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# Degrees without Freedom: The Impact of Formal Education on Dalit Young Men in North India

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## ABSTRACT

This article considers the capacity of formal education to undermine established processes of caste and class reproduction in an area of north India, with particular reference to the views and strategies of educated Dalit young men. It draws on quantitative and qualitative research conducted by the authors in a village in Bijnor district, western Uttar Pradesh (UP). We discuss how educated Dalit young men perceive education, how they seek to use educational credentials to obtain 'respectable' jobs, and how they react when this strategy fails. Increased formal education has given Dalit young men a sense of dignity and confidence at the village level. However, these men are increasingly unable to convert this 'cultural capital' into secure employment. This has created a reproductive crisis which is manifest in an emerging culture of masculine Dalit resentment. In response to this culture, Dalit parents are beginning to withdraw from investing money in young men's higher secondary and tertiary-level education. Without a substantial redistribution in material assets within society, development initiatives focused on formal education are likely to be only partially successful in raising the social standing and economic position of subordinate groups.

## INTRODUCTION

There is considerable disagreement concerning the capacity of formal education to empower previously excluded sections of society in India and other areas of the global South. Some scholars claim that formal education substantially improves the position of previously disadvantaged social actors by increasing their skills base, knowledge, confidence and freedoms

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(Drèze and Sen, 1995; Sen, 2000). Others, however, argue that school education acts as a 'contradictory resource', opening up certain opportunities but also drawing disadvantaged groups more tightly into systems of social inequality (Levinson and Holland, 1996). We need to examine, then, how far oppressed groups are able to use formal education to undermine iniquitous processes of social reproduction.

Drawing on quantitative and qualitative data from a village in Bijnor district, western Uttar Pradesh (UP), this article considers how increased formal education has affected educated young men belonging to the Chamar caste of Dalits.<sup>1</sup> We discuss how educated Chamar young men perceive education, how they seek to utilize educational credentials to obtain white-collar jobs, and how they react when they join the ranks of the 'educated unemployed'.<sup>2</sup> The study shows that educational initiatives are likely to be only partially successful in raising the social standing and economic position of disadvantaged groups without a substantial redistribution in material assets or economic growth. In highly unequal societies with scarce job opportunities, the schooling strategies of oppressed people may not follow a simple upward trajectory towards growing participation in formal education.

## THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF UTTAR PRADESH

There continues to be a close relationship between caste and class in UP. According to the 1931 Census of India, the last census for which caste figures are available, upper castes (principally Brahmins and Thakurs) comprised 20 per cent of the population of the state. In most areas of UP, these castes control access to lucrative business, professional and white-collar employment. They remain pre-eminent within government bureaucracies and usually own relatively substantial amounts of agricultural land. Below the upper castes in the ritual hierarchy is a thin stratum of 'intermediate castes', including, most notably, the Jats and increasingly the Yadavs. In 1931 the Jats comprised just over 2 per cent of the total population of Uttar Pradesh, but they dominate landownership, local economic opportunities and political organizations in pockets of western UP. The backward castes comprise a more heterogeneous range of *jatis* (caste groups), which are generally accorded Shudra status within the *varna* hierarchy of caste, are often socially and economically disadvantaged and are also known under the official legal

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1. Dalit means 'broken and oppressed' in the Marathi language.
  2. For a more explicit discussion of the political strategies of educated Chamar young men and their links to low caste politics see Jeffrey et al. (forthcoming). The differences between Chamar and Muslim strategies are explored in Jeffrey et al. (2004).

designation of 'Other Backward Classes' (OBCs). In spite of their relative wealth, Jats obtained OBC status in 2000 in UP.

Dalits are located at the base of the Indian caste hierarchy, outside the four-fold *varna* categorization, and were identified in the past with 'polluting' occupations, such as leatherwork and scavenging. Dalits comprised 21 per cent of UP's population in 2001. Historically marginalized on the edge of villages and denied access to formal education, these untouchable castes had limited interactions with others. The 1950 Indian Constitution offered the Dalits legal equality and reserved places in public-sector employment, educational institutions and government representative bodies (Galanter, 1991). Nevertheless, in most areas of rural north India, Dalit households are confined to manual wage labour and remain largely dependent on richer higher castes for work (Mendelsohn and Vicziány, 1998). Dalits continue to be subject to a range of deprivations stemming from their low ritual status, economic impoverishment and social isolation.

