

Rethinking Inequality:  
*Dalits* in Uttar Pradesh in the Market Reform Era

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### *Abstract*

In the contentious debates regarding the consequences of India's shift from a state-led to a market-oriented economic model the issue of caste and caste practices, particularly for Dalits, has been an empirical weak link. We draw on a unique survey designed and implemented by members of the Dalit community to capture social practices and conditions important to them which are not captured in the usual household surveys. This survey asked *all* Dalit households in two blocks of Uttar Pradesh (one in Azamgarh district in East U.P. and one in Bulandshahar district in West U.P.) both about conditions currently and in 1990. The survey results show substantial changes in a wide variety of social practices affecting Dalit well-being—increased personal consumption patterns of status goods (e.g. grooming, eating), widespread adoption of “elite” practices around social events (e.g. weddings, births), less stigmatising personal relations of individuals across castes (e.g. economic and social interactions), and more expansion into non-traditional economic activities and occupations. These findings suggest that placing exclusive focus on measures of material well-being, such as consumption expenditure and its inequality, is misplaced as it misses important changes socially structured inequalities and hence in individuals' “functionings.” During this period, the decline of unfreedoms resulting from the reduction in social inequalities in the case of Dalits in UP was itself development – and for them perhaps more fundamental than any other yardstick of development.

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Popular media and academic descriptions of India's rapid economic transformation in the era of market reforms often come with a "but": "But development has also disrupted existing ways of living. It has strained the social and cultural fabric of the villages."<sup>2</sup> If any post-Foucauldian social scientist has any insight to offer, surely it is that the nostalgia of elites is an unreliable guide to the actual experiences of marginalized social groups. As Ambedkar recognized more than six decades ago: "The love of the intellectual Indians for the village community is of course infinite if not pathetic... What is the village but a sink of localism, a den of ignorance, narrow mindedness, and communalism?"<sup>3</sup> Precisely those people and groups the "cultural fabric of the villages" pressured into social inferiority generally lack access both to media outlets and to the technical tools of academia for structuring discourse, both of words and numbers. Do Dalits' own assessments of the era of market reform come with a "but" or with an "and"?

We add to the existing literature on the evolution of well being during the era of market reforms using a survey constructed by Dalits, implemented by Dalits, administered to all Dalit households in two blocks of Uttar Pradesh. The blocks chosen are Bilaria Ganj in Azamgarh District in Eastern UP and Khurja in Bulandshahar District in Western UP [hereafter eastern block and western block respectively]. The instrument, uniquely among existing large-scale surveys, asks specifically about changes since 1990 in a variety of caste practices at the household and social level. With this data we can document three massive changes in the areas surveyed.

First, there have been major changes in the grooming, eating, and ceremonial consumption patterns of Dalits, signaling their higher social status by adopting higher status consumption patterns. Dalits shifted out of low status (but highly caloric intensive) foods like sugar cane juice and *roti chatni* into diets containing (unbroken) rice, fresh vegetables and spices and increased use of high status foods in social occasions like weddings.

Second, respondents report changes in the accepted behaviors between castes, with rapid erosion in discriminatory processes that stigmatized Dalits. By and large in these blocks Dalits are less likely to be seated separately at weddings, they no longer are expected to handle the dead animals of other castes, there is a noticeable increase in

births in Dalit households that are attended by non-Dalit midwives, and non-Dalits increasingly accept hospitality in Dalit homes. None of these practices were common in 1990.

Third, there have been large shifts in the pattern of economic life both away from and within the villages. There has been a considerable increase in (mostly) circular migration to distant cities to work with nearly half of Dalit households in the eastern block having a member in the cities. In the villages, Dalits have shifted into professions (e.g. tailors, masons, and drivers) and businesses (e.g. grocers, *paan* shop owners). Agricultural relations have changed such that almost no Dalits participate in bonded economic ties (*halwaha*) and many fewer Dalits even perform agricultural labor on upper caste lands as Dalits now are much more likely to contract in factors from high caste groups (e.g. tractors, land) than sell their labor to them.

### **Inequality in what? For whom?**

India's socially marginalized populations suffer from two key forms of disadvantage – social indignity and material poverty – which emerge from intertwined socially and economically perpetuated inequalities. Empirical assessments in India tend to conflate the two into measures of material well being (e.g. poverty or inequality) or “neutral” social indicators like education, health, or nutrition outcomes. Even if the distinction between indignity and economic status arises, it is treated as axiomatic that the first is completely dependent on the second. Even when attention is turned to “caste”, often the data compare outcomes on standard indicators (consumption expenditures, education) across castes, but with almost no attention to how caste markers, behaviors, and practices themselves may have changed.

Many have expressed concern that growth of the market economy in India unleashes “inequality-increasing” forces. Dev and Ravi (2007) reach a “clear conclusion” that inequality “increased significantly in the post-reform period” a conclusion shared by other researchers (e.g. Himanshu 2007, Datt and Ravallion (2010)). But the exclusive use of consumption expenditures or differences across castes in a few outcomes as measures of inequality cannot be adequate in the many parts of rural India where social inequalities—servility, humiliation, lack of self-respect—are important. Comparing

consumption expenditures based inequality statistics across states immediately reveals the incompleteness of the picture they present. Table 1 shows that the Gini index of consumption expenditure inequality is considerably greater in Kerala than in UP, in both rural and urban areas. Moreover, the difference between Kerala and Bihar or UP are substantially larger than the All India *changes*, so the gap between UP and Kerala in urban areas in 2005 is .044 points versus a total All-India change of .034 points. Thus, despite substantially lower inequalities in human capital in Kerala relative to UP in the early 1980s as well as two decades later, in 2005 Kerala had more unequal consumption inequality. Simply comparing consumption expenditures or consumption inequality alone would lead one to conclude that Kerala is more unequal than UP. But such a conclusion would contradict the findings of a host of studies extolling the greater commitment to equality of the Kerala model of development. The reason is that the cognitive and social aspects of inequality e.g. self-respect, servility, full participation in social and political life, need to be factored in to make an adequate comparison.

| Table 1: Comparison of Gini coefficient of consumption inequality between Kerala and UP reveals Kerala is, on this dimension, much more unequal   |             |         |         |        |
|---|-------------|---------|---------|--------|
| Region  | Rural/Urban | 1983/84 | 2004/05 | Change |
| All India   | Rural       | 0.308   | 0.305   | -0.003 |
| Kerala  | Rural       | 0.32    | 0.382   | 0.062  |
| UP  | Rural       | 0.292   | 0.29    | -0.002 |
| Excess of Kerala over UP  |             | 0.028   | 0.092   |        |
| All India   | Urban       | 0.341   | 0.375   | 0.034  |
| Kerala  | Urban       | 0.39    | 0.41    | 0.02   |
| UP  | Urban       | 0.372   | 0.366   | -0.006 |
| Excess of Kerala over UP  |             | 0.018   | 0.044   |        |
| Source: Dev, S Mahendra and C Ravi, 2007. "Poverty and Inequality: All-India and States, 1983-2005." <i>Economic and Political Weekly</i> , Vol. 42, No.6 (February 10). Using consumption inequality from either Himanshu (2007) or the Planning Commission gives similar results. |             |         |         |        |

As elsewhere in rural India, in rural Uttar Pradesh caste has played a key role in structuring individual identity, limiting economic choices, and reinforcing patterns of consumption consonant with the identification of Dalits as social inferiors. In evaluating

the evolution of well being of Dalits and other socially excluded groups during the era of market reform—a period that also coincides with increasing political empowerment of Dalits in U.P.—one cannot simply assume how the complex interplay of economic, political and social has played out. As Chandhoke (2009: 141) points out, “the link between redistribution (of material resources) and what has come to be known as recognition (development of feelings of self respect)” has “proved to be more tenuous than originally conceived by egalitarians” especially since recognition “is not so easily commanded by politics.” Passing a law against discrimination will not make an upper caste invite a lower caste person into his house, or, even if he does, to offer him something to eat and drink. Conversely, perhaps an increasing penetration of markets may increase income/consumption inequality overall, but the move to arms length market transactions may have socially egalitarian consequences in the “recognition” dimension. This could be much more important in rural India as social inequalities shape the daily lives of marginalized populations. Improvements in self-respect in daily interactions may matter more to rural Dalits than the income inequality from increases in wealth amongst the Mumbai industrialists or the Bangalore IT tycoons. But before the changes in caste differences can be evaluated and valued they must first be measured.

### **Survey Instrument and Methods**

The data we analyze is unique, in four key ways.

