delhi parliamentary constituency, particularly trans-Yamuna area (Shahdara zone) has very few civil amenities. Potholes in roads and streets, poor street lighting and shortage of drinking water are commonplace. Absence of sewer lines and proper drainage turns whole localities into slush and filth during monsoon. Bhangis are a minority among scheduled caste neighbourhoods throughout the locality. The community is partly of local origin while others have moved out from their congested inner city mohallas in search of livelihood and living space.

Madangir, Tughlaqabad of South zone, Mahilpur of Najafgarh zone, Madipur of West zone are the rural areas of outer Delhi parliamentary constituency. In these reserved wards there are scheduled castes of several caste groups. From Tughlaqabad the Bhangi community has its second MCD councillor. He is Mr. Kishan Chand Benniwal, a councillor since 1967, on Congress ticket. Tagore Garden in West zone, Nizamudin and Kotla Mubarkpur in New Delhi zone are the other reserved wards for scheduled castes. Here were villages now swallowed by the expanding New Delhi. In these

reserved wards there are scheduled caste neighbourhoods within sight of bungalows of the upper caste rich.

10. 6. REPRESENTATION OF BHANGIS AT LOCAL LEVEL POLITICS

There is a widespread belief among Bhangis that they are not getting a fair share in the political process. According to my Bhangi informants, their community has only a small representation and influence in local affairs. Bhangis consider themselves as the chosen ones of Mahatma Gandhi. But in the world of real politics, party tickets at election time go to those most likely to win election. Vote banks of lower castes and other minority groups cannot be ignored by any political party. In Delhi, Bhangis are a minority group among the various scheduled castes. Barring the wards of Baljit Nagar in West zone, where the Bhangis form the largest scheduled caste group, they are a scattered caste compared to, for instance, the chamars. Another complaint of the Bhangis is that the chamars are favoured in the distribution of party tickets because compared to Bhangis, chamars are socially more acceptable to upper caste Hindus. Upper caste votes are cast on party lines. Parties select scheduled caste candidates most likely to attract the bloc votes of their caste. Exception is made when a scheduled caste candidate, even if from a minority scheduled caste community, is popular with all sections of the scheduled castes. The case of Councillor Kishan Chand Beniwal mentioned above is illustrative. He is a winning Bhangi candidate since 1967, even though in Tughlaquabad ward the Bhangis are a small community. Here may be explored the pattern of political leadership in the Bhangi community. Traditionally leadership

has vested with caste elders, the Chaudharies who settled disputes and otherwise exercised authority and influence in the socio-economic life of the community. Fifty years ago, there was a change in this area of the tradition. Two Bhangis, Mahashya Karam Chand and Mahashya Nanak Chand emerged to provide new pattern of leadership to the Delhi Bhangi community. They organised "Mehtar Labour Union" or Sanitation Workers' union and articulated their community's demands to the municipal authorities. Inspired by the Arya Samaj, they were the pioneers of reforms in their community.

Ram Rakha Mal, now in his eighties, hails from Lahore, the capital of the undivided Panjab. Until 1939, he served in the army as Khansaman (butler) and subsequently in a dispensary when he also did social work among his caste fellows. He participated in the 1942 Quit India movement and was imprisoned by the British. Partition brought him to Delhi. Here he started a strong trade union movement among the municipal sweepers and won many concessions for them. As a result he came to have considerable hold over Bhangis of Old Delhi. In 1958, he contested election of Municipal Councillor on Congress ticket from Rajinder Nagar (reserved ward at that time). He could not win the election. Later, in 1971, he was nominated as alderman to the Corporation by the Congress party.

Another leader of the Bhangis was Rattan Lal Balmiki. Educated up to 9th standard (one year short of Matriculation) he started as a peon in the post office. His parents were then working as sweepers in Lady Harding hospital. There he organised a union of class IV employees in 1945. The hospital administration got

annoyed with his activities and banned his entry in the hospital. In 1946, he came to Panchkuyian Road Bhangi colony. Mahatma Gandhi was staying in that colony. Rattan Lal was greatly impressed by Gandhi and thought of doing something for his community. He became a staunch supporter of Congress party. He formed the Municipal workers union among Bhangis of NDMC. From 1953 to 1970, he was many times nominated as scheduled caste member of N.D.M.C.

Roshan Lal Chauhan, who is educated upto Middle standard remembers watching the 1942 Quit India processions. He organised a branch of Mehtar Mazdoor Federation or Sanitary Workers Federation among the sweepers of NDMC. This union had a good hold in the neighbouring state of U.P., but failed to have much influence in Delhi. He started propagating reform ideas among his caste fellows on the lines shown by Arya Samaj. In 1952, Roshan Lal came in contact with the then central Home Minister, G.B. Pant who had his political base in U.P. Pant wanted to have some organisation of the sweepers at all-India level. In 1954, Pant organised "Hind Sweepers Sewak Samaj", a voluntary organisation similar to the Harijan Sewak Sangh. Roshan Lal Chauhan was appointed the General Secretary of the Delhi branch of the new organisation. In 1958, Chauhan contested municipal election on Congress ticket from the then reserved ward of Lajpat Nagar. He lost. In 1972, he was nominated the scheduled caste member of NDMC.

Until late seventies, these three men have provided leadership to the Bhangi community of Delhi. Ram Rakha Mal had his hold among sweepers of old Delhi, while the other two had it in

New Delhi. After the 1977 Emergency, Ram Rakha Mal joined Jagjivan Ram's Congress for Democracy, which was a constituent of Janata Party. After his defection, he lost his influence among Bhangis. But he denies that he joined Janata Party.

Rattan Lal Balmiki also joined Janata Party at the time of 1977 Emergency. He says that he was disillusioned with the dictatorial attitude of late Mrs. Indira Gandhi and her associates. In the 1977 election to Metropolitan Council the Janata Party did not give him the party ticket. He stood as an independent but he could not get more than a few hundred votes. His caste did not support him as he had been unfaithful to Congress.

Roshan Lal Chauhan was a nominated member of NDMC for three years, 1972-75. After that he left politics, but during those three years he secured the tea-stall contract for Nizamudin Railway Station, which is one of the several stations serving Delhi.

Municipal Elections and Bhangis:- Because of the minority position of Bhangis among the scheduled castes in the reserved wards, political parties were reluctant to put up a Bhangi candidate in the 1951 elections of DMC. At the next election in 1954, Ram Kishan Bhajni, who was president of "Delhi Prantiya Balmiki Mazdoor Sangh" organised by Ram Rakha Mal was the Congress candidate from Kadam Shariff - Navin Karim reserved ward. Bhajni was a resident of Navin Karim Bhangi bustee. But Devi Dass, a chamar who was Jan Sangh candidate won. Chamars were more numerous than the Bhangis.

In 1956, Gaddu Ram Galhot of Bhangi caste was the Congress candidate for the reserved seat of Shahdara Municipal Committee. Opposing him was another Bhangi, Kishan Lal, who was the Jan Sangh candidate. They both lost to an independent scheduled caste candidate of dhobi caste (hereditary washermen). After the merger of Shahdara Municipal Committee with MDC in 1958, Shadara wards were reorganised, Dhobis were resettled elsewhere under the slum clearance scheme. In order to determine the cause of election victory of an independent, I interviewed a cross section of voters who could recall the 1956 municipal election. It appears that among the scheduled castes, the dhobis were the largest group and they voted solidly for their caste candidate. Other non-Bhangi scheduled castes when they did not vote on party lines, voted for the Dhobi candidate. The upper caste Hindu committed voters voted for the Jan Sangh/Congress backed Bhangi candidates. But quite a number of them cast their votes for the dhobi candidate who himself was a working dhobi and who along with his fellow dhobis had the relationships with upper caste clientele which relationships were more interpersonal than those of the Bhangi with his Jajmans.

1958 Corporation Elections:- In 1958, Ram Rakha Mal, General Secretary of the sweeper union, Balmiki Mazdoor Sangh, was the Congress candidate from Rajinder Nagar ward which was reserved ward at that time. The scheduled castes which had a small number of Bhangis lived in squatter settlements. Upper caste population was that of Panjabi refugees who were mostly supporters of Jan Sangh. Ram Rakha Mal lost to his Jan Sangh opponent of chamar caste. The squatter settlements have since been cleared and Rajinder Nagar is no longer a reserved ward. In the 1958 election,

Roshan Lal Chauhan also contested from Lajpat Nagar reserved ward on Congress ticket. He too lost to a Jan Sangh candidate.

1962 Corporation Elections:- At this election, no political party fielded Bhangi candidates.

Corporation Elections, 1967:- Things changed in 1967 in favour of Bhangi representation in MCD when two candidates from this community stood for MCD Councillor election on Congress ticket. One was Kishan Chand Beniwal who after passing Matriculation examination, got employed as a peon in Delhi administration. Realising the importance of education, he continued his studies in the evenings and completed Sahitya Rattan (Pre-degree in Hindi language). Now he got the job of lower division clerk, the first rung in the routine office work, in the offices of Deputy Municipal Commissioner. He did not like this job and got teacher training and was employed in a Delhi Corporation primary school. Here he came in contact with Choudhary Braham Prakash, a Congress MP of outer Delhi. In the parliamentary election campaign of the Choudhary, Beniwal worked for mobilizing the support of his caste. The Choudhary encouraged him to enter local politics. Beniwal stood for election of Municipal Councillor from Tughlqabad reserved ward, a rural municipal ward in the outer Delhi parliamentary constituency of Choudhary Braham Parkash. Beniwal won, defeating his Jan Sangh opponent. For one year he was Deputy Chairman of the Rural Committee of the MCD.

The other Bhangi candidate was Ram Kishan Bhajni (see Municipal elections, 1954, above) now again the Congress party choice from Kadamsharif - Navin Karim reserved ward. He was defeated

by his old Jan Sangh opponent, Devi Dass, a chamar candidate, who was the sitting Councillor for the past two terms.

Corporation Elections, 1971:- Kishan Chand Beniwal, the sitting Councillor from Tughlaqabad reserved ward was the Congress party candidate, and won. He was appointed the Deputy Chairman of Water Supply and Sewerage Disposal Committee.

Ram Kishan Dev of Shahdara, contested as an independent candidate from Ghonda reserved seat of Shahdara zone but lost. He belonged to the Jan Sangh party and in 1966, started Sweepers' union - Nagar Nigam Safai Karamchari Sangh or Municipal Corporation Sweepers' Union. Bhangis say that this union was started at the behest of Jan Sangh to weaken the pro Congress sweepers trade union led by Ram Rakha Mal. Jan Sangh had promised election ticket to Ram Kishan Dev, but when the promise did not materialise, he stood as an independent candidate.

In 1971, Ram Rakha Mal, then nearly 65, was nominated as alderman by the Congress party group in the corporation. This was in recognition of the mobilisation of his community's votes in favour of Congress. He did this primarily as a trade unionist, rather than as a caste council leader. He was easily the father of militant trade union movement among the Bhangis and they acknowledged his services. He was thus pre-eminently placed to help lead his community into the democratic process. He once told me that he was pro-Congress but he had never sacrificed the interests of the working Bhangis for the sake of the party.

The term of the Fourth Corporation was to expire in June 1975.

But on 24th March 1975, the central government superseded the Corporation and vested the Commissioner with all legislative and executive powers as provided under the MCD Act. After the general election in the country, civil elections were held on 12th June, 1977. As mentioned earlier, late Mr. Jagjivan Ram, the veteran Harijan leader of the undivided Indian National Congress, broke away from the parent body and formed his own party, the Congress for Democracy (CFD). In this post-Emergency period, when the grand old Indian National Congress started breaking up, the Bhangi community was not a little puzzled. Ram Rakha Mal and Rattan Lal Balmiki announced their allegiance to Jagjivan Ram, perhaps because he was the scheduled caste leader of the old party. However the general mass of the Bhangis owed their allegiance to late Mrs. Gandhi's Congress (Indira), even though her party had been routed in the general election. Ram Rakha Mal told me that he did not change his political allegiance to Jagjivan Ram.

Corporation Elections 1977:- Mrs. Gandhi's Congress was defeated and Janata party formed the government at the centre and also in many states of India. Kishan Chand Beniwal, who was the sitting Councillor from Tughalaqabad ward for two terms (since 1967) announced his allegiance to Jagjivan Ram's party. He was not sure of his future in the Congress party now associated with the defeated Mrs. Gandhi. He stood for election as candidate of Jagjivan Ram's Congress for Democracy (a constituent of Janata Party) but lost.

In Baljit Nagar reserved ward of Karol Bagh zone (Karol Bagh is also the reserved Parliamentary Constituency), there lived

migrant Bhangis from neighbouring villages. They were concentrated in squatter colonies. In 1977, it was for the first time that a Bhangi Suraj Bhan Balmiki was the Congress candidate from this ward. Opposing him was the Janata Party's Bhangi candidate Mangat Ram. Scheduled castes in this ward were Congress supporters, but other voters were pro-Janata. Suraj Bhan lost to his opponent by a small margin of 195 votes. According to Suraj Bhan, two other Bhangis who were hoping to be Congress candidates, contested as independent candidates. They reduced his votes. An independent candidate is likely to get votes of his close friends and relations, even if the rest of the community votes on party lines. For instance, Suraj Bhan himself polled less than two hundred votes in the 1983 election when he stood as an independent candidate. Suraj Bhan's defeat at the hand of Janata candidate was reflective of the time, there was Janata wave pushing Congress away. And in this ward, the upper caste voters who were in a substantial majority, must have determined the election outcome by voting overwhelmingly for Janata.

A few words about these two Bhangi candidates: Suraj Bhan was educated upto Matriculation, had worked for Congress party in the election campaign of the scheduled caste Member of Parliament, Naval Prabhakar. Thereafter he joined government service as peon in the office of Election Commission and got promoted to a clerical post. He came in contact with Radha Raman, the (Congress) Chief Executive Councillor of Metropolitan Council. In 1976, he was nominated a member of the Harijan Welfare Board. Ticket to MCD election was the next reward. His Janata party opponent was a sweeper in the Corporation, had little education or

political experience. However, he won as a Janata candidate with the almost solid support of upper caste voters.

The ordinary scheduled caste voter's continued allegiance to Congress party came to be underlined by Sukhan Lal Sood's electoral victory on Congress ticket in Patparganj general municipal ward of Shahdara zone. As noted elsewhere, a scheduled caste candidate can stand from a general ward/constituency in elections of any level. This ward had almost lost its upper caste majority following demographic changes in 1976, when slums and squatter colonies were cleared and the inmates settled elsewhere. Three of these new settlement colonies of ex-squatter scheduled castes are in Patparganj ward. These colonies are Tirlokpuri, Khichripur and Himatpuri. During the Emergency when slums were cleared the slum-dwellers were angry. However they found that the new settlements were well planned and when the Congress party promised them ownership of the houses, the popularity of the Congress with these people revived dramatically. Sukhan Lal Sood, a Corporation sweeper until he stood for election when, as per rules, he resigned, won with a comfortable majority defeating his high caste opponent.

In the Madangir reserved ward, the Congress candidate Ramji Lal Jatav, defeated his rival, Hati Ram Balmiki. Non-Bhangis were in a majority among the scheduled castes in this ward.

In January 1980, after the mid term general election, Congress(I) came into power. In exercise of power conferred by sub-Section (1) of Section 490 of Delhi Municipal Act 1957, the central government again superseded the Corporation for a period of one

year from 11th April 1980. All legislative and executive powers under provisions of the Act now vested with the Commissioner. On completion of the term, the period of supersession was extended four times for six months each. Finally the elections for the Municipal Corporation were declared to be held on 5th February, 1983.

Before the February 1983 elections, the "All India Scheduled Castes Yuvjan Samaj" (All India Scheduled Castes Youth Association) presented a list of 13 Bhangi candidates to be considered for elections to Delhi Corporation and Delhi Metropolitan Council¹². The list was presented to Delhi Pradesh Congress Committee (DPCC). The association emphasised that unless Bhangis are given proper representation in politics, they will not be able to make real progress. The members of the association met Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, her son Rajiv, the president of DPCC, Mr. H.K.L. Bhagat and scheduled caste MP from Delhi Dharam Dass Shastri. The last person is also the president of DPCC, Harijan cell. Bhagat assured the association that the Congress party will select more Bhangi candidates in the forthcoming elections. But when the final list was published, to the great disappointment of Bhangis only 4 Bhangi candidates were on the list, two for MCD and two for Metropolitan Council. The Bhangi caste association (the one named above) passed the following resolution:-

1. The community had given its support to Congress almost blindly for 36 years, but henceforth this support will come only in area where there are Bhangi candidates.

2. Where the Congress put up a non-Bhangi candidate in preference to prominent Bhangi in a reserved ward, the community will give its support to the candidate opposing the Congress candidate.

3. Our concern should be not the political parties but the candidates who can best serve the interests of the Bhangis.

The demands may be legitimate but the extent was exaggerated. According to the 1971 census for Delhi area, out of the total scheduled caste population of 635, 698, the Bhangi community (including Chuhra, Balmiki and a mere 36 Lal Begi) were 134,987 or about 21.25% of the scheduled caste population. On the population ratio, the Bhangis deserved at least 6 of the MCD and Metropolitan Council seats when, infact the Congress party offered 4 seats in both the bodies. The Bhangis had demanded 13 seats. In this context it is relevant to comment that it is not possible for any political party to give arithmetical representation to a scheduled caste. While professing to serve the interest of all the scheduled castes, a national political party has to please them all individually, to fit the various scheduled caste pressure groups in the strategy of winning the elections. Delhi Bhangis, though the substantial minority of the scheduled castes, do not live in compact communities to fit in with the election calculations of the political parties.

Corporation Elections 1983:- In 1977, Kishan Chand Beniwal lost when he was the candidate of Congress for Democracy (JagJivan Ram's Congress or Congress - J, as it is now known). Realising that he had no future outside Congress - I, among Harijans, he came back to the old fold, when Congress-I was being reorganised in 1978. The prodigal son was handsomely rewarded. He was

appointed the General Secretary of DPCC and a member of the Telephone Advisory Committee by Buta Singh in 1980 (a Bhangi Sikh from Panjab), the General Secretary of All-India Congress Committee. Beniwal now wanted to stand for election to Metropolitan Council. HKL Bhagat, President DPCC agreed but wanted to change his constituency. Beniwal did not agree to that and contested from the same old constituency of Tughlaqabad for Municipal Councillor. He won with a good majority defeating his rival Rattan Singh, a Bhangi candidate of Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP).

Suraj Bhan Balmiki who, contested from Baljit Nagar ward in 1977, and lost by 195 votes, did not get Congress ticket this time. He stood as an independent candidate. Balbir Singh was the Congress-I candidate. He was a sweeper in MCD, and also a member of Harijan Welfare Board. During the 1980 mid term general elections, Balbir Singh had worked in the election campaign of Dharam Dass Shastri, a Congress MP (scheduled caste) of Karol Bagh Constituency. Balbir Singh was now rewarded by Shastri. In the 1983 elections, Members of Parliament were given the responsibility of distribution of party tickets, as they had a better knowledge of their constituencies. This decision was taken by Congress-I, following its defeat in the state Assembly elections in Andhra and Karnatka. Balbir Singh won on Congress-I ticket, defeating his BJP opponent, Kishan Lal. Suraj Bhan who had contested as an independent candidate polled about 200 votes, as compared to 1977 elections when contesting on Congress ticket, he lost by a margin of 195 votes.

In the Sat Nagar reserved ward of Karol Bagh zone where Chamars are in majority among the scheduled caste voters, the Bhangi candidate, Dalip Singh Balmiki fought the election on Janata Party ticket and lost to Congress-I candidate, Hazari Lal Chouhan, a Chamar by caste. Chamar votes were not decisive, but the upper caste voters had had enough of Janata party's internal squabbles and had voted largely for Congress-I.

**TEXT BOUND INTO
THE SPINE**

TABLE 12

Party	1958		1962		1967		1971		1977		1983	
	Coun/Ald		Coun/Ald		Coun/Ald		Coun/Ald		Coun/Ald		Coun/Ald	
Congress/I	39	3	67	6	40	2	41	3	17	2	58	4
B. Sangh/	25	2	8	-	54	3	54	3	-	-	37	2
Janata	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	81	4	1	-
Independent	8	1	3	-	2	1	3	-	1	-	1	-
U.P.	7	-	2	-	2	-	-	-	1	-	-	-
U.P. (Exist)	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-
Congress(o)	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-
Republican	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
U.P. Sabha	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
U.P.	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
U.P.	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
U.P. Dal(c)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	3	-
	80	6	80	6	100	6	100	6	100	6	100	6

(Delhi Gazetteer 1976; 735)

TABLE 13

Representation of Bhangis in Delhi Municipal Corporation

Year	Total	SC	ST	No. of Seats contested by Bhangis	No. of Seats won by Bhangis
1958	80	12	-	2	-
1962	80	12	-	-	-
1967	100	13	-	2	1 (Congress)
1972	100	13	-	2	1 (Congress)
1977	100	15	-	4	2 (1 Congress 1 Janata)
1983	100	15	-	4	2 (Congress)

(Compiled from field notes)

10. 7. METROPOLITAN COUNCIL ELECTIONS

In the first Metropolitan Council elections held in 1967, out of the 52 elected seats, Jan Sangh won 33 seats and the Congress 19. Vijay Kumar Malhotra was its first Chief Executive Councillor. At the next elections in 1972, Congress won 44 seats and the Jan Sangh only 5. The new Chief Executive Councillor was Radha Raman. Jan Sangh returned to power in the 1977 elections. Kidar Nath Sahni was now the Chief Executive Councillor. However, the Council did not survive its full term as it was dissolved in June 1980, after the Parliament elections. The fourth elections of the Metropolitan Council were held in February 1983, when Congress returned having won 34 seats. BJP or Jan Sangh under a new name secured 19 seats. Jag Parvesh Chandra is the present Chief Executive Councillor.

Representation of Bhangis in Metropolitan Council:- There was no Bhangi candidate for the Delhi Assembly elections which were held in 1952. When the Metropolitan Council was constituted in 1966, Ram Kishan Balmiki was nominated for the interim period of 6 months, until the first elections in 1967. Ram Kishan Balmiki, a resident of Talkatora Gardens New Delhi Bhangi colony, was a member of DPCC. He was given a certificate of recognition for his services to the Congress and his participation in the freedom movement. This is a paper certificate compared to, for instance, the small copper plaques given to others.

Metropolitan Elections 1967, 1972 and 1977:- As said above, Ram Kishan Balmiki was nominated to the Metropolitan Council for six months. But neither he nor any other Bhangi was given ticket by any political party in the Metropolitan elections of 1967 and

1972. However, the situation changed in 1977, when both the Congress and Janata parties polled their candidates for the Gole Market Metropolitan Constituency in New Delhi. The choice of the Congress was Ram Nath Chandeliya, a Bhangi graduate employed in central government office. His political activities began way back in 1957, when he consolidated his community's support in favour of Shashi Bhushan, the Congress candidate in the New Delhi parliamentary constituency. His enthusiasm could not escape the notice of the rising youth wing of the Congress under Mrs. Gandhi's son, the late Sanjay Gandhi. From 1974 to 1977, Chandeliya was the General Secretary of the Harijan Cell, Delhi Pradesh Youth Congress. After the 1976 Delimitation of Constituency Order, Gole Market Metropolitan Constituency was declared reserved. Chandeliya was given Congress ticket for this constituency on the recommendation of Shashi Bhushan. The latter who was Congress MP from South Delhi in 1971, contested from New Delhi in 1977, but lost to Janata candidate, Vijay Kumar Malhotra. Chandeliya had worked for Bhushan and continued his allegiance to Congress-I and was rewarded in the 1983 Metropolitan election.

Chandeliya's opponent was Savrup Chand Rajan, the candidate of the Janata party. He, too, was a university graduate and was Inspector of Schools for Physical Education in MCD. As per rules he resigned in order to stand for election. He won, defeating Chandeliya and two independents. Rajan's case, too, illustrates the close liaison between party at the local level and the national level for success in elections. It was Ram Swarup Vidyarthi, a Jan Sangh ex-MP from Scheduled Caste reserved constituency of Delhi who asked Rajan to organise Bhangi youth

for the support of Jan Sangh party.

In 1969, Chief Executive Councillor of Metropolitan Council, Vijay Kumar Malhotra from Jan Sangh party, celebrated untouchability abolition week. The function ended in Panchkuyian Road, Bhangi Basti, where pro-Congress Bhangi leaders tried to disrupt the meeting. In their speeches they alleged that under pretext of untouchability abolition week, Jan Sangh was invading Bhangi community for its votes. However, Rajan spoke in favour of Jan Sangh. In course of time, Rajan succeeded in gaining some support of the Bhangi youth in favour of Jan Sangh. The arrangement worked and in 1971, Rajan was nominated as a member of Harijan Welfare Board, which is a special cell of Delhi Administration.

In the general elections of 1977, Rajan worked hard to persuade his community to vote for Atal Bihari Vajpayee, the Jan Sangh candidate from New Delhi parliamentary constituency. Vajpayee was elected MP from that constituency. He was so pleased with Rajan's work that he got him the Janata party ticket for election to Metropolitan council from Gole Market Constituency.

Another contestant for the Gole Market reserved Metropolitan constituency was the 65 year old Rattan Lal Balmiki. He was a supporter of Congress since the days when Mahatma Gandhi used to stay in Bhangi Basti of Panchkuyian Road. He was very popular among his community. For a number of times he was nominated as the scheduled caste member of NDMC. After the Emergency, Rattan Lal Lal Balmiki joined Jagjiwan Ram's Congress for Democracy

(CFD). Later on, when CFD merged with Jan Sangh to form Janata party, he was left out of the selection process of the Janata party for the Gole Market Metropolitan Constituency. He contested as an independent. His community did not want to support him as he had turned his back to New Congress (Mrs. Gandhi's Congress). The voting was like this:

Total votes	-	28,308
Votes cast	-	11,553
Votes valid	-	11,451
Votes invalid	-	102
Swarup Chand Rajan (Janata)	-	6594
Ram Nath Chandeliya (Congress)	-	4028
Rattan Lal Balmiki (independent)	-	758
Surinder Singh (independent)	-	71

Swarup Chand Rajan won the Metropolitan council seat. Harijans voted for Congress but Janata's Rajan won on account of solid upper caste Hindu support at that time. Rajan was also nominated to NDMC. He was associated in different capacities with the Telephone Advisory Committee, special cell for Minorities (formerly special cell for scheduled castes), Labour Welfare Committee, Employment Advisory Committee for scheduled castes/tribes, Harijan Welfare and Delhi Sports Council.

After 2½ years of Janata rule, the parliament was dissolved. Following the mid-term elections in 1980, Congress under Mrs. Gandhi formed the central government. Congress won 6 of the 7 parliamentary seats in Delhi. The Jan Sangh still ruled the MCD and Metropolitan Council. The central Government

declared them as unrepresentative of changed political reality, dissolved them forthwith and took over their functions as per Acts.

Metropolitan Council Elections 1983:- In the Gole Market Constituency, Chandeliya and Rajan were the main contestants in the election fray for the second time. Rajan's victory promises were libraries and a sports club, rent subsidy for retired government employees, better civic services and a 'complaint cell' where people will get help to solve their problems. This last was a sort of Citizens Advisory Bureau. These were the promises for all sections of voters. As to Bhangis, he warned them against what he called the Congress deception. He alleged that Congress wanted the poor to remain poor so that it could continue to pose as the saviour of the poor. Congress had not given push to any local Bhangi candidate in the political sphere. It was only when Janata/Jan Sangh selected him (Rajan) as the party candidate in the 1977 Metropolitan election, the Congress put up Chandeliya.