The recent history of Uttar Pradesh has been characterized by the increasing participation of backward castes and Dalits in the political process. In the mid-1960s the Indian government shifted the direction of development planning away from Nehru's model of industrial growth and administrative reform towards a programme for improving agricultural production. This policy shift contributed to the rise of a new rural élite: prosperous members of the peasantry belonging to intermediate castes and upper sections of the OBCs in UP. Within and later outside the Congress Party, the Jat politician Charan Singh improved the position of the prosperous peasantry by raising government support prices for key cash crops and extending subsidies on fertilizer and irrigation (Byres, 1988). Until his death in 1987, Singh blocked efforts to introduce a credible system of agricultural taxation or land reform that would negatively affect the middle and rich peasantry. More recently, backward castes have benefited from the decision of V. P. Singh (then Prime Minister) in 1991 to extend the quota of jobs reserved for OBCs to 27 per cent across India. In addition to being represented in formal politics, a new rural élite has effectively colonized and co-opted local government bureaucracies in many parts of UP (Jeffrey and Lerche, 2000).

A second wave of democratization in UP politics has been associated with the rise of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) during the 1990s. Formally committed to building a mass movement of UP's 'oppressed classes', the BSP has acted in practice to represent the interests of Dalits, especially the Chamars, who are the most numerous Dalit caste in UP (Duncan, 1999). The BSP held power at the state level four times between 1993 and 2003. It has attempted to place Dalits in key positions within the UP bureaucracy, channel development funds to villages containing high proportions of ex-Untouchables and increase the speed and rigour with which crimes against Dalits are investigated. It has also engaged in a symbolic programme entailing the construction of statues, temples, parks, memorials, schools

and libraries across UP dedicated to the memory of the Dalit hero, Dr Bhim Rao Ambedkar (Lerche, 1999).

The process of party political democratization in Uttar Pradesh has had a substantial impact on the representation of lower castes within the bureaucracy and formal political bodies and has contributed to the rise of a small 'middle class' amongst Chamars (Jaffrelot, 2003). However, accumulating evidence suggests that the BSP has not reversed established relationships of dominance based on class and caste (Hasan, 1998; Jeffrey and Lerche, 2000). The BSP has made no substantial attempt to introduce land reform or agricultural taxation. Widespread rent-seeking amongst rural élites continues to threaten the well-being and security of the rural poor and prevents the state from securing funds for its developmental and revenue functions. UP continues to be characterized by high levels of poverty (Dube, 1998; Hasan, 1998) and wholly inadequate health and infrastructural provision (Drèze and Gazdar, 1996; Jeffery and Jeffery, 1997).

State failure is particularly marked in the sphere of education. The quantity and quality of state primary, secondary and higher education in UP fails to meet the demand from parents (Drèze and Sen, 1995; The Probe Team, 1999). Most state schools and colleges remain distant from pedagogic advances and lack civic amenities, and teacher absenteeism and negligence are endemic (Drèze and Gazdar, 1996; Jeffery et al., forthcoming; Singh, 1995). The political power of government teachers has prevented funds being diverted from teachers' salaries into improving teaching facilities and systems for monitoring curriculum delivery (Kingdon and Muzammil, 2003). Since 1991 the fiscal crisis of the UP government has led to disinvestment in government schooling. Formal education is increasingly provided within an array of non-state schools and extra-school tutorials in UP.

At the same time, economic liberalization, a process that prefigured the formal announcement of economic reforms in 1991, has resulted in a collapse of productive employment opportunities in rural areas of UP (Chandrasekhar and Ghosh, 2002: 146). Liberalization has reduced the availability of rural credit and therefore possibilities for rural enterprise development. Recent studies of 1993 and 1999–2000 National Sample Survey (NSS) data show falling work participation rates in large parts of the Indian countryside (Chandrasekhar and Ghosh, 2002).

This review of the relationship between the state and rural classes in UP highlights the continuing nexus between state power and dominant sections of agrarian society. A new rural middle class has influenced the character and direction of state policies in UP since the mid-1960s. Moreover, rural élites from intermediate castes and higher sections of the OBCs have been fairly successful in cultivating social links within the local state. This provides an important context for understanding the struggles of poor Chamar households for educational credentials and salaried employment.