First, our data is a *census* covering all Dalit households (a total of 19,087 Dalit households) in eastern block as well as western block. In each village in these two blocks two instruments were administered: a village instrument which collected data about economic and social characteristics of the village; and a household instrument applied to *all* Dalit households in the village, not just to a sample. While we do not wish to claim that these two blocks are representative of broader geographical areas the two districts were purposively chosen – in Azamgarh District (East) and in Bulandshahar District (West) – as instances of the range of districts in UP to illuminate the socio-economic dynamics sweeping the state. The physical distance between the two districts is almost 800 kilometers. Bulandshahar District, an early beneficiary of the Green Revolution, is

more fertile and rich, compared to Azamgarh District. As of the late 1990s, ten percent of the population of Bulandshahar was below the poverty line, whereas the incidence was four times greater in Azamgarh. Furthermore, Bulandshahar's proximity to Delhi has made it more integrated into a nearby large urban economy while Azamgarh is more remote. Within the districts the blocks were chosen to be as "typical" as possible, if anything somewhat poorer and more remote than the blocks containing the district center.

Second, lifestyle changes can only be understood in comparative perspective presenting us with two alternatives: compare the lifestyles of Dalits with non-Dalits or compare the present lifestyle of Dalits with their past. We chose the second approach, which in turn determined instrument design and choice of enumerators. We sought to understand changes in the food habits, lifestyle, caste practices, mobility and occupations of Dalit households since 1990. In the absence of any previous study on these topics there was no alternative but to ask people for their recall of previous conditions, with all the limitations this implies. However, as subjective well being is the primary phenomena of interest and changes in "capabilities" may affect perceptions of well-being then it is not at all clear comparisons of responses at two points of time are superior to recall data. Moreover, the danger of recall bias is outweighed also by the desire for a current assessment of caste phenomena, as ironically, while there is broad unanimity on the past plight of Dalits, differences often arise on the present.

The reference period was chosen as 1990 to capture people's recall of how conditions were before the more aggressive and open market liberalization efforts at the national level that began in 1991. One risk of recall is that people generally have a difficult time anchoring in a specific period. It is often difficult to tell whether questions about conditions twenty years ago elicit responses of "a long time ago" or "ten years ago" and if people's responses are pushed into the far distant past this may overstate the apparent changes. However, when Dalits and non-Dalits alike were asked in unstructured ways (e.g. as part of a film that was made in conjunction with this research effort) about how much things had changed, the query elicited comments like "Night and day" or "The world has been turned upside down." When asked when these changes began the most commonly proposed timing was "10 to 15 years ago" which, as the survey was carried

out in early 2008 would have dated the changes to beginning 1992 to 1997, which was before the reference period. We further addressed the question of recall bias by comparing the answers from households with younger (less than 40) and older heads (who might have very different “telescoping” propensity) and found no evidence of recall bias working in any particular direction. Finally, the survey also has questions on certain physical assets such as cell phone ownership, where it is easy to check if the responses for the earlier period are more optimistic than the reality, since we know that cell phones were simply not around in 1990.

Third, the survey is unique in that the questions were developed *by* Dalits to reflect the economically and socially salient changes *for* Dalits. Our survey instrument reflects our belief that, while there are many aspects of well-being that are objective, many others are contextual to the lived experience of peoples in these communities and cannot be reduced to the lens that standard government mobilized survey instruments use to “see” and hence structure reality (Scott 1998). Amartya Sen has emphasized that well being is subjectively assessed and emphasizes “capabilities” and “functionings” that reflect a particular subjective valuation. However, in empirical practice this conceptual insight has congealed into merely emphasizing a slightly different set of outcomes (and slightly different set of summary statistics) while the question of *whose* views matter in the *design* of the survey instrument is ignored.

For instance, Bourdieu’s *Distinction* (1984) emphasizes that the consumption choices that individuals make are not merely the result of homogenous agents but rather reflect that agents and agency of individuals are embedded in larger social structures or “fields.” He shows that choices of individuals about music, art, food are not just shaped by freely floating “preferences” or idiosyncratic “tastes” but rather are deeply influenced by individuals’ conception of themselves, their identity and role in the pre-formed fields of social orders. Individuals choose based on their (re)presentation of their identity to their social world. Our survey instrument asks about consumption of specific items through which Dalits have expressed their desire for increased status. “Consumerism” (gaining social status through consumption patterns) has many drawbacks, particularly for those whom social status is assured through other means. But, at the same time the

restructuring of social fields such that acquiring status through consumption is a new possibility that can represent a new freedom to those for whom that freedom to status has been historically denied.

The inevitable disadvantage to this approach is that we have less direct comparability with other survey instruments. However, perhaps this will change in the future. For instance the recent *Report by the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress* recommends that “...the time is ripe for our measurement system to shift emphasis from measuring economic production to measuring people’s well-being.”<sup>4</sup> Since “objective and subjective dimensions of well-being are both important” therefore “...the Commission has identified the following key dimensions that should be taken into account...(a) Material living standards (income, consumption and wealth); (b) Health; (c) Education; (d) Personal activities including work (e) Political voice and governance; (f) Social connections and relationships; (g) Environment (present and future conditions); and (h) Insecurity, of an economic as well as a physical nature.” Our process of bottom up elaboration of a survey instrument led us to include several of these dimensions. Furthermore, the social changes captured by our survey instrument are a measure of sustainable social change. While incomes can go up and down, once Dalits have begun to look into the eyes of upper castes rather than lower them in servility, things will never be the same again.

Fourth, given the unique subject matter the survey used only Dalit enumerators, whose presence in the village was facilitated by people known to the residents. The quality of any survey data is afflicted by incentives and capabilities of the different actors in the supply chain – be they respondents, enumerators, collection entities or data analysts (Herrera and Kapur 2007). Targeted programs create the legitimate fear of losing access to program benefits, either individually (e.g. being taken off of a “below poverty line” list) or collectively which creates powerful incentives for individuals to under-report their income and assets. Even with the facilitation of fellow Dalits known to the villagers, the enumerators experienced instances in which they felt respondents were deliberately understating their true asset ownership or lifestyle.<sup>5</sup> In addition to respondent incentives, it is unclear how reliable government non-Dalit enumerators have been with regard to data collection on Dalits. Historically, many survey enumerators would elicit

information from one or two key respondents from the Dalit hamlet about all of the Dalit households due to their social and cultural reluctance to enter into Dalit hamlets or households, which could be interpreted as “Untouchability in practice” but simply a result of shirking and apathy in class terms.

### **“The World Turned Upside Down”: Changes in social practices**

Our survey provides five types of changes in consumption patterns and social behaviors: (a) grooming; (b) eating practices; (c) community social occasions (e.g. transport to weddings, what guests are fed); (d) inter-personal relationships across communities (e.g. accepting snacks, midwifery, hiring upper caste men to till Dalits’ land with tractors), and; (e) social relationships across communities (e.g. seating separately at weddings). In each of these social domains our survey demonstrates four important trends. First, there have been not just changes but *massive* changes. Second, these changes are not just a continuation of previous trends but a sharp *acceleration* in the pace of change. Third, while many social practices are positively associated with households’ level of material well-being and while there have been considerable improvements in material well-being, the observed changes in wealth alone (proxied by change in an index of assets) do not explain the magnitude of the changes in social practices. Fourth, there are often differences across the two blocks in the level and pace of change.

### **Changes in asset ownership**

We begin with reporting the results on changes in material well being, principally because in discussing the social changes below we wish to emphasize that the social changes are far larger than would be “expected” from the material changes alone. Table 2 reports the much higher levels of ownership of basic consumer durables in 2007 than in 1990 and improvement in the quality of housing. Ownership of bicycles, fans, TVs, and of course mobile phones, all increased by typically a third to a half of households. (Reassuringly on the question of recall bias almost no one remembered owning a mobile before 1990). However, these improvements were from a very low base so this is still a very poor group of people, poorer in the eastern block than in western block. There was also a very substantial improvement in housing, with 64.4 percent and 94.6 percent

respectively in eastern block and western block reporting they now live in *pakka* housing compared to 18.1 and 38.4 percent respectively in 1990.

We use Principal Component Analysis on these ten asset/housing indicators to construct an index of assets from the first principal component as a proxy for each household's wealth or long-run income (Filmer and Pritchett 2000). Looking at the index based in 2007 (the overall mean across the two blocks in 2007 is zero by construction) we see there has been substantial increase in the asset index, by 1.56 units (almost a full standard deviation) in eastern block and by more than a standard deviation in western block, increasing by 2.39 units. These are massive increases in assets as nearly every household had a lower asset index in 1990 than the *average* index in 2007.