Chandeliya of Congress-I supported the section of split New Congress party—Congress - Indira or Congress-I, led by Mrs. Gandhi. The party sent him with others on campaigns of political propaganda in Western Uttar Pradesh. There he told the scheduled castes to support Mrs. Gandhi and not to join Jagjivan Ram's camp who, though from a scheduled caste himself, only exploited that label for his personal gain (This argument is used by many candidates both of scheduled castes and upper castes, to malign the opponents). As a full time worker of Congress-I, Chandeliya organised rallies and demonstrations of

scheduled castes in support of Mrs. Gandhi when she lost the parliamentary elections to Janata. For breaking the ban on demonstrations near the parliament building, he and the other demonstrators were arrested and sent to jail for a short spell. During the seventh parliamentary elections in 1980 he was a member of New Delhi election Campaign Committee of Congress-I candidate, Stephen. But the BJP candidate, Atal Behari Vajpayee won. Later on, Stephen got elected MP in a bye-election in some other state. He did not forget Chandeliya who now became member of Telephone Advisory Committee in Delhi.

In the 1983 elections, Chandeliya of Congress-I defeated Rajan of BJP, by a margin of 1264 votes. The voting was as below:-

Electorate	-	34813
Votes polled	-	14870
Invalid	-	5
R.N. Chandeliya (Congress-I)	-	7663
S.C. Rajan (BJP)	-	6296
Jaspal Singh (Independent)	-	508
A.R. Nim (Independent)	-	266
Soni Ram (Independent)	-	132

Sukhan Lal Sood, who was another Bhangi candidate of Congress-I was elected Metropolitan Councillor from unreserved seat of Krishna Nagar Metropolitan Constituency. In 1977, Sood was Municipal Councillor from unreserved Patparganj municipal ward (Krishna Nagar Metropolitan Constituency constitutes Patparganj municipal ward along with others and resettlement colonies) Sood's support came largely from Harijans living in the

resettlement colonies and other pockets.

Table 14

Party position in Metropolitan Council

Party	1952	1967	1972	1977	1983
Congress/I	39	19	44	10	34
Socialists	2	-	-	-	
Jan Sangh/BJP	3	33	5	-	19 (BJP)
Janata	-	-	-	45	1
Independents	3	4	2	1	-
C.P.I.	-	-	3	-	-
C.P.I.(Marxist)	-	-	-	-	-
Republican	-	-	-	-	-
Hindu- Maha Sabha	1	-	-	-	-
Congress(O)	-	-	2	-	-
Lok Dal(C)	-	-	-	-	2
	—	—	—	—	—
	48	56	56	56	56
	—	—	—	—	—

(Delhi Gazetteer 1976: 735)

Table 15

Representation of Bhangis in Metropolitan Council

Year	No. of Seats			Representation of Bhangi Seats contested/won and party affiliation	
	Total	SC	ST	Contested	WON
1952	48			-	-
1967	56	7	-	-	-
1972	56	7	-	-	-
1977	56	9	-	1	1 (Janata)
1983	56	9	-	2	2 (Congress)

(Compiled from my field notes)

Share in the power and opportunity structure

A fair share in the power and opportunity structure was given to the scheduled castes and tribes and age-old social disabilities were declared illegal so that these people could be integrated with the larger society. A policy of positive discrimination was adopted. This included educational facilities and reservation in government jobs and higher educational institutions. Only where suitably qualified scheduled caste candidates are not available, are the reserved posts and seats in educational institutions given to other candidates.

Integration demanded that the scheduled castes/tribes should have their housing in the general area and proximity of caste Hindus residences. Likewise, educational opportunities should be provided to them in the schools and institutions open for all.

10. 8. COMMISSIONER FOR SCHEDULED CASTES/TRIBES

According to Article 338 of the constitution of India there shall be a special officer for the scheduled castes/Tribes. The special officer shall be designated as Commissioner for scheduled castes/tribes. The post was started on 18th November 1950. The functions of the Commissioner are:-

- (a) To investigate all matters relating to the safeguards provided for the scheduled castes/tribes in the constitution.
- (b) To report to the President of India upon the working of these safeguards at such intervals as the President may direct and the President shall cause all such reports to be laid before each House of Parliament.

Janata government set up a Commission for scheduled castes/tribes on 28th July, 1978 under the chairmanship of scheduled caste Member of Parliament from Bihar. The members were persons of eminence in public life. The functions of the Commission were very similar to that of the Commissioner, but the two were separate entities. The Commission was set up by a government resolution. In order to give constitutional status to the Commission, the constitution (Forty-sixth Amendment) Bill 1978, was introduced in the Lok Sabha in August, 1978 to amend Article 38, but the amendment was not carried through.

According to the government notification, the Commission would not decrease the authority of the Commissioner. The latter was made a full member of the Commission in his individual capacity. It was not clear why a new multimember body the Commission was set up to perform functions similar to those of the single member Commissioner. The Commissioner noted this state of affairs like this - "It would, therefore, be appropriate to note that this duality has affected the more effective functioning of the organisation of the Commissioner without at the same time providing any significant strength to the Commission itself". (Report 1978-79; 14)

The Commission appointed by Janata government was dissolved by the Congress government when it came to power in January 1980.

10. 9. CENTRAL ADVISORY BOARDS :-

The governmental policies and schemes for the betterment of

the scheduled castes/tribes are formulated in consultation with the central advisory boards, of which one is for the scheduled castes and the other for the scheduled tribes. They evaluate the existing schemes and advise on new ones. The national economic five year plans have financial outlays for the material improvement of these castes and tribes. The state governments give grants and loans to scheduled caste persons engaged in agriculture. For others loans and subsidies are available for the development of cottage industries. The welfare schemes include better housing. Small plots of household sites are given at very cheap price. Grants are given to local bodies for the construction of houses for the Harijan employees.

The central government provides financial assistance to voluntary organisations like Harijan Sevak Sangh, the Bhartiya Adamjati Sevak Sangh and Hind Sweepers Sevak Samaj. These organisations work for the eradication of untouchability.

10. 10. HARIJAN WELFARE BOARD (DELHI ADMINISTRATION)

This body looks after the welfare of Harijans in union territory of Delhi. It was formed in 1970, following the first Metropolitan Council elections in 1967. It has 11 members, of whom 7 are officials and 4 non-officials. The official members are appointed by the Lt Governor of the union territory of Delhi, while the non-official members are appointed by the political parties holding seats in the Metropolitan Council. Harijans in government employment can be appointed as official members to Harijan Welfare Board. The non-official members can be from among the sitting Metropolitan

Councillors or from persons associated with Harijan welfare. The official members can be from any caste but the non-official members must be from the scheduled castes. The head of the Harijan Welfare Board is known as its president and he must be a non-official and a Harijan.

The Board's main welfare programmes are: household sites, grants for cottage and small scale industries, scholarships to children of the scheduled castes, coaching centres for scheduled caste applicants where they are instructed regarding interviews for job, improvement of Harijan residential areas, improvement in the working conditions of sweepers/scavengers.

10. 11. WELFARE PROGRAMMES FOR SWEEPERS/SCAVENGERS

Welfare programmes for sweepers/Scavengers are for the improvement in the working and living conditions of this community. Traditionally, the working conditions have been filthy to the extreme. There is a growing feeling in the Bhangi community and in the larger society that the carrying of garbage and excreta in baskets as head load should come to an end. The Commission for scheduled castes/tribes too, has drawn the attention of the government that the degrading custom should end. However, there are some real reasons for the continuation of the practice which I have noted in the chapter-OCCUPATION.

The first serious attempt towards improving the working conditions of sweepers/Scavengers took place in the state of Bombay in 1949. An inquiry committee under the chairmanship

of V.N. Barve, surveyed the working conditions of sweepers in that state. Its findings and recommendations were for local bodies in Bombay state only, but they were capable of wider application. The Ministry of Health at Delhi forwarded the summary of Barve Committee recommendations to governments of all the states and the union territories asking them to implement as many of them as possible. The recommendations were: Receptacles for night soil collection and wheel barrows for carrying it to storage depots and dumping grounds; increase in wages, reduction in working hours, work clothes or uniforms, facilities for education of adult sweepers.

In 1957, the central Advisory Board for Harijan Welfare appointed an Enquiry Committee on Scavenging conditions. Its chairman was N.R. Malkani, a Gandhian social worker, who was a member of Parliament during 1952-62 and was a nominated member of the Central Advisory Board for Harijan Welfare. The committee submitted its report in 1959, after studying the problem in all the states. The report made recommendations for eliminating the inhuman practice of carrying night soil as head load, for removing filth and indignity from all stages of scavenging and for improving the working and living conditions and social status of sweepers/scavengers. The committee made detailed and comprehensive recommendations about the design of dry latrines, implements for removing night soil, alternative methods for disposal of night soil and mechanisation of transportation to dumping grounds. The Malkani committee recommendations were comprehensive regarding the handling and disposal of night soil. During the second Five Year Plan, a scheme was

introduced in 1957-58, to put a stop to the system of carrying night soil as headloads. The scheme provided for 50 per cent of the expenditure to municipalities for buying wheel barrows, gloves and gumboots. After the Malkani committee report, the central government grant-in-aid was increased to 75 per cent of the expenditure in the case of municipal bodies which served less than 100,000 population, but those with a population of 100,000 or more, were allowed 50 percent grant, the balance to be found by the local bodies themselves. Under this scheme, there were financial outlays in the Five Year Plans. This produced some improvement in the working conditions. But the practice of carrying night soil as head loads has persisted. The Commissioner for scheduled castes/tribes commenting on this has said that (a) The wheel barrows provided by the municipalities are often heavy and defective. Consequently the scavengers do not find them convenient to use; (b) There is no provision for replacing or repairing the barrows/carts given to private scavengers. (Report 1970-71; 59)

Emphasis on the use of wheelbarrows seems to ignore local conditions. Scavengers engaged in private scavenging in areas of non-flush latrines (10% in Old Delhi; 60% in Greater Delhi) consider it an imposition. According to the Delhi Corporation officials, "Private sweepers/scavengers, especially women do not want to use the wheel barrows. They prefer to carry the garbage as head loads". Officials, stress the need of propaganda among the sweepers that there is health hazard in the traditional mode of working as it involves more contact with garbage and filth.

However, despite efforts to improve the working conditions of this group, stigma persists as before. The Commissioner for scheduled castes/tribes commented, "The measures such as the provision of wheelbarrows..... cannot really help them to come up to social level of the rest of the society unless scavenging is banned as a profession. The ultimate goal should be the abolition of scavenging as a caste profession by diverting scavengers to other non-caste based occupations."

(Report 1970-71; 58)

The Malkani committee strongly recommended municipalisation of private sweeping and scavenging and abolition of customary Jajmani rights of Bhangis. The sweepers opposed this suggestion when it was made. Delhi Municipal Corporation has no plans for abolition of customary rights. On the contrary, Jajmani has extended to the fast growing new residential areas.

In December 1966, the Central Government appointed a National commission on Labour to review the changes in the conditions of labour since Independence and to make recommendations. Earlier, the government had been considering the setting up of a wage board for dealing with the question of pay and allowances of sweepers and scavengers throughout the country. But as the commission's terms of reference included all employees covered by the Industrial Disputes Act 1947, it appointed a committee to report on the social and economic problems of the sweepers and scavengers. The committee made several recommendations for the amelioration of living and working conditions of the Bhangis. The working conditions related to removal, collection and disposal of night soil and refuse. Their

service conditions included pay and allowances, hours of work, leave etc. As the recommendations of the various committees and commissions are not mandatory, the implementation of the recommendations by the employers is not uniform and is generally half-hearted. Constitutional safeguards for representation of scheduled castes and reservation of non-traditional jobs notwithstanding, the Bhangis employed as sweepers/scavengers have organised themselves in trade unions and have obtained better service conditions through their organised strength.

Over the centuries, the Bhangis both in villages and cities have lived crowded together in poor and segregated houses. The Malkani committee and the committee appointed by National Commission of Labour made a number of suggestions for improvement in this area. The major recommendations were:-

- a) Local bodies should construct houses for scavengers under the low income housing scheme and allot these quarters to them on a hire/purchase basis.
- b) These houses should have essential amenities like running water and electricity.
- c) The sweepers should live in homes randomly mixed with houses of other social groups. This will bring about their integration with the larger society.
- d) In the already existing larger colonies of Bhangis, there should be a welfare centre with a community and medical facilities. A social worker should look after the welfare activities of the centre.

During the Third Five Year Plan, 29 million rupees were earmarked for housing of scavengers, and a similar amount in the Fourth Plan. In the Fifth Five Year Plan, states were advised to make provision for the housing of sweepers and scavengers¹³ in the general development programmes. The money allocated was too little. The 1961-62 Report of the Commission for scheduled castes and scheduled tribes noted that the sweeper colonies continued to be segregated from the rest of the community, that these were situated away from cities and in dirty surroundings. In many cases, the sweepers were living near pail depots and public latrines. Sixteen years later, the 1978-79 Report referred to this inhuman situation and also that "it was nothing but a special form of bonded labour in which only people of a particular caste were condemned to work in particular dirty professions." (Report 1978-79; 123)

The "bonded labour" continues and so also the practice of a certain number of sweepers living near or above the garbage depots in tenements constructed by the local or municipal authorities. These can be seen in Old Delhi. Colonies for sweepers/scavengers built by MDC are single room tenements. Most of these tenements are double-storey housing colonies in run down areas. The tenements are open only on one side with the result that there is no cross ventilation. There are communal water taps and common latrines - only three water taps and three latrines per hundred households! One of the recurrent demands of Bhangis in Delhi is that MDC should change its housing policy of segregating Bhangis from the rest of the society. They want proper houses with basic amenities like indoor toilet and individual water points for each household.

They have even wanted ownership rights to the rented accommodation. As said above, MCD has no new housing scheme for Bhangis. Delhi-Development-Authority (DDA) has housing scheme for low income groups under which it constructs low cost basic flats known as 'Janata' flats or common person's flat. DDA reserves 15% of these flats for the scheduled castes. Janata flats are sold on long term hire-purchase basis. But a sweeper/scavenger because of his low income cannot find the initial deposit. Only those Bhangis who have left the caste occupation and are economically better placed have been able to purchase 'Janata' flats.

Welfare programmes for sweepers and scavengers revolve around two issues, the improvement in working and living conditions. Politicians keep commenting on 'carrying of night soil as head loads'. For instance, Mrs. Gandhi told Lok Sabha on 22nd March, 1983 that while it was a disgrace that the scavengers were carrying night soil as head loads, no definite date could be set to end this practice. Opposition members were quick to blame the government for the continuation of the practice. The problem of sweepers/scavengers is not simply broom and basket problem. The head loads will disappear when all the dry latrines are converted into waterborne ones. The sanitation problem will remain, of course. If sweeping/scavenging is mechanised and the wages raised considerably, there is a possibility that persons from other castes might come forward for this work. This, however is conjectural. The Hindu society is sensitive to purity pollution notions which are the strongest regarding scavenging. Britain has one of the best

mechanised sanitation system. According to my observation (including information from a wide circle of friends and acquaintances), Indians settled in the United Kingdom have scrupulously avoided work in sanitation departments. Upper caste Indians for obvious reasons and Bhangis, too, for obvious reasons.

Political leaders are aware of the vote banks of the lower castes. Bhangis also get visitations from the politicians. India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru addressed a large gathering of Bhangis in Ramlila Maidan, New Delhi on 2nd January, 1964. Bhangis proudly remember that Nehru addressed their meeting. They also remember what he said in that meeting. When they present their demands to the present day politicians, the Bhangis quote from Nehru's speech. Nehru was sensitive to the evils of caste system. In his "Discovery of India", he wrote - "In the context of society today, the caste system and much that goes with it are wholly incompatible, reactionary, restrictive and barriers to progress. There can be no equality in status and opportunity within its framework, nor can be political democracy and much less economic democracy. Between these two conceptions conflict is inherent and only one of them can survive." (Nehru 1956; 34) Here are some extracts from Nehru's address to Delhi Bhangis:-

"I visited several times, some years back, the places where you live. Seeing your huts, I felt unhappy and embarrassed. I therefore hesitated to appear before you now as then and yet be reconciled to your miserable condition. This is our government and we have our own constitution which provides that our

worker comrades and those who are considered as low should receive special care and protection. It is our duty to abolish this evil of high and low by birth and specially to improve the condition of those who do sanitation work..... "you know very well what Gandhiji said in this connection and how he lived according to what he said. Frequently he used to live where you people live.... He thought that by doing so he would be able to focus people's attention on your miserable plight... In this big city of Delhi we see big and luxurious houses and huge offices being built, but the real test of the progress of the city is the living conditions of the common man - where he lives, what amenities he enjoys, what his inconveniences are and whether they are being rectified or not. Where you have great palatial buildings on one side and filthy 'basties' on the other, it is not a sign of progress..... This city is full of slums. I live on the hope that they will be cleared though it is taking a long time. Unfortunately even those who live in them put in obstacles in slum clearance and moving to other places. But it is not right that there should be slums. All of us should have clean places to live in, more especially those who do sanitation work. It is not proper that some should have stately houses to live in as I have and the rest should face inconveniences and discomforts..... "I would like to know that all your children are in schools, because nothing uplifts a community so much as the imparting of education. Children who are educated fashion their lives in a different way. They cannot tolerate those conditions of living which were endured by their parents. I therefore give my highest priority to education. It is only thus that progress is made, otherwise a

community is considered backward and inferior. There should be no high and low and all should have equal opportunity.... you are doing sanitation work, which is considered an essential service. It is not right that those who do sanitation work should be considered low. Of course, your methods of work should change, so that you have the least inconvenience and discomfort..... It is the primary duty of Delhi Corporation to build for you proper houses which are neat and supplied with water and electricity. It is not obligatory on you to cling to hereditary occupation, you can take up other occupations. All Indians should be able to live decently and work honourably and receive regard for doing it."

Nehru then observed that even after many years since Independence, the weaker sections had not made sufficient progress. This he attributed to insufficient consideration for the weaker sections. He blamed caste and its distinctions of high and low for much of social ills. He then offered a piece of advice to the Bhangi community; it was suggested in his usual polite way - "Some of your customs are sometimes too old and wrong. By giving up the useless customs and by adopting good ones you can benefit yourselves and your families. This is not something for me to dwell upon, but it is obvious that even those who are your well wishers cannot achieve success unless they receive your full cooperation."

From time to time, politicians keep addressing the Bhangi gatherings and do not forget to say that the Bhangis are the most despised section of Indian society and that something

needs to be done for them. On April 18th 1973, Prime Minister late Mrs. Indira Gandhi along with Jagjivan Ram (then Defence Minister, and chamar by caste) addressed a large gathering of Bhangis in Ramlila ground, where Nehru, her father addressed a similar meeting nine years ago. Mrs. Gandhi held out the promise of a distant dream for the emancipation of the Bhangis. Unlike her father's heart felt words, her message was in the official jargon -

"The Centre (Central Government) was planning to appoint a high official with wide ranging powers to tackle problems peculiar to the Harijans in the country. The official would suggest ways and means to enforce laws which had been made by the government for the upliftment of the Harijans and which had remained on paper only. He would recommend steps to reduce the incidences of disease among the Harijans. (This presumes that the high official would be a high priest of medicine) and eliminate the degrading practice of carrying human excreta on their heads in wicker baskets." She hoped that India would reach a stage when human excreta would be disposed of by mechanical means as in the western countries. She also said that at a recent conference of state chief ministers she had urged them to form cells or committees answerable to the chief ministers, "to tackle the problem of Harijans on a war footing." Mrs. Gandhi strongly advised the Bhangis should branch out into other professions.

Three years later, on 20th June 1976, Mrs. Gandhi's son, late Sanjay Gandhi, addressed a meeting of sweepers in Ramlila ground Delhi. Delegates of All India Safai Mazdoor Congress came to

attend the Congress from various parts of India. Sanjay Gandhi's preoccupation was family planning programme for the country. He attributed all the problems of sweepers to their large families. He said that the sweepers and other working people should have far fewer children in order to better educate them. He regretted that the 20 point programme for economic betterment and social regeneration would prove abortive if the population continued rising. On casteism he made the stock remark that caste was an impediment to progress and that it prevailed also among the weaker sections of society. Mahatma Gandhi was not forgotten: "he had made cleanliness and eradication of untouchability a major part of the struggle for freedom and national resurgence." He gave the startling revelation that the sweepers in Delhi who were earning about Rupees 100 to 125 per month were offered better jobs by the authorities but many of them refused the opportunity and preferred their present jobs. Of this Sanjay Gandhi was totally ignorant or misinformed. The monthly earning of a sweeper in Delhi in 1976 was about Rupees 350. Alternative jobs were not refused by the sweepers then, now or ever. The Bhangis were resentful of this remark by Sanjay Gandhi and many of them called it a sick joke. Sanjay Gandhi, who had that day visited some resettlement colonies of sweepers said that the sweepers there were living in clean and healthy surroundings.

Buta Singh from sweeper caste then Deputy Minister for Railways and the president of the conference said that millions of sweepers in India continued to live in poverty, slums and unhealthy surroundings. He, however, hoped that the 20-point

programme held a promise of better deal for the scheduled castes.

In her message to the conference, the Prime Minister, late Mrs. Gandhi said that poverty should not mean being dirty. "By hard work the dirt of the villages and the cities can be removed and for this we have to launch a national campaign, specially we have to instil a sense of pride in our Safai Mazdoors." So the message was not that of "mechanical means" of public sanitation as envisaged in Mrs. Gandhi's address in 1973, but one of still more hard work for the sweepers. The public at large were left free to throw rubbish around and even defecate. Perhaps the stage had not been reached when India could provide a sufficient number of clean public conveniences, even in the capital city.

If politicians find opportunities for addressing gatherings of scheduled castes, the caste/community leaders - and, in this case, Bhangi leaders - also take advantage of these meetings. They contribute to national cause; for instance, Ram Rakha Mal, collected about Rupees 10,000 from Bhangis for National Defence Fund and presented it to Prime Minister Nehru at the time of the 1962 war with China. Rupees 16,000 were presented by him to Mrs. Indira Gandhi in the 1965 war with Pakistan. During the emergency in 1976, when Mrs. Gandhi had started her 20-point economic programme mainly for the welfare of the down-trodden, Ram Rakha Mal presented her a silver necklace made up of 20 lockets symbolic of the 20-point programme. Along with the silver necklace he presented her a small basket and a broom

made of silver, symbolising the Bhangi caste's heritage.

10. 12. CASTE ASSOCIATIONS

The authority of the traditional caste council made up of caste elders has declined these days. The functions of the caste council have been taken over by the caste associations. Among Bhangis of Delhi, the traditional caste council still exists but its authority exercised by caste elders, the Chaudharies, is limited to a narrow area, that of supervising marriage functions. These days the Chaudharies do not, as of right, decide disputes among the caste members. Disputes are settled by caste associations and, in the last resort, by the courts.

These days caste councils and their modern counterparts, caste associations, are usually found among the lower castes. Caste associations of Bhangis are organised mainly for promoting the welfare of their caste for obtaining political representation and economic advantages from the state. These associations speak for their community and create consciousness for progress. In this respect they are pressure groups for the caste they represent.

"Caste associations have been built up into effective agencies for modern education and for participation in political democracy. Its leaders generally use parliamentary procedures in their meetings and emulate the organisational style of the main political parties" (Mandelbaum 1970; 500) Rudolph and Rudolph name caste associations as para communities. "The characteristics

of the para community resemble in many ways those of the voluntary associations or interest group familiar to European and American politics" (Rudolphs 1967; 29) And according to William Rowe, "Most caste associations are organised around the general theme of promoting the welfare of an endogamous caste." (Rowe 1964; 25).

At present there are many caste associations working among the Bhangi community of Delhi. Membership is open to those Bhangis who pay the membership fee and abide by the rules of the association. Unlike the leaders of the caste councils who were hereditary, the leadership of the associations is elective. While members only may participate in the activities of the associations, the associations claim to represent the interest of the whole Bhangi community. Each association has its office, which is usually a small place or a corner in the house of one of the leaders. The associations do not have the financial resources to rent office space. However, membership and election procedures are strictly followed. Bhangi caste associations articulate their community's interests to those who hold political power so that maximum benefits could be obtained for the community. The associations hold conferences where demands are made and resolutions passed.

Rudolph and Rudolph have noted the para community's role in structural and cultural change by providing an adaptive institution in which traditional and modern social elements can work together. The caste association^S of Delhi Bhangis have shown adaptive growth in response to the changing times. During the pre-Independence period, the caste associations of Bhangis

were involved with reform work and change of religious and ritual practices. Since 1947, caste associations are concerned with various goals ranging from reform work to gaining economic and political ends. They act as pressure groups for more participation in political power, more representation in administration and economic improvement.

In 1926, two Bhangi men Maharaj Khakshah and Maharaj Khukran organised a Balmiki society in Delhi. It was named "Prem Sabha or Friendship society. These Bhangi leaders were greatly influenced by the teachings of Arya Samaj. Because of their role as religious preachers, the two leaders came to be called Maharaj which is a kingly title in secular affairs and is also extended to high religious functionaries as a mark of respect by their followers. Maharaj Khakshah used to edit, a periodical called "Ruchi Prakash." Other similar associations sprang up in Bhangi neighbourhoods. These associations motivated their caste members towards change in life style, especially to give up Muslim way of life and to adopt Hindu customs, rites and beliefs. These internal changes in the community brought about changes in response to the external world. In the 1930's some Bhangi men formed the "Tooti Tor Sabha" or the Committee for breaking pipes. The members, in act of defiance, would break bamboo pipes at the water stands or "Piaos". These "Piaos" were of two types. The running water taps provided by the municipality or a private philanthropist; or, the old style well from which a paid or voluntary worker would draw water to provide drink to the passers-by in hot weather. The water was poured from a brass tumbler into the cupped hands of the thirsty person. If the thirsty person happened to be an

untouchable, the water was poured into a receptacle fitted with a steel or bamboo pipe.

In 1934-35, an association "Mehtar Labour Union", was organised by Bhangi leaders, Mahashya Karam Chand and Mahashya Nank Chand. These two leaders were literate and were able to articulate their community's demands to the municipal authorities. They organised another association, Harijan Jati Sudhar Sabha, or the organisation for the Welfare of Harijans. Mahashya Karam Chand started editing a weekly newspaper, "Harijan Hitayshi" or Harijan Sympathiser. Through this newspaper he used to propagate reform ideas, urging upon the caste members to give up Muslim customs and adopt Hindu ways of life. The association conducted propaganda against the leadership of caste Chaudharies. It urged the community not to collect the shrouds from the dead, to stop animal sacrifice, to give up drinking and to adopt Arya Samaj teachings. Mahashya Karam Chand was greatly inspired by the teachings of the (upper caste) Samajist, Swami Shradha Nand. The Mahashya established in Delhi a branch of All India Shradha Nand Dalit Uddhar Sabha. Bhangis who had adopted Islam and Christianity were reconverted to Hinduism. The education of Bhangi children was not forgotten and a school - Arya Vedic Pathshala - was opened in the Bhangi 'bustee', Arya Nagar, in Pahar Ganj.

In 1937-38, articulate members of the Bhangi community formed new associations like "Balmiki Sabha" and "Balmiki Yuvak Mandal", whose aims were much the same as of the older associations. Consequently, the Bhangis began to identify themselves as the descendants of Balmiki. Muslim influence started

waning from their socio-religious practices. They were persuaded to give up eating beef, dead animals and leftovers.

After Independence many more caste associations came to be organised and their goals ranged beyond reforms to gaining economic benefits and political representation. Proliferation of these associations reflected the rise of new leadership. It also produced divisions at 'Mohalla' levels. There is no centralised body to coordinate their activities. The first and the foremost among these associations was Delhi Prantiya Balmiki Mazdoor Sangh (Delhi state Balmiki Workers Union). This association was formed in 1949 by Ram Rakha Mal who had worked for his community in Lahore before Independence. He was ousted from its leadership in the 1960's when he formed another association. The reasons for this split have been discussed under Trade Unionism.