**DALITS AND EDUCATION IN UTTAR PRADESH**

In spite of the hostile schooling and employment environment, a large number of Chamar families in UP have recently embraced formal education as a means of social mobility. Drawing on NSS data, Nambissan and Sedwal (2002) show that, while Dalits continue to lag behind the general population, school attendance amongst 5–14 year old children rose faster within Dalit communities than within the general population between 1987–88 and 1993–94 in UP. Modest improvements in the economic position of many Dalit households in north India, at least until the early 1990s (Sen, 1997), combined with positive discrimination in government employment, appears to have encouraged ex-Untouchable castes to increase their expenditure on schooling. A rise in education amongst Dalits is also linked to the emergence of the BSP, which has promoted a ‘petit-bourgeois’ vision of Dalit upward mobility through school education and entry into service employment (Chandra, 2000; Lerche, 1999). This message is linked to the ideas and image of Ambedkar, who extolled the benefits of formal education (Gore, 1993).

Of three strands of scholarly literature regarding the impact of formal education on rural Dalit households in UP, the first emphasizes the capacity of school education to empower Dalit communities, particularly members of the Chamar caste. Most notably, this work includes recent investigations of Chamar political identities in four villages near Meerut, western UP (Pai, 2000, 2002). Pai (2000) argues that Chamar young men in peri-urban Meerut district have used formal education to obtain service jobs outside rural areas and thereby escape relationships of economic exploitation. According to Pai, formal education created a new generation of confident Chamar young men, who played an important role in communicating BSP ideology to the wider Chamar community and in organizing fund-raising, rallies and agitations (Pai, 2002). However, it is difficult to generalize from Pai’s descriptions of social change (Jeffery et al., 2001). Pai’s research was based in villages where dominant castes do not monopolize landownership, and the villages are accessible to a major city in a relatively prosperous area.

A second strand of research focuses on educational institutions and is more pessimistic about the capacity of school education to act as a mechanism of empowerment. These studies highlight how formal education may further entrench social exclusion by exposing Dalits to discriminatory attitudes or processes within the formal, informal or hidden curricula of the school or college.<sup>3</sup> This strand of research includes work documenting caste discrimination in school textbooks (Kumar, 1989) and bullying and exclusion by teachers or peers (Drèze and Gazdar, 1996). This strand also examines higher rates of failure and drop-out amongst Dalit students (Mendelsohn and Vicziany, 1998: 142–3), relegation of Dalits into less

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3. For summaries of research in India as a whole see Nambissan (1996).

prestigious schools and courses (Singh, 1995), and biases built into the iconography of educational institutions (Jeffery et al., forthcoming).

A third view suggests that increased formal education may have had an impact on the confidence of Dalit households without substantially changing patterns of asset ownership or relationships of dominance (Dube, 1998; Lieten and Srivastava, 1999). In his account of social change in a village in eastern UP, Dube (1998) showed that formal education had opened up some opportunities to obtain secure government employment. However, upper castes' continued control over land and access to political contacts outside the village had limited the positive affect of school education amongst Dalits. In particular, he showed that educated Dalit young men were increasingly being excluded from secure white-collar employment because they lacked the bribes required to obtain these posts.

Taken together, these second and third strands suggest that formal education may act to improve the lives of Dalit men but that there are limits to the capacity of education to free these men from caste and class oppression. However, few studies based away from urban centres have sought to explore how Dalits living in rural UP perceive the potential of formal education to change their lives and the relationship between these perceptions and their schooling strategies.

This study offers a new perspective on the contradictions associated with formal education within one Dalit community in rural north India. Drawing on field research amongst Chamars in a village in north India, we argue that increased formal education has led to a degree of emancipation from caste oppression. Education has given Chamar young men a sense of individual dignity and confidence in the face of upper castes. However, the most recent generation of Chamar young men have not been able to convert their educated status into secure employment. The article describes a marked disjuncture between the aspirations of Chamars and their disadvantaged position within local class and caste hierarchies. Chamars continue to lack access to agricultural land and social networking opportunities and most households remain dependent on locally dominant Jats for paid employment. Moreover, Jats have effectively resisted the social threat posed by Chamars through strategies aimed at dominating the fields of education and employment. This disjuncture has created a crisis of unfulfilled ambitions. Crucially, we show that in the face of increasing 'educated-unemployment', Chamar parents are beginning to withdraw from investing money in young men's higher secondary- and tertiary-level education.