While one might think of this as a change in material status only, there is also a social component to consumption, which in the case of Dalits is a plus in and of itself. As markets expand, consumer durables such as cell phones, scooters, TVs, etc., have become the markers of social prestige and the Dalits can now buy and brandish them. While some might decry this “consumerism”, earlier the only marker of prestige was one's birth and Dalits, being at the bottom, could not alter their social standing irrespective of their economic position. Consequently, an increase in access to status, even from consumption goods, is an expansion in freedoms.

|                               | Eastern Block<br>[Azamgarh District] |             |        | Western Block<br>[Bulandshahar District] |             |        |      |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-------------|--------|--|-------------|--------|------|
|                               | 1990<br>(%)                          | 2007<br>(%) | Change | 1990<br>(%)                              | 2007<br>(%) | Change |      |
| Live in a <i>Pakka</i> house  | 18.1                                 | 64.4        | 46.3   | 38.4                                     | 94.6        | 56.2   |      |
| Have a TV set                 | 0.9                                  | 22.2        | 21.1   | 0.7                                      | 45.0        | 44.3   |      |
| Basic phone                   | 0.2                                  | 1.8         | 1.6    | 0.1                                      | 2.8         | 2.7    |      |
| Mobile                        | 0.1                                  | 36.3        | 36.2   | 0.2                                      | 32.5        | 32.3   |      |
| Pressure cooker               | 1.3                                  | 16.8        | 15.5   | 0.6                                      | 32.4        | 31.8   |      |
| Fans                          | 2.1                                  | 36.7        | 34.6   | 4.5                                      | 61.4        | 56.9   |      |
| Use firewood for fuel         | 98.7                                 | 97.0        | -1.7   | 98.9                                     | 98.5        | -0.4   |      |
| Bicycle                       | 46.6                                 | 84.1        | 37.5   | 37.7                                     | 83.7        | 46.0   |      |
| Motorcycle/ scooter           | 0.7                                  | 7.6         | 6.9    | 0.7                                      | 12.3        | 11.6   |      |
| Chairs                        | 1.6                                  | 17.0        | 15.4   | 1.1                                      | 38.2        | 37.1   |      |
| Asset Index,<br>based 2007    | Mean                                 | -2.03       | -.474  | 1.56                                     | -1.95       | .438   | 2.39 |
|                               | Std. Dev.                            | .594        | 1.71   |  | .588        | 1.83   |      |
| Source: Authors' calculations |                                      |             |        |  |             |        |      |

### Changes in Grooming Practices

We start our analysis of the social changes proper with what might seem not social at all but three seemingly trivial consumer items: the use of personal grooming products; toothpaste, shampoo, bottled hair-oil. Adam Smith articulated that “poverty” is a contextual social construct of the minimum standards a person must meet to appear in society without shame. If Dalits were treated social inferiors then they also could (and in many instances could only) appear in society with lower (or at least different) standards of personal appearance. Change in grooming and in dress is itself an assertion of social aspirations. Table 3 shows the massive shifts in the use of the three personal grooming products the survey asked about, as well as two items of dress (petticoats, shoes/slippers in public). Almost none of the respondents recalls using these items in 1990 while today over half of the people in both blocks report someone in the household using each of the three items (with the exception of hair oil in western block). Dalits who used *none* of these three items went down by 80 percent.

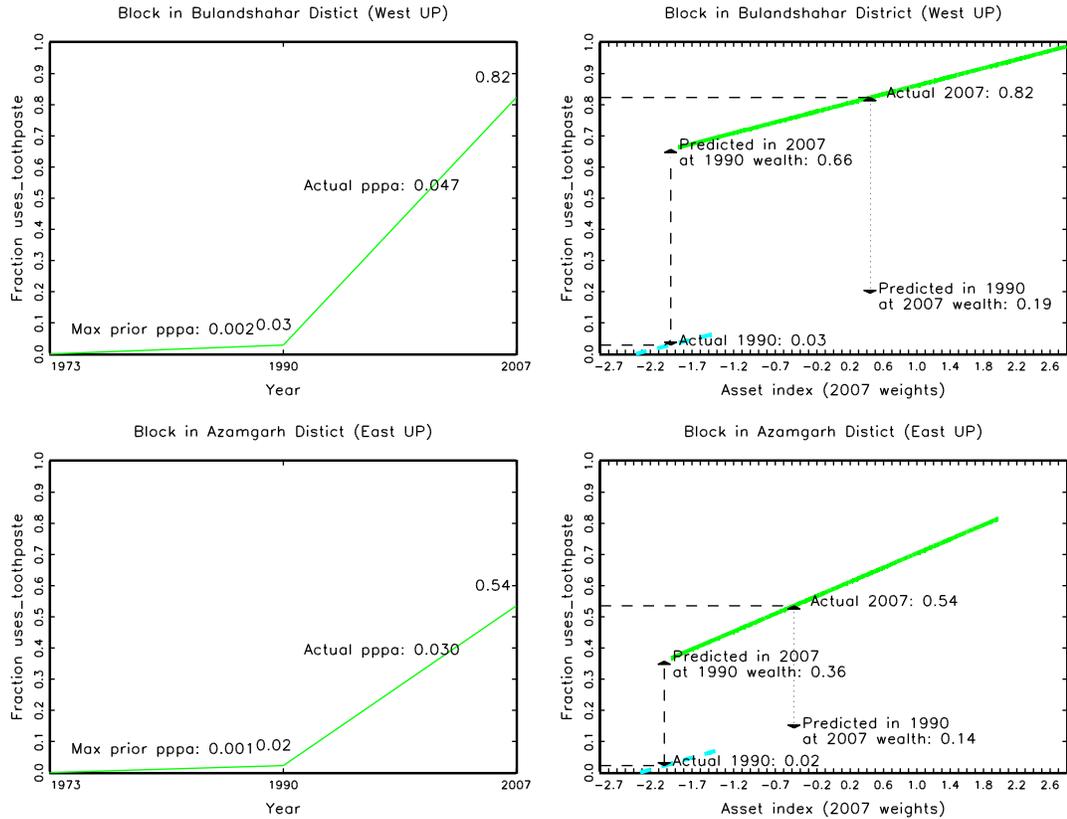
|  | Eastern Block<br>[Azamgarh District] |             |               | Western Block<br>[Bulandshahar District] |             |               |
|--|--------------------------------------|-------------|---------------|--|-------------|---------------|
|  | 1990<br>(%)                          | 2007<br>(%) | Change<br>(%) | 1990<br>(%)                              | 2007<br>(%) | Change<br>(%) |
| Uses toothpaste <sup>a</sup>   | 2.2                                  | 53.6        | 51.4          | 2.9                                      | 82.3        | 79.4          |
| Uses shampoo <sup>a</sup>  | 0.8                                  | 84.5        | 83.7          | 0.7                                      | 55.8        | 55.1          |
| Uses bottled hair oil <sup>a</sup>   | 6.4                                  | 59.1        | 52.7          | 0.6                                      | 22.5        | 21.9          |
| Uses none of the three   | 92.9                                 | 11.4        | -81.5         | 96.8                                     | 15.6        | -81.2         |
| Elderly wear slippers in public <sup>a</sup>   | 59.6                                 | 99.3        | 39.7          | 93.3                                     | 99.3        | 6.0           |
| Women wear petticoats <sup>a</sup>   | 90.6                                 | 98.9        | 8.3           | 97.9                                     | 99.3        | 1.4           |
| Source: Authors' calculations  |                                      |             |               |  |             |               |
| <sup>a</sup> Respondents saying “always” or “often” (compared to “never” or “rarely”). |                                      |             |               |  |             |               |

Is this a continuation or an acceleration of previous trends? As the data only has two periods, the current period and recall of 1990, it might seem impossible to answer this question. However, *zero* use is a lower bound on usage rates. If we assume that use was exactly *zero* in 1973 (17 years before 1990) and calculate the *fastest* that usage could have grown before the survey (from 1973 to 1990) i.e. what could have been the maximum percentage point per annum (pppa) growth in use in the period prior to 1990 and still be consistent with the observed (recall) levels in 1990. In the western block

toothpaste utilization rose from 2.9 percent to 82.3 percent in 17 years which is an average rate of 4.7 percent of the population per year. Since utilization in 1990 was only 2.9 percent the fastest it could have grown in the previous 17 years was under the extreme assumption that use was exactly zero in 1973 which means use grew *at most* by .2 percent per year. Hence, even though we do not have data from before 1990 we can still know that the percentage point per annum (pppa) rate of increase in toothpaste use was *at least* 27 times faster ( $4.7/.2=27.4$ ) from 1990 to 2007 as from 1973 to 1990.

These observed changes might be just a consequence of the simple fact that people with more income or wealth consume more material goods of all types. The right panels of Figure 1 address the question of whether the increase in assets alone can explain the increase in use of grooming products. We do this by estimating the relationship at the household level between the asset index and, for instance, as illustrated in Figure 1, toothpaste use in 2007. We then use that relationship to predict the average toothpaste use in 1990 using the average level of the 1990 asset index. Even though households with more assets use more toothpaste and average assets increased, this only accounts for a small fraction of the observed change. Take the example of western block. The *predicted* level of toothpaste use in 2007 of a household with 1990 level assets was 66 percent—compared to the actual use in 1990 of only 3 percent. So, if we de-compose the change in usage into an “income” component and a “social shift” component, the difference between the actual level of toothpaste use of 82 percent and the 1990 income predicted use of 66 percent can be accounted for by the increase in assets (moving along a given relationship) but this still leaves the vast majority of the shift—from 3 percent to 66 percent *at the same level of assets* to be explained by other factors. We can also run this same procedure the other way, take the relationship between asset index and toothpaste use in 1990 and predict what use would be in 2007 due to just the increase in the asset index. Again, the massive increase in assets does predict that use would have increased from 3 percent in 1990 to 19 percent in 2007, still leaving  $82-19=73$  percentage points of the increase unexplained.