Economic demands have inevitable political connotations. In India, caste identifications have entered politics. This was noted by Srinivas and others. "It may very well be that identification with one's community will become an increasingly important political force in India in the years ahead".(Quoted by Weiner 1962:17). The extension of universal adult suffrage, to all the people has been accompanied by a rapid rise of organised interests in India political life. The impact of these demands by various organised groups on the government and the problems that such demands raise for developing country like India is what is called politics of scarcity.



Caste Association meetings.

Caste, that is scheduled caste identification, is one among many others that play an important part in the development of organised interests. These castes function as interest groups. They are primarily concerned with the economic and social welfare of their members.

There was no homogeneity in the past among all the polluting castes. Nor is it there even today. In fact, pre-existing differentiations among various scheduled castes have been reinforced by the modern political processes. Such differentiations are observed in reserved S.C. constituencies where various castes compete among themselves to capture legislative seats. Rising expectation, is in reality social competition and demands by a group for improvement in its economic and social position. Expectations are directed at places in colleges, jobs in offices and political power.

The desire to enhance the position of groups by political means is strengthened by government policy. The government's opposition to "provincialism", "casteism" and "communalism" has in fact strengthened these sentiments. Politicians in search of power appeal to such sentiments. Various political parties have their own Harijan cells to consolidate the support of various Harijan castes. Comparison may be made with immigrant vote bank in British politics.

However, this caste calculation was a factor far less powerful than some of its theorists would admit. Caste and politics have a peculiar affinity in the case of scheduled castes, as these castes have reservation of seats, of jobs and can use

bloc voting, though this is not permissible under election rules. But even here, its influence will decrease in course of time.

Trade Union demands of Delhi sweepers have had their impact on local politics and this has been noted elsewhere. The caste associations of Bhangis, representing the economic and social interest of the community, have made representations to the politicians at all levels. In 1953, during strike of sweepers, the Delhi state and central Health Ministers were approached by the sweepers' union (trade union cum caste association), if only because sanitation then came under the department of health. In 1967, Delhi Prantiya Balmiki Mazdoor Sangh, under the leadership of Ram Kishan Bhajni, presented a charter of demands to Jagjivan Ram when he became Labour and Employment Minister in Mrs. Gandhi's government. He belongs to Jatav caste, the chamar group of untouchables. Bhangis share with him the common identity of Harijans. The charter was made up of demands on the line of demands by the striking sweepers in the earlier (and subsequent) years. The demands covered all round improvement in the prospects of the community - better educational facilities, better jobs and promotions, better housing and recreational facilities, and more political representation in the MCD and Parliament. The caste association made a political move on behalf of the community in that it presented its demand to a central cabinet minister belonging to scheduled caste.

Delhi Pradesh Balmiki Samaj Vikas Parishad:- or Association for the Development of Bhangi community of Delhi. This

association was organised by K.L. Balguher in 1957. He is educated upto Matriculation and is a clerk in MCD. Many young Bhangis started taking interest in the organisation. Bhangi youth were urged to get education as one way of improving their social status. The association started evening schools to help children with their education at day schools. The programme did not last long, for lack of funds.

In 1972, K.L. Balguher while appreciating the Congress government efforts to improve the lot of the Harijans, regretted that 'artificial Harijans' had used the concessions at the cost of the Bhangis. He listed three types of Harijans as follows:-

(i) Privileged Harijans:- Those who had progressed and crossed the barrier of backwardness, were a separate class of Harijans among other Harijans. They were opportunists, did not support the Congress party and had no scruples in using the Harijan label for selfish ends at the cost of their poorer caste fellows.

(ii) Artificial Harijans:- They procure false certificates of scheduled caste status to obtain privileges open to Harijans in education, jobs and housing.

(iii) Real Harijans:- They were the most depressed section of scheduled castes and Bhangis more than any other belonged to this category. The real Harijans should be given preference in the matter of positive discrimination. It was also noted that while the state recognised art, literature, social work, medicine, engineering etc in the annual honours list, no Safai Mazdoor had ever been recognised for his services. This was a

reminder to the government and the society, that mere change of nomenclature from sweeper to 'Safai Mazdoor' was nothing more than a sop and that the majority of the Bhangis continued to suffer from the outrageous twist given to Karma theory in the ages past.

Over a period of time, Balguher's caste association made the following demands:-

- (a) Abolition of head loads for removal of night soil; more representation of Bhangi community on the Harijan Welfare Board of Delhi Administration (the caste association deputation to Lt. Governor Baleshwar Prasad, on 30th July 1972).
- (b) Modernisation of Sanitation and recruitment of more sweepers (the caste association to MCD on 12th November 1973).
- (c) The words Chuhra and Bhangi were derogatory and should be banned. The feature film "Phagun" should be banned as words offensive to the Bhangi community were spoken in that film. (Balguher to B.K. Kapoor, the Deputy Commissioner).
- (d) The increase in the amount of scholarship for scheduled caste children, as the scholarship had fallen far behind the inflation. The qualifying ceiling was the parental monthly income of Rupees 200. The ceiling was later raised to Rupees 300. (Balguher's letter dated 20th June 1974 to Krishan Sawroop, the Executive Councillor.)
- (e) Demand that a Bhangi should be nominated to the Delhi Pradesh Congress Committee (Joint deputation from some caste associations of Bhangis under the leadership of Balguher met

H.K.L. Bhagat, President Delhi Pradesh Congress Committee) The local Congress bosses were not ready for this. But following Janata party rule at the centre and in many states in 1977-80, the defeated Congress party's (Congress-I) Delhi branch elected K.C. Benniwal, a Bhangi, as one of its general secretaries.

(f) At the beginning of the Emergency rule, Balguher sent Mrs. Gandhi a letter extolling her political virtues - "She has started a new epoch by bringing Emergency rule and had given relief to public through the 20-point economic programme." He called Mrs. Gandhi "the queen of equality", "Messiah of Socialism" and a "goddess"¹⁴. After this fulsome tribute, Balguher presented his demands which were both economic and political and were similar to the ones presented by other caste associations and Bhangi leaders. The political demands were: nomination of a sweeper to the upper house of parliament, the Rajya Sabha (This demand would envisage the amendment of the constitution); a Bhangi parliamentary candidate for the Karol Bagh reserved constituency; a Bhangi cabinet minister (At the time, Buta Singh of Bhangi caste, was a junior minister (Minister of state) for railways).

Balguher's caste association holds 'mohalla' level public conferences from time to time. Mention may be made of the 'Jagran' to celebrate Balmiki birthday, when Bhangis keep awake all night and sing hymns in praise of Balmiki. This is in the style of upper caste Jagrata/Jagran in praise of mother goddesses. The upper castes themselves had adopted Jagrata from certain lower castes, for example, the Jhevars (water carriers) in Panjab.

Whatever the political party in power at Delhi, the Bhangis as a scheduled caste receive due attention. In 1977, when the Janata party formed the central government, the Deputy Minister of Social Welfare was present at the Balmiki Jayanti celebration in the month of October. The Bhangi audience took a mass vow that they will not send their children for sweeping and scavenging. In practice the vow is not observed, as many children drop out of school system at the age of 10-12 years, to help their mothers in private scavenging.

In December 1977, at an other conference to debate the problems facing the Bhangi community, the association said that no one from this community had been made a state governor, chief minister or ambassador. Thus the caste bloc voting had now started rising expectation of political power sharing and rewards of a higher order.

In 1982, mass conversions of Harijans took place in Meenakshipuram and a few other places, under inducement by Arab petrodollars, as some say. Delhi Bhangis held conferences and debated the issue. They were unanimous in condemning and rejecting this sort of conversion. K.L. Balguher wanted that the idol of Balmiki be installed in the neighbouring Lakshmi Narain temple of caste Hindus. In a function organised by Balguher's caste association, Balmiki's idol was duly installed in the said temple by Vasant Sathe, the information and broadcasting minister. It boosted the Bhangi ego that their guru was integrated with the "high caste" gods of the Hindus.

Balmiki Yuvak Samaj or Balmiki Youth Association, was organised and registered in 1963, by the educated younger generation of the Bhangi community. Any Bhangi youth above the age of 16 can become its member. The constitution of the association makes it clear that it is not affiliated to any political party. It has branches in various Bhangi neighbourhoods. The office holders are elected by secret ballot. The association has an Advisory Board and an Executive Committee. The aims of the association are:-

- 1) To motivate the Bhangi community to get education.
- 2) To inspire the community to have self confidence and to improve and develop on modern lines.
- 3) To abandon the dirty occupation of sweeping/scavenging and to adopt other occupations. Pending that, to modernise the occupation of sweeping and scavenging.
- 4) To inspire the women of the community to be educated, to give up private scavenging and take up knitting and tailoring.
- 5) To motivate the community to stop wasteful expenditure on marriages, religious festivals and to give up drinking.

In 1968, the Balmiki Yuvak Samaj chalked out a three point programme for the welfare of the Bhangi community. The programme was forwarded to the relevant Ministers, M.P.'s, Metropolitan Council and Delhi Corporation. The programme was about problems that the Bhangi community faced in education, occupation and housing. The members of the association said that the government had not done much in these matters. This is how they saw the problems:-

(a) Education:- Lack of education is the root cause of the social, economic and political backwardness of the Bhangi community. In other words, the community now realised that while outward manifestation of untouchability had largely decreased, the community was educationally ill-equipped for using its otherwise guaranteed scheduled quota of jobs. The problem of education needed to be tackled from several perspectives. Thus education should be declared absolutely compulsory for the children of this community. Delhi Administration should give incentives to Bhangi employees who send their children to school. Obviously, the incentive was meant for those only who still did sweeping and scavenging. Those who had moved to other occupations knew the value of education. To discourage parents from hindering their children's education, the association recommended that sweeping/scavenging by 6 to 11 years old children (even as a casual help to parents) should be declared illegal and such parents who take their children along to work should be punished. In suitable cases, the government may provide hostel accommodation for school going children so that they are not pushed into this occupation of sweeping/scavenging. Technical education in secondary schools should be made compulsory for Bhangi children.

(b) Occupation:- Complete modernisation of sweeping and scavenging so that it may be bearable occupation. The Bhangi community still worked and lived in a degrading situation. To hasten integration of the Bhangis with the rest of the community, preference should be given to Bhangi community when selecting candidates for non-sweeping/scavenging jobs.

(c) Housing:- Bhangi community or a majority of them were living near dumping grounds, community latrines or in run-down mohallas. These surroundings hampered their development and gave a bad name to the community. Bhangis should be provided with at least a 2-room accommodation per family. Their houses should be dispersed in the houses of the rest of the community.

Other achievements of the association:- Balmiki Yuvak Samaj corresponded with Delhi Administration regarding the community's long-standing demand that Balmiki's birthday be declared a holiday. This was accepted for Delhi, but not for the whole of India, as the birthday of Balmiki is not celebrated all over India and in places where it is observed, it is on different days. Another achievement of this association was the 20 paise postage stamp of Balmiki issued on 14th October, 1970 at the annual session of Congress party at Patna by the Harijan leader, Jagjivan Ram. Three leaders of the Yuvak Samaj had a free trip to the session at the expense of the Congress party.

Scheduled caste certificates entailed a cumbersome procedure: the application form was required to be signed by a gazetted officer or a first class magistrate and the worthy official was to attest and certify that as per his personal knowledge the applicant was a member of the scheduled caste. The brown sahib could not have personally known more than two Bhangis, the scavengers in his household and the club. The rest of the applicants had a hard time finding other persons known to them and the official. Delhi Administration agreed that members of the Harijan Welfare Board could henceforth attest the forms.

The association, in line with other caste councils, has protested that the word 'Chuhra' was derogatory and should not be used in scheduled caste certificates. However, nothing has been done by the authorities in this regard.

To establish common identity and unity with other scheduled castes, the association celebrates the birthdays (Jayanti) of other patron saints of other Harijans, for example, the birthday of Ravidas, the Chamar saint. Scheduled castes have lacked cohesiveness. The internal diversities among various scheduled castes prevent them from forming a united political force. The internal differentiations among various scheduled castes have been sharpened and strengthened by the economic and political developments under the Politics of Scarcity.

Bhangi caste has frequently complained that Chamars have gained at their cost in the matter of jobs, reserved seats and the opportunities provided by the political system. The lower castes do not identify with one another. At the time of election they compete among themselves for seats in the reserved scheduled caste constituencies. The election circus is managed largely by the upper castes. The association, established as it was by the younger and educated Bhangi generation, is active in resolving the day to day problems of the Bhangis which they may have with the authorities. Periodically they hold conferences where the problems of the community are discussed.

Delhi Pradesh Safai Mazdoor Congress (DPSMC) or the Delhi State Sanitation Workers' Union - is a branch of the caste association

of sanitation workers at the all-India level which is the All-India Safai Mazdoor Congress (AISMC). This association was registered in 1965, to co-ordinate the struggle of the sweepers/scavengers in the country. These sweepers belong to a number of castes and sub castes like Bhangis, Mehtar, Hela, Lal Begi. Many sweeper organisations are working in different parts of India. There was the need for a nation wide organisation. The head office of this organisation is in Bombay. The association's flag is of red colour with the rising sun in the middle. All-India Safai Mazdoor Congress is printed across the rays of the sun. The aims and objectives of the association are summarised below:-

To strengthen the economic, social, educational and political status of the sweeper caste all over the country, through legal methods guaranteed in the constitution and through negotiations with the authorities. Only when negotiations fail would the strike be ever used. To help improve the working conditions and to protect sweepers who become unemployed as a result of the modernisation of their caste occupation.

The association has branches in different states. The office bearers at the headquarter and in the branch offices are elected annually on democratic basis, that is, one member one vote. Conferences are held periodically in different places, where sweeper delegates assemble for the exchange of ideas. The first session was held in Bombay on 21-23 May 1966, where 450 delegates from 11 states, legislators and community leaders assembled and discussed the problems of the sweepers. A special session was held in Lucknow on 11 November 1966. The third

session was held on 11-12 November 1967. The fourth session was held on 2nd October 1969, again in Bombay. This session was remarkable for its radicalism. It was noted that many Harijan leaders were concerned about their own self interest (Echoes of Ambedkar). The Harijan ministers who were not very helpful to the cause of the fellow Harijans should resign. Lastly, if the sweepers failed to get justice they will abandon Gandhian methods. A list of resolutions was passed and forwarded to central and state governments. The resolutions covered the old ground in regard to work and wages. There were some new demands, e.g. those among the scheduled castes who were economically well-off should be excluded from the benefits of the reserved list; an investigation into the affairs of the associations that were receiving state grants in the name of Harijans; sanitoriums for the health of the sweepers; nomination of sweepers to the upper house of parliament, the legislative councils, municipal committees and village panchayats, a separate ministry to look after the affairs of the sweepers/scavengers. The last two demands were for more political representation and political action. This sort of political pressure was not a new feature. Three years earlier in 1966, before the fourth general election in 1966, Yashwant Rai, a member of the Panjab Legislative Council, a former minister of social welfare in that state, and himself from the sweeper caste, presented demands to Kamraj, the president of All India Congress Committee, when the Congress Committee was going to prepare the list of party candidates for the forthcoming election. The Congress party was reminded that the Bhangi community had always supported the Congress party, but the Congress had

not done enough for them, especially regarding their political representation in proportion to their population in parliament and the legislative assemblies. This political representation was seen by the community as an important way for improving their position in society.

A member of the sweeper community, Buta Singh, was a M.P., from a reserved constituency in Panjab since 1962, that is, four years before this demand resolution of 1966. In 1974, Buta Singh became the Deputy Minister for Railways. During the Emergency and afterwards he fully co-operated with Mrs. Gandhi and was the general secretary of Congress-I. When Mrs. Gandhi returned to power in 1980, Buta Singh who had won his reserved seat, was given the cabinet post of Transport and Shipping minister. This boosted the community ego of Delhi Bhangis. Before the Asiad games in November 1982, Buta Singh was given the additional portfolio of Minister for sports. The Bhangi community wished the success of the games as a member of their community was in charge of the affair. According to an informant, "The success of Asiad games meant that a Bhangi had managed the whole business very well and that the Bhangis had the ability to manage complicated affairs, not just sweeping and scavenging."

Buta Singh assumed the presidentship of All-India Safai Mazdoor Congress in 1977. The previous president of the association, Yashwant Rai Chauhan, a former deputy minister of Social Welfare in Panjab state, left the Congress party after the Emergency and joined Janata party. He could not win the election. The Bhangis did not want him - a Congress deserter - to remain the

president of the association.

Currently, the association has the following demands in addition to those mentioned above:-

(1) A committee should be formed at the national level to study the problems of sweepers/scavengers in the community. Sweeper representatives should be taken on the committee which should submit its report within six months and the recommendation should be implemented at the earliest possible time.

(2) Another committee should visit foreign (Western) countries to study the working conditions of sweepers there and the amount of benefits they receive. This report of the committee should be the guide for improving the conditions of Indian sweepers/scavengers.

(3) Recommendations of Malkani committee report and Gajendar Gadkar committee report (Report of National Commission of Labour) should be implemented and ownership rights of houses should be given to the sweepers on easy instalments.

(4) Sweeping/scavenging occupation should be declared technical and be upgraded from grade IV to grade III for remuneration.

(5) A compulsory life insurance scheme for sweepers/scavengers with minimum insurance of Rs. 10,000 and premiums to be paid by local authorities. (In 1981, MCD started compulsory insurance for sweepers/scavengers. Half the premium at the rate of Rupees 10, per mensem is deducted from the wages and the balance

made up by the employer).

(6) A judicial inquiry into the atrocities on Harijans in the various states of India which were on the increase during the previous few years of Janata rule. Harijans should form half the police force (to ensure protection of the Harijans). The association condemned the anti reservation agitation in the country, particularly in Gujrat. Reservation policy should continue till the scheduled castes/tribes had attained social equality with the rest of the society.

All India Scheduled Caste Yuvjan Samaj.

(An association for the youth of scheduled castes at all-India level). This association was formed by the educated elites of Bhangi community of Delhi. As its name indicates, the association is open to the youth of all the scheduled caste communities, though its members are mostly from the Bhangi community. Its organiser and the general secretary is Surinder Parkash Chandel who is a post-graduate and works as a senior Assistant in Central Hindi Directorate, a Government of India office. S.P. Chandel felt that the educated among the community were becoming alienated from the larger Bhangi community. It was imperative to organise them and use their collective efforts for the betterment of the community. The association has a central executive committee and a central advisory board of educated and other well-placed Bhangis in various fields like politics, administration, education, professions etc. Its branches are in the various

Bhangi neighbourhoods of Delhi and also in the other states of the country. According to its constitution, the association shall have no political aims or links with any political party. The majority of the members being government servants cannot participate in politics. At the same time, the constitution specifies that the association work to awaken political consciousness in the Bhangi community, promote education and caste unity. Buta Singh, the Cabinet Minister, is the chief patron of the association. (a sort of royalty among the Bhangis?)

The association holds sport events, essay writing and debates. There are competitions for the physical, social and mental development of the Harijan Youth. The subject matters are as below:-

Why does sweeper community remain neglected?

Is it necessary to leave the occupation of sweeping to achieve social equality?

Untouchables and the reservation politics.

Should Bhangi youth participate in politics?

The place of Balmiki in Indian culture.

Religious conversions and untouchables.

These essay competitions and debates are held in order to familiarise the Harijan youth about the problems facing their caste. On annual conference the association has started publishing a magazine which highlights the current problems faced by the Bhangi community. For lack of funds it is very difficult to meet the cost of publication. From scheduled caste businesses the advertisements are accepted on concessional rates. In this regard the scheduled caste associations have

started reservation policy of their own.

The association demands a separate Harijan ministry. It has organised women's wings in its branches in the Bhangi colonies of Delhi. The Bhangi women are made conscious of the dirty nature of their occupation and the importance of the education of their children, so that they could aspire for other occupations. The association organised women's conference on 8th January, 1984. The conference was inaugurated by Manjit Kaur, wife of Buta Singh, then the Housing, Development and Sports minister and was chaired by a woman Metropolitan Councillor. Among the guests were a few women MPs. The educated women of the Bhangi community spoke about their problems, which are reflected in the resolutions passed. The conference pledged that:-

- (1) Bhangi women will send their children to schools and pay special attention to the education of their daughters.
- (2) Bhangi women will be made conscious of the stigma attached to this occupation and they will be inspired to leave this occupation and take up other jobs.
- (3) Women should spend less on social and religious functions and should give up blind faith and other social evils.
- (4) Social equality between men and women should be achieved.
- (5) Promotion of women sweepers in the employment of MCD was non-existent. They should be promoted as sanitary guides and inspectors according to their qualifications.
- (6) The conference demanded that the government should start sewing training centres in Bhangi neighbourhoods. Also Day

Care centres for the children of working Bhangi mothers.

The association is trying to establish common identity with other Harijans by demanding public holidays on the birthday of other 'lower caste' gurus like Kabir, Ravidas, Sudershan. The members told me that they celebrate Ambedkar Jayanti (birthday) and considered him their social guru. They firmly accept Ambedkar's observation that untouchables can make progress through education and other secular symbols of achievement. However, they reject Ambedkar's philosophy of religious conversion as a means to achieve social status.

10. 13. POLITICISATION OF BALMIKI MOVEMENT

We have seen that Bhangis recognise Balmiki as their ancestral guru or saint and, infact, many of their organisations are named after him. By organising various Bhangi sub-castes throughout India under one name, they hope to transform it into an effective political force. For centuries, Bhangis have been struggling against social oppression. In the past, this struggle was in the form of religious protest which led to the emergence of Balmiki movement. Bhangis, who were not sure of their identity, were an easy prey to alien religions like Islam and, later on, Christianity. This further complicated the identity dilemma of the Bhangis. Arya Samaj told Bhangis that Balmiki was their link with Hindu tradition. This move was aimed at preventing further conversions of Bhangis to Christianity, and coupled with 'Shuddhi', it brought back to Hinduism many of the Bhangis who had converted to Islam and Christianity.

Bhangis chose Valmiki, the author of Hindu epic Ramayana, as their patron saint and adopted his name for their caste. There already existed a tradition that Balmiki (Valmiki) was from the lower castes. Arya Samaj did not invent the Balmiki identity, it was present all along in the Bhangi tradition. It now became more visible, provided a framework of cultural and religious identity for Bhangis and a link with the mainstream Hindu Society. Bhangi caste associations promote the veneration of Balmiki and also social reform. Balmiki movement is on the rise throughout North India.

The first Balmiki Sabha in Delhi was organised in 1926. In the 1930's, as the movement gathered momentum, many more Balmiki Sabhas came into existence. After Independence, when Bhangis began to be more active in cultural matters, in trade union demands and political process, their Balmiki identity came as a readymade symbol and focal point. Bhangis started celebration of Balmiki's birthday in 1950, and is now an annual carnival on the full moon day in the month of October, that is, around Divali, the great festival of the Hindus. A month before the event, "Balmiki Janmotsav Samiti" (Balmiki birthday celebration committee) is elected at a general meeting from among prominent members of the community. The committee elects its office holders, an executive committee and an advisory board. The election is not a smooth affair. The factions and the leadership tussle influence the election drama.

In the 1950's, for the first few years of Jayanti celebrations, Bhangis of Old Delhi (Urban Bhangis) and New Delhi (Rural Bhangis) used to take out two different processions. Later on it was resolved that they should unite and project a united picture of their caste by celebrating the event together. A large procession of men, women and children of the Bhangi community starts from the open space in front of the Red Fort and proceeding through various parts of Old Delhi and New Delhi, ends at Balmiki temple in Bhangi colony on Panchkuyian Road, where Mahatma Gandhi used to stay. Here the procession is received by the leaders of the colony. On the way, there are reception centres managed by various caste associations of Bhangis who serve tea and snacks. The highlights of the procession are tableau scenes from Ramayana; Balmiki is given an important place. The scenes are prepared by the various caste associations of Bhangis, after months of careful preparations. Volunteers of Bhangi Youth in uniforms manage the procession. Men, women and children of the community from the rural areas of Delhi came to join the procession in their bullock carts.

Modern Bhangi leaders look down upon the bullock carts as derogatory to their caste. (A Duke on an official visit or on private holiday in India might relish a ride on the bullock cart. A crowded bus may be faster and modern compared to the age-old bullock cart but can be very uncomfortable). On the day following the procession, a public meeting is held where speakers pay homage to Balmiki. Prizes are awarded to the best three tableaux.

Since Independence, the Balmiki Jayanti has been an opportunity for Congress politicians wooing Bhangis for their electoral support. They attended the inauguration of the procession and the public meeting to pay homage to Balmiki. Bhangi politicians and intelligentsia also make speeches and highlight their community's grievances to the politicians. As said earlier, the earliest of the Bhangi leaders was Ram Rakha Mal, who had established his pro-Congress Delhi Pradesh Balmiki Mazdoor Sangh for the economic betterment of the Bhangi community. He was also the president of "Balmiki Janmotsav Samiti" for many years to come. His contribution to his community has been described elsewhere. In the 1960's, other caste associations came into existence, all concerned with improving the social, economic and political conditions of the Bhangis. With these associations, many more Bhangi leaders came onto the platform of Balmiki Jayanti.

In 1972, "Akhil Bhartiya Safai Mazdoor Congress" opened its branch in Delhi and in mid-seventies this association increased its influence among Bhangis of Old Delhi. By this time, Ram Rakha Mal lost his influence in his community, partly because

of the consequences of the 1972 strike of sweepers and later when he shifted his political loyalty to Janata party just before the 1977 elections. On both these counts he became unpopular in his community. Buta Singh, a Bhangi from Panjab, who was State Minister for Railways in Indira Gandhi's government during emergency, became the chief patron of the union, Akhil Bhartiya Safai Mazdoor Sangh. He also became the patron of another caste association of Bhangis, the All India Yuvjan Samaj. Leaders of these associations continued supporting Congress(I) when Mrs. Gandhi was out of power. During the Janata party rule in 1977-79, Balmiki Jayanti celebrations were on a low key. When Indira Gandhi returned to power in 1980, Balmiki Jayanti was celebrated with pomp and show. Buta Singh contributes a substantial amount of money towards the cost of Jayanti celebrations. I am not sure if these funds are contributed privately or out of Congress party funds. According to one of my well-informed and reliable informants.... "This money is donated by influential businessman of Delhi who then are rewarded by the politicians with licenses and quotas of items in short supply." In this case, Buta Singh indicated to the businessman the amount of money (Rs. 10,000) by discreetly opening both his palms (10 fingers)¹⁵. Politicians, too, benefit by contributing money to their caste/community gatherings. They can demonstrate to their party bosses the extent of support they have from their caste/community. Buta Singh, who became Cabinet Minister after the 1980 election, himself inaugurated the Jayanti procession. Office bearers of the two associations mentioned above have got elected as the officials of Balmiki Janmotsav Samiti every year since 1980. From 1981, late Mrs. Gandhi herself inaugurated Jayanti processions and made

speeches. In the February 1983 local elections, two office bearers of the above mentioned associations were proposed as Congress party candidates. They were Charan Singh Kandra, president of Delhi Pradesh Akhil Bhartiya Safai Mazdoor Congress and Ram Prasad, general secretary of the association. Buta Singh was in favour of the candidates, but on account of other considerations, they could not get the party ticket.

I had the opportunity to observe the Balmiki Jayanti in October 1982. The conference was marked by the presence of leaders of ruling Congress(I) party. A summary sample of the speeches delivered would show the upper/lower caste interaction¹⁶.