We must acknowledge several 'silences' in our account. First, this study focuses on boys' and young men's schooling and employment in western UP. This focus is partly pragmatic: we found it difficult to interview young women except in the presence of their parents, when they were reluctant to talk openly. The focus on young men also reflects the article's concern with tensions between societal expectations associated with formal education and employment outcomes. The few Chamar young women educated beyond

junior high school (Eighth Class) are not expected to enter paid employment or assume the role of main breadwinner. However, the schooling levels of girls do affect the marriage market and therefore expectations of the education which young men should possess: it is therefore important to note that, while school participation rates are lower for girls than boys, the number of girls going to school or college is increasing at all levels. Second, we deal primarily with young men's views of formal education and experiences of utilizing educational credentials in the search for employment rather than their experiences of school itself or use of schooling credentials in marriage markets. This again relates to the nature of our data: we found it difficult to encourage discussions of young men's experiences in school and within marriage negotiations. Third, in the context of a rapid rise in formal education amongst Chamars but comparatively little ethnographic research on the 'products' of the education system, we have chosen to focus on *educated* young men, defined as those with at least eight years of schooling. The issue of how Chamars without experience of school perceived education is dealt with mainly in relation to parental discourses.

The following section of the article provides a background to the area in which we conducted research. We then describe Chamar schooling strategies, the social construction of education among educated Chamar young men and how far these men have used their educational credentials to obtain secure employment. In the penultimate section we consider young men's reactions to their 'educated unemployment'. Finally, we reflect on the implications of our material for an understanding of Dalit social mobility in rural UP and discuss the broader implications of this study.

## RESEARCH LOCATION AND METHODOLOGY

Bijnor is about 150 km north-east of New Delhi, on the east bank of the River Ganges. According to the 1991 Census, about 42 per cent of the district's population is Muslim, 35 per cent caste Hindu, 21 per cent Dalit (about 16 per cent Chamar) and there are a few Christians and Sikhs. Bijnor district's economy is based on the intensive cultivation of sugar cane, wheat and rice. Between 1960 and 1990, modest land reforms, improved agricultural technology and high government support prices offered for cash crops increased agricultural profits. A locally dominant class of rich Jat farmers have used their agricultural wealth to improve their political links and social standing (Jeffrey, 2001). The Green Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s also modestly improved agricultural wage rates in Bijnor district (Jeffery and Jeffery, 1997). Furthermore, the construction in 1984 of the Madhya Ganga barrage and road across the Ganges opened up direct links between Bijnor and Delhi and accelerated the growth of service-based industries in the district.

Nevertheless, Bijnor district — outside the growth corridor between New Delhi and Dehra Dun — lacks a substantial industrial manufacturing base. In

addition, the liberalization of the Indian economy may have reversed modest improvements in rural livelihoods in the 1970s and 1980s (Sen, 1997). Opportunities for service employment continue to be concentrated in the public sector in areas such as education, policing and agricultural development. Moreover, the substantial growth in public-sector employment opportunities in the decades following Indian independence began to slow from 1984 to 1985.

Our field research has been concentrated in two villages in Bijnor District: Qaziwala and Nangal Jat, also called Nangal. This paper refers to Nangal, a large village about 15 km south-east of Bijnor and connected by half-hourly bus services. In 1990, Nangal's population was 4,160, of which 45 per cent were Dalits, 28 per cent Jats and 19 per cent other OBCs. In 2001 the total population had risen to 5,300, of which the Dalit share was about 50 per cent (Chamars being 48 per cent) and the proportion of Jats and other OBCs had fallen slightly, to 26 per cent and 18 per cent, respectively.<sup>4</sup> The Jats dominate local landownership, owning 83 per cent of the agricultural land in Nangal in 2001. Of the 216 Jat households, 88 per cent owned more than 0.5 hectares and 59 per cent owned more than 1 hectare in 2001. Jats have successfully reinvested agricultural surplus in small business ventures such as wood yards, sugar-cane processing units, and shops and schools in and around Nangal. Nevertheless, the rapid subdivision of agricultural land has increased economic differentiation within the Jat caste.

The Chamars, traditionally leather-workers (Mandelbaum, 1970: 48), work mainly as local manual wage labourers, though a very small number have entered service occupations since 1960. In 2001, the Chamars owned only 8 per cent of the agricultural land in Nangal. Of the 457 Chamar households in the village, 77 per cent were landless, 18 per cent owned less than 0.5 hectares of land and only 5 per cent owned more than 0.5 hectares. Social inequalities in landownership were reflected in the broader asset profiles of Chamars and Jats. According to our 2001 census survey, 56 per cent of Chamars lived in *pukka* (brick built) houses compared to 89 per cent of Jats. Only 19 per cent of Chamar households had televisions compared to 70 per cent of the Jat households. There is a close but not perfect fit between caste and class in Nangal.