**Figure 1: Changes in toothpaste use among Dalits in UP, 1990 to 2007**



The four major facts: (a) massive change, (b) acceleration on past trends, (c) not mechanically accounted for by material changes, and (d) differences across blocks are all illustrated in four panels of Figure 1 using toothpaste use<sup>6</sup>. All panels show the magnitude of the change in the fraction of Dalits using toothpaste as the vertical shift upwards in use. The left panels show for each block that the change from 1990 to 2007 was a dramatic *acceleration* over the even the fastest possible change in the previous 17 years (illustrated with the assumption of zero use in 1973).<sup>7</sup> The right panels show that the changes are much larger than would have been expected just based on the upward shift in assets as vertical distances are the toothpaste usage differences between the two periods of households of equivalent assets in each period. Finally, comparing the top and bottom panels shows the difference in the starting levels and the pace of change between the two blocks (as well as the difference in average assets between the two blocks as the asset index is on a common scale). While admittedly this makes for a complex graph, it

does contain a great deal of information and we use exactly this same graph to illustrate changes in other personal and social practices in the following sections.

We deliberately began with seemingly trivial items like toothpaste and shampoo. Elites, whose social standing is never in question, find it easy to dismiss the increased consumption of these items as a baneful product of mass merchandising encouraging people who cannot afford it to waste their money just to keep up with social elites. But an alternative view is that the market provides a space Dalits can use to assert their status in their self-presentation.

### **Changes in eating habits**

Table 4 shows the shifts in eating habits among Dalits as some foods with low social markers, which were the community's main sources of calories, have practically disappeared and new elements (e.g. spices, vegetables) have appeared. One example is drinks made of either sugar cane (in winter) or from hardened molasses a.k.a. *jaggery rus* (in summer). These are high calorie intensive drinks that provide energy for manual labour but with little other nutritional content. As these were often provided by landlords for their workers in the field as part of the wage, these came to be associated with agricultural labour and low social status. Often non-Dalits too would consume these drinks but more often than not it was matter of choice not as necessity in case of the Dalits. This drink has essentially disappeared in both blocks, with the shift beginning much sooner in western block.

**Figure 2: Disappearance of *roti chatni* as a staple from the Dalit diet**

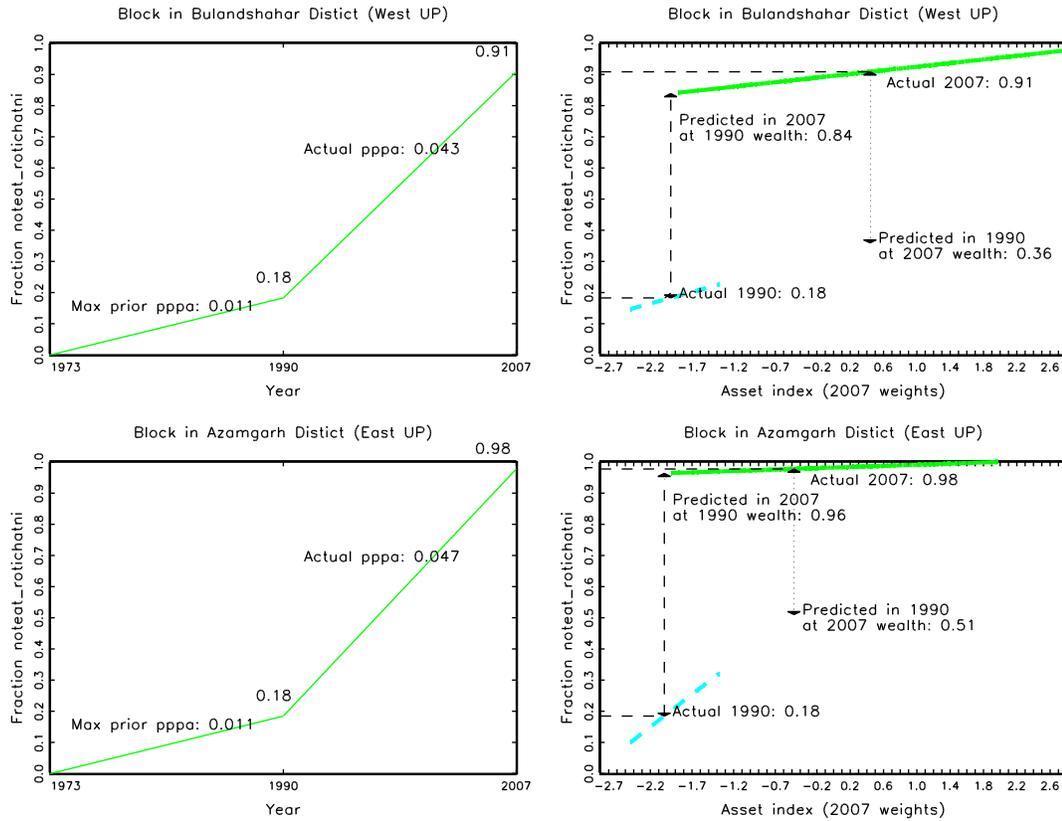


Figure 2 shows the rapid disappearance of *roti chatni* (a staple in the earlier period) from the diet. In 1990 only 18 percent of households in either block reported “never” or “rarely” eating this, while by 2007 this food was rarely admitted to be in the diet, with 98 percent in eastern block and 91 percent in western block reporting no longer eating it. Again, as seen in the right panel for each block the wealth improvements alone do not explain the huge shift.

In addition to the low status items dropped from the diet, there have also been new additions. Tomato, packaged salt, and cardamom were uncommon to non-existent in the diets of Dalits in 1990 but they are now part of regular consumption items (with the exception of cardamom in western block where the uptake is relatively modest). These changes in eating habits go beyond the usual shifts associated with higher incomes as the rapid disappearance of foods that were status markers highlights the effort (and ability) of Dalits to shift towards higher social status foods and empirically affirm Gopal Guru’s (2009) argument of foods serving as a metaphor for cultural hierarchies.

| Table 4: Changes in eating habits among Dalits from lower quality foods (e.g. coarse grains, broken rice, calorific drinks) to higher quality (processed salt, tomatoes, cooked pulses) |                                      |             |               |  |             |               |
|---|--------------------------------------|-------------|---------------|--|-------------|---------------|
|   | Eastern Block<br>[Azamgarh District] |             |               | Western Block<br>[Bulandshahar District] |             |               |
|   | 1990<br>(%)                          | 2007<br>(%) | Change<br>(%) | 1990<br>(%)                              | 2007<br>(%) | Change<br>(%) |
| Does not eat broken rice <sup>a</sup>   | 46.0                                 | 97.4        | 51.4          | 77.3                                     | 98.9        | 21.6          |
| Does not eat “ <i>savan</i> ” rice <sup>a</sup>   | 46.1                                 | 99.8        | 53.7          | 91.9                                     | 99.6        | 7.7           |
| Does not eat <i>roti</i> chatni for lunch <sup>a</sup>  | 18.4                                 | 97.8        | 79.4          | 18.3                                     | 90.9        | 72.6          |
| Does not pluck pea [matar] leaves for <i>saag</i> <sup>a</sup>  | 11.5                                 | 83.6        | 72.1          | 71.7                                     | 96.9        | 25.2          |
| Does cook pulses <sup>b</sup>   | 31.0                                 | 90.0        | 59.0          | 60.1                                     | 96.9        | 36.8          |
| Children <i>not</i> served previous night’s leftovers <sup>a</sup>  | 4.1                                  | 83.8        | 79.7          | 32.0                                     | 86.5        | 54.5          |
| Does <i>not</i> drink sugar cane juice in winter <sup>a</sup>   | 13.7                                 | 96.5        | 82.8          | 78.1                                     | 98.7        | 20.6          |
| Does <i>not</i> drink <i>jaggery rus</i> in summer <sup>a</sup>   | 13.1                                 | 92.4        | 79.3          | 94.9                                     | 98.5        | 3.6           |
| Uses packaged salt <sup>b</sup>   | 1.1                                  | 71.2        | 70.1          | 0.4                                      | 87.5        | 87.1          |
| Uses cardamom [ <i>elayachi</i> ] <sup>b</sup>  | 5.0                                  | 86.9        | 81.9          | 0.3                                      | 5.9         | 5.6           |
| Buys tomatoes <sup>b</sup>  | 23.9                                 | 87.7        | 63.8          | 3.2                                      | 56.8        | 53.6          |
| Source: Authors’ calculations   |                                      |             |               |  |             |               |
| <sup>a</sup> “Does not” aggregates the “never” or “rarely” responses.   |                                      |             |               |  |             |               |
| <sup>b</sup> “Does” or “uses” or “buys” aggregates the “often” or “always” responses.   |                                      |             |               |  |             |               |