(a) Hari Singh Balmiki (A Bhangi MP from Uttar Pradesh) -
 "Balmiki was the only protector of Dalits (depressed classes) Ramayana is the only literature which teaches us equality..... depressed classes should read Ramayana every day and try to stand on their own feet. Depressed classes are weak and need support..... we need to educate our women. Even Sita was educated by Balmiki."

(b) H.K.L. Bhagat, Housing Minister (upper caste)
 "Balmiki has given inspiration to all the depressed classes.. Sweepers have always remained with Congress.... Mrs. Gandhi has always helped us. She has given me this portfolio of housing. Our plan is to give houses to scheduled castes, not on segregation basis but alongwith other caste groups. In the next five years we are going to build 500,000 houses, of which 25 percent will be reserved for scheduled castes (Promise and

bribe of houses). In our crisis of 1977 (when Congress was rejected by the electorate in the election after Emergency), we found love and affection from you people."

(c) Buta Singh:- "If Balmiki had not written Ramayana, the tradition of our country would have been different. Mrs. Indira Gandhi our most beloved and most worshipful (Sarva Priya, Sarva Pujya) great leader has come to share our happiness.... (They about the social progress made by the Bhangi community on account of the policies adopted by the Congress party)... Even now there is no small scale industry associated with our community, so that we could make progress.... Our destiny lies in the hands of Mrs. Gandhi, the great leader of mankind. She is aware of our problems. She learnt to struggle in KamlaJee's lap. (Kamla was Mrs. Gandhi's mother) Mrs. Gandhi is not an individual or an institution but a tradition (Muryada¹⁷). Buta Singh, roused in his sycophancy, would have gone on and on, but Mrs. Gandhi indicated to him to finish his speech.

In her speech, Mrs. Gandhi spoke of the contribution of Balmiki to Indian tradition. His literary effort was the result of devotion and hard work. She then spoke of more production and a fairer distributive justice...." No single party or institution can bring change by itself. You have got to put in your own efforts. I have special affection for you people."

Mrs. Gandhi then spoke about the divisive forces (The Akali agitation in Panjab was on the increase)

Mrs. Gandhi offered garlands to the picture of Balmiki. She inaugurated a Hindi Journal SAMARIKA edited by Dr. Sukhbir Singh



Mrs. Gandhi offering garland to the picture of Balmiki.

a prominent Bhangi (a university lecturer in Hindi literature)

Ram Prasad Balguher, the president of the Samiti, thanked Mrs. Gandhi assured her of his community's political loyalty and reiterated the hopes and demands of the community.

Balmiki Jayanti has largely been the area of Congress politicians. During Janata party rule, the party leaders too recognised the importance of Bhangis as vote blocks. Bhangi politicians elected on Janata party tickets used to organise the processions. They were Sawroop Chand Rajan, Metropolitan Councillor, and Mangat Ram Balmiki MCD Councillor. My informants told me that during Janata rule, the Jayanti was not celebrated with previous enthusiasm. This shows the politicisation of cultural event. Its enjoyment should be independent of extraneous factors.

The Bhangi community felt honoured when, on 18th October 1978, President of India, Sanjiva Reddi, addressed the gathering of Bhangis organised by their elite. The President said that Balmiki, though from the lower castes, belonged to all. He said that it was significant that in ancient times, a person of lower caste could give direction to the society. He also recalled that Dr. Ambedkar who was from a lower caste, framed the constitution of modern India. The Minister of State for Education presented a large picture of Balmiki to the President who promised to place it at a suitable place in the President's house.

Bhangi caste associations and Balmiki Janmotsav Samiti insist that Balmiki's birthday should be a gazetted public holiday.. that some educational institutions should bear the name of Balmiki and that an institution should be established for research into the Balmiki literature. They also want the derogatory word "Chuhra" deleted from the scheduled caste forms and the respectable word "Balmiki" inserted. This demand has not been accepted by the authorities, although Balmiki's birthday was declared a restricted holiday in Delhi in 1963, that is restricted only to Bhangis of Delhi.

At the third International Religious Conference which was held in Delhi on 26-28 February 1965, . . . representatives of various religions participated. A prominent Bhangi social reformer the late Pandit Gyanesvar, a key figure in Balmiki movement was a participant in the religious conference. He was a bachelor and used to wear saffron clothes on the pattern of Hindu ascetics and was given the honorific "Pandit" by his community. No Harijan religious representative was invited to the international religious conference held in 1947 and 1960.

Bhangis insist that Balmiki has contributed to the welfare of mankind through his epic creation Ramayana. They say that the Epic has gone to the neighbouring countries, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Indonesia, Mauritius. When Partap Chander Chunder, the Education Minister in the Janata government promised to organise an international seminar on Ramayana, the Bhangis saw it as an overdue gesture. Ramayana and its author represent to Bhangis a symbol of their pride and identity. Balmiki movement has

brought about this consciousness. Bhangi caste associations continue to be active in the community. They provide the caste organisation for their struggle to obtain economic and political benefits. Balmiki of Ramayana provides self respect to the average Bhangi who hopes that one day he will find integration with the mainstream Hindu society.

A small minority of Bhangis think that the way to self respect is through conversion to another religion. They are critical of Balmiki Jayanti celebrations. They say that politicians have no religion of their own and will playact to humour the community whose votes they are after.

Bhangis use various social tactics for limiting their marginality. The awareness of exploitation and deprivation has led to politicisation and unionisation by the group to assert themselves. Political resources being a pre-requisite for success in pursuing economic interests, representation in political bodies is attempted, agitations launched and associations are formed. However, the caste-based reservation of seats in the central and state legislatures, politicisation and unionisation have encouraged and intensified consciousness of caste identity. This reversion to caste loyalties ensures access to education, employment and political representation.

NOTES

1. At the All Parties conference held by Congress to Counter the Simon Commission, Depressed Classes Association was not invited. According to Congress ideology, Depressed classes were part of Hindus. But Congress invited the Sikhs and Dravida Mahajana Sabha.
2. However, later on at the Round Table Conference in London, Dr. Ambedkar advocated separate electorates, which caused controversy between him and Gandhi.
3. Three sessions on three conferences - 1930-31, 1931, 1932. Congress boycotted the first conference as Civil Disobedience movement was in progress. The Civil Disobedience was called off following Gandhi-Irwin Pact in March 1931; political prisoners were released and salt laws were amended.
4. Ambedkar's view was hardly any different. Referring to economic and social boycott of lower castes by high castes he said, "We do not know of any weapon more effective than this social boycott which could have been invented for the suppression of the depressed classes."
5. This amounted to Ambedkar's scheme for the Fundamental Rights of Minorities..... In the constitution of independent India, these were incorporated in the Fundamental Rights of the citizens.
6. Europeans in India.
7. Under the terms of the Poona Pact, depressed classes voters in the general list were to elect a panel of four candidates belonging to depressed classes, for each of the reserved seats by the method of single vote, or primary election by depressed classes. These four persons were to be candidates for election by the general electorate. Depressed classes were to have fair representation in the central legislature on the principle of joint electorate as in the case of provinces. The system of primary election was to be abolished after 10 years or earlier,

if an agreement to that effect was made. Depressed classes were to have fair representation in local bodies and in appointment to services subject to educational qualifications. Out of the educational grant, an adequate sum was to be provided for the depressed classes..... The British government amended the communal Award in line with the Poona Pact.

8. Whereas the 1919 electorate was broken up in 10 parts the Award fragmented it into 17 parts. Every possible division - religious, occupation, sex, etc - was introduced (see Mehta and Patwardhan: Communal Triangle) It was a Machiavellian device intended to widen existing lines of cleavage in order to secure the British Raj by the maximum Divide and Rule. This communal electorate was extended to local bodies and communal ratio was introduced in educational establishments and services. The British "disinterestedness" penalised the Hindu everywhere. The Europeans were given 5000 times weightage in Bengal, 10000 times in the whole of India. Weightage was given to Muslims in those provinces where they were in a minority. But, instead of giving weightage to Hindus in Bengal where they constituted 44.8% of the population, the Award gave them only 32% of seats. In Panjab the Hindu minority was sacrificed for a smaller minority - the Sikhs. Sikhs also did not get the necessary weightage. No wonder Sikhs too opposed the Award.

9. Muslims, Sikhs, Indian Christians, Europeans etc had their special constituencies. General meant the rest of the Indians. At a later stage, Muslim and non-Muslim was much in use, as if only Muslims mattered in India. The word Hindu seemed to have disappeared from political usage.

10. The double-member constituencies were abolished in 1961.

11. In these early post-Independence times, the original inhabitants when dispossessed of their agricultural land could still manage to stay in the locality. Since then the urbanite neo-rich, neo-colonisers have become increasingly averse to the poor and the socially low spoiling what are locally called

"posh" residences. Delhi continues encroaching into its rural belt. But now the local inhabitants have no means of staying on. Their agricultural land is acquired and compensation paid as per rates laid down by the Land Acquisition Act of 1894, that is Rs. 1.50 a square yard. Delhi-Development-Authority later sells this land to property developers at over Rs. 1000 sq. yd. The dispossessed farmer often receives compensation in small instalments and becomes a mere labourer in the urban market.

12. There are 15 reserved seats for Delhi Corporation and 9 for Metropolitan Council, a total 24 seats.

13. Currently, DMC has no plan to build more houses for sweepers and scavengers.

14. Political Sycophancy is commonplace in India. Even in Britain, at the 1983 Conservative Party Conference a Tory speaker called Mrs. Thatcher "the mother of the nation." Mrs. Gandhi's Emergency rule was indeed a new epoch. There was nothing in the 20-point economic programme that was not already in the Five Year Plans. Bhangi support for Congress party could be more than just sycophancy. They feel that their material progress is on account of the Congress party. Though they agree that it is not much and that their stigmatised low caste status has not been abolished, their material position is many times better than that of their forefathers and because of this the Congress party deserves their loyalty.

15. This is a well known and widely practised mode, considered superior to whispering in social gatherings in India. As it is widely practised, it has lost its secret code and is a mere habit.

16. When I was making notes of the speeches, a man sitting next to me in the (front rows) of the audience asked me if I was from the press. He told me that he was from the CID or the Intelligence Dept..... India's CID can be unintelligent and conspicuous by its non-undercover. Our moles and spies are superb.

17. Someone who has a library of books and pamphlets published by Foreign Languages Publishing House, Moscow, when Stalin was alive, tells me that the phrases used by Buta Singh about Mrs. Gandhi strongly remind him of the eulogy of Stalin by his sycophants. If that is so then one wonders if Buta Singh has really read those Moscow publications, or that sycophancy is a universal trait..... I have already mentioned that a Tory sycophant called Mrs. Thatcher as the mother of the nation.

CHAPTER 11

TRADE UNIONISM

11. 1. CASTE AND OCCUPATION

In India economic development and social regeneration have been going on for the attainment of "socialistic pattern of society". Under conditions of political freedom, numerous groups have emerged and multiplied, all with their many demands on the present limited resources of the country. There is the additional dimension of caste even more so in the case of castes whose members, or a majority of them, earn their livelihood by following the traditional caste occupation. One such caste is that of the Bhangis, whose demands on the state are made through caste association and also the standpoint of modern trade unionism when they act through the municipal sweepers' union. This caste, the lowest in the Hindu traditional social structure, has been given safeguards of protective discrimination under the Constitution. A study of their efforts to use these constitutional safeguards for the improvement of their material and social conditions is mainly the subject matter of Bhangi politics, and has been explored in chapter - POLITICS. These constitutional safeguards have, as I will show subsequently, also assisted them in their trade union activities. Their low caste position (and the caste cohesion) because of the nature of their traditional work which they and they alone have been doing has given them a peculiar position in the scheme of things. Their trade union activities thus show, on the one hand, the usual features of trade unionism and, on the other, militancy of the down-trodden. They are a caste based community pressure group and also

function, as municipal sweepers, as a trade union.

11.2. TRADE UNIONISM

The trade union movement in India had its beginning through the efforts of social workers. The first trade unions were the Bombay Mill Roads Associations, 1890, and the Amalgamated Society of Railroad Servants of India and Burma, 1897. It was after the first World War that the trade unions grew in numbers and membership. Between 1918-19 alone 17 trade unions came into being. (Punekar 1948; 59) In 1920, the All India Trade Union Congress was formed for co-ordinating and strengthening the trade union movement in India. For reasons to be explained below, Indian trade unionism in its formative phase had its leadership and guidance from persons who were primarily nationalist politicians involved in the national movement or the struggle for freedom.

The Indian industrialists supported the freedom movement with money, may be partly, for ulterior motives to have a protected market in free India. The nationalist politician-cum-trade unionists did not want to fight against the national capitalists who were struggling hard against the British capitalists.

The All India Trade Union Congress or AITUC as it came to be known, was, until the end of the Second World War, controlled sometimes by the Congress and, at others, by the leftists, socialists and communists. There were short duration splits and mending of the splits. During the Quit India Movement (1942-44) the Congress leaders were in jails, but the communists were not, because of their support to the British

Indian government, following the invasion of Russia by Germany in June 1941. The socialists were either in prison or mostly underground, fighting a guerilla Quit India struggle against the British. The socialist hold on the trade unions weakened, while the communists entrenched their position. In 1945, when the Congress leaders were released, they formed a new trade union, the Indian National Trade Union Congress or INTUC. The socialists formed the Hind Mazdoor Sabha or HMS (Indian Workers Assembly) and the Marxists, the United Trade Union Congress, UTUC.

Trade Unions in western countries, notwithstanding their close contacts with political parties, have functioned independently. That, however, is not the practice in India. The history of Indian trade union movement explains this. The trade union leaders though sincere trade unionists were nationalists first. They used the industrial force against the British Indian government. The industrial strikes in the pre-Independence period were in the main political, directed against the alien rule. This practice of organising industrial workers (and later on, the agrarian landless labourers) under the organisational control of political parties has been continued in the post-Independence period. Even the apparently non-political¹ Bhoodan started by Vinoba Bhave was supported by all the political parties, including the communists. Politicians of all hues on the political spectrum wanted a stake in this mass movement which was dedicated to bringing about a revolution in the heart of the landlords, persuading to give away their surplus land for the landless peasants.

While the trade union movement under the nationalists was directed at the British rule in India, the government on its part found itself involved with the trade unions, whose activities were regulated by law. As early as 1888, that is, two years before the first trade union in India, the Manchester Chamber of Commerce, to control competition from the Indian products requested the British Government to limit the working hours of women and children in India. Most of the legislation for regulating hours and working conditions in industrial establishments in India came after the First World War, to satisfy the requirements of India's membership of International Labour Organisation. After Independence, the major legislation in the field of industrial relations was the Industrial Disputes Act, 1947. Under the provisions of the Act, there is a Labour Commissioner in each state who appoints Conciliation Officers. Failing conciliation between the employer and the employee, the Labour Commissioner may recommend to the state Labour Minister to appoint the arbitration tribunal whose decision is binding on the parties. During tribunal hearings and after, it is illegal to strike over the issues under consideration. This legislation was criticised as bordering on the totalitarian control of labour relations. The current thinking on management labour relations in economically advanced countries is not dissimilar to the central idea of this Act, namely, that industrial disputes retard production. The general philosophy of industrial

relations in independent India was enunciated as - "The working class performs functions vital to the maintenance of the country's economic life. Labour will be serving itself best by the observation of greater regularity, discipline and meticulous care in the discharge of its duties. To ensure this, much greater attention must be paid to a healthy development of trade unions so that workers are not exposed to exploitation and can act with a growing sense of responsibility. In a system functioning on the basis of competition, private monopoly or private profit, the worker's right to have recourse to peaceful direct action should not be curtailed. In an economy which is organised for planned production and distribution, aiming at the realisation of social justice and welfare of the masses, strikes and lock-outs have no place. India is aiming in this direction." (Labour Gazette XXX 1951; 1280-82).

V.V. Giri who retired from public life as India's President, was once a trade union leader. As Minister of Labour in the Indian government (1952-54), he was in favour of free bargaining between unions and employees. He argued that undue spoon feeding by the state hindered growth of trade unions (Labour Gazette XXXII 1952: 125). However, by the end of 1953, he admitted failure and spoke in favour of compulsory adjudication and arbitration. (Commerce and Industry XLI 1954; 3)

Another legislation affecting the trade union activity is the Essential Services Act, passed in anticipation of a threatened Post and Telegraph strike in 1958. These two Acts between them enable government to effectively ban strikes. And behind

these Acts are the Emergency provisions of the Constitution. There is nothing extraordinary about these powers as they are found on the statute books of all countries.

From the account so far it would be erroneous to assume that because INTUC policy is one of strike avoidance, a large number of workers in India consider strikes as improper instruments of trade union action; or the belief that militant trade unions are kept at bay by the Acts. When conciliation fails and arbitration is unsatisfactory to the workers, a strike of short or prolonged duration follows. Not only that, strikes may sometimes be threatened and even started, for the setting up of a tribunal. This, however depends on a careful assessment by the trade union leadership, whether a tribunal is likely to be sympathetic to the demands, or a strike may get the results. In general, strikes on their own have a rather poor chance of succeeding. There being no social security payment to the families of the strikers, the workers have a weak bargaining position. The management can recruit strike breakers from the labour surpluses. The trade union leaders, therefore, welcome the tribunal, and so also the employer in the hope of industrial peace at least for some time to come.

Despite the Industrial Disputes Act and the Essential Services Act, and the strike avoiding INTUC, the unions have not forgotten the primary reason for their existence, viz; the usual trade union demands: higher wages, better working conditions, shorter hours, protection against dismissal. This briefly is the general trade union scene for workers in factories and offices in public and private employment. Delhi Bhangis, as

public employees, that is as sweepers and scavengers in the employment of DMC (and other government departments, banks and large commercial and manufacturing organisations) are organised in unions. As self-employed scavengers for removing night soil and garbage from private dwellings, the Bhangis have their customary rights protected by Jajmani. This has been discussed in detail elsewhere. Even when Bhangis act as trade unionists they function with their Kamin caste consciousness which imparts its special influence to their trade union activities. A brief look at Kamin caste consciousness will help in understanding the modern trade unionism of Delhi Bhangis.

11. 3. KAMIN CASTE CONSCIOUSNESS

In the traditional village economy, a Kamin caste in asserting its rights or for gaining additions to these rights, could withhold its services to the Jajmans, usually of the higher castes. Withholding of services was akin to modern day workers' strikes. Caste panchayats, which are the formal expression of caste cohesion, used to control these occupational relations and thereby acted as trade unions. The powers of Kamin caste panchayats depended on co-operation within the caste due to kinship, caste occupation and the need for united action for securing social and economic advantages. Blunt refers to several cases of caste panchayats taking action in professional disputes and held the view that "the caste panchayats on the professional side were like "trade guilds" and the latter day bar associations and they all reflected the desire of men with common interests to unite for the protection of these common interests against a common aggression." (Blunt 1931; 246) Castes most concerned with 'work and wages' were

those engaged in traditional occupations, the Bhangi, the Nai, the Bahishti and the Darzi. However, the countryside could not remain immune from the modernisation process and its effects on economic relations and social values. With the decline in the value of caste occupations, the 'trade unionism' of Kamin castes, too, declined. It declined even more when a Jajman himself provided services of ceremonious nature (or did without the need for these ceremonies) which the lower castes refused to provide. (Beals Vol. 5, No. 17; 487-92)

In situations as these, threats or even the actual withholding of service may be counter productive (The weak bargaining position of industrial workers vis-a-vis management, in India, above) The Kamin 'trade unionism' was always faced with intra-group competition. "While occupation unites a caste by forcing its members to 'unionise' themselves to be protected from abuse, this same occupational unity forces caste members and ultimately kin into competition with one another for employment and benefits" (Srinivas 1954;6). To counteract this type of competition for employment, lower castes have their Kamin codes, namely that no caste member will serve the client of a fellow caste member without the latter's approval. As Mohinder Singh observes: "Transgression of this rule is promptly punished by the caste panchayat, the penalty varying from simple fine to ex-communication. As each man owes allegiance only to his own sub-caste, this mode of regulating competition usually proves ineffectual; where members of more than one sub-caste are found. There is nothing, for instance, except mutual understanding, that can prevent a Hela from poaching on Lalbeg's Jajmani. That the different Bhangi

subcastes can come to terms and create a united front where common interests are involved has been shown by the recent successful strikes by these people to get their demands accepted by local bodies." (Mohinder Singh 1947; 98)

(Delhi Bhangis, according to my information have not tried to encroach upon another Bhangi's Jajmani on the pretext of sub-caste differences) With intra group competition regulated by Kamin caste panchayats, the sweepers have a complete monopoly of their work. They are under no fear that in the foreseeable future any other caste will take up sweeping and scavenging, as this work is the lowest in the ritual pollution scale.

A secure job does not automatically mean security of income. The inflation due to inevitable deficit financing of the Five Year Plans and then the world-wide inflation has hit the sweepers as it has the other fixed income groups. Then there are the pressures due to rising expectations not confined to sweepers alone. Bhangis have been a socially ostracised group and as such their caste affiliations are carried into their traditional occupation. To improve their wages and working conditions they have often used the threat and even the actual withdrawal of labour. Strikes of sweepers in the employment of municipalities were reported in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Crooke referred to an attempt by a municipality to sell night soil, which hitherto was sold by the scavengers. The city authority was forced to abandon its scheme by the striking sweepers. (Crooke 1896 Vol. I; 259-293) Blunt refers to the caste panchayats dealing with caste occupations. Regarding Bhangis he has this to say, "The Bhangi

Panchayats deal regularly with Jajmani disputes. It has more than once been able to organise an effective strike: for instance, following a decision of a municipal board to sell night soil which had previously been the pre-requisite of the scavengers, the municipal sweepers themselves struck, and were able to prevent others from replacing them, and the municipal board to make terms." (Blunt 1931; 243-44) Information on municipal affairs prior to British period is not available but the sweepers must have exercised their power to withdraw their service. In modern times, it is the sweepers' trade unions, and not the caste panchayat, that negotiate with the local authorities.

Before venturing on the present day strike scene a brief description of the conventions for strike settlements will be relevant to the understanding of the strikes. When sweepers give notice of strike or go on strike a committee made up of city fathers and other influential persons tries to bring about a compromise between the sweepers and the Corporation. The first step in this well-rehearsed process is the promise of sympathetic consideration of all grievances, provided the work is resumed within a short time. Usually this inducement on its own is not enough and therefore part of the pay/rise (increment) demanded is sanctioned for an interim period pending examination of all the demands by a specially constituted committee. If this offer satisfies the sweepers the strike notice is withdrawn or the strike is called off. In some cases, however, the work is not resumed until the full increment is sanctioned, the other demands are left to be

examined by the committee. These committees take a few months to examine the problem and to produce the report. They do not always recommend sanction of increment or its continuation beyond the interim period. Their recommendations more generally relate to stoppage of bribery, providing residential quarters and similar matters. The municipality accepts these recommendations, but the implementation is slow and only in parts, thus paving the way for future strike action; The sweepers may react by staging another strike. But it is not easy to mobilise them for another round so soon after the first.

In Delhi, the strikes of sweepers have become frequent after independence; before that there were only occasional strikes. To put in perspective, the strikes of Delhi sweepers and the attitude of the 'Gandhian' authorities and of the wider society, the Bombay sweepers' strike in April 1946 needs mentioning here, as it started some interesting arguments between Mahatma Gandhi and his critics of whom some were Harijans. Gandhi was of the opinion that "There are certain matters in which strikes would be wrong. Sweepers' grievances come in this category" (HARIJAN 21.4.1946). His firm belief was that sweepers should never go on strike. In Durban, South Africa, he voted to exclude sweepers from strikers as neglecting sanitation would cause epidemics. He suggested to Bombay sweepers to "always" accept an impartial tribunal for settling disputes with municipal authorities. To the towns. people he suggested that they should forget the notions of untouchability and learn the art of cleaning their own and the city's drains so that if a similar occasion arises they are not non-plussed and can render the necessary temporary service. "I go so far as to say that the

military who know this work should be used for such emergency" (ibid). Here Gandhi was misinformed, as normally the Bhangis in the army do the sweeping. However, Gandhi had some plain speaking for the high caste people: "...it is the duty of everyone to stretch out the hand of fellowship to the Bhangis, educate them, see that they are properly housed, permit them like any one else to live wherever they choose, look in the matter of an equitable wage for them and see that justice is meted out to them without their having to demand it." (ibid). Gandhi's article in "HARIJAN" 12.5.1946); he had adopted the word Harijan on the suggestion of a Gujrati untouchable.... that it did not exclude the use of a current name of a sub-caste..... that in reply to a similar objection from Delhi sweepers, who preferred to be known as 'Mehtar', he had told them, during his recent stay there in sweepers' quarters, that "Whatever the origin of the word may be, 'Bhangi' is in my opinion, another name for Shivji. Whether you call a sweeper Mehtar or a Bhangi, like Shivji he brings health to man. The one brings it by keeping the home clean, the other cleanses the mind of men" (ibid). In reply to the second objection from the Harijan, Gandhi elaborated on his opinion about Bhangis going on strike: "We may not even be able to digest what we get by force. The strikers got what they did by coercion..... If my occupation is to keep latrines clean and I refused to do the work, can it be termed anything other than coercion? Of course, I am not bound to take up the job of cleaning latrines and I may be said to have every right to lay down my conditions of service. But according to my way of thinking laying down of conditions is not an absolute right. Even if such an absolute right would be permitted it might not

be proper to use it under certain circumstances" (ibid). This, coming from someone who had used non-cooperation and non-violent resistance to British rule! A month and a half later on, in reply to the question, "Is the Bhangi to continue his service on starvation wages, living in dirt and squalor?" Gandhi said that the question was inappropriate. "I claim that in such cases the proper remedy is not a strike but a notice to the public in general and the employing Corporation in particular that the Bhangis must give up sweeping service which consigns those reserved for that service to a life of starvation and all it means..... This will wake up society from its disgraceful slumber resulting in a proper scavenging of the overgrowth that has smothered public conscience. At a stroke the Bhangis will raise scavenging to a fine art and give it the status it should have had long ago." (HARIJAN 23.6.1946)

A very appropriate line of action, if the average Bhangi had other occupation available to him. In the absence of those opportunities, this well-meaning "at a stroke" solution was bound to be a non-starter, like the 25 years later "at a stroke" solution of inflation proposed by Mr. Heath.

But Gandhi's view that sweepers should never go on strike had practical, moral and philosophical conditions. It was not safely practical, as the risk of epidemics in a hot country was immediate; hence it was immoral to pursue a trade union activity which would endanger the whole community. But these moral obligations bound also the authorities and the society in general. Hence Gandhi's insistence that justice be meted out to the sweepers without their having to demand it (HARIJAN 21.4.1946). He went further, or rather, had gone further, long

ago. In 1921, he wrote - "The removal of untouchability implies that there is no sin or shame in cleaning for other people, even as it is no sin for a mother to clean her baby or for a paid nurse to clean her or his patient" (Young India, 22.6.1921)

11. 4. SWEEPER UNIONS

The Delhi sweepers' trade unionism having been set in perspective, let us now turn to its functioning. Delhi sweepers are organised in the following unions:-

1. Delhi Prantiya Balmiki Mazdoor Sangh;
2. Delhi Pradesh Balmiki Mazdoor Sangh.
3. Delhi Nagar Nigam Safai Karamchari Sangh, or Delhi Municipal Corporation Sanitation Workers Union.
4. Akhil Bhartiya Safai Mazdoor Congress, or All India Sanitation Workers' Congress.