The failure of the state to provide adequate schooling facilities has led to the increasing privatization of educational facilities in Nangal and rural Bijnor district. Nangal contains two government primary schools, three private primary schools and two private secondary schools. Brahmins run the private primary schools. Jats dominate the management committee of the larger of the village's two secondary schools: the Nangal Jat Junior High School. In 1978 an educated Chamar from Nangal established the Ambedkar Junior High School (catering mainly for Dalits, but also for Muslims and some OBCs, up to Eighth Class). All the schools in Nangal are poorly maintained and equipped in comparison to privately-run English-medium

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4. We have continued to list Jats separately from the OBCs for reasons of clarity.

schools, and to most Hindi-medium schools in Bijnor. The Nangal schools have inadequate amenities, with children sitting on the ground in the open air during lessons, and there are very few teaching materials. Similarly, the government degree college in Bijnor is poorly provisioned relative to private institutions in larger cities within western UP. The college lacks basic teaching materials, civic amenities and adequate assessment procedures. It is widely said to be easy to pass college examinations by hiring private tutors and cramming from 'cheat books' available in local markets.

Our research in Nangal in 2000–02 involved conducting a village survey as an up-date to an identical census carried out in 1990. We then interviewed Jat and Chamar parents and their children in households with young men or women aged between 15 and 34. Our discussions were semi-structured covering, amongst other things: perceptions of school education; schooling, employment and marriage strategies; child rearing; and political affiliations and activity. The interviews were written up in Roman Hindi by one of our research assistants within twenty-four hours of the conversation and we then translated these accounts into English. Our interviews with parents and young people were supplemented by interviews with school and *madrasah* (Islamic school) teachers and managers, politicians and state officials.

## SCHOOLING AND CULTURAL CAPITAL

Most Chamar parents and young men in Nangal perceived schooling, and the qualifications, skills and credentials that it provides, as central to efforts at improving a household's economic position and generating 'cultural capital': the possessions, manners and attributes that tend to be valued in social settings (Bourdieu, 1984). The philosophy of the Dalit hero, Dr Ambedkar, had promoted awareness among the Chamars of the potential for school education to transform social and political structures and create individual confidence and prosperity.

Table 1 shows a sharp increase between 1990 and 2001 in the number of Chamar boys of upper primary and secondary school age in formal school education in Nangal. Nevertheless, Jats retained their advantage over Chamars in the educational sphere.<sup>5</sup> For example, in 2001, 94 per cent of Jat 13–17 year old boys were in formal education compared to 55 per cent of the Chamar boys in this cohort. As a result of the relative wealth of their families, Jat boys were much more likely to be enrolled in private primary schools, moved into secondary school earlier than Chamar boys and remained in formal education for longer. Many Jat parents were able to pay for private tutors and, partly as a consequence, their children were less likely to drop out of school. Jat parents were also generally more educated

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5. See Jeffery et al. (2001) for more detailed information on Jat levels of education.

Table 1. *Schooling Status of Chamar Boys and Young Men in Different Age Cohorts, Nangal, 1990 and 2001*

	1990			2001		
	8–12	13–17	18–22	8–12	13–17	18–22
Government primary schools	} 41%	} 2%	} 0	42%	4%	0
Non-state primary schools				36%	5%	0
Government secondary schools	} 14%	} 36%	} 16%	0	0	0
Non-state secondary schools				8%	47%	10%
Higher education	0	0	6%	0	0	1%
Not in school	45%	62%	77%	14%	45%	89%
<b>N</b>	<b>139</b>	<b>95</b>	<b>135</b>	<b>193</b>	<b>155</b>	<b>146</b>

*Notes:* Totals do not all add up to 100% because of rounding. The number of 8–12 year old Chamar boys in 1990 does not equal the number of 18–22 year old Chamar young men in 2001 due to the 11-year (not 10-year) gap between the two censuses, migration and deaths.

*Source:* Village censuses conducted by authors, Sept–Oct 1990 and February 2001.

than Chamar parents and therefore better able to supervise their children's schooling. In addition, the richest Jat families had increasingly enrolled their children in secondary schools outside the village, such as English-medium schools in nearby cities. In these cases, Jat children were often placed with urban relatives who assumed responsibility for the children's schooling.