Deaton and Dreze (2008) have highlighted the puzzle that, while there are many indicators of economic progress in India, caloric intake appears to have fallen since the early 1980s. Some use this indicator to suggest that the gains from economic growth have not benefited “the poor.” But in our household survey people were asked if their food/clothing situation today was “worse”, “as it was”, “improved”, or “much better” than in 1990. In both blocks less than 2 percent of households responded that their food/clothing situation was either the same or worse while 61 percent in eastern block and 38 percent in western block responded that their situation was “much better”. Obviously people can feel their food situation is “much better” (and have much more disposable income) but have the same (or less) calories if they are buying more than calories with their food. It is well known that typical quality upgrading raises cost per calorie (as Dreze and Deaton address) but this research raises the question of how much Dalits are “buying” status by upgrading their food habits to eliminate invidious social

distinctions revealed in what people eat, a factor not captured in the standard measures of either expenditures or calories.<sup>8</sup>

### Changes in Social Occasions “within” community

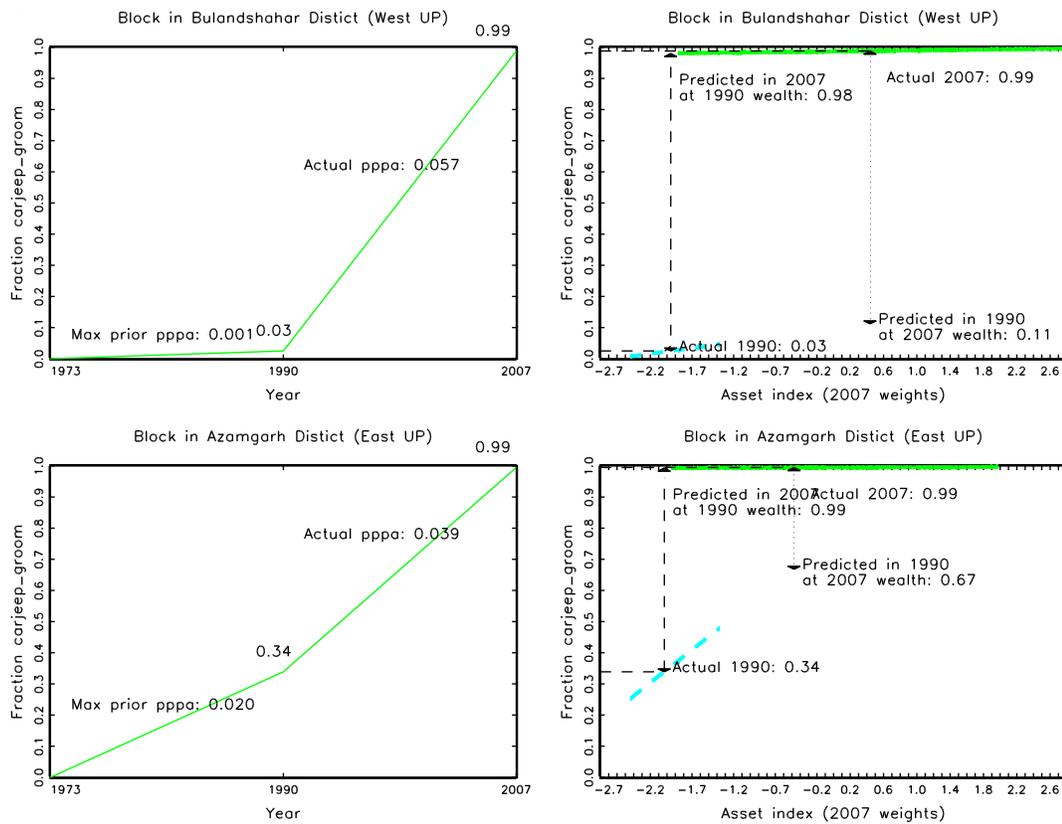
The items so far have been “private” consumption which signal social status and reflect patterns of status upgrading. Now we turn to practices that are explicitly *social*, around weddings and visits of relatives, but which still reflect within caste behavior. Again, these show massive change, in which practices that were rare – such as taking the groom to the bride’s village in a car or jeep (or caravan of cars/jeeps) rather than walking or in a cart – have become socially obligatory. Moreover, the foods served to the wedding party have been upgraded. Whereas formerly *bheli* was an acceptable sweet, these have now disappeared in favour of *ladoos* (Table 5).

|   | Eastern Block<br>[Azamgarh District] |             |               | Western Block<br>[Bulandshahar District] |             |               |
|---|--------------------------------------|-------------|---------------|--|-------------|---------------|
|   | 1990<br>(%)                          | 2007<br>(%) | Change<br>(%) | 1990<br>(%)                              | 2007<br>(%) | Change<br>(%) |
| Car or jeep to take groom’s marriage party to bride’s village <sup>b</sup>  | 33.8                                 | 99.4        | 65.6          | 2.5                                      | 98.8        | 96.3          |
| Car or jeep to bring bride back to groom’s village <sup>b</sup>   | 33.5                                 | 99.7        | 66.2          | 2.8                                      | 99.3        | 96.5          |
| Do not serve <i>bheli</i> to <i>baratis</i> <sup>a</sup>  | 33.1                                 | 98.2        | 65.1          | 94.3                                     | 99.5        | 5.2           |
| Do serve <i>ladoos</i> to <i>baratis</i> <sup>b</sup>   | 32.6                                 | 99.2        | 66.6          | 2.7                                      | 96.7        | 94.0          |
| Not offer wheat fodder as mattress to <i>baratis</i> <sup>a</sup>   | 34.5                                 | 98.3        | 63.8          | 73.9                                     | 99.0        | 25.1          |
| Offers visiting relatives tea <sup>b</sup>  | 14.3                                 | 93.4        | 79.1          | 6.0                                      | 94.4        | 88.4          |
| Serves roti-rice-pulse-vegetable to visiting relatives <sup>b</sup>   | 41.2                                 | 98.7        | 57.5          | 2.9                                      | 58.2        | 55.3          |
| Source: Authors’ calculations<br><sup>a</sup> “Does not” aggregates the “never” or “rarely” responses; <sup>b</sup> Aggregates the “often” or “always” responses. |                                      |             |               |  |             |               |

Another noticeable change is in the mode of transport used in the wedding party’s journey from the groom’s village to the bride’s village. People recall the use of a car or jeep as non-existent in 1990 in western block (although already a third of households did this in eastern block by 1990). By 2007 the expectation of the “appropriate” arrival mode for the groom’s party is by car or jeep and the practice is nearly universal in both the

blocks. As Figure 3 shows even the poorest Dalits now use a car/jeep for weddings.<sup>9</sup> The same is true for the journey back to the groom’s village after the wedding ceremony.

**Figure 3: Vehicles are now used by the groom’s party in Dalit weddings**



Along with evidence about weddings there is also evidence about the standards for hospitality for treating visiting relatives. Offering tea has become nearly universal, a clear social marker. Offering a meal of mixed “nicer” foods has become more prevalent in the western block and universal in the eastern block.

Again, one could cite the baneful effects of the “wasteful” efforts of parents having to pay for the cars and the financial burdens of pressuring poorer Dalits to signal their status through “wasteful” consumption during social ceremonies. However, we feel this would be missing the deeper point of the positive change that Dalits feel that they are entitled to as much as anyone else from other social groups and it is socially appropriate for them to engage in social practices that have long been the province of the upper castes.

## **Relationships between Dalits and non-Dalits**

We have been building from “private” consumption issues but which nevertheless reflected and reinforced caste “distinctions” such as grooming and eating, to publicly symbolic items like weddings. We now move to relationships between the castes as reflected in both social occasions (such as weddings in the village of other castes), formerly caste stratified activities (lifting dead animals, midwifery), and inter-personal relationships. In this case we use the household survey but since some of these questions are village specific, the village enumerators also filled out information about the village from a combination of key respondents, Dalit facilitators and discussions while in the village.