The first two translated into English will both be: Delhi Province Balmiki Workers' Union, Prantiya or Pradesh meaning province. The second union was a break-away group from the first. All sweepers, both men and women are unionised, women are on the working committees of the unions. Recruitment is also automatic. Membership fee is Rs. 2 per annum. Every member has the right to attend the general body meeting which is held once a year but more often if an important decision (strike, for instance) is to be taken. The general body meeting is held in open spaces near Bhangi bastis. Decisions are by majority with show of hands. Working committee meetings are held in the union office, which is usually in the house of the union leaders. Decisions are by majority, president has casting

vote. Decisions are communicated by word of mouth and also through handbills and posters.

Over the years the unions have centred their activities on the following issues:

(1) Earnings:- One major cause of struggle has been for increase in basic pay and dearness allowance. Dearness allowance or DA was introduced by the British following inflation in the Second World War (that inflation was chicken feed compared to the peacetime inflation that we now face.... the phrase chicken feed is unrealistic. My neighbour stopped keeping chickens a few years ago as the chicken feed had become very expensive). The pay scale of sweepers is now equal to that of class IV employees, (peons etc) of the Government of India. They now automatically get the increase when the class IV employees get it. But those on daily wages are in a different category. They earn less than a sweeper in regular employment. Not only that, their continuation in their job is very much dependent on the whim of the Sanitary Inspectors to whom they have to pay bribe money.

(2) Bribery:- The sweepers allege that bribery is paid for securing employment and for retaining it. A sweeper may arbitrarily be transferred to work in a zone far from where he lives or allotted heavy and odd jobs. Delay may be caused in the sanction of leave (other than sickness leave) for which prior permission is needed. A loan from the provident fund may be delayed. Things become relatively easy when money is paid to the superiors. Weiner's argument in defence of corruption

that bribery contributes flexibility to the rigid administrative system and that equal opportunity to corrupt is more important than the amount of corruption is true but only in a ghoulish way when applied to the survival needs of low paid employees. (Weiner 1962; 235-36)

(3) Difficult Working Conditions:- Sweepers in the sewer gang have had to struggle long to be eligible for protective boots, gloves and masks. Those working on garbage lorries use shovels and baskets for loading and unloading loose garbage. The system of weekly plastic bags will not be practical; the garbage rots quickly in summer months. On the dumping grounds, the conditions are even worse; that is the nature of these places anywhere in the world. In India, the work on the dumping grounds is done manually. The unions had had to campaign long and hard for proper work-tools, wheel barrows, work clothes for the street sweepers.

(4) Strange as it may appear, female sweepers were not entitled to maternity leave, though women in various government departments had this entitlement. The sweepers union won this right for sweeper women in 1953.

(5) Miserable housing is one of the major problems faced by sweepers. In the old city areas, they live in one room tenements. The Corporation has provided single room flats to only a minority of sweepers. When both the husband and the wife are Corporation employees, house rent is deducted from the pay of both of them. The unions have objected to this double rent and have demanded its refund. The other demands have been the

provision of electricity and water. Not very long ago, many houses were without electricity, and a communal tap still serves many of houses. Another cause, for serious complaint is the demolition of hutments and 'Jhuggies' where a number of sweepers live. With increase in numbers and the division in their families, sweepers have built these hutments adjacent to existing residential areas called 'Basti' and in other open spaces in the city - a problem common to most expanding urban areas where the poor rural immigrants live, not sweepers alone. The slum clearance department of the Corporation has periodically demolished these hutments to clear away unauthorised occupation/building on Corporation land. Sweepers occupying these hutments, like other homeless people, have demanded that alternative accommodation be provided before the demolition of these structures which are homes for those on the social and economic fringe of society. Sweepers provide healthy surroundings for millions of people, but in doing so put their own health at risk. Over the years they have demanded free soap so that they may have a shower after finishing the dirty job. The official response has been niggardly and slow. Given these aspirations and their organisation into demands by the unions, but the tardy response of the authorities, certainly in the earlier decades after Independence, the strikes were inevitable. Gandhi's strictures about sweepers' strike were no doubt there, but so was his admonition of the uncaring authorities and the heartless society.

11. 5. SWEEPER STRIKES

In 1946, the Bhangis of Delhi went on strike for their demands. They were led by their union, Delhi Prantiya Balmiki Mazdoor Sabha, under

the chairmanship/leadership of Ram Rakha Mal, a caste choudhari or headman. The agitation was started at Balmiki Mandir. This is the temple of Bhangis situated in one of the bigger Bhangi Bastis, on a main road at the 'border' of Old and New Delhi. A few among the strikers were on hunger strike, a technique of pressurising the authorities or warring factions perfected by Mahatma Gandhi but used with great discretion, and only in extreme situations. The sweepers' demands were the very basic ones, that is, about better wages, improved working conditions and so on. A poster listing the demands was printed, but a copy was not available among the records kept by Ram Rakha Mal. However, he could recall the detail from his remarkable memory.

During a strike in 1949³, the police lathicharged the sweepers, men as well as women. Four years later in 1953, a strike was organised by BPMS, on the question of Fourteen Demands which they had been urging on the municipal authorities to accept, but to no avail. A few sweepers were fasting unto death unless their demands were accepted. As the condition of the hunger strikers deteriorated (and also of the sanitation in the city), the government intervened in a matter which strictly speaking is a local authority matter. Raj Kumari Amrit Kaur (Cabinet Health Minister), Dr. Sushila Nayar (Delhi state Health Minister - Delhi was then Part C state) and Mr. Pyare Lal (once Private Secretary of Mahatma Gandhi) found the demands of sweepers as justified and decided in their favour, a sum of 30 lakh rupees (3 million rupees) was sanctioned for building houses for Bhangis in Azadpur area. Mr. K.L. Balmiki (Bhangi MP from Delhi) Mr. Yashwant Rai (a former MP) and

Mr. Bholu Rawat MP assured the hunger strikers that their genuine demands will be accepted. The strike was called off. Nothing was done about the demands. The sweepers active in the BPMS were suspended from duty. Mr. K.L. Balmiki spoke about the municipal authorities adopting these repressive tactics against the sanitation workers. As nothing came out of the promises made by the authorities earlier in the year, the BPMS gave a call for strike in December 1953. The authorities responded by arresting the strike leaders, including women. A few strikers were injured by the police. On seeing that the strike was being crushed, several sweepers went on hunger strike. Their condition deteriorated resulting in the usual 'alarm' of the authorities. Mr. Shyam Nath, President Delhi Municipal Committee, contacted Mr. K.L. Balmiki, the Bhangi MP from Bulland Shehar and gave him written assurances that sweepers' demands will be accepted. When Mr. Balmiki read this letter to the sweepers, the hunger strike was terminated and the sweepers resumed work. As narrated to me by a Bhangi leader, three months passed but the authorities did nothing towards implementing the written assurances. Rather the contrary: four sweepers were dismissed, others suspended, fined and even taken to court. The sweepers' union gave the call for strike and this time even women went on hunger strike. Mr. Balmiki MP sent a letter to the DMC warning it of the consequences of action taken by the sweepers; copies of the letter were sent to the Delhi state government and Central Government, urging upon them to solve the sweepers' problem. The sweepers' case was also presented to Delhi citizens, elected members of Delhi municipality, Delhi Adminis-

tration, Congress workers and social workers involved in Harijan cause. On 30th May, 1954, the Fourteen Demands originally made prior to the strike of December 1953, and subsequent work stoppages, were discussed and a settlement reached in the office of Raj Kumari Amrit Kaur, in the presence of Dr. Sushila Nayar, Municipal Commissioner, Harijan workers and officials of the sweepers' union. Four months later, that is on 26th September, 1954, the sweepers held a public meeting, presided over by Mr. Bholu Rawat MP. It was in the nature of victory celebration.

In July 1957 it was the turn of New Delhi sweepers to strike work with regard to certain demands. Sanitation in the otherwise clean New Delhi was in chaos. The uncollected rubbish heaps were stinking in the July sun and rains. The health officer of the NDMC said that the sweepers had deliberately emptied garbage lorries and night soil in the middle of the roads. Those garbage lorries were normally emptied on Kutub Road platform and from there transported to Badli dumping ground. This time, on 31.7.1957, the police intervened in force. When tear gas failed to disperse the sweepers, the police resorted to shooting. Four sweepers were wounded and a leader of the procession, Bhup Singh, was killed by police firing. This infuriated the Delhi city sweepers. They stopped work, threw rubbish on the roads and in defiance of authorities, stopped buses and trains. Such was the strength and feeling behind this strike that the Municipal Commissioner, Mr. Aggarwal, met the Prime Minister, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and the Prime Minister mediated and acceded to the demands of the sweepers

of New Delhi Municipal Committee. The newspapers of 3rd August 1957 reported that the hunger strikers broke the fast the previous day and were taken to Bhangi colony in a huge procession, that the 12 men arrested during the strike and demonstration were released. To look into the sweepers' demands the Central Government Health Minister Raj Kumari Amrit Kaur called a meeting of officials of her Health Ministry, officials from NDMC and also its Vice President. A commission was appointed to investigate the police firing. Session Judge, Mr. J.D. Sharma and District Magistrate Mr. Safiq Hussain gave the commission's decision on 3rd October, 1957: that the police firing on sweepers in New Delhi on 31st July 1957 was justified and was not more than necessary. The decision was given by the commission after investigating all the circumstances of the case and the witnesses. According to the commission findings, the police did not fire in the Harijan Basti. In spite of the lathicharge, the mob did not disperse and threw stones at the police. The police was unable to protect a constable whom the mob had picked and lifted high. As the Session Judge put it, "an angry mob is like the devil, bent upon creating trouble". This prompted the firing.

That, sad to say has been the general tone of all inquiries into what is called executive action, discharge of duties and so on by the armed power of the state in India, from Jallian Walan Bagh shooting to the present day. In varying degree that is true of all states. For instance, in Britain, in the case of Grunwick photographic strike, there was no shooting, but there was considerable police repression on the workers,

mainly immigrant Indian workers. In 1984, the British miners strike was defeated by repressive law and brute police tactics. The developing countries, that is countries with colonial past, show this violent response to demonstrations more than the developed countries. In October 1982, employees of El Al, Israel's airline demonstrated along with their families at Ben Gurion airport in Tel Aviv. They blocked the runway and threw rubbish. "What else will you expect from a Bhangi" is the disdainful comment of the average Indian when the striking Bhangi scatters rubbish on the streets. Yes, what else should he scatter? The striking El Al employers fought with the Israeli police, but no shooting took place. At this point, a brief analysis of the public demonstrations in India and the response of the authorities will be relevant. In 1920, began the Gandhian era in Indian freedom struggle and with that mass public meetings and demonstrations. India continues to be in the age of demonstrations, but with two differences. First, while during the freedom movement, these public meetings and demonstrations were well disciplined and nearly always peaceful, they are not so peaceful now. Secondly, whereas the earlier demonstrations were openly political, the present ones are overtly so. They may be tipped with appeals to caste, religion, tribe, language or ethnicity, and to that extent they run counter to the modernising united India. Even demonstrations for better wages put an increasing demand on limited resources, which the government wants to keep more and more for economic development. The confrontations between divisive forces and governments, between immediate consumption and long term development, sometimes, erupt in violence. These less than non-violent civil disobedience campaigns, whether political in

the garb of casteism, regionalism etc., or communal in the attire of politics, or purely in pursuit of trade unionism are sometimes blessed and even led by erstwhile Gandhians, while other Gandhians have said that disgruntled self-seeking politicians instigate these campaigns and as such these are false Satyagrahs. The government, faced as is with the allocation of limited resources for economic growth, considers these agitations as retarding economic development and modernisation. These demonstrations and strikes, anywhere in the world, are the reflex of, and a release of, tension in society. But the conflicting views regarding these agitations remain unresolved: the view that caste and community oriented agitations are a menace to the integrity and modernisation of India (Selig Harrison: India, the Most Dangerous Decades) and, at the other extreme, the view that social changes accompanying modernisation are bringing about increase of community interests in Indian politics and that while these associations within a state are smaller in number the threat to orderly state is most pronounced, but that when these community interests go on multiplying, the result would be stabilisation. (Weiner 1962; 72) The stabilisation due to community forces counteracting against one another when their number reaches a hypothetical number is problematical.

Balmiki Mazdoor Sangh organised a public meeting of sweepers for 9th January, 1958 in order to discuss their long standing demands and to present them to Ram Niwas Aggarwal, President Delhi Municipal Committee and to other Municipal Commissioners. These were indeed old demands and grievances, with a few new ones added. They were regarding wages, working conditions and

housing, and were as follows:

1. Payment at overtime rate for work done during free time. This pertained to the agreed 8 hours of free time (for lunch and tea breaks) of which the sweepers were getting only 6 hours. Sweepers working on dumping grounds did not get any free time.
2. Sweepers who are suspended from work following their participation in strikes, should be paid money till their cases are decided. This rule is applied to other workers and the sweepers should not be the exception.
3. DMC sweepers receive pay in the middle of the month (for work done in the previous month). They should be paid at the beginning of the month so as to escape having to incur debt. (In India, monthly and not weekly, payment is the general rule. The need for raising loan need not arise if the pay is received at regular monthly intervals. That the sweepers insisted on payment at the beginning of the month was due to the desire for psychological parity with others who received their pay at the beginning of the month).
4. Sweepers working on daily wages should be made permanent on the basis of length of service. (It was a reasonable demand, to be implemented gradually. Eleven years later, in exasperation, they will demand its immediate implementation)
5. Sweepers working on dumping grounds should have provision for shower after work and be given washing soap.

6. Shoes to protect their feet from nails and broken glass. (At one time, sweepers whether in municipal employment or private scavenging, used to work barefoot or with such cast-off shoes that they could beg from a Jajman). It was recalled at the meeting that in 1953, according to the agreement made in the presence of Cabinet Health Minister, Raj Kumari Amrit Kaur and others, sweepers should have been given soap, oil and shoes and that their attendance marked twice a day instead of four times a day, but five years had elapsed and the authorities had not implemented the agreement.

7. There should be a committee to settle disputes between sanitary inspectors and sweepers. The committee should have a representative of the sweepers union.

8. All sweepers to have the day off on Sunday.

9. Three month maternity leave for women sweepers. Doctors to visit Bhangi colonies periodically to check the health of sweepers and their families.

10. Abolition of double rent and refund of one half of the double rent deducted from pay. DMC to provide houses for sweepers and to stop slum clearance pending provision of attractive accommodation.

In 1958, Delhi Municipal Committee and its constituent bodies were dissolved and Delhi Municipal Corporation was formed. The change probably produced betterment in the political - and other - fortunes of some politicians; no change in the

abbreviation D.M.C. (Modern bureaucratic structures with ponderous titles turn to abbreviated symbols); as to the improvement in the fortunes of sweepers, that remains to be seen. The Corporation incorporated the whole of metropolitan Delhi, except certain areas of New Delhi which remained under the jurisdiction of New Delhi Municipal Committee. P.R. Nayak was the first Municipal Commissioner of MCD.

Delhi Pradesh Balmiki Mazdoor Sangh sent Mr. Nayak a letter of welcome in November 1958. The letter stated that "sweepers are very happy to see Mr. Nayak as the head of the local body. We serve society from our worm-like existence. Mahatma Gandhi was the only person who understood our agony and was so overwhelmed by our misery that he started calling himself a Bhangi. If present day politicians could have one-tenth of the feelings that Mahatma Gandhi had for us, our problems would have been solved long ago."

The sweepers presented the following new demands in their letter to Mr. Nayak:

1. Sanitation being an important work should have the status of skilled occupation. (This indicated that the sweepers realised the social importance of their job, underlined by their united action over the years).
2. Corporation allowance in addition to bonuses.
3. The annual paid leave (holidays) be increased from 15 days to one month, in line with the leave enjoyed by government

employees.

4. Suspension pay to sweepers who were suspended during the strike of 1953, and were subsequently allowed to resume work, but were not paid anything for the period of their suspension.

5. A demand for curbing the vicious circle of bribery to sanitary guides and inspectors. The rest of the demands were the same as addressed in January 1958, to Mr. Aggarwal, who was the then President of Delhi Municipal Committee. The continuing misery of sweepers living conditions was described thus - "In only ten years after Independence, hundreds of thousands of refugees have been rehabilitated in various parts of Delhi, but the Bhangis continue living in their delapidated, dark and dingy hutments. Nay, in the name of slum clearance even our hutments have come under demolition," and those affected have nowhere to live.

As usual, the authorities were unresponsive. One year later, on 26th November 1959, the Bhangis demonstrated in front of the Town Hall in Chandni Chowk. They also held public meetings at various other places to publicise and get public sympathy for their demands. This produced movement in the authorities. Elected members of the Corporation and higher level officials held four meetings, one in December 1959, and three in January 1960, when some of the demands were accepted. Balmiki Mazdoor Sangh called a public meeting of the sweepers on 28th February 1960, to inform them about the decision of the Corporation regarding their demands. The meeting was presided over by Brij Mohan President, INTUC. Among the invitees were the Corporation members

who were present at the four meetings and were party to the decision. The sweepers were informed that the Municipal Commissioner, Mr. Nayak, had accepted the following demands: Payment of overtime money for work done during free time; provision of shoes, soap, oil and towels for all categories of sweepers; increased annual holiday; the complete list will be given to circle inspectors so that sweepers may take leave in rotation. After this announcement the union urged the Corporation to do something about the miserable housing of the sweepers, to abolish the harsh system of suspending a sweeper for minor mistakes and imposing fine amounting to 5 rupees, which was a substantial sum as the sweeper's monthly pay at that time was only Rs. 65 (Rs. 40, if on daily wages)⁴. As usual, the Bhangis affirmed their affinity and link with Maharishi Balmiki and acknowledged the contribution of Mahatma Gandhi for their cause.

The demands which the Corporation had accepted but failed to implement brought about another public meeting in July 1968. It was revealed at this meeting that on 27th April 1960, it was agreed between B.N. Seth of DMC and Ram Rakha Mal of the sweepers' union that overtime money for three years will be paid "immediately", and the rest pending decision of the standing committee. The union secretary agreed only after a lot of persuasion. Apparently he was by now well aware of the delaying tactics and unredeemed promises of MCD. The Corporation had confirmed this agreement vide its letter dated 3rd May, 1960, addressed to the union, that the overtime money will be paid in June. The meeting appealed to the Mayor and other members of the Corporation to implement the

agreement, otherwise the inevitable "further steps" will follow. It was also reiterated that the housing problem for Bhangis remained deplorable as ever, that 'fringe benefits' like soap, etc. were not available to all categories of sweepers⁵. Corruption, too, was mentioned. Bribe rate had gone up from 5 rupees to 10-15 rupees for ordinary favours. Sweepers on daily wages were the worst hit. Despite the Corporation's assurance that all sweepers will be paid by the 10th of the month, those on daily wages were still paid after the 20th. And the Rs 200-300 as bribe was the norm when sweepers on daily wages were made permanent.

In case of a conflict arising between sweepers and the Safai Darogas, the former were automatically supposed to be at fault and could be suspended for months. The underlying policy was to suppress the sweepers. Sanitary inspectors and Darogas remained working at a particular place for years. This gave them the opportunity of establishing reliable links for extorting bribes. The union demanded that these officials should be transferred periodically.

A sweeper named Budh Ram, while working on the overhead water tank of the public latrines in Roshanara Gardens fell down accidentally and was killed. Not only no compensation was paid to his dependants but also the pay for the last month he worked, and the provident fund, were not paid even after one year of his death.

For the next 2½ years the matters simmered. Then on 4th April 1963, Delhi Pradesh Balmiki Mazdoor Sangh demonstrated in front

of Town Hall Building. All the doors of the Town Hall building were hastily shut. The sweepers waited outside the administrative headquarter of the capital, symbolising that though the sweepers were of this city, they were not in it; nay, that could be said of this country and all its sweepers, and of the poor in general, irrespective of their caste. The sweepers stood outside from 2 p.m. to 7 p.m. - 5 hours of wait was nothing compared to years of waiting for a living wage and some decency in the inhuman working conditions. According to the hand bill published by the union, "The D.M.C. officials were as unapproachable as gods were to the Sudra at one time." But those who shut the others out soon find that they have also shut themselves in. At last a door opened and Brij Mohan (the name means Lord Krishna of Brindaban), President Delhi Pradesh Congress Committee, also leader of the ruling party in the Corporation, came out and assured the sweepers that D.M.C. will appoint a committee within a week, that the committee will meet on 17th April and their decision implemented by 20th April - a promise of unbelievable efficiency. May be the authorities had come upon the fabled Alladin's lamp in the basement of the Town Hall.

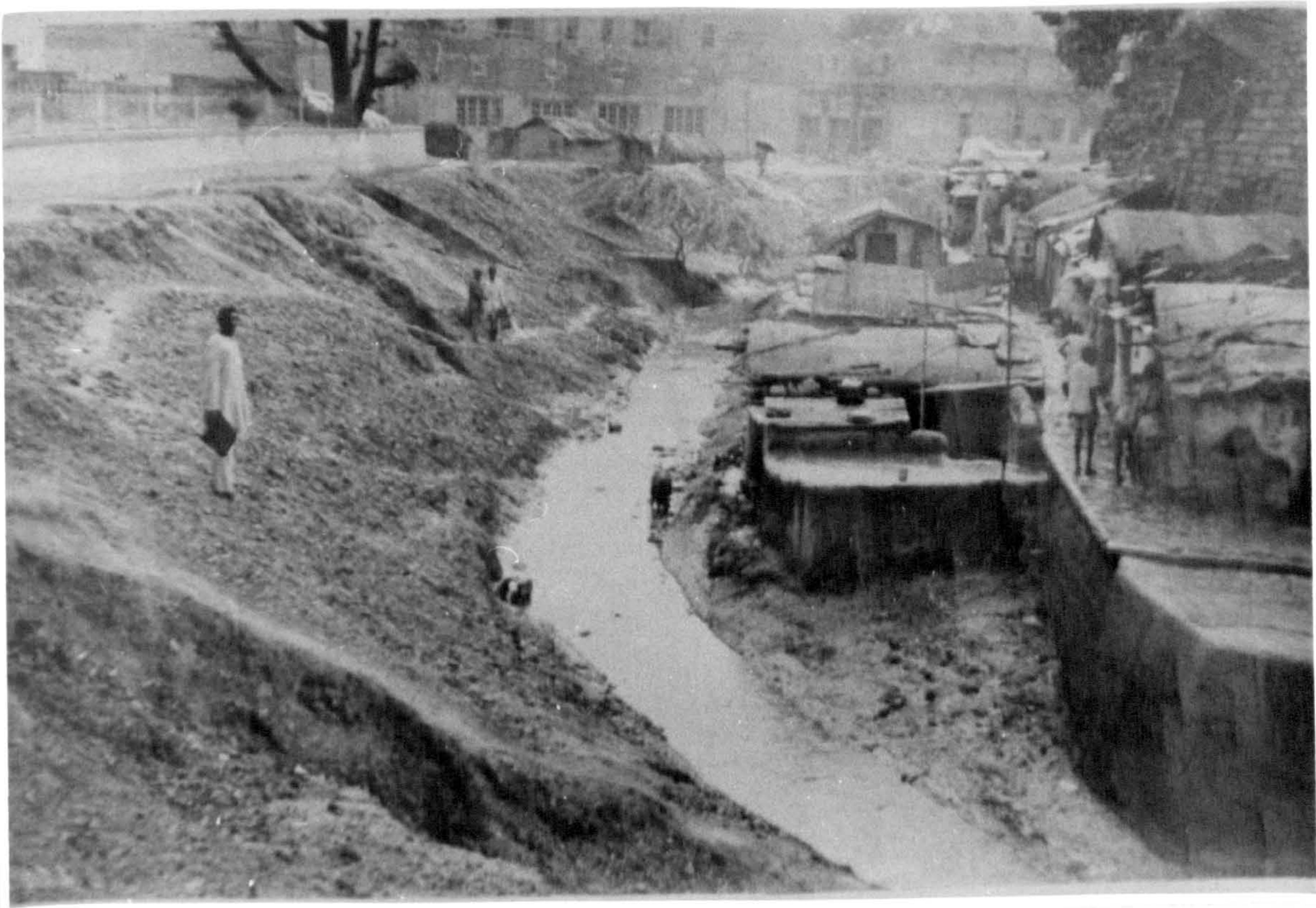
Demands presented in the demonstration of 4th April 1963 were substantially the same as in the previous demonstrations. There were two new demands. First, now that the dumping grounds were far away from the built-up areas, the sweepers who went to work there should be given the fare money. This was reasonable as the sweepers could not subsidize the sanitation of the city. One wonders why they did not demand

that whole or part of the travelling time should be included in their 8 hour duty.

On 8th December 1963, the Balmiki Mazdoor Sangh organised its periodic trade union meetings, this time at Jhandewalan Road. The meeting was chaired by Brij Mohan, President DPCC and attended by Corporation officials, besides a large gathering of sweepers, both men and women. The union appreciated the steps taken by Brij Bhushan to remove corruption. Then came their charter of demands, many were the old promises and forgotten agreements. There were a few new grievances, the most notable was what may be described as extended flexible working hours, namely, 7 a.m. to midday, 2 to 4 in the afternoon, and to make up the 8 hour working day, 9 to 10 at night! The schemer who thought of this work pattern did not realise that the one hour night work will disrupt the social life of the sweepers. One wonders if the source of this brain wave had got his cue from the rumour, true or false, that Moscow streets are washed every night. A few years previously, the then Chief Minister of Panjab, Partap Singh Kairon, had introduced one hour of evening school, to keep the teachers away from politics. The result was opposite of the intended one. There was request for early implementation of the scheme for community radios in Bhangi colonies, a demand for holiday on alternate Saturdays, for one hour of lunch break, and the reminder, about payment for all extra work done during lunch breaks over the years. How much broomstick should a sweeper have was another point of contention. According to the union, the Corporation gave a sweeper 1 kg of broom once every three months, but which lasted only for a month. The demand was not for extra broom but for

money in lieu thereof. The Corporation could say that this was an excuse on the part of the sweepers to obtain a little extra money. But 1 kg of broomsticks lasting for three months was a difficult proposition. Bhangis were becoming conscious of time and motion involved in their work. As the broom wears off it is less flexible and less easy to use. Its spread decreases and the sweeper has to put in more work to clean the same area. The area per sweeper had increased. There was demand for increase in pay, from 65 rupees to 100 rupees per month and those on daily wages to be made permanent. The long standing complaint about the high handedness of supervisors was underlined. The sweepers who went to the Prime Minister's house to contribute money to the Defence Fund, were marked absent and their pay was deducted.

A few months later, the summer of 1964 saw sweepers pitted against the authorities. On 28.4.64, the slum clearance campaign struck at the sweepers' 'jhuggies' and hutments in Navin-Karim area which is right in the middle of the city and has a large Bhangi Basti. On receiving an angry letter from the union, some members of the Corporation visited the area and assured the Bhangis that "Justice will be done." Demolition was stopped but not for long. On 14.6.64, hutments were again pulled down in Navin-Karim and other areas. Bhangis reacted with work stoppage. According to the newspapers, 4000 sweepers of DMC did not report for work on 16th June and protested in front of Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri's house. This step was taken because when demolition was under way in the Navin-Karim area, the sweepers protested. There was stonethrowing by the sweepers and as a result two police officers received minor



1. Sweeper jhuggis at Navin Karim.

2. Jhuggis demolished.

injuries. Ram Rakha Mal of the BMS was arrested along with ten others including two women, under sections 107,151 of Indian Penal Code. The sweepers responded with strike, garbage started accumulating and some was deliberately thrown on the streets. Forgotten were Gandhi's exhortations that a Bhangi should never strike work and that society should see to it that the occasion for strike does not arise.