Jats' capacity to invest in education is linked to their smaller family sizes (see Jeffery and Jeffery, 1997). Jats began to use modern forms of contraception much earlier than other caste groups in the area. Jat reproductive strategies increasingly focus on investing greater resources in a smaller number of children (Jeffery and Jeffery, 1997). By contrast, Chamars (like most groups in rural UP) have been slower to reduce their fertility. The increase in the numbers of Chamar boys aged 8–12 and 13–17 between 1990 and 2001 also reflects the effects of mortality decline since the 1960s, leading to population growth in the 1980s and early 1990s. With larger numbers of living children, it is harder for Chamar households than for Jat households to invest in their sons' schooling.

Chamar parents cited poverty as the single most important reason for withdrawing boys from school. The Chamars lacked the requisite money and social connections to send their children to private schools outside Nangal, and many said that they could not afford to keep their sons in the village secondary schools. The costs of schooling rise markedly after Eighth Class due to higher fees, the need to pay for transport to schools outside the village, and greater pressure to arrange expensive private tuition. As a result of corruption amongst teachers and bureaucrats, Chamar parents rarely received the full amount of government scholarships to which they were entitled. Aside from the costs of schooling, Chamars cited family crises and boys' lack of interest in school as the most common reasons for removing boys from formal education.

Most Chamar young men believed that local schooling regimes are capable of providing the confidence and cultural capital associated with 'education' in its ideal form. Chamar criticisms of schools and colleges focused on an insufficient *quantity* of teaching rather than the *quality* of the formal, informal and hidden curriculum. Parents and young men more often complained about teachers' poor attendance records and lack of commitment to instructing pupils rather than biases built into the schooling or college system that systematically excluded lower castes.<sup>6</sup> Chamars who spoke of caste discrimination complained that teachers occasionally singled out Chamars for punishment or made remarks about the caste background of pupils. There was near universal agreement that acts of exclusion based on notions of 'untouchability' had disappeared within schools and colleges in the 1960s or 1970s. This decline in caste discrimination is likely to relate to the increasing separation of lower castes and higher castes into different schooling streams.

Many Chamar parents and young men argued that the principal benefit of education (*parhāī*) was that it provides opportunities to obtain service employment (*naukrī*). In this sense, schooling was central to the ambitions of Chamar young men and their parents. Chamars maintained a three-fold distinction between the scarce, lucrative, secure and comfortable nature of government employment, insecure and poorly paid private service, and demeaning and irregular manual labour. Chamars regarded a government job, even a low-ranking post, as offering the chance of a regular salary, a large 'over-income' (from illegal rents), financial security (job security and a pension), prestige and enhanced social networking opportunities. Jat parents made similar distinctions between different forms of work and also highlighted the value of education in providing access to salaried employment.

Chamars believed that school education enhances the employment prospects of young men by conferring formal qualifications. A high school pass is a minimum qualification for many types of low-ranking government employment, and many Chamars believed that further qualifications would increase opportunities to obtain secure white-collar jobs. In addition, parents maintained that schooling provides skills (reading, writing and arithmetic) that are important in establishing useful social contacts, competing for government employment, building confidence and defining 'civilized' adulthood. Parents contrasted the educated with illiterates (*anparh log*), who were depicted as savages (*bārbār*) or animals. Jat parents also maintained that education provides key skills, useful knowledge and 'humanity'. But many Jats parents believed that only schools outside the village could deliver 'civilization'.

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6. We cannot read too much into this virtual silence on questions of caste discrimination. We have not done research inside local schools to assess processes of social exclusion within these institutions. It is also possible, though unlikely given discussions about caste in other spheres, that Chamar informants were unwilling to discuss caste discrimination in school.

Among educated Chamar young men, there was an emphasis on schooling as a source of individual dignity and masculine prowess. These young men described how the educated Chamar man is bold, knowledgeable and independent in his interactions in modern urban spaces, while the illiterates are typically helpless and awkward. A popular joke amongst educated Chamar young men was that illiterate men pick up a telephone in a public call box and shout loudly into the ear piece: ‘why can’t you hear me you fool!’. This joke acted as a condensed symbol of illiterate incompetence and typified the embarrassment that an uneducated person was said to experience in various modern settings.