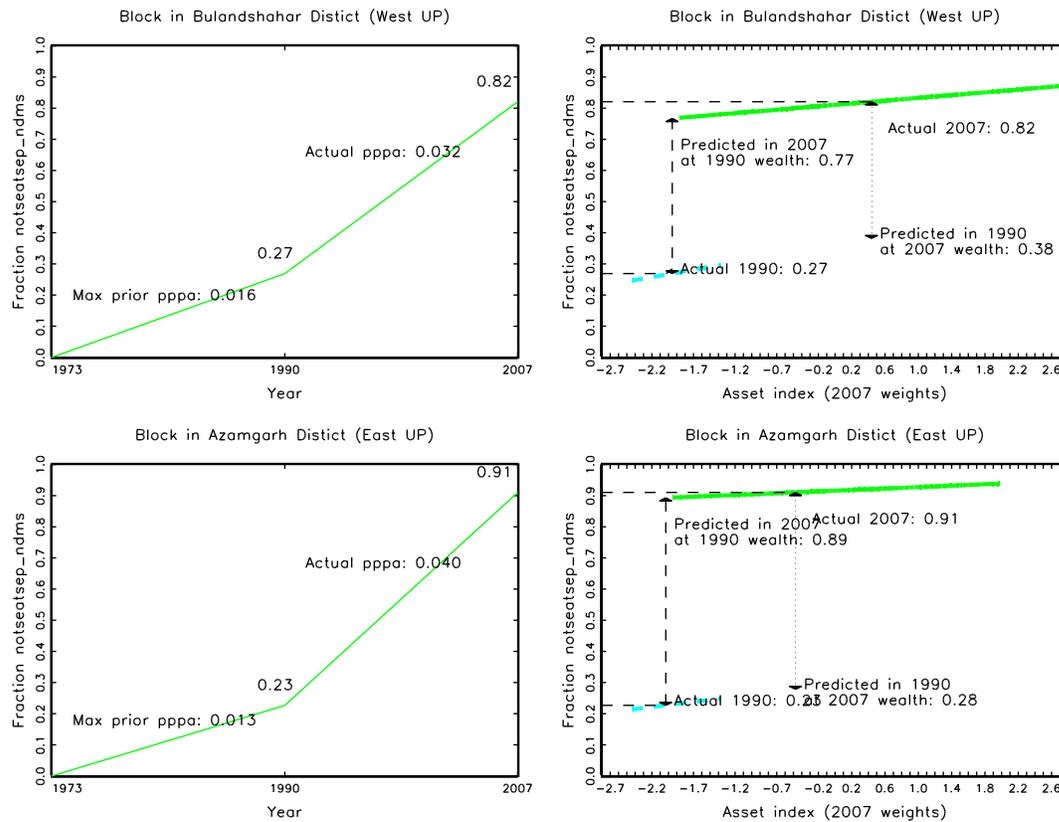
The survey asked households directly two questions about weddings of non-Dalits in the village. One was about their own involvement, whether they attended the weddings of non-Dalits (separately for sons and daughters). A second question was asked if “in the village” Dalits were seated separately at non-Dalit weddings (asked separately for sons and daughters).<sup>10</sup> These questions are related because people may have been willing to suffer the social humiliation of being seated separately at a wedding in the interests of either fulfilling a social obligation to be present or to engage in the festivities even on unequal terms.

The basic finding (Table 6) is that fewer Dalits report attending non-Dalit weddings while at the same time the practice of separate seating of Dalits at weddings, which had begun to erode by 1990 (already by 1990 a quarter to a fifth of villages had eliminated separate seating), had been substantially eliminated by 2007. In the eastern block only 9 percent of Dalits report villages still had separate seating of Dalits at weddings (either “often” or “always”) while the figure was 18 percent in the western block.

Poverty and dependence might explain why more Dalits attended non-Dalit weddings in 1990 even though separate seating was more a norm then. By 2007, though such humiliation became rare, fewer Dalits were keen to attend non-Dalit weddings. It is a mark of Dalits’ new-found independence – both from upper castes and the food in their feasts.

|  | Eastern Block<br>[Azamgarh District] |             |               | Western Block<br>[Bulandshahar District] |             |               |
|--|--------------------------------------|-------------|---------------|--|-------------|---------------|
|  | 1990<br>(%)                          | 2007<br>(%) | Change<br>(%) | 1990<br>(%)                              | 2007<br>(%) | Change<br>(%) |
| Dalits not seated separately at non-Dalit weddings of grooms in the village                          | 22.7                                 | 91.1        | 68.4          | 26.9                                     | 82.1        | 55.2          |
| Attend non-Dalit weddings of grooms  | 75.6                                 | 51.3        | -24.3         | 38.3                                     | 16.1        | -22.2         |
| [E] Non-Dalits visiting Dalit homes eat/ drink snacks/tea/ water if offered <sup>b</sup>             | 1.7                                  | 72.5        | 70.8          | 3.6                                      | 47.8        | 44.2          |
| [E] Births of Dalit babies in the village are midwived equally by Dalits and non-Dalits              | 1.1                                  | 89.9        | 88.8          | 1.8                                      | 4.4         | 2.6           |
| [E] Government and non-Dalit midwives come to Dalit homes to deliver babies <sup>b</sup>             | 3.4                                  | 53.4        | 50.0          | 0.0                                      | 3.6         | 3.6           |
| [E] Only Dalits lift dead animals  | 19.1                                 | 0.6         | -18.5         | 72.6                                     | 5.3         | -67.3         |
| [E] Dalits <i>not</i> mortgage jewellery to non-Dalits in distress situations                        | 24.2                                 | 70.7        | 46.5          | 35.4                                     | 78.8        | 43.4          |
| Most or all children go to school  | 28.8                                 | 63.4        | 34.6          | 21.7                                     | 65.7        | 44.0          |
| Most or all girl children go to school   | 10.0                                 | 58.7        | 48.7          | 6.8                                      | 56.9        | 50.1          |
| Source: Authors' calculations  |                                      |             |               |  |             |               |
| [E] This question was answered by the enumerator about the village; <sup>b</sup> "often" or "always" |                                      |             |               |  |             |               |

**Figure 4: Dalits report declines in separate seating at the weddings in their village of sons of non-Dalits**



Many other dimensions of social practices have also seen impressive improvement as recorded by the survey enumerators.<sup>11</sup> As of 1990 it was almost unheard of for non-Dalits to accept drinks or snacks if they visited Dalit households (2 percent and 4 percent respectively in eastern and western blocks), which, in a culture of hospitality, excludes Dalits from reciprocal relationships. By 2007 in almost three-quarters of villages in the eastern block (72.5%) and nearly a half (47.8%) in the western block, non-Dalits would accept drinks or food on visits.

Another traditional practice was that only Dalits would lift the dead animals of the non-Dalits. Enumerators recorded whether dead animals of non-Dalits were lifted by “only Dalits” “mainly non-Dalits” “equally” or “no one.” In the western block in 1990 in three-quarters of the villages (72.6) only Dalits lifted the dead animals of non-Dalits. By 2007 this was only true of 5 percent of villages. Interestingly in the eastern block this transition appears to have happened earlier, with only 19 percent reporting “only Dalits” even in 1990; the practice almost disappeared (0.6 percent) by 2007.

The births of Dalit babies were traditionally never handled by non-Dalit midwives and in 1990 this was extremely rare. By 2007 in the eastern block in East UP it was reported that in 90 percent of villages these were handled by Dalit and non-Dalit midwives equally. However, this particular transition does not seem to have happened in the western block yet.

Another common practice among Dalit households in these areas was the mortgaging of wedding jewelry during times of financial distress. Traditionally this was a transaction with a non-Dalit creditor and would place Dalits in an adverse financial position that reinforced their socially discriminated status, especially since land, labor and credit markets tended to be interlinked (see e.g. Bardhan 1980). Again, over this period this practice has become much less common. Households not resorting to this practice in the eastern block increased from 24.2% in 1990 to 70.7% in 2007. The corresponding figures for the western block in West UP are 35.4% and 78.8%.

Finally, the question of schooling of children, which is a complex decision as schooling choice is in part an economic decision about preparing children for a future occupation but is also very strongly a social decision and signals about a child's place in society.<sup>12</sup> There were significant improvements in the number of households reporting sending most or all of their children to school in both blocks, particularly among girls where half of all households report having shifted to the practice of sending girls to school over this period from less than ten percent earlier.

### **Changes in occupation and economic relationships**

The final domain of caste related practices we examine is the pattern of economic activity, as caste has always been associated with occupation. Here again we see large changes during this period, of three types. First, there is a significant shift of Dalits into non-caste-traditional occupations. Second, (and related to the first) there has been significant migration of Dalits into cities leading to circular flows of members of Dalit households between the rural and urban areas. Third, there have been major shifts in the practice of agriculture as Dalits are increasingly less likely to work the fields of the traditional landlords and instead, with the mechanization of agriculture and hence decline of bullocks, Dalits are becoming sharecroppers, cultivating upper caste lands and

increasingly hiring upper caste men to till the land by tractors, shifting the nexus of contracting relationships.