To resolve the situation, Mir Mushtaq Ahmed, the new president of Delhi Pradesh Congress Committee, Bhatt of All India Labour Congress, Chakaravarty, a labour leader, all went to the Town Hall and met Baba Bachitar Singh, the Mayor and Bhagat, the Deputy Mayor. Then they met Ram Rakha Mal who was detained in the Jail. He was released on bail. It was agreed between the parties to the dispute that the sweepers' union will give its complaint in writing. (as if they had not done it so many times in the past) and the Mayor's decision will be acceptable to all. The unbending authorities were thus compelled to do horse trading to work out a face saving formula. The bailed out R.R. Mal, along with Deputy Mayor and Bhatt went to the Prime Minister's house where about 2000 Bhangis were protesting. The trio (although they had nothing in common) assured the protesting sweepers that their demands will be looked into sympathetically and the Mayor's decision will be in their favour. The strikers dispersed and sanitation was resumed. The trio visited the areas of demolition and made expressions of sympathy and assurance to the sweepers. A fortnight later, on 28th June 1964, the union held a public meeting at Jamuna Bazar Sanitary Depot. The issues discussed were the recent demolitions and the 14 main demands presented to municipal

authorities from time to time. There was one new incident of high handed marking of absences, viz, the day the Prime Minister Jawahar Lal Nehru died (27.5.64) was a day of public mourning but the sweepers had been marked absent.

Nothing positive came out of the agreement whereby the June 1964 strike was called off and three years later, on 25th June 1967, the union reminded the MCD about the sweepers' long standing demands and grievances. On 17th September, a public meeting was held in Harijan Basti Mori Gate, and to which municipal councillors from different areas were invited. Two more years went by but the sweepers' demands remained ignored. Consequently, on 24th June 1969 they demonstrated in front of the Town Hall. Their demands were the familiar old ones, but there was a militant twist to some of these, e.g. Abolition of part-time jobs; washing allowance at the rate of 5 rupees per month retrospectively for the last 20-21 years; provident fund for all categories of sweepers; free medical treatment for sweepers and their families and in the event of prolonged sickness implementation of the moribund regulation that help of Rs. 500-1000 be given to the long term sick; 16 holidays on festivals like the rest of the population; houses on 100 square yards for those living in hutments. At least one demand was on behalf of sweepers in private scavenging: Because many garbage depots (Dalaos) in the city had been moved out, the private scavengers had to carry their loads of night soil and garbage to distant places; hence the demand for restoring/building Dalaos in the city. Lastly were demands which went beyond the strict trade union scope of DMC sweepers, and were part of the larger problem of positive discrimination. These

demands were:- (a) Brilliant children of sweepers should be given free higher education in boarding schools; (b) Loan for sweepers so that they may start small businesses; and (c) Reservation of 50 percent of government jobs for the educated unemployed Bhangis youths. These demands need to be analysed briefly. (a) There are general scholarships for all brilliant students including those of Scheduled castes. Students belonging to Scheduled castes and backward classes do not have to pay tuition fee and they also receive a small stipend. That apparently is not enough. For reasons of unfavourable home environment many Bhangi children do not realise their potential. The idea behind this demand appears to be that the academically brighter among the Bhangi children should be educated in congenial boarding school atmosphere. The idea needs to be applied to all students, irrespective of caste, who are caught in the poverty trap. That means at least half the student population.

(b) The demand for business loans indicates desire of average Bhangi to discard sweeping as an occupation. Gandhi had noted that spinning and weaving were among the industries that were supporting thousands of Harijans (HARIJAN 27.4.1934) He also supported the idea of Harijans as cooks in Hindu homes (HARIJAN 25.5.40). Let it be said that Gandhi's ideal was to enable Harijans to rise to the highest rank, absorbing Harijans into Hindu homes would make them a living link between other Harijans and caste Hindus (HARIJAN 25.5.40) "what is more, let those who can afford it take Harijans in their families as their own children and give them proper training. All this can only happen if men and women are sincere in their professions, and if the truth has gone home that under the garb of religion

Hinduism is said to have consigned to untouchability their own kith and kin for no fault of theirs." (HARIJAN 19.5.46)

(c) Reservation of 50% of government jobs for the educated unemployed Bhangis was an unrealistic demand. There already is reservation of jobs for Scheduled castes, and to reserve half the vacancies for one of the Scheduled castes, the Bhangis, would be impractical. Unemployment among the educated is not confined to the Scheduled castes; it is very much India wide problem, irrespective of caste or region.

The sweepers ended their charter of demands on an ominous note- "Our demands should be decided upon without further delay, failing which we will go on strike on 21st July 1969, and demonstrate in front of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's house." The Corporation started negotiations with the sweepers' union and a settlement was reached on 24th July 1969 and the strike averted. But 6 months later, on 22nd Jan, 1970 the Corporation sweepers went on strike. According to the union, the sweepers began the strike because the Corporation had not implemented the terms of the settlement arrived at on 24th July, 1969. But the Municipal Commissioner gave a different description of the state of affairs. He said that the strike was illegal and unwanted as the DMC had implemented the agreement; the Corporation had paid the arrears of pay, and of overtime money amounting to 7 lack rupees (Rs. 700,000) issued uniforms, refunded excess house rent. He said that consequent to the 24th July settlement the following steps had been taken: Provident Fund books had been issued; the disputed matters were being considered by the standing committee and Delhi Administration had organised a reconciliation board. The Municipal

Commissioner added that Delhi sweepers were among the highest paid sweepers in India. The monthly pay of Delhi sweeper then was Rs. 172, compared to Bombay sweeper's Rs 166 and Madras sweeper's Rs 101. The new demands of the sweepers will cost DMC Rs. 1.50 crores (15 million rupees). The main demands were: washing allowance for the previous 20 years, at the rate of Rs. 5 per month; dirt allowance at Rs. 15 per month; revision of pay scale; abolition of employment on daily wages, house on 100 square yards plot; free boarding and scholarships for dependent children of sweepers. Finally the Municipal Committee appealed to the citizens of Delhi to help keep the city clean, and face this illegal strike of sweepers.

11. 6. PARTY POLITICS

At the time of the strike in Jan 1970, Jan Sangh was in power in MCD and Congress party was the main opposition in the local body. However, Congress was the ruling party in the central government. It is fairly common to blame the party in power (or the opposition) for labour troubles. The Congress opposition in MCD blamed Jan Sangh leaders for prolonging the strike. (As if Congress, when it was running the municipal affairs, had not done precisely that). Kishori Lal, a leading member of the Congress opposition in MCD, accused Jan Sangh administration of suppressing the strikers and refusing any move for negotiations. He said that the strike situation should be kept out of politics and if a minister of the Central Government offered to act as a mediator, he should not be opposed. This statement was political opportunism according to Jan Sangh. It accused Congress of instigating the strike and thereafter of political fishing in troubled waters. The Congress denied these

allegations; Jan Sangh denied the allegation of crushing the strike; which continued as usual. In these circumstances the opposition party exaggerated the worsening sanitation situation, while the party in power claimed that the situation was well under control. The Congress party saw filth everywhere and the epidemics on the point of breaking out. It said that if MCD could not accede to the demands of the sweepers, the Jan Sangh leaders should themselves do the scavenging and keep the city clean. (These national political heirs to Gandhi had never cared to learn that Mahatma Gandhi wanted everyone to be his own Bhangi, and before anyone else they should have set an example). The party in power made contrary claims. According to Manchanda, the Municipal Commissioner, there was no danger of epidemics, that every effort was being made to keep the city clean and that there was definite improvement in the strike situation. The Chief Executive Councillor, V.K. Malhotra, a Jan Sangh member, said that if Administration was forced to accept the demands of the illegally striking sweepers, Delhi will become another West Bengal. Objecting to this a Congress leader said that no state should be named contemptuously.

Claims made to demoralise the strikers

The party in power often makes claims that are at great variance with the true state of affairs. It is usual political practice to be unscrupulous in order to remain in power, (or to wrest power, if in opposition). To demoralise the strikers all sorts of claims are made by the ruling party. On 2.2.1970, Malhotra gave this statistical analysis of the strike situation: 2000 or 58 percent of the sweepers were back

on duty; 1380 new sweepers had been employed; 920 sweepers were arrested, including the leader of the union, Ram Rakha Mal. The Chief Executive Councillor was wrong in his sums..... Congress opposition in DMC blamed Jan Sangh for the lathicharge on the sweepers in front of the Town Hall. The opposition also alleged that the arrested sweepers were detained in mental hospital where they were given very little food and inadequate clothing in the February cold. Jan Sangh was quick to refute these allegations. The Congress frustrated by the Jan Sangh, appealed to the Central Health Minister against what it called the "vindictive attitude" of the Jan Sangh towards the sweepers and their just demands. Jan Sangh members of MCD were strongly against the possible interference of the Central Government in municipal affairs, unless the Corporation asked the Centre to intervene. The Union Health Minister agreed with this; however he said that he will invite the sweeper leaders and advise them to end the strike⁶. The Jan Sangh accused Congress of masterminding the strike and of escalating it. True, there was the precedence of the Central Health Minister participating in the settlement with the sweepers, albeit on the request or consent of the party in power (Congress) - Raj Kumari Amrit Kaur in 1953 and again in May 1954. DMC Congress then desperately wanted the Centre to rescue the municipal authorities from a desperate strike situation.

Call of support by other unions

The other two unions of the DMC and of New Delhi Municipal Committee announced that if the Corporation did not settle its dispute with the conservancy staff within a week, they will go on sympathetic strike to back the sweepers' demands - a show of

sympathy never seen before (and since). The two supporting unions were the Municipal Drivers Union, and the New Delhi Palika Karamchari Ekta Union (Union for the unity of workers of New Delhi Municipal Committee). The Delhi branch of the United Trade Union Congress (UTUC) a Marxist union, backed the sweepers and appealed to the citizens to put pressure on the Jan Sangh administration in the Corporation to concede the demands of the sweepers. Congress and Marxists, with nothing in common between them, united and converged against the common enemy the Jan Sangh. Gandhi's one-man powerful trade union, his crusade for the untouchables, gave birth to formal trade unionism of the sweepers. The activities of the latter produced some benefits for the sweepers, but not enough. In the 24th year of Independence, the sweepers were still struggling for the very basic benefits. But the problem which should have been one of urgency for the whole society irrespective of political affiliation of its different sections was sliding into politics in the bad sense. The role of the police in this strike will further illustrate the point. Kidar Nath Sahni, chairman of the powerful standing committee of the Corporation (MCD) and a member of the Jan Sangh party wrote to the Home Minister Yashwant Rao Chauhan and alleged that the police were doing very little to enforce the provisions of the Essential Services Act under which the strike had been declared illegal by the Lt. Governor. Sahni accused Congressmen, especially Indira Gandhi's group to have instigated the strike just to give bad name to the ruling Jan Sangh party in the local body. A Congress MP supported the demands of the sweepers at one of their meetings and encouraged them to continue the strike. He said that the police were taking no

action against the strikers. Faithful women sweepers who wanted to work were beaten by the strikers but the police gave the victims no protection. Strikes had removed brooms, baskets, spades and wheel barrows in large numbers. Congress leaders, big officials and local Congress bosses were behind the could-not-care-less attitude of the police. The responsibility lay squarely on the Home Minister, because the leaders of the sweepers' union were saying openly at their meetings that they had talked to the Home Minister and that the police will not make arrests. Quite a list of allegations! The Deputy Commissioner of Delhi Police described the police action or inaction like this: Police had banned the procession of the sweepers under the Essential Services Act and orders had been issued for the arrest of those who participate in processions. It was difficult to arrest sweepers who were demonstrating in large numbers in front of the Town Hall..... it was also difficult to arrest sweepers without names and reports.... the strike was peaceful and no damage had been done to government property. (WHAT A STATEMENT!) But this same Delhi police had used lathis, tear gas and bullets on the processions in the past, processions of sweepers and of others, and without the invocation to Essential Services Act. Compare the effete response of police on this occasion with their brute performance four years later in 1974, when the railway men's strike was crushed using terror methods on women and children of the strikers. Strikes or no strikes, police have a wide inventory of powers to make arrests without going into the bother of asking names. To prevent damage to government property was not the only essential function of the police under the Essential Services Act. I am not the least for police regulating trade

union activity, hindering it or even helping it. But that is what the police appears to have done, under pressure from Congress, the party in power at the Centre. It was at least a change from the hindrance and repression by the police in the past, again under instruction from Congress when it controlled MCD. The tone of the statement by the Deputy Commissioner of police was not of the Indian police which is, to describe in one word, crude. The statement sounded more like that of the British police officer, glib, sly, and hypocritical. Its authorship seems to be from the same political quarter that winked at the police to stand at ease, notwithstanding the imposition of Essential Services Act. The sweepers, too, gradually slid into amoral trade unionism of using one political party against another, or looked at differently, of becoming a pawn in the Congress-Jan Sangh fight.

Cleanliness Campaigns by the citizens

The Corporation adopted alternative methods to counteract the effects of the strike. These were (a) employment of extra temporary sweepers on daily wages and (b) cleanliness campaigns. MCD employed about a thousand extra sweepers on daily wages so that areas worst hit by the strike could be kept clean. Private scavengers were asked to do sanitation work in some areas of the city, but these caste black sheep were beaten up by the strikers and forced to stay away.

As sanitation worsened, "citizens of Delhi started cleanliness campaigns." The use of the word "citizen" by the newspapers seemed to exclude sweepers from the citizen category. This is the usual newspaper technique, part sensation and part

reflecting the fact that newspapers certainly the big newspapers, are owned by those who belong to Society with a capital S. "Miners - a menace to Britain." Was the newspaper outcry when Arthur Scargill was elected to the leadership of the Miner's union. A touch of comicality was provided by newspaper speculations and comments that although the Republic Day parade area and route (due on 26th January, just four days after the strike started) were being kept clean, the piled up garbage will cause misery to visiting dignitaries. These newspaper offices are located in New Delhi which though it is surrounded by MCD urban area, was not affected by strike. The visiting dignitaries are all accommodated in New Delhi. They probably go to Old Delhi, as they would to Aldgate East and similar 'native quarters.'

The Corporation tried a third approach, that of outflanking the sweepers' union. This came at a later stage when the strike had been going on for a long time. Action Committee of about 20 sweeper Chaudharies was organised to negotiate with the Corporation. The MCD officials reached agreement with this Committee regarding the demands of the sweepers and the committee decided to call off the strike. This was immediately repudiated by the Balmiki Mazdoor Sangh, which originally gave the call for the strike under the leadership of Ram Rakha Mal who was now in jail. According to the union, the Action Committee formed by the Choudharies had no locus standi to negotiate with the civic authorities. It was not authorised by the union to negotiate with the civic authorities, the only authorised negotiation committee was the one constituted of one M.P., one Metropolitan Councillor and two Municipal

Councillors. But Jan Sangh was not prepared to talk with the negotiation committee. As soon as the Action Committee and the MCD officials reached agreement, the Jan Sangh ratified the agreement by majority vote at a specially and hastily convened meeting of the standing committee of the MCD. It recommended to the Lt. Governor to adopt a lenient attitude towards the arrested strikers. A copy of the agreement was also sent to the Lt. Governor by the Commissioner.

In theory, Councillors are elected to run the affairs of the city, but in real life party politics take precedence. The city was stinking with accumulated garbage, but H.K. Gaur and H.P. Gupta (Congressmen) criticised the stand taken by the Administration. Gaur said that the agreement was invalid as it had not been approved by the MCD. He was right on this. Congress administration had in the past made agreements with the union, even though it did not subsequently implement the agreements or implement in full. There was some delay in the release of strikers and their leaders which was one of the conditions on which the Action Committee had agreed to talk with the civic authorities. According to the Secretary of the union, the Action Committee was never interested in the release of the arrested sweepers, especially the leaders. It was also against the strike from the very beginning. The Secretary also denied that the Action Committee included two representatives of the union. "It was a false propaganda," he said. Apparently, this false propaganda was aimed at the sweepers to break their will. He asserted that despite official announcements to the contrary, the strike will continue till the union's demands

were met. By now sweepers had been on strike for two long months. There was no social security payment for the families of the strikers. By any standards, sweepers had given a magnificent display of their trade union militancy. But the Action Committee trick had worked. Ram Rakha Mal was in jail and could not rally the flagging spirit of the striking sweepers. When he realised that the strike was fizzling out, he saw no point in its continuation and accepted the fait accompli. In the village context, caste councils did not have to withdraw their labour for that long. A sincere agreement used to be reached much sooner. The village was a small community, the Jajman and the Kamin belonged to that small world and knew one another personally. The City, on the contrary, is a large impersonal place. The strike in Delhi dragged on for very long, the parties to the dispute were behaving as if they were holding Disarmament Talks at Geneva. The Jan Sangh had played long, calculating and callous, and so had the union perhaps. Years later, in 1982, the Tories in Britain under Margaret Thatcher, acted in a similar manner towards the Health workers especially the nurses, in full knowledge that nurses will not go on strike. Gandhi's advice that sweepers must never go on strike, and that society correspondingly should anticipate their needs, seems to be impossible of realisation. Neither the experience in India, nor that in Britain (for example, non-striking nurses falling behind in earnings) bear out Gandhi's hope. The fact is that the dominant sections of society want to be served at minimum cost.

A delegation of Balmiki Mazdoor Sangh, led by the released Ram Rakha Mal met the Lt. Governor and the latter agreed to

mediate between the Balmiki Mazdoor Sangh and Municipal Corporation of Delhi. A few days later, the union published a handbill condemning the members of the Action Committee. The poster described them as traitors to their community as they had ignored the interests of their caste and had compromised with the Jan Sangh ruled DMC. As to the demands of the sweepers, the Lt. Governor A.N. Jha, Labour Commissioner B.K. Channa, Municipal Commissioner, the Mayor and his Deputy held meetings on 4th and 6th April 1970, and arrived at a decision.

The union had suffered a setback and it needed rehabilitation. One year later, on 12.4.1971, a procession of nearly 2000 sweepers both men and women, led by R.R. Mal went to Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's house. The union leader/Secretary appraised the Prime Minister about the working conditions of sweepers and their miserable living quarters. He went beyond the trade union field when he complained that officials of Delhi Pradesh Congress Committee had been ignoring sweepers "when giving tickets", that is, selecting party candidates for election to DMC. The Prime Minister gave the standard assurance, that of looking into these demands. Processions in India can be a 'spontaneous' affair, organised by the pressure groups. They can also be a command affair from other interested quarters⁷. I have said this because of the Jan Sangh controlled MCD's success in April 1970, in scuttling the sweepers' strike, alleged by Jan Sangh, to have been instigated by local Congress politicians of Indra group. The union, for its part needed to display that it had its hold on the rank and file. It also needed to win back supporters that might have strayed, and to strengthen its organisation. An unsuccessful display of unity

can recoil on the organisation. But there was no danger of that here. The union was strong and the Prime Minister apparently had agreed beforehand to meet the sweepers' procession. The sweepers' 'Long March' was a success from beginning to end. Now the union was on the look-out for a trial of strength with the MCD. There were enough old grievances to provide an excuse. The inevitable happened on 5th July 1971. A strike was started in the Civil Lines area. A union spokesman said that the strikers' main demand among others, was that a sanitary inspector of Vijay Nagar area be transferred. Ram Rakha Mal made it quite clear that the strike will spread to the whole of the city if attention was not paid to the demands of the sweepers of the Civil Lines Area. Initially no politician took any interest in the strike, at least not openly. After 20 days of strike the leader of the Communist party in the Corporation, Guru Radha Krishan made a move to end the strike. Negotiations followed and after 25 days of the strike, limited to civil lines area, an agreement was reached between the Corporation officials and the union. The agreement was reached in the presence of the Mayor, Deputy Municipal Commissioner and the leader of the Congress party.

Less than 3 months later, Balmiki Mazdoor Sabha gave notice of strike from 15.10.71, regarding its outstanding demands; first a demonstration on 14th October in front of the Town Hall, to be followed by the strike on 15th October. The MCD tried the old technique of invitation to talks, but the union leaders ignored the invitation. At this the Municipal Commissioner issued a statement that following the decision of the Lt. Governor and others in April 1970, the sweepers' demands had

been met. But the Corporation was not in a position to provide pay increase bonus, washing allowance and houses on 80 sq. yards for each of its employees. He then warned the union that sanitation had been declared an essential service by the Central Government and as such the Administration will take a serious notice of the strike. He accused the union of trying to disrupt the life of the city on the eve of Diwali. This was a clever move (but in cheap style) to put the "citizens of Delhi" against the sweepers. However, the Central Health Minister, Umashankar Dixit intervened, the worst was averted and the Mayor repeated the wellworn formula that sweepers' genuine demands will be looked into.

But six months later, on 22nd May 1972, the union was once again talking of strike. Ram Rakha Mal was now an Alderman in the Corporation, elected on Congress ticket. The union placed the following demands before the MCD:- (19 demands summarized into 16)

- 1) MCD to draw seniority list of part-time sweepers; sweepers on daily wages to be made permanent.
- 2) Attendance twice a day instead of four times a day.
- 3) Upgrading of pay-scales.
- 4) Overtime money for 8 holidays and arrears thereof from 1958 onwards.
- 5) Annual bonuses.
- 6) Dirt allowance at the rate of 15 rupees per month.
- 7) Arrears of dirt/washing allowance from 1958 onwards.

- 8) Arrears in lieu of soap and oil to all categories of sweepers.
- 9) Arrears for incomplete uniforms/work clothes from 1958 onwards, both for men and women sweepers.
- 10) Dalas or garbage depots to be re-built at neighbourhood places. (MCD had moved these away from built-up areas, in the interest of hygiene. The sweepers engaged in private scavenging had now to carry their garbage to far off places. This had increased their work. There was a hiatus between the welfare of society and of a section of that society and the need for the reconciliation of the two.
- 11) Refund of excessive house rent deducted over the years.
- 12) Sweepers living in hutments be given houses on 80 sq. yards of plots (In the past the demand was for houses on 100 sq. yards).
- 13) Electricity and tap water in sweeper bastis; tap water in individual households, not mere communal taps.
- 14) Flats for sweepers in Azadpur. (This colony was built following the 1953 strike settlement under the aegis of Raj Kumari Amrit Kaur. But the sweepers then refused to move to this area as it was, at that time, relatively far off from their work places. The flats were therefore given to others. But by early 1970s, Delhi had expanded all around Azadpur and these rejected flats would now have been most suitable considering the new work places.
- 15) Adult education centres in sweeper bastis and provision

of community television sets at these centres. (Sweepers now have started having their own T.V. sets.)

16) Sweepers to approve the material and workmanship of the new prototype uniform before it went into production. This was a new indicator of their assertion as Corporation employees, not as mere sweepers of yester years.

The initial response of MCD was a letter dated 20th May 1972, from the Health Officer whose department is concerned with sanitation. The letter accused the union of going back on its understanding after the strike of January 1970, that it will accept the Lt. Governor's decision regarding its demands. The letter claimed that DMC on its part had fully implemented that decision: nearly 700 sweepers upgraded to permanent job; pay scale of part-time sweepers increased from 50 rupees to 65 rupees per month; increased washing and dirt allowance for sweepers working on lorries; festival and bank holidays increased from 8 to 16. The union "has repeated demands which were rejected by the Lt. Governor. This time the union has posed 19 demands. DMC has assured that 14 out of 19 demands will be looked into sympathetically. But the union is bent upon strike." The letter concluded that taking into consideration the inconvenience to public resulting from strike and the possible outbreak of epidemic diseases in the hot weather, the strike had been declared illegal under the Essential Services Act.

After the strike notice, talks were held between the Municipal Commissioner, B.S. Das and the representatives of Balmiki

Mazdoor Sangh. The Commissioner informed the union representatives of the extent to which 14 out of the 19 demands could be met, while it was not possible for the civic body to concede to any extent the other five demands. This was not acceptable to the union. "Reluctantly we will have to go on strike from 22nd may", said Ram Rakha Mal. Both the MCD and the union wanted to appear reasonable to the public.

The strike invoked 'show cause notices' to more than 1500 sweepers thus indicating the firm attitude of the MCD authorities. Chief Executive Councillor Radha Raman said that "the city and the people cannot be put to ransom and exposed to the hazards of insanitation. The Corporation may follow it up with terminating the services of adamant staff." The strikers were reportedly resorting to violent picketing in a bid to stop night squads of temporarily employed sweepers from doing work. City-Sadar-Paharganj zone was the worst affected. About 340, non-striking sweepers could not do much to keep the city clean. Sewers were getting blocked up, there were reports of strikers scattering rubbish everywhere. The Municipal Commissioner stated that 1800 temporary sweepers were being hindered by the pickets. Strikers who obstructed others were arrested. There were reports of angry "citizens" beating up sweepers. Radha Raman also revealed that some sweepers reported only for attendance and did very little work. Shopkeepers were told by authorities that garbage heaps in front of their shops will render them liable to action taken against them. This indicated desperate authorities in a desperate situation. The Mayor appealed to the public for cooperation, wrote 300 letters to Corporation Councillors and social workers, asking them to

organise volunteer corps in their respective areas for maintaining the sanitation system in some order.

Party Politics

Politics entered this strike even more blatantly than in the 1970 strike. The chairman of the Republican party condemned the double-faced policy of the Congress. On the one hand the Congress politicians were encouraging the strike and on the other, the strike had been declared illegal under "Essential Services Act." The mud-slinging between Congress and Jan Sangh was even more this time. Opposition Congress party in MCD condemned ruling Jan Sangh for its dictatorial attitude towards the sweepers. A Congress Councillor alleged that sanitary inspectors were making money by misusing the power of appointing substitute sweepers for night operations. (In the past, these Congress Councillors had ignored union's complaints that sanitary inspectors had set up bribery racket).

In addition to verbal attacks, the Congress Councillors demonstrated outside the Town Hall. In relay groups of hunger strikers they kept up a 'dharna' or sit-in, in front of the civic centre. Gandhi used fast when all else failed, on rare occasions, and after soul-searching or, as Vinoba Bhave has done, having lived a great life, he stopped taking food, in order to leave his feeble body. These Congress Councillors were making a mockery of that fast. They fasted for short periods, not quietly but with fanfare. Jan Sangh sent its contingent of 11 Councillors outside the office of Delhi Pradesh Congress to beat Congress at its own game of 'dharna'. Leader of the Jan Sangh party in the Metropolitan council said

that 'dharna' of Congress Councillors was aimed at misleading the public. If they were really concerned about the sanitation of the city, they should order Ram Rakha Mal who was from the Congress party to end the strike. The counter 'dharna' by Jan Sangh caused DPCC to authorise Kishori Lal, leader of the Congress party in DMC to take disciplinary action against Alderman Ram Rakha Mal, leader of the striking sweepers' union. The party reportedly took a serious view of Ram Rakha Mal's defiance of the appeals made by Delhi Pradesh Congress Committee (DPCC) president, Radha Raman (who was also Chief Executive Councillor) and by others to call off the strike. They could not have suspended him from the party for fear of losing Bhangis' votes. O.P. Jain, a senior member of DMC urged the Lt. Governor Baleshwar Prasad, to expel Congress Alderman Ram Rakha Mal, as he had violated the oath of allegiance as a corporator when he instigated the sweepers to go on strike. He pointed out that though the working conditions were the same in the MCD and NDMC, only Delhi sweepers were on strike which was politically motivated. Jain's arguments were specious. Alderman's oath did not cancel Ram Rakha Mal's life-long allegiance to sweepers' cause, of whom he was one. DMC sweepers were the pace-setters in the capital, for New Delhi and Cantonment sweepers and for those working in government offices and commercial establishments. When a politician uses the label "politically motivated", he means either that his political opponents are using organised labour for political ends, or, that the trade unions have trespassed into politics. Politicians of all shades love to use industrial muscle for party political purpose. But they would cry wolf if those directly involved in the work

process want to use their organised strength for influencing the political process. Politicians forget that as their actions or lack of these, affect the life and work of individuals and of groups, it is inevitable for the individuals and groups to get "politically motivated" and thus threaten the monopoly of professional politicians. Politicians claim for themselves Brahminhood, even when the attributes of Brahminhood are missing in them. Jain ringing the fire-alarm was understandable: a trade unionist-cum-Alderman upsetting the MCD applecart, all the worse as this newcomer was a mere Bhangi and his proper place was in the front of that apple cart - as a beast of burden!