Young Chamar men’s sense of acquired dignity was also rooted in notions of the distinctive nature of educated consumption (Miller, 1995). For example, these men made a clear distinction between the films that the ‘educated’ watch and the films that attract an uneducated audience. The educated film is usually devoid of violence or explicit sexual content, focusing instead on well-rehearsed popular dance and song routines. By contrast, the uneducated film is a violent, crude and badly acted drama starring ‘wild man’ actors. This notion of educated versus uneducated consumption practices extended to discussions of clothing, hairstyles, room decoration, magazines, alcohol and drugs.

Young Chamars frequently reflected on the myriad ways in which the dress, speech and bodily demeanour of the ‘educated’ marked them out as superior to illiterates. One young man described the differences between ‘educated’ and ‘uneducated’ speech: ‘the uneducated say “*ābe oo ka jārā?*” [“Oi! Where yer goin’?” — impolite, ungrammatical] and the educated say “*āp kahān jā rahe hain?*” [“Where are you going?” — polite, grammatical]’. The key importance of demeanour was evident during discussions of how to spend leisure time. Young Chamar men claimed that the educated are better at ‘hanging out’ in street settings: they know how to wear modern clothes and avoid bad habits. By contrast, the illiterates exhibit bad taste: they tuck in their modern shirts, wear ostentatious charms around their necks and harass young women. In this narrative, the illiterates not only chew *pān* (betel nut) — bad enough in the eyes of educated young men — but also dribble the *pān* juice down their fronts to create pools of betel juice under their chins.

According to Chamar young men and their parents, educated people internalize acts of good taste so that they became good habits (*achchhī ādat*). Young men, in particular, intimated that education manifests itself in unconscious traits and orientations to action formed through repeated contact with such icons of modernity as the telephone, cinema and western-style shirt. Parents and young men considered educated habits to be an essential qualification for marriage. In this view, only educated parents could create a good environment (*māhaul*) for bringing up children in the future.

These aspects of social change are crucial to understanding the emancipation of educated Chamar young men and their greater sense of confidence

within public space and *vis-à-vis* upper castes. Young Chamars saw ideals of educated behaviour as a much more acceptable basis for establishing a person's social value than caste. When one of the authors asked a Chamar man in his late twenties with a Master of Commerce degree, how much caste discrimination exists in Nangal, he responded by ridiculing the behaviour of two Jat brothers in Nangal who had become addicted to narcotics, wore torn clothes and slept in the sugar cane fields surrounding the village. He argued that the demeanour of these men made it impossible any longer to sustain the notion that caste determines a person's social worth. We heard similar arguments from other Chamar young men. Chamars regarded themselves as being superior to higher caste men whose behaviour signalled a lack of educated cultural distinction. They advanced this argument with reference to those aspects of 'Chamar behaviour' historically identified as characteristic of their ritual pollution. They chastized uneducated Brahmins for their uncleanness and celebrated the meticulous hygiene and good manners of local educated Chamars.

Chamar young men who circulated these new visions of social worth did not argue for an end to hierarchy, but for the imposition of a new order of distinction based on achieved rather than ascribed status. This constitutes a limited critique of the caste system. Educated Chamar young men did not reject notions of 'impurity' and 'baseness', but instead claimed that such stigma and subordination should not be attached to them as educated people (compare with Gooptu, 1993: 291). Educated Jat young men also spoke of the myriad differences separating the 'educated' from the 'uneducated', but they sought to legitimize their privilege by noting differences between those educated within the village and those, generally children from richer Jat families, who had experience of private schooling outside the local area.

This account of the social construction of education amongst the Chamars broadly supports the notion that education increases an individual's skill-base, dignity and sense of available opportunities (Drèze and Sen, 1995). It also lends weight to Pai's (2000) thesis that rising investment in school education, in combination with political representation at the state level, has improved the confidence of Chamar young men.

## THE SEARCH FOR SECURE EMPLOYMENT

The most recent generation of educated Chamar young men has failed to convert this cultural capital into secure employment. In October 1990, ten Chamar young men from Nangal were in higher education. In February 2001, six of these men were working as daily wage labourers in Nangal; one had a small cigarette business; one made and sold glass bangles from a wooden cart in the village; and one man described himself simply as *khālī*: 'empty' or 'free'. Only one of the ten men studying for a degree in 1990 had

obtained a government job in 2001 — as an office worker in a local land reorganization office.

This pattern of ‘failed social