### Expansion of Dalits into non- traditional occupations

Households were asked whether the household “depended on” any of a variety of activities and about those same activities from 1990. Over this relatively short period half or more of households had added someone working as a migrant, in a profession, or in business so that by 2007 about four-fifths of Dalit households in these two blocks had at least one family member (sometimes more) in one of these three activities. Even if we exclude migrants and just focus on the households with members who work locally in a profession (e.g. mason, tailor master, driver) or in a business (e.g. grocery, fruit/vegetable, *paan* shop) this increased to 48 percent of households in the eastern block and 78.8 percent of households in the western block.

|   | Eastern Block<br>[Azamgarh District] |             |               | Western Block<br>[Bulandshahar District] |             |               |
|---|--------------------------------------|-------------|---------------|--|-------------|---------------|
|   | 1990<br>(%)                          | 2007<br>(%) | Change<br>(%) | 1990<br>(%)                              | 2007<br>(%) | Change<br>(%) |
| Depend on members migrated to urban centres?                        | 14.5                                 | 50.5        | 36.0          | 6.1                                      | 28.6        | 22.5          |
| Any member works locally as mason/<br>tailor master/ driver         | 14.0                                 | 37.0        | 23.0          | 9.3                                      | 42.1        | 32.9          |
| Depend on business  | 4.2                                  | 11.0        | 6.8           | 6.0                                      | 36.7        | 30.8          |
| <b>At least one member doing one of the<br/>three</b>               | <b>30.9</b>                          | <b>78.4</b> | <b>47.5</b>   | <b>19.4</b>                              | <b>80.2</b> | <b>60.8</b>   |
| Government job  | 7.2                                  | 6.8         | -0.4          | 5.0                                      | 7.3         | 2.4           |
| Depend on your land   | 16.6                                 | 28.4        | 11.9          | 50.5                                     | 67.6        | 17.1          |
| Do sharecropping?   | 16.7                                 | 31.4        | 14.7          | 4.9                                      | 11.4        | 6.5           |
| Have a tube-well  | 2.5                                  | 6.8         | 4.4           | 5.9                                      | 18.3        | 12.4          |
| <b>At least one of the above (depend,<br/>sharecrop, tube-well)</b> | <b>32.0</b>                          | <b>57.2</b> | <b>25.2</b>   | <b>51.9</b>                              | <b>69.9</b> | <b>18.0</b>   |
| Any member <i>Halwaha</i>   | 32.1                                 | 1.1         | -31.0         | 1.6                                      | 0.2         | -1.4          |
| Any member does agricultural labour                                 | 76.0                                 | 45.6        | -30.4         | 46.1                                     | 20.5        | -25.6         |
| Source: Authors' calculations                                       |                                      |             |               |  |             |               |

### Migration

Migration has clearly been a powerful engine of Dalit empowerment. The legal proscription on bonded labor from 1976 and the gradual demise of the *halwaha* system

(discussed below) meant that the economic and social institutions that had rendered Dalit labor unfree, became less binding. We believe an important indirect effect of India's robust economic growth has been growing opportunities in the urban informal sector, leading to a considerable increase in (mostly) circular migration to distant cities to work. These have resulted in tightening labor supply in the villages and financial flows to households from migrant members, enhancing the bargaining power of Dalit households within the village economy and weakening traditional clientelist political structures.<sup>13</sup>

The survey provided a roster of those who were part of the household, but living away. Clearly in the more remote and less economically integrated eastern block there was more outward movement, with 52.8 percent of households in the eastern block having at least one member living outside the village compared to only 13.5 percent in the western block (Table 8). Comparing Table 7 to Table 8 one can see many more households in the western block 'relying on a migrant' than reporting an absent household member, suggesting shorter-term migration to more nearby urban areas.

| No. of HH members living outside | Eastern Block<br>[Azamgarh District] |         | Western Block<br>[Bulandshahar District] |         |
|----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|---------|--|---------|
|                                  | Number of HHs                        | Percent | Number of HHs                            | Percent |
| 0                                | 4,322                                | 47.2    | 8,580                                    | 86.5    |
| 1                                | 2,622                                | 28.6    | 573                                      | 5.8     |
| 2                                | 997                                  | 10.9    | 262                                      | 2.6     |
| 3                                | 414                                  | 4.5     | 134                                      | 1.4     |
| 4                                | 229                                  | 2.5     | 154                                      | 1.6     |
| 5                                | 188                                  | 2.1     | 95                                       | 0.96    |
| 6+                               | 382                                  | 4.2     | 119                                      | 1.2     |
|                                  | 9,154                                | 100     | 9,917                                    | 100.0   |

### Changes in agriculture

In addition to the migration to the cities for jobs and the shifts out of agriculture even in rural areas, there are also three major shifts *within* the patterns of agricultural activity, all of which have some connection with traditional caste practices. First, the decline of bullock use for plowing has led to the near extinction of the relationship of *halwaha*. Second, the advent of tractors for plowing means that upper caste men now

plow the land of Dalits themselves on a cash transactional basis. Third, there has been a rise in Dalits engaged in sharecropping.

The practice of *halwaha* in which a Dalit household would provide for, among other services, fulltime care of bullocks owned by its upper caste landlord has essentially disappeared from these blocks. Jagjivan Ram, probably the most powerful Dalit Congress leader in the 1960s and 1970s, had this to say about this practice: “Ninety percent of our people are agricultural laborers—rather agricultural serfs. If you have to see remnants of slavery you go to a village and see a *halwaha*. For a few rupees he is forced to mortgage himself to a *kisan* and serve him on mere subsistence allowance. ...These *halwahas* are not free to go over to other villages on higher wages.”<sup>14</sup> The practice had already begun to wane in the 1970s and 1980s. It was essentially gone from the western block even by 1990,<sup>15</sup> but a third of households were in a *halwaha* relationship in 1990 in the eastern block. By 2007 the practice had essentially disappeared in the West (0.2) and also in the East (1.1) (Table 7).

Second, there has been a considerable *rise* in sharecropping by Dalits such that in the eastern block in 2007, 31 percent of households have someone engaged in sharecropping. This is somewhat less true in the western block, where although the proportion of sharecropping doubled, but only from 4.9 to 11.4 percent. The reasons for this are undoubtedly complex but one likely explanation is that with their greater economic opportunities and freed from the entanglements of inter-locked labor and credit markets, Dalits simply refuse to work as agricultural laborers on upper caste land. This means that either the landlords have to farm the land themselves or they choose to sharecrop the land with Dalits under contract.

This rise in sharecropping, together with the rise in the fraction who report depending on their own land, is associated with a sharp drop in the fraction of Dalit households engaged as agricultural laborers. This is substantiated by data reported in Table 7: in the eastern block, the number of households with any member as agricultural labor declined from 76% in 1990 to 45.6% in 2007 whereas, in the western block, the corresponding numbers are 46.1% in 1990 and 20.5% in 2007.<sup>16</sup>

Third, there has been a substantial shift in the eastern block towards Dalits *renting in* plowing services, now usually performed by upper caste men themselves. In 1990 the

practice of upper caste men, working themselves and driving their own tractors, plowing Dalit lands was prevalent in only 5 percent of the villages. By 2007 this was the nearly universal practice (98.3%). In contrast, this practice was already widespread in the western block (Table 9): 96.5 percent in 1990 and 100 percent in 2007.

|   | Eastern Block<br>[Azamgarh District] |             |               | Western Block<br>[Bulandshahar District] |             |               |
|---|--------------------------------------|-------------|---------------|--|-------------|---------------|
|   | 1990<br>(%)                          | 2007<br>(%) | Change<br>(%) | 1990<br>(%)                              | 2007<br>(%) | Change<br>(%) |
| Upper caste men plough their own land with tractors               | 7.3                                  | 97.8        | 90.5          | 97.3                                     | 100.0       | 2.7           |
| Dalit land ploughed by tractors owned by upper caste men          | 18.5                                 | 98.9        | 80.4          | 95.6                                     | 100.0       | 4.4           |
| Dalit land ploughed by upper caste men driving their own tractors | 5.0                                  | 98.3        | 93.3          | 96.5                                     | 100.0       | 3.5           |
| Source: Authors' calculations                                     |                                      |             |               |  |             |               |

### **Conclusion: Freedom from Social Inequality As Development**

The results of this unique survey reveal very substantial shifts in Dalits' lives consistent with a growing sense of empowerment and opportunity and declining ability of others to impose social inequalities. The changes in grooming and eating are both consistent with a deliberate attempt to shed consumption patterns that reflected and reproduced social exclusion and inferiority through the rapid adoption of "elite" consumption patterns—much faster than can be explained by economic variables alone. The changes in the traditional stratifications in the social life within the village have also rapidly eroded. No one would argue Dalits have achieved anything like equality, but it is certainly the case that many practices that reflected social subordination and routine humiliation of Dalits have declined considerably. In a large majority of the villages in this survey Dalits no longer lift non-Dalits' dead animals; Dalit babies are often delivered by non-Dalit midwives; Dalits are rarely seated separately at weddings; and it is no longer uncommon for non-Dalits to accept foods in Dalit homes. Economically there has been a rapid shift out of traditional Dalit economic relationships into local occupations and professions, migration and changed agricultural practices.