Fasts and counterfasts by Congress and Jan Sangh did not arise from moral considerations, but from motives of maligning the opponents. Public was soon tired of its entertainment value. Up went the wallposters from Jan Sangh, proclaiming that the demands of the sweepers were unreasonable and that they were instigated into making these demands by leaders of Delhi Pradesh Congress Committee (DPCC). This created stir among Congress circles. A meeting was called in the old Secretariat building and was attended by DPCC officials and Congress members of the various local bodies - MCD, NDMC, Metropolitan Council. They rejected the Jan Sangh allegation that Congress was behind the strike. On the contrary, said the leader of Congress party in MCD, it was the ruling Jan Sangh party that was responsible for the strike. Jan Sangh had gone back on its promises to the sweepers - that house rent which was deducted from the pay of the sweepers included electricity and water charges, but not every Bhangi household had these amenities. He suggested that

DMC owned land was lying unused in different areas of Delhi and this could be allotted to the homeless sweepers for building houses (These pious proclamations could, with equal ease, have been addressed to past Congress administrations of the city). He said that the Standing Committee of the Corporation should authorise the Municipal Commissioner to confer with the sweepers' union and "thrash out" a mutually acceptable agreement.

Advani, chairman of Delhi Pradesh Jan Sangh, urged the Lt. Governor to provide police protection to the loyal sweepers another Jan Sangh leader said that the last five demands were too big in financial terms and were beyond the resources of the MCD.

Ram Rakha Mal said that persons belonging to Rashtriya Swayam Sewak Sangh or RSS, the parent body of Jan Sangh, had mistreated Balmiki women and had beaten them up. He said that it was wrong for the Jan Sangh to say that MCD had accepted 14 out of 19 demands. The first 14 demands were complaints or reminders about the old demands which were accepted in the past but not implemented. If MCD and Jan Sangh members had spent money on meeting sweepers' demands instead of now wasting it on false propaganda, the strike would not have taken place. An official of another sweeper union said that water supply to many Bhangi Bastis was cut off, in revenge on the sweepers.

The Corporation made the usual claims of situation under control; the Mayor, Municipal Commissioner and other officials made quick rounds of the congested inner city areas which were the worst affected by the strike. Citizen Council (made up of

middle classes) exhorted the public not to throw rubbish anywhere in the streets, but at collection points in the main streets from where garbage lorries could remove it, while most people held debates and discussions in coffee houses and tea-shops and under the banyan trees (figuratively speaking, as there are not many of these magnificent trees left in Delhi) as to whether the strike was for genuine demands of the sweepers or was a manifestation of the strife between Jan Sangh and Congress parties in MCD.

In the second paragraph above I mentioned that Jan Sangh ruled MCD had accepted 14 out of 19 demands. That was a positive feeler to bring the strike to an end. Now Jan Sangh made an appeal through the Mayor Kidar Nath Sahni (Jan Sangh) to Chief Executive Councillor, Radha Raman (Congress) to intervene in order to bring the strike to an end. The opposing politicians were now using their formal official position to resolve the situation. A day earlier, the chairman of the Standing Committee, I.D. Mahajan, had announced that if the union called off the strike, the talks will follow. The Mayor sent a letter to Ram Rakha Mal, informing him about the stand of the Standing Committee. Along with that the Mayor and the chairman of the standing committee met the Governor and the latter suggested that the sweepers' demands should be looked into sympathetically. All these developments seemed to point to the softening of the official attitude. However, the chairman of the Standing Committee told press reporters that an extra 2 crores of Rupees (20 million) will be needed to meet all the demands of the sweepers.

In his reply to the Mayor's letter, Ram Rakha Mal said that the union had not received anything in writing from the Municipal Commissioner that 14 out of 19 demands had been accepted by the Standing Committee. That was a counter feeler from the union that prior acceptance of 14 demands would result in the end of the strike. He was less conciliatory regarding the Municipal Commissioner's suggestion that the union should talk to the Delhi Development Authority - DDA - (An autonomous body) about the land for houses. The union rejected this suggestion for the reason that as the sweepers' employer, MCD, had got the land, it should be given to the sweepers. Lastly, he reminded the Mayor that in the past MCD had made promises and given assurances but had not implemented them.

Strike ended when the MCD and the union agreed on a compromise formula on the 19 demands. The DMC immediately accepted 14 out of 19 demands. The accepted demands included: DDA to consider 80 Sq. yards of plots to sweepers who were homeless; flats falling vacant in Azadpur colony henceforth to be allotted to sweepers; arrears in lieu of soap and oil to be given to all categories of sweepers; refund of excess rents; provision of water and electricity in Bhangi Basties; night classes for adult education at eight centres, and also television sets. The Lt. Governor assured the sweepers' union that the demands that had been accepted will be implemented soon - "by Gandhi Jayanti or Mahatma Gandhi's birthday on 2nd October that year" - 1972, assured the Municipal Commissioner.

The following demands still remained under the consideration of the authorities:-

1. Arrears of washing allowance from 1958 onwards.
2. Rs. 15 dirt allowance for all categories of sweepers.
3. Arrears of ladies coats and sarees from 1958 onwards.
4. Overtime money arrears for eight holidays from 1958 onwards.
5. Annual bonuses and arrears for all categories of sweepers.

According to Balmiki Mazdoor Sangh these demands were being studied by Mrs. Gandhi. This was quite a new departure for the Prime Minister to take cognizance of local municipal matters. The 9-day May 1972 strike was called off when the MCD gave assurance that the 14 agreed demands will be implemented by Gandhi Jayanti that is Mahatma Gandhi's birthday on 2.10.72. When nothing came out of the official promises, DPBMS again gave notice of strike. Consequently sweepers went on strike on 30.10.72. This was the longest ever strike of Delhi sweepers. It lasted for 45 days that is till 13th November, 1972.

The MCD conservancy services were declared essential under the Defence of India Rules. The MCD adopted a resolution accepting the Standing Committee's decision to refer the five disputed demands to a tribunal for adjudication and an amendment that a monthly progress report be submitted on the implementation of the 14 accepted demands. The authorities were anxious this time as it was occasion for the Asia 72 trade fair which was to be opened in the capital on 2nd November. Lt. Governor appealed to the Delhi citizens to keep the city clean so that visitors could carry happy memories of their visit. Municipal vans filled with loudspeakers went round the city to announce the "No work, No pay decision". The Municipal Commissioner

warned the striking sweepers that they would lose their pay for the strike period. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was kept informed of the strike situation. As usual the political parties in the MCD blamed one another. Newspapers of 10th November reported that 'Mayor K.N. Sahni wielded a broom today in a bid to show that Delhi could be kept clean. The Mayor's broom raised a lot of dust and left many areas unswept. Sahni along with his army of broom carrying dignitaries drew quite a crowd.... Onlookers said that this was just another political stunt. Some thought that the gesture would have been more convincing had the Mayor and his army collected garbage from the dumping spots and put it in the collection vans.

Jan Sangh members accused Congress that MCD sweeper strike was instigated by the Congress leaders to malign Jan Sangh party which controlled the civic body. Congress party had disowned responsibility in the matter. They neither condemned the strike nor the violence by the sweepers. Jan Sangh members said that Congress was trying to justify even those demands of the sweepers which they had rejected while in office. Jan Sangh Councillors demanded the expulsion of Alderman Ram Rakha Mal of Bhangi caste from Congress party or action against him at the party level. Show cause notices were served on the striking sweepers. Municipal Commissioner, B.S. Dass blamed leaders of the MCD sweepers for non-implementation of most of their 14 demands which were accepted after the 9 day strike of May 1972. Dass in his 12-page statement presented at the Corporation meeting said that one of the 14 accepted demands was the revision of pay scales of sweepers. Five letters were written to the sweeper representatives for their view of pay

scale revision so that the Corporation may forward it to the Third Pay Commission, before whom the matter was already under consideration. From the Commissioner's statement it appears that Corporation does not send more than 5 reminders. In connection with 6 other accepted demands the Corporation wrote five letters to Balmiki Mazdoor Sangh but no reply came from the union. According to Dass the DPBMS failed to cite any case of non payment of dirt allowance. Regarding the allotment of plots at cheap rates to the sweepers the sweepers' union did not forward any applications. Demands like uniforms for sweepers since 1958, allotment of quarters in Azadpur, arrears of soap and oil to the sweepers of drains and dalaos... these were being implemented. Five disputed demands were already before the Industrial Tribunal and its decision was to be binding on the Corporation.

There were cases of violence throughout the city. Mobs of striking sweepers damaged garbage vans and strikers armed with lathis obstructed the loyal workers from performing their duties. The Corporation continued to complain of inadequate police protection given to loyal workers.

The five demands referred to the Tribunal were opposed by the MCD at the hearing of the case. Municipal Commissioner said that the Corporation opposed the demands in principle and because of financial implications. The Corporation pleaded that it would be wrong to accept the demand for the payment of dirt allowance arrears from 1958, as the allowance was sanctioned much later. The bonus demand was opposed on the ground that it was not paid to the other employees of the Corporation. MCD. did

not have resources to meet the demands. The main demands for which the sweepers were on strike were rejected earlier when referred to the arbitration following the 9 day strike in May 1972.

Jan Sangh and opposition Congress were blaming each other for the strike. The chairman of the Standing Committee I.D. Mahajan urged the Central Government to take over the MCD. Kishori Lal leader of the Congress party, described this statement by the chairman as a clear confession after so many years that the Jan Sangh had misled the MCD and brought it to financial bankruptcy.

After the month long strike the sweepers' union said that the strike could be called off pending the Tribunal decision, provided the authorities were ready to pay for the strike period. The chairman of the Standing Committee said if striking sweepers immediately returned to work their cases would be considered sympathetically and that they will not be "victimised". On probing by opposition Congress members, he said that his sympathetic consideration included pay for the strike period. Later on under pressure from his party bosses, he had to repeat his party's policy of "No work, No pay".

The Industrial Tribunal gave its decision on 5th December 1972. It rejected the washing allowance demand retrospectively from 1958, but allowed it at the rate of two rupees per month. The second demand was that all the sweepers be paid Rs. 15 a month as dirt allowance. The Tribunal decided that the road conservancy staff who were not getting soap and oil be paid Rs 5 a

month as dirt allowance with effect from October 30, 1972. Certain other categories of sweepers were already receiving dirt allowance varying between Rs. 5 and Rs. 7. The remaining three demands were rejected. In spite of the sympathy call by Standing Committee chairman, and tribunal's award on December 5th, 1972, sweepers did not resume work till December 12th. MCD decided to sack the sweepers who did not return to work soon after the Tribunal decision. Instructions were issued terminating the services of part-time and temporary sweepers. MCD spokesman stated that Corporation already had suffered a loss of Rs. 80,000 in damage to its vehicles and had spent Rs. 1-2 million to keep the conservancy services going.

When the strike was called off, MCD adopted a hard line and almost vindictive attitude towards the sweepers. It dismissed 268 temporary sweepers for participating in the strike. Some of those with permanent jobs were suspended from duty without pay. There was no pay for the strike period. "Loyal" sweepers were given cash incentives. The Lt. Governor, an appointee of the Congress - dominated Central Government, recommended payment for the strike period, but Jan Sangh - ruled DMC refused that for lack of funds.

After the October 1972 strike, some of the close associates of Ram Rakha Mal defected due to internal differences. They formed a branch of "All India Safai Mazdoor Congress" in Delhi under the Trade Union Act 1926. "All India Safai Mazdoor Congress" is a caste association of sweepers at an all India level. Its Delhi branch was called "Delhi Pradesh Safai

Mazdoor Congress." Its main aims are to improve the economic, social and political conditions of people engaged in sweeping/scavenging work. The other aim is to oppose the anti-labour policy of MCD officials. This union is not affiliated to INTUC, but it is Congress dominated. In 1976, Mr. Buta Singh (who is Bhangi by caste) then Deputy Railway Minister was appointed as the chief patron of the association. This is a non-striking union. This was largely responsible for breaking the trade union movement spearheaded by militant leader, Ram Rakha Mal. A large majority of MCD sweepers are now its members. It has organized sit-outs and demonstrations. This union has a red flag which does not indicate affiliation with the communist party or parties. It is no more than a mere symbol of sanitation workers' interest.

DPBMS repeated its demand for the strike pay, revived some old demands and also demanded annulment of suspension orders and in case of MCD ignoring these demands, the sweepers' union gave notice of strike action from 16.12.73. Almost at the same time "Delhi Pradesh Safai Mazdoor Congress" put the same demands in their handbill to MCD officials. The strike was patchy and fizzled out quickly. After this, Ram Rakha Mal's influence declined considerably. The sweepers were resentful but were not prepared to take further industrial action.

The Corporation's fourth term was to expire in June 1975, but it was taken over by the Central Government on 24th March 1975. Three months later Emergency was declared for the whole of India. It was illegal to go on strikes during Emergency, which lasted till March 1977, when general elections were held and

Janata party came into power. Ram Rakha Mal had joined Janata party along with Kishori Lal who was a former leader of the Congress party in MCD. Bhangis being staunch followers of Congress party, lost faith in Ram Rakha Mal's leadership. He was abused in Bhangi bastis for being disloyal to Congress. His inability to get 45 days of strike pay was another factor which turned people against him. The Jan Sangh ruled MCD had refused pay for the period of strike. Jan Sangh was an important constituent of Janata party. Ram Rakha Mal's defection to Janata party was construed as disloyalty to Congress party and alliance with enemies of Bhangis. After the general elections in the country, civic elections were held on the 12th June 1977. Janata party (former Jan Sangh and other parties) came into power in MCD.

Delhi Administration had agreed to pay 45 days of salary to sweepers. This is clear in the following letter to the Municipal Commissioner from the Secretary to the Lt. Governor. The letter is dated the 11th March 1977. This was political gesture to the Bhangis of Delhi from Congress ruled Central Government, in view of the coming elections.

Dear Shri Tamta,

No. 1488/RN/77

Kindly refer to the discussions you had regarding the payment of arrears of wages to the Safai Karamcharis of the M.C.D.

An overall review of Delhi Administration budget has been made with a view to locate (locating) savings of Rs. 10 lakhs so that this amount could be made available to the M.C.D. over and

above the amount accepted by the Government of India in the revised estimates for payment of non-plan grants to the MCD. Necessary sanction for payment of this amount has been issued.

Yours sincerely,

Jag Mohan

(Secretary to the Lt. Governor)

In the minutes of the meeting of the Standing Committee on 29th December, 1979, here is the following information:-

"Delhi Municipal Corporation sweepers went on strike during October-December 1972 for their long standing demands. After the strike was over, sweepers demanded pay for the period they were on strike. It is understood that Delhi Administration had given the money to MCD in the year 1977, for the above mentioned payment. But the payment has not been made so far. These workers whose earning resources are very limited have already suffered due to the non-payment of their wages. The Standing Committee decides that sweepers who were on strike during the year 1972 will be paid their wages of the strike period as a special case so that in future this is not cited as an example."

Relationship between the Corporation and the sweepers soured again when a female sweeper of J.J. Colony Wazirpur was abused and then pushed by a sanitary inspector. In protest, the sweepers of that area stopped work. Following this MCD threatened to dismiss them. Ram Rakha Mal started hunger strike on 12.7.87, and called to other sweepers to support him. The sweepers demonstrated in front of Janata Prime Minister, Morarjee's house. They demanded

dismissal of the sanitary inspector. In the changed socio-political milieu, the Bhangis expected to be treated like other citizens. The other union, the Delhi branch of the Akhil Bhartiya Safai Mazdoor Congress, also demonstrated in front of the Town Hall. Ram Rakha Mal's hunger strike lasted for 60 days. He ended the fast when he was persuaded by Congress for Democracy leader, Jagjivan Ram and Delhi's Mayor, Rajendra Gupt. The Mayor promised to hold an inquiry into the incident. The current main demands of Ram Rakha Mal's union, DPBMS are:-

1. Arrears for uniforms for the period 1972-77. It had been agreed between Deputy Municipal Commissioner, Dinesh Mehta and Ram Rakha Mal in July 1977, that the payment will be made in a fortnight.
2. Payment of strike pay for the 45 day October-December 1972 strike. Rs. 10 Lakh (1 million rupees) had been sanctioned by Delhi Administration (vide letter quoted above). The union argued that dirt allowance (Rs. 5 per mensem) had covered the strike period and it was an anomaly that the pay for that period had been withheld.
3. Wage slips giving detail of hours worked etc.
4. Terrycot (Polyester-cotton) uniforms for sweepers, in line with Terrycot uniforms of some other DMC employees.
5. Permanent job status to temporary sweepers who had worked for more than 240 days, as per promise of Deputy Municipal Commissioner at his meeting with Ram Rakha Mal in April 1978.
6. Selection grade for sweepers, as per Central Government orders that a certain percentage of class IV employees should

be given this selection grade with effect from 1977.

7. According to Municipal by-laws, streets are swept twice a day. However, in order to save money, but in contravention of the by-laws, certain areas are cleaned only once a day, in the afternoon. This is done by sending sweepers to the 'selected' areas after lunch break. The following day these sweepers have to clean up a much larger amount of rubbish in their own beats. The union demands overtime rate for that (The union should have refused to work contrary to the requirement of the municipal by-laws.)

8. DMC officers of class I grade, even if they travel just a few miles, are paid annual conveyance allowance of Rs. 730. The sweepers demand atleast Rs. 50, conveyance allowance.

9. Rs. 210, basic wage for permanent sweepers.

10. Check on extortion from daily wagers when they are made permanent.

11. Soap, oil and uniforms for daily wagers.

12. Medical benefit, in cash.

Other unions also have similar demands except Ram Rakha's demand of strike pay.

"Delhi Pradesh Akhil Bhartiya Safai Mazdoor Congress" has the same demands as that of DPBMS union, except for some extra demands for sweepers of sewer gang.

1. Bicycle allowance for sewer Beldars (At present sewer Baldars on emergency duty are given bicycle allowance)

2. Gas masks and gumboots to sewer men.
3. No other castemen should be employed in sewer gangs. Masons or bricklayers of non-Bhangi caste attached to these gangs refuse to work until the sewer is cleaned by a Bhangi.

Some of these demands were accepted by the MCD in May and July 1981. These were as follows:-

1. 20% of the selection grades by 15th August 1981. (15th August is Independence Day, of course. It is also a day of atonement towards the scheduled castes and the poor in general)
2. Compulsory life insurance scheme from August 1981.
3. Permanent status for daily wagers of 1975 and 1976.
4. Increase in allowance for soap and oil.

The MCD was well-managed by Jan Sangh party, but Mrs. Gandhi's Congress party back in power at the Centre in January 1980, wanted to oust Jan Sangh from MCD. Delhi Corporation was superseded on April 11, 1980 and the local municipal affairs passed into the control of the central government. This was decried as an undemocratic step and misuse of power by the central government. Parliament passed the Essential Services Maintenance Act 1981, empowering the central government to prohibit strikes in any Essential Service like the Railways, Post and Telegraph, Civil Aviation, etc. Vide Section 2 (10) it extended to any Service in, or in connection with the working

of, any system of public conservancy, sanitation or water supply, hospital or dispensaries, in any union territory, cantonment area or undertaking owned or controlled by the central government."

Under Section 4, any person who commences a strike which is illegal under this Act or goes on or remains on, or otherwise takes part in any such strike, or who instigates or incites other persons to commence or take part in any such strike shall be liable to disciplinary action including dismissal. Thus the sweepers cannot resort to strike. They emphasize in their handbills that MCD has now openly adopted the policy of exploitation of sweepers, that agreements arrived at between the MCD officials and the union representatives are conveniently forgotten by the Corporation.

Strikes are now banned but 'Dharnas' and demonstrations of sweepers take place from time to time. The Municipal Corporation is tired of the sweepers' ever increasing demands as it feels that they have already got too much of the local body's scarce resources. Sweepers themselves are not united and are members of three different unions. And union leaders forgo the interests of the workers to gain their own personal and political ends. For instance on 16.6.82 in Lajpat Nagar Okhla

Estate a female sweeper was insulted by a policeman and another sweeper was beaten up and sustained injuries. Sweepers of that area went on strike and demanded that the policeman be suspended from the job. Sweepers demonstrated and staged 'Dharna' in front of the MCD zonal office of Lajpat Nagar. Police lathi-charged and arrested Ram Rakha Mal along with 48 other sweepers. The rival unions tried to break the strike by providing substitutes. However, striking sweepers of Lajpat Nagar did not allow them to do so. Finally the crisis was resolved when assurances were given by Prime Minister Mrs. Gandhi, and the matter referred to Lt. Governor for inquiry.

In February 1983, after 16 years of Jan Sangh rule in MCD the Congress party which claims to be the party that cares for the Harijans again came to power in MCD. To what extent the Bhangis benefit, remains to be seen.

NOTES

1. I have said apparently non-political, because the communist extremists under B.T. Randive (in the 1950's) accused Vinoba Bhave of being a bourgeois stooge, his Bhoodan was to blunt the revolutionary communist uprising in Telangana, in Andhra (then Nizam's Hyderabad).

2. Agitation, in Indian social and political is like the jinn in the bottle. Once released it can become uncontrollable, that is, if the number agitated is large and comes from all strata of society. Unlike the nationalist agitation which affected all, the Bhangi agitation, even though it affects everyone, is generally understood to be a struggle between the sweepers and the municipal authorities.

3. Lathicharge was a technique for riot control developed during the British rule. The lathi is a 6 feet long cane staff, 1¼ " thick, with a steel stave at one end. This stave was to protect the 'lathi' from wear when held on the ground. As the Indian assemblages during freedom struggle were peaceful and disciplined, the authorities had no need for the lathi. But it was frequently used to disperse these assemblies, of course after declaring the public meeting as unlawful under Section 144 of Criminal Procedure Code. After Independence, these public assemblies are less peaceful the lathi has continued to be the basic tool in the police armoury for riot control. But if the mobs manipulated by religious zealots and others continue menacing and if the militants use hand grenades and firearms as in Panjab, the lathi will become a museum piece.

4. Nowhere an employee of a government department or of a reputable private company has to pay fines for mistakes that may occur in the discharge of his duties. The only example, and a much more stupid example, that one may recall in recent times is that of the British Defence Ministry sending a bill for equipment lost in battle to the old mother of a soldier who died fighting on the Falklands Islands.

5. Those working on latrines, garbage depots, slaughter houses and drains were excluded. Their work, according to the all-knowing authorities, was not dirty enough. While the poor sweeper had to beg for any soap, the socialite wives of the "Nation Builders" had an ever widening choice of skin emollients, hand lotions, if one was to go by the advertisements in the Indian weeklies.

6. Under the DMC Act 1957 and vide the Manual of Rules and Regulations 1959 and Manual of by-laws 1959, the Central Govt has supervisory and controlling powers. Not only that, the reserve powers entitle the Centre to intervene in any matter and enforce its views, if it is of the opinion that any duty imposed, upon the Corporation has not been performed or performed in an imperfect insufficient or unsuitable manner - the DMC Act, 1957 Sections 481-488.

7. During Mrs. Gandhi's political eclipse and the Shah Commission deliberation in 1978, processions of the political faithfuls were understandable. What was less understandable, however, were the rickshaw drivers' processions and the like. Some of these headed by brass bands imparted a rather suspect spontaneity.

CHAPTER 12

CONCLUSIONS

In the previous chapters I have described the socio-cultural and economic marginality of the Bhangis and their efforts to escape from their marginal situation by changing their stigmatised identity. The awareness of exploitation and deprivation has led to politicisation, unionisation and change in religious identity by the group to assert themselves. However, the caste based reservation, their politicisation and unionisation have encouraged and intensified consciousness of caste identity.

On a scarce economic base or in the politics of scarcity the trend is towards a reverting to primordial loyalties. For that is what provides access to scarce resources like employment, education and political representation. It does not mean that Bhangis' situation remains totally unchanged but in the near future caste barriers will not be that easy to dismantle more so in the politics of scarcity. I shall summarise the areas in which their stigmatised identity is being reinforced and the areas where it is breaking down.

12. 1. MARGINALITY

The Bhangi community, historically, has lived on the periphery of Hindu society. It has been poor, rejected, dirty and untouchable. Changes in the ruling dynasties made no difference to the social situation of the Bhangis. Conversion to Islam by some of its members and then to Christianity, did not change their marginal position. Social awakening in the later half of the 19th century was mainly confined to the problems of the

upper castes though not without some positive repercussions on the lower castes. Christian missionary activity among the lower castes with promises both of redemption in the life hereafter and some material reward here and now, awakened the Hindu organisations, chief among them the Arya Samaj, to the importance of keeping these castes in the Hindu fold. A programme of reconversion was started. Its impact on the Delhi Bhangis has been discussed under "RELIGION". The freedom struggle and the British response to it in the form of divide and rule, brought the scheduled castes directly in the politicisation process. After the independence of India, constitutional and legal safeguards were provided for these castes and classes and the promise of material improvement and social advancement. Education was to be the main instrument for enabling these castes to compete with the more advanced sections of society. To circumvent widespread social prejudice against the scheduled castes, a guaranteed quota of jobs in the various government departments was reserved for them.

12. 2. OCCUPATIONAL MARGINALITY

The Bhangi community is the lowest among the lower castes and its problems of material and social advancement are somewhat more complicated. The word Bhangi automatically translates into scavenger, polluted identity, extreme untouchability. It is a special form of bonded labour in which a particular caste has performed this occupation in a primitive and unhygienic way. Like the Hindus, the Muslim rulers of Delhi treated the Bhangis as no better than animals. The British brought about incidental marginal improvement in the work of the Bhangi when they introduced pots and commodes in place of dry latrines.

The ordinary Indian, too, now started placing flat-bottomed open bowls under the seat of the dry latrine. But as there was no flush system, the Bhangi still had to 'handle' excreta. His work was extended in some cases as when the Bhangi was required to sweep the large courtyard of the Sahib's bungalow. Only a few who found jobs as cook's assistant or waiter, escaped from the harshness and misery of their traditional occupation. In the next phase, the British did effect a basic change in the nature of scavenging occupation. This was when underground sewer lines were laid in selected areas of the main cities, namely, the official and commercial buildings and the residential areas of the British. This, merely touched the fringe of the vast problem. The municipal authorities across the country were too poor to undertake sewerage projects. The provincial and Central governments were not interested. Only after independence was underground sewerage extended to most of the areas in the cities and major towns. This has greatly eased the nature of work for the scavengers, but the work itself has remained confined to the Bhangi caste. For instance, in the Railways, there is a cadre of sanitation workers who clean the compartments and wash the trains. These workers are from all the castes though Bhangis predominate. But Bhangis alone clean the toilets. As long as the occupation of scavenging continues to be performed by the Bhangi caste alone, they can never be integrated with the rest of the society. It is not suggested that the essential work of sweeping/scavenging is in any way mean or low. But that a particular caste or social group is supposed to do this work and is condemned for that reason makes it questionable. From time to time social workers and politicians have taken up brooms and baskets during

cleanliness campaigns, or as part of Mahatma Gandhi birthday celebration. The hollow exercise is reported in the newspapers with suitable photographs of the ritual. Alone among the upper caste Hindus, Mahatma Gandhi practised what he preached. He himself cleaned and disposed his excreta and urged his Ashram inmates to do the same. This was his way of awakening society to the need of making scavenging a worthwhile occupation on modern lines. This was also a cultural revolution aimed at eradicating untouchability.