Our analysis suggests that for the surveyed Dalits the description of the market reform era should come with an "and" not a "but": prosperity raised the standard of living

*and* the social and cultural fabric of the village has changed, much for the better. Debates about the effects of economic reforms on inequality in India based on changes in consumption inequality have so far been completely missing these much larger changes in social and cognitive inequality. The good life, as Hegel argued, is fundamentally dependent on being held in regard by others and approval and recognition are crucial to this. The arrival of modernity in Western societies ruptured existing social hierarchies, replacing them with a universal language (even if not practice) of dignity and self-respect. In India questions of dignity, self-respect and humiliation were at the core of the nationalist discourse. But as Gopal Guru (2009: 4) has perceptively argued while Indian nationalists were deeply cognizant of the racial humiliations resulting from colonization, they were much less so over caste based humiliations. Thus it was “Janus-faced”: externally radical but internally conservative – something Ambedkar clearly saw in Congressmen when he called them “political radicals and social Tories.”

We stress not over-interpreting these results. As the experience of caste is localized our results certainly do not speak to anything like all of India.<sup>17</sup> However, even if we limit the implications of our study just to the state of Uttar Pradesh (as caste has played out very differently in different regions and states of India so we claim no generality across India) there are roughly 32 million Dalits just in UP, which is comparable to civil rights for African-Americans in the United States (the “black alone” population of the USA in 2004 was 36 million) or the end of *apartheid* in South Africa (the “black” population of South Africa is roughly 38.4 million).

Moreover, in the present work we make no attempt to distinguish among the potential driving *causes* of these shifts by disentangling the political (the rise of the BSP in U.P.), economic (market oriented reforms and rapid growth), exogenous social (e.g. exposure to media), or technological (introduction of tractors and irrigation) explanations. *But what needs emphasis is that during this period, as per their own self-assessment, the social well-being of large numbers of Dalits advanced even faster than their material well-being.* Certainly this additional human freedom should count as an “and” in assessing the achievements of the market reform era.



Table 10: Summary of changes reported by Dalits in social and economic spheres in two blocks of UP showing:  
(1) massive change, (2) acceleration on previous trend, (3) social changes not just wealth shifts, (4) differences across blocks

| Domain of social change | Example(s)  | Eastern Block [Azamgarh District] |          |            |   |                                     | Western Block [Bulandshahar District] |          |            |   |                                     |
|-------------------------|---|-----------------------------------|----------|------------|---|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|----------|------------|---|-------------------------------------|
|                         |   | 1990 (%)                          | 2007 (%) | Change (%) | Ratio change to maximum previous change | Change at same assets (1990 avg.) % | 1990 (%)                              | 2007 (%) | Change (%) | Ratio change to maximum previous change | Change at same assets (1990 avg.) % |
| Grooming                | Uses toothpaste                                     | 2.2                               | 53.6     | 51.4       | 23.4                                    | 34                                  | 2.9                                   | 82.3     | 79.4       | 27.4                                    | 63                                  |
| Eating                  | Does <i>not</i> eat <i>roti chatni</i> for lunch    | 18.4                              | 97.8     | 79.4       | 4.3                                     | 78                                  | 18.3                                  | 90.9     | 72.6       | 4.0                                     | 66                                  |
| Sociability             | Car/Jeep transport groom's party to bride's village | 33.8                              | 99.4     | 65.6       | 1.9                                     | 65                                  | 2.5                                   | 98.8     | 96.3       | 38.5                                    | 95                                  |
| Caste barriers          | Dalits not seated separately at non-Dalit weddings  | 22.7                              | 91.1     | 68.4       | 3.0                                     | 66                                  | 26.9                                  | 82.1     | 55.2       | 2.0                                     | 50                                  |
|                         | Non-Dalits accept food                              | 1.7                               | 72.5     | 70.8       | 65.1                                    |                                     | 4.1                                   | 62.6     | 58.5       | 14.3                                    |                                     |
| Occupation in villages  | Work locally as mason/tailor/driver                 | 14.0                              | 37.0     | 23.0       | 1.6                                     |                                     | 9.3                                   | 42.1     | 32.9       | 3.5                                     |                                     |
|                         | Depend on business                                  | 4.2                               | 11.0     | 6.8        | 1.6                                     |                                     | 6.0                                   | 36.7     | 30.8       | 5.1                                     |                                     |
| Migration to cities     | HH member migrated to urban centres?                | 14.5                              | 50.5     | 36.0       | 2.5                                     |                                     | 6.1                                   | 28.6     | 22.5       | 3.7                                     |                                     |
| Agriculture             | Upper caste men plough Dalit land themselves        | 5.0                               | 98.3     | 93.3       | 15.5                                    |                                     | 96.7                                  | 100.0    | 3.5        | 0.0                                     |                                     |
| Consumer goods          | Bicycle   | 46.6                              | 84.1     | 37.5       | 0.8                                     |                                     | 37.7                                  | 83.7     | 46.0       | 1.2                                     |                                     |

Source: Summary from tables above.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>2</sup> Akash Kapur, “An Indian Says Farewell to Poverty, With Jitters,” *The New York Times*, 8 August, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> These remarks were made at the Constituent Assembly Debates in 1948.

<sup>4</sup> *Report by the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress* September 2009. Available at: [www.stiglitz-sen-fitoussi.fr](http://www.stiglitz-sen-fitoussi.fr)

<sup>5</sup> Total household consumption reported through the National Sample Survey is only about half of the national accounts measure of the same concept (Deaton 2000). The most telling experience was that, accompanied by a facilitator, the enumerators were being told how poor the household was, it dawned on the local facilitator that this family was arranging for their son to be a groom to the facilitator’s cousin. The facilitator mentioned this, which dramatically changed the household head’s incentives from understatement of assets to overstatement. The respondent insisted the enumerators tear up the survey instrument they had just filled out, admitting he had been less forthcoming to them because he was worried about losing his benefits, and insisted they fill out a new form with all new answers.

<sup>6</sup> Due to space constraints in publication we show only one indicator for each section, but the graphs for all variables are available at <http://www.hks.harvard.edu/fs/lpritch/>.

<sup>7</sup> Since our survey was carried out in the early months of 2008, we use 2007 for the purposes of end-year for these computations.

<sup>8</sup> We are not proposing this as a general India-wide answer to the calorie puzzle as our evidence applies only to Dalits and only to UP (at best).

<sup>9</sup> This does mean that in the figure the “predicted” method for predicting behavior at 1990 levels of wealth means that since there is no asset gradient the prediction is that (nearly everyone) would have done this at median wealth in 1990. This illustrates the enormity of the shift.

<sup>10</sup> Although asked separately of sons and daughters the answers were nearly identical so we report only sons (as these usually remain in the village).

<sup>11</sup> The averages reported in the tables are the data from enumerators but merged into the household file attributed the village characteristic to each household, so these are the equivalent of “Dalit household weighted” village averages, not the raw village averages.

<sup>12</sup> The economics of schooling and caste are complex in India because caste and occupation are intertwined. There are two points. First, much of the economic return to education comes from the fact that people make higher wages when educated. However, most of this return comes from children entering into different occupations than their parents. It is well documented around the world that the returns to schooling for those who remain farmers are quite low, especially where farming is not particularly dynamic. Rosenzweig and Foster (2004) show that in regions of India that were technologically stagnant the returns to basic education were zero. Munshi and Rosenzweig (2006) find that even in Mumbai the strength of caste occupational ties influence education decisions so that boys in castes with strong occupational links go to local language schools. Some of the increase in schooling could be an increase in perceived returns as parents no longer anticipate their children will remain in occupations with low returns, which is both a social and economic shift.

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<sup>13</sup> The effects of financial remittances in weakening traditional patron-client relations in villages are likely to become significant as migration increases. For evidence based on a survey of Bihar villages see Kapur and Witsoe (2010).

<sup>14</sup> Cited in Sanjay Paswan and Pramanshi Jaideva ed. *Encyclopedia of Dalits in India*, p. 83.

<sup>15</sup> This is conformed by a small survey of 50 agriculture labor households in three villages East UP that was done in 1991-92 and found that the practice of halwaha had disappeared in the early 1990s. See Kripa Shankar, "Agricultural Labourers in Eastern UP," *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 28, No. 24 (June 12, 1993): 1211-1214.

<sup>16</sup> Although the instrument said, "Does any member of the household work as a landless agricultural laborer" which conflates "landless" and agricultural labor. The close concordance of the occupational and activity questions suggests both are referring to this type of labor as a primary activity.

<sup>17</sup> For instance a recent study in Gujarat finds that caste-based discrimination against Dalits continues to be pervasive. However, unlike our survey, this study did not measure change. For Dalits at least, there is unlikely to have been a halcyon past. See Navsarjan Trust and Robert F. Kennedy Center for Justice and Human Rights (2010), "Understanding Untouchability: A Comprehensive Study of Practices and Conditions."