Industrialisation and modernisation of manufacturing processes have brought about changes in the attitudes of the people towards hereditary occupations once considered to be exclusively the domain of the low castes, or occupations which were outright defiling. An example of the former is weaving. In upper India, the weavers in most cases were 'low caste' Muslims. Following their wholesale migration to Pakistan from Indian Panjab and contiguous areas, this occupation was adopted not only by the scheduled castes but also by the other castes. Small scale handloom weaving factories are now owned and/or worked by all castes and classes in Panjab, Haryana, Himachal, Rajasthan and western U.P. Barbers, traditionally were from the Nai castes. Now, in the larger urban areas men's hairdressers have a sprinkling of other castes; the more expensive hairdressing saloons are run by the non-scheduled caste persons either as self employed or as capitalist owners, the operatives are from all castes, are paid well and earn good tips from the customers. The newly introduced occupation of women's hairdressers was not started by the traditional Nai castes. Women's hairdressers/beauticians are all from the upper caste

middle classes. This is for two reasons: this is a relatively expensive business in terms of premises and equipment, especially the former which require large amount as premium in big cities. This sort of finance can be arranged by the resourceful middle class. Secondly, the service is run by the middle class women for the middle and upper class women, nearly all from upper castes.

Another example where caste barriers have come down is the occupations relating to leather. The economic lure in the export potential of leather and leather goods has drawn in upper castes in this lucrative market. Thus leather does no longer produce the image of chamar; scavenging, on the contrary, raises the spectre of Bhangi, as ever before.

The Bhangi community is aware of the importance of sanitation in urban areas and the key-role of the community in the matter. The community has made use of the various devices - Jajmani, trade union, political - and put forward demands to improve its material condition.

12. 3. ECONOMY OF SCARCITY

Theoretically it can be assumed that under the process of industrialization and urban migration once the hereditary occupation base gets weakened, it will lose its vitality and will eventually disappear. Bhangis' case does not prove this hypothesis. Despite development, Indian economy is an economy of scarcity. There are not enough jobs to go around. Many caste groups continue sticking to the caste occupation.

Bhangis are aware that scavenging is socially the lowest of all occupations but there is yet no organised group movement for renouncing it as happened among Mahar of Maharashtra. During the past three decades the sweepers, who are in the employment of local authorities, government departments and private companies, have won better pay scale and other facilities. They have organised into a strong trade union movement. The aim has been to raise the wages and the economic position of the group. They have gained self-confidence and self-assertion from their bargaining power. Security of livelihood is an additional factor. Though relations between local bodies and sweepers remain strained, municipalities now call them 'Safai Mazdoor/Karamchari, that is sanitation workers, not Bhangis. Municipalities are also keen to avoid confrontation and avoid using degrading names.

Through trade union activity, they consolidate their caste's economic interests. From time to time they keep expressing the need for new tools and adoption of modern methods of sanitation. This is an important way of minimising the consequences of stigmatised identity.

Their earnings are equal to that of class IV employees of Central Government; class IV is the lowest bracket of government employees and includes all castes. The Bhangis won this pay equation after considerable struggle. However, the stigma sticks to their work and to their caste. It is true that the

effect of sweepers' strike in any Indian town in any season can be devastating. But there is a limit to the use of strikes. The strikers' families do not receive any social security benefits; the authorities use scab labour; scavenging is now an essential service and strike is illegal. Jajmani-Biradari days are almost over. Sweepers are open to the allurements of urban material culture. Most now own monochrome television sets, the strike will be an interruption in their distant dream of colour T.V. set, for instance. Material affluence blunts collective political consciousness of the workers.

The private scavenger works for less real money than before. A private scavenger gets only Rupees 4 to 5 per month from an average household. The amount goes up to Rs. 30 from rich households. About 30 years ago, the payment was Rupee 1 or less. The cost of living and wages of other working people have gone up by upto 10 times. The earning position of other low castes is as follows: A shoeshine charges Rupee 1 for polishing the shoes; a washerman (Dhobi) charges 60 paisa per garment; a man's haircut costs not less than Rupees 3. A middle class housewife, who may easily spend upto Rupees 125, for perms will not hesitate to haggle with a Bhangin, the domestic help, or the vegetable-sellar. A kind-hearted householder who may want to increase the wages is deterred by the others - "you are spoiling these people." There is need for a trade union of the private scavengers.

Since Independence, working conditions of sweepers have been studied by various committees and commissions. In the light of their reports and recommendations, the government and the

local authorities have introduced wheel-barrows, banned head loads, provided work-gloves and so on. Extensive underground sewerage and flush latrines have greatly reduced the need for handling and carrying of human excreta from house to house as in the past. Nevertheless, there is a bedraggled look that strikes the eye in the whole system of sanitation in Delhi, as elsewhere in India. But then this unkempt appearance is noticeable everywhere, in offices, public places, streets and roads and even in most houses (excepting the drawing room). As said above, sweepers working for the Corporation and other organisations now earn more than ever before. Here lies the danger that the sweepers as a caste might be satisfied with what they have gained and stop thinking of abandoning this occupation as caste occupation. In like manner, Jajmani rights of private scavengers buttress the historical relationship between scavenging and the Bhangis.

The Enquiry Committee appointed by the Central Government have recommended municipalisation of private scavenging and abolition of Jajmani rights. To this the pro-Jajmani faction reply that public scavenging is done by the Bhangi caste alone and that Corporation sweepers are still low caste Bhangis to the average person. They forget that sweepers employed by MCD earn more and have much better conditions of work than the private scavengers. Some of the latter are employees of Jagirdars (a term used for feudal landlords) of their own caste who 'own' more 'mohallas' than they can work themselves and therefore, lease to others. The 'tenant' private scavenger's low earning is further reduced, as he has to pay to the 'landlord'.

Municipalisation of private scavenging would mean improved working conditions, more earnings and a better standard of living. The recent privatisation of essential services by some local authorities and hospitals in Britain was opposed by dustmen and hospital workers as it would cause them to put in more work for less wages. Thus, by any account, there is a case for municipalisation of private scavenging in Delhi.

So far we have looked at the Bhangi problem in its traditional context, namely improvement in the work situation and better pay. This assumes that scavenging will, in the foreseeable future, remain the occupation of the Bhangi community alone.

If industrialisation and economic growth were fast enough so that jobs would be readily available then perhaps the caste barriers could be weakened.

12. 4. POLITICISATION

However, caste system has shown resilience in other areas. The political participation of the deprived groups on the basis of reservation of seats has consolidated and strengthened caste interests. Politicisation, that is, the deliberate measures which have given power to deprived groups to assert themselves, have helped in the development of a strong sense of group identity. Bhangis view their own group as people different from other groups. Their caste associations, though unlike the traditional caste councils, are organised mainly for promoting the welfare of their caste by obtaining maximum benefits from the state. Their caste associations are a response to modern social, economic and political situations, even

though they operate in the traditional unit of caste.

The concepts of purity and pollution have considerably weakened atleast in urban areas. Untouchability as a practice which permeated the whole of Hindu society has decreased. In urban areas, untouchability is not overt, and among the educated even covert observance is slowly disappearing. But it still remains a fact of life for scavenging Bhangis. Their tea cups are kept separate in a corner of the courtyard.

In marriages, caste endogamy is an important principle. Among upper castes, caste endogamy principles have weakened to some extent because other class factors also play their role. Hypergamy was prevalent even in earlier times. Among middle range castes, some castes would give their daughters in marriage to men of upper castes. Among lower castes, caste endogamy barriers are still very strong. They are particularly rigid in the case of Bhangis. I have not heard of any class I officer of Bhangi caste marrying outside his caste. Rather, no higher caste person would allow his daughter to marry a Bhangi class I officer.

Caste system has undergone changes in some respects and adaptations in others. Caste tensions and conflicts are added factors which are basically related to reservation policy where the groups seek political and economic power or where they manipulate the state apparatus to promote group interests. Compared to other low castes, the Bhangis still have to cross many barriers.

The national policy is to raise the economic and social status of the Bhangis (as also of other scheduled castes/tribes) and to integrate them with the rest of the society. It is here that educational incentives and reservation of jobs enter the picture. Some voluntary organisations and Gandhian workers have classified the problem into two categories. These are: 'Bhangi Kasht Mukti' or amelioration of the hardships suffered by the Bhangis; and 'Bhangi Mukti' or Bhangi emancipation, that is to say, the elimination of the caste basis of this work. The first category represents a relief programme of an indefinite duration leading to the ultimate goal of 'Bhangi Mukti'. Before that day arrives, the sanitation system will be fully modernised and will cease to be a filthy, degrading occupation. In terms both of work situation and remuneration, the occupation will have to be such as to attract persons from across caste frontiers.

Bhangi Mukti though an attractive goal is still in the far away future. Under the present situation, the Bhangi's identity is co-terminous with his work tools. That is true of any trade, anywhere. In the case of the Bhangi caste, this identity continuous to condition its members even when the tools are no longer used by a Bhangi who has moved out of the caste-ordained work. According to a Bhangi intelligentsia - "By working to remove others' excreta our self-respect and ego have been destroyed and we do not feel anything about our own sub-human existence." In other words, as long as the public sanitation remains primitive and the scavenging continues to be done by the Bhangi caste alone, this community will remain in a sub-human and marginal position in India.

There are various factors that both describe and contribute to the marginality of the Bhangis. One is the residential pattern. An 'outcaste' group has to live in segregation, be that 'Chuhra basti' in the village or the town, negro ghetto in the USA, or black townships in South Africa. The Bhangis have lived at the lowest level of urban squalor, along the open drains at one time, above the rubbish depots and near the dumping grounds. This segregation is continuing under one pretext or the other. After long intervals the slums of the urban poor are cleared usually with a show of municipal brutality. The displaced persons are re-housed. By some administrative design or quirk of Karma, the sweepers find themselves together in a cluster or row of segregated tenements. In Delhi, this type of housing or re-housing by the Corporation works against the idea of integration of lower castes with the upper castes. There has to be mixed housing before there can be fellow feeling among people. Sweeper colonies are a stark reminder of the continuing marginal position of the Bhangis.

12. 5. STIGMATISED IDENTITY

Identity in case of Bhangis is not a physical distinctiveness as in the case of Blacks and Asians in Britain. There are a number of ways in which stigmatized identity of Bhangis is made evident, ways in which they are made aware of how they are considered inferior to other poor of higher castes.

Their segregated homes are usually at some distance from the main dwelling areas. Even where their bastis are geographically near the upper caste localities, the bastis are clearly thought of as "separate". Physically separated habitations result in

social exclusion. After finishing scavenging, sweepers return to their bastis and spend most of the remaining time over there. The very squalor in which Bhangis live stands in the way of establishing new social identity. Poverty and ritual purity/impurity keep them separate from the rest of the society.

It is an altogether different picture in the street scene. In shops, teastalls and restaurants there is no segregation. The person sitting next to you in the bus could be of Bhangi caste. All eat from the same plates and cups in the teashops. No one asks the person serving food in a restaurant what his caste is. It is ironic that those upper caste people who will consume food or drink served by an unknown scheduled caste person (And there could be millions of such persons working in the eating establishments across the country), would shrink away from the tiffin of a white-collar Bhangi colleague working in the same office.

There is evidence of continuing and widespread prejudice that works against the Bhangis. Only in the case of individual Bhangis who have achieved middle class status, the prejudice seems to be marginally reduced. They cannot overcome their marginality. The new economic status does not provide them a new identity. The social distance between these individuals and their community increases. At the same time, they are denied real acceptance by the higher castes. Inevitably, they stop being ashamed of their Bhangi origins. They begin to articulate the interests of their caste in which case the identities are strengthened and not weakened.

Bhangis' identity can be flexible or manipulable as it is not determined by physical distinctiveness. Sometimes phenomenon of passing accompanies the experience of marginality. Passing is possible for those who have escaped from their traditional occupation and residential neighbourhoods. But in government offices this is not possible as their caste identity is known via the reservation quota.

Casteism especially when applied to untouchables, continues to be a sad living reality. It has its parallel in the case of Blacks in the USA and South Africa. Berreman rightly says that "Racism or casteism..... bestows a unique social, political and economic stigma - unique because it is intrinsic - unalterable." (Berreman 1979; 275)

Educational incentives have helped many Bhangi persons of the post-Independence generations to receive the benefits of education and thereby leave the traditional occupation of their caste. It is here that the policy of reservation of jobs and promotions shows its importance. Job reservation or the policy of positive discrimination, while it has helped the Bhangis to make some material progress, has not brought them much nearer to the average upper caste Hindu. For the Bhangi, no matter what his achieved status may be, his stigmatised identity remains a fact of life. He is required to reveal his identity on the prescribed forms if he wants to have the benefit of protective discrimination. For admission to educational institutions, or for scheduled caste scholarships, status is certified by a gazetted officer or Member of Parliament. In the beginning, the form required the applicant to state his

community. Subsequently, it was discovered that several non-scheduled caste persons were misusing the community requirement. Therefore, the word community was replaced by caste/tribe.

The government needs to identify people in order to give them benefits. It is for this reason that in census reports scheduled castes and tribes are listed. A Bhangi, like the other scheduled castes, can hardly shed the low caste status from which the government is trying to help him to escape. This self-identification by caste on application forms, the labelling on personal files runs counter to the aim of integration. The information in the forms and the files is meant for processing of scheduled caste benefits and for no other purpose. But it gets revealed to the upper caste colleagues, some of whom then indulge in sarcastic remarks about the scheduled castes. A Chamar becoming a shoe merchant or a Bhangi selling vegetables or driving a scooter-taxi, are acceptable norms of social mobility, that is, acceptable to upper caste 'traditionalists'. But let a scheduled caste person enter the exclusive club of the upper castes - the government offices - and disturbing ripples appear. There is curiosity to know "which caste among the scheduled castes?." The Bhangi knows from experience that he should soften the shock to his upper caste colleagues. Bhangis prefer to be called Balmikis rather than Bhangis as the latter word is felt to be derogatory as it is a synonym for a scavenger. To the ordinary Hindu, Balmiki means Bhangi but not exactly the same thing. The former is harsher while the latter evokes for some atleast, vague connection with Rishi Valmiki. Names and words have

peculiar effect on people. Mr. Rooldoo Ram evokes the image of a person from the sub-montane region of North-Western India. Orange Juice is just orange juice. Ju-Cee is more modern, scientifically constituted and must have high Vitamin C content. Packaging colours our idea of the worth of a product. So does clothing and fashion. In the same way, an educated Bhangi doing a white-collar job (a relatively prestigious position) in the office is not looked upon as a polluting scavenger. But his new status is not accepted lightly. The upper caste clerks will not mind a Bhangi peon as the job is one of menial service at the disposal of the (upper caste) clerks and others. But a Bhangi as a fellow clerk is an interloper, an imposition by the government. To his upper caste colleagues, the Bhangi clerk is a favourite of the government who, because of reservation system, has easy access to job and promise of quick promotion. This is a half-truth and like all half-truths contains ignorance, prejudice and is the source of resentment and even hatred. It is unlawful to insist that Bhangi colleagues should have separate or marked cups and glasses. The way out is to have one's own cup separate from the common lot. This too would be an offence if it could be shown that it was expressive of untouchability. But that would not be easy to prove in the courts as the 'untouchability' offender could say that his 'exclusive' cup was not directed against scheduled caste colleagues or any colleague. It is at lunch break that the upper caste susceptibilities about food can be sensitive. (See the case of Sant Lal) The taunts of the caste Hindu are often within the hearing of their scheduled caste colleagues; in fact these are meant to be heard - "Why should they (the scheduled castes) worry about performance..... they are the Prohits of

the government". In offices, they are frequently blamed for mistakes, incompetence and lack of knowledge. It is not a pleasant experience for the Bhangi elites¹. In their school days many of the first generation Bhangi elites had helped their parents in private scavenging. They had first hand experience of the housewife's remarks about the quality of scavenging work. After working the hard way through school and even university, finding a white collar job (the dream of every Bhangi boy) and then to be confronted by upper caste prejudice and cold shouldering is a depressive state of affairs.

12. 6. RESERVATION POLICY

Caste Hindus have mixed responses and changing attitudes to the improvement in the condition of the untouchables and other deprived sections of the society. In the beginning they openly accepted the policy of positive discrimination in favour of scheduled castes. For two decades after independence, most scheduled caste applicants were usually for manual or menial jobs and only a small number for clerical posts. In the expanding bureaucracy, scheduled caste applicants were absorbed without much concern to entrenched upper castes.

Bureaucratic expansion and contraction alters social relationships between groups. Upto the mid-sixties there was a steady though slow progress in the representation of scheduled castes in government service. Upper caste privileged groups did not show adverse feelings against reservation as it was a period of expanding bureaucracy. This was for three reasons: first, the scheduled castes/tribes were accepted as 'the sins of our

fathers' and had to be brought back into the mainstream of national life. Secondly, at that time there were not many job seekers from these groups to clerical upward posts to pose a threat to the socially entrenched sections. Thirdly there was a merry-go-round of expanding bureaucracy in which a few newcomers from the low castes caused no concern to the upper caste groups. However, in the next decade, with the expansion of educational opportunities for the low castes, and the improvement in the implementation of reservation policy upto class I posts, a visible number of scheduled caste/tribes were to be seen in the bureaucracy at almost all levels. Anti-reservation feelings hitherto dormant came to life precisely when the process of bureaucratic expansion started coming to a halt.

A comparison may be made with the socially disadvantaged coloured immigrants in Britain (and other European countries). In the post-war economic expansion, British employers (both the state and the private sector) welcomed the new Commonwealth workers as cheap labour in British factories and hospitals. As the economic upsurge levelled off, the immigration was controlled and then halted. When the slump set in, the immigrants became unwanted. Race emerged as an issue for political and public debate.

The situation has changed during the last 12-15 years. Now there is a far greater number of scheduled caste candidates (including also scheduled tribes and the ever-increasing list of backward classes for government jobs). They are better educated and there is competition even among the scheduled caste applicants for job quotas. They are taking up jobs

at the top level. It is here that the upper castes feel threatened. Reservation quota system applies not only to appointments but also to promotions. Then there is roster system under which reserved posts that remain unfilled by the scheduled caste candidates are transferred and added to the next reserved quota, thereby reducing the share of the general candidates. This, as would be shown later, has proved to be the last proverbial straw for the general population, especially in Gujrat state.

The reservation system is operative in the civilian service of the government. Private employers are under no obligation to observe this system. At first 12.5% of the jobs were reserved for the scheduled caste candidates, but in March 1970, this was increased to 15%. In the beginning, class I and class II reserved posts could not be filled according to the reserved quota requirement, the reason being the shortage of qualified scheduled caste candidates, despite lowering of qualification standard for them. In class III posts the representation was almost complete in accordance with the required quota and in class IV posts (peons, sweepers etc) the untouchables exceeded the quota. The Report of Commissioner for scheduled castes and scheduled tribes for 1969, stated that, "while a large number of scheduled caste candidates remained unemployed, about 5% of the vacancies reserved for them were filled by persons belonging to other communities. (Report 1970, P. 80). The Commissioner commented that, "it was not the lack of suitably qualified candidates but the indifference and conscious or unconscious discrimination in the selection procedure." Subsequent reports are no different.

With the passage of time, caste Hindus or the non-scheduled caste Indians are becoming bitter about the reservation system. It looks that in the coming years the competition for Jobs and opportunities between the scheduled castes themselves and with the rest of the society will become tougher causing social friction on an increasing scale. The anti-reservation movement was first started in Bihar and then in Gujrat. In the latter case, the issue was reservation in medical colleges. The government employees of Gujrat state threatened to go on strike in March 1980, on the issue of promotion by roster system. A section actually went on strike. The state-wide threatened strike was called off following conciliatory gestures by the government. In 1981, a violent anti-reservation agitation went on for 3 months and left more than 40 dead. The social fabric lay in tatters.

Widespread disruption of law and order and social relations occurred^r in April 1985. It started as the upper caste reaction against the state government manipulation of caste for electoral gains, when the government extended the scheme of reservation to recently discovered new backward classes for seats in engineering and medical colleges².

The reservation policy is opposed on, what the opponents say, are basic issues. It is argued that the policy contravenes^e the preamble of the constitution because the policy tends to restrain the establishment of a socialist and casteless society. In the beginning, reservation applied only to legislatures so that representatives from the depressed sections of society could participate in the law making process. But its extension

to educational institutions and government jobs was stretching the meaning of Article 335, according to which the state may (and not shall) provide "facilities for the advancement of socially and culturally backward groups." This according to the opponents of the reservation policy, could mean better educational opportunities and living conditions for these groups. But reservation of job quotas, lowering of standards of education and professional training for these castes and groups for their recruitment to jobs and services in the reserved quota was destructive of service morale. That is to say, if some officers are promoted on the basis of reservation quota others will feel cheated. Reservation policy perpetuates the caste walls and holds back progress. Only when talent is rewarded can the country go confidently into the 21st century (The latest slogan of the Congress party is about the 21st century. The anti-reservationists belong to the opposition parties and use the "21st century" slogan for their own purpose. They maintain that reservation will hold back progress.)

The rallying point for both the anti-reservationists and the protagonists of reservation and its extension to backward classes in recent times is the report of the Mandal Commission. B.P. Mandal, at one time the Chief Minister of Bihar, came from a backward class. The report which was submitted at the end of 1980, has not been accepted by the government. The widespread suspicion about the report was that it was unscientific and doctored. Prof. B.K. Roy Burman, a noted demographer, was asked by the Commission to conduct the research. But when the demographic data started coming in, he was denied access to it.

As to Mandal, he was of the opinion that over half the population of India (52.4 percent) were backward classes and that these groups were between the upper and the lower castes. The backward classes needed reservation, as in the case of scheduled castes/tribes. But as the scheduled castes/tribes had already been given just over 22 percent of job quotas and the Supreme Court had restricted job reservation to 50 percent, these 52.4 percent backward classes could not get more than 27-28 percent reservation.

The identification of the backward groups was to be with reference to rate of literacy, average land holding, etc. The reservation was to be extended to the whole caste group, including its prosperous sections. The anti-reservation agitators disagree with this line of thinking. (The Caste Crunch, India Today, April 15, 1985). Some of them have even advocated abolition of reservation for a caste when two-thirds of its members have improved their economic and social status. But this will leave the remaining one-third in almost perpetual backwardness. The Central Government is reported to be considering having a new look at the whole problem of reservation. If caste criterion is given up in favour of economic backwardness, it will benefit all the poor of the scheduled castes and of the backward classes, including also the poor among the upper castes and the minority communities. This will satisfy all, being in line with modern thinking and will remove the caste leverage in politics. (But are the politicians ready to forego the tactical advantages of the bloc votes of the lower castes?) A policy of means testing for the purpose of help

with educational expenses and better housing will need to be formulated. But the existing differences in social, cultural and environmental factors among various sections and regions will continue conditioning the educational achievements despite the yet-to-be formulated means testing for all. This is observable in advanced countries; India has to cover a long ground yet. Reservation for nearly forty years has produced only marginal results and has strengthened caste consciousness. A policy of universal means testing should produce a more progressive and egalitarian society and further reduce the caste cry in Indian society.

12. 7. CASTE CONSCIOUSNESS

An Indian society freed of restrictive ideas and practices of caste, where a person's worth is not overshadowed by his birth, is an ideal - a Satyuga to come. In the real world, caste consciousness has sharpened. In an expanding economy where more and more goods are available for a much larger number of people including the lower classes not possible 25 years ago, social conflicts flare up as people's expectations grow and outstrip the available goods and services. Politics of scarcity have gone beyond basic food, clothing and shelter to what once were comforts and even luxuries for many e.g. room coolers, television and an ever larger variety of consumer goods. Social conflicts are on several levels - Hindu-Muslim, regionalism (local Assamese Vs the foreigners from Bangla Desh) and, of course, caste conflicts. Sometimes, many strands are seen in these often localised conflicts. Observers have noted the viciousness of conflicts in the two materially most advanced regions of India - Gujrat and Panjab.

These social conflicts and the increasing outcry against reservation has alarmed the scheduled castes, including the Delhi Bhangis, of whom many are engaged in the traditional occupation of scavenging and sweeping, and many more are doing low paid unskilled and semiskilled jobs. Only a relatively few have progressed to white collar occupations and thus, for most purposes, become socially touchable. The scavenging Bhangis, the poorly paid Bhangis, can be seen living on the edge of Hindu society. Their poverty and the nature of their work (even though less polluting since the introduction of flush latrines) ensures their marginality for the foreseeable future. But what about those who through education and reservation have succeeded in securing relatively prestigious jobs? Their position is not easy either. They want to live with their community but their hard-earned new economic (and social) status is strongly discouraging in this respect. To return from the world of non-scavenging work, from an office or factory, to the Basti environment is really hard for the educated ex-Bhangi, that is, ex-scavenger. His new achieved status gives him self-respect. He lives in a better locality, sends children to better schools and his wife does not have to work as a sweeperess. If she is educated, she may be engaged in a prestigious job. If he is a government employee he may get a government flat appropriate to his status in the bureaucratic hierarchy. As accommodation provided by the government is limited to a small percentage of the employees, most government servants find accommodation by themselves. For an ex-Bhangi, renting private accommodation is not very easy in lower/middle class (upper caste) areas. He has to conceal his caste identity or, what is more likely, declare a false one.

Whatever his attained status in life, his upper caste neighbours would still consider him a Bhangi, Chuhra or Balmiki. So he is concerned about concealing his true caste identity. The cases of Sant Lal and S.P. Chandel illustrate this dilemma. (Sant Lal is concerned about concealing his caste identity. Chandel is politically more aware and active and thus need not and should not worry about his caste identity.) This would mean no visitors from his community and his own visits to his community would become less frequent. In this state of affairs, he becomes a sort of outsider to his people, an educated "Babu" who has deserted his community. One cannot blame the educated ex-Bhangi for living away from the slum influences of the Basti. However, the new surroundings fail to provide him with a new identity. His roots are in his community and it is there that he returns for life-cycle ceremonies. Sooner or later, he becomes a spokesman for the less fortunate members of his community.

Notwithstanding caste conflicts here and there, caste barriers have been lowering slowly. This is progress, even though very tardy at times. Upper caste attitudes towards untouchables, even towards the most untouchable Bhangi caste, are less rigid now. Hindu society is going through a process of change and at the same time trying to find a new equilibrium. Bhangis are part of that changing situation and, on the whole, they have benefited from it. In the past conversions to other religions did not bring the Bhangis any real advantage. Today Islam the world over, is going through the internal turmoil of fundamentalism and should have no attraction for would-be converts. Christianity in India is now synonymous with some

hospitals here and a few schools there. Hindu society alone is set on the slow and at times painful process of reclaiming its lost brethren, the untouchables. The Bhangis who in their school days scavenged and studied were, in the spirit and tradition of Valmiki, trying to grow out of their socially prescribed situation. Politics of scarcity is sometimes a convenient excuse to hide the restrictive attitudes and practices of one section of Hindu society against another. Within the individual family, scarcity and prosperity is shared equally; nay, the very young, the sick, the old and the vulnerable and given preferential treatment to protect them from hardship which the family may be facing. What is true in the family context should be the norm for a society based on justice. The untouchables and Bhangis suffered even in the golden age of Hinduism. Society in India, or for that matter any society, which tolerates injustice and flourishes on the oppression of one section by another is a divided society. Restrictive caste practices and caste conflicts indicate the social ills endemic in India. Bhangi caste condemned in perpetuity to carrying night soil of their fellow Indians symbolises the chronic social malady.

NOTES

1. Elite is here used in a limited sense. It is not a ruling group but a section of the community that is above the average in education and influence.

2. In July 1985, the anti-reservation agitation was called off when the state government withdrew its scheme for extension of reservation. The bloody agitation cost hundreds of lives. The Chief Minister, Madhav Solanki, had to go.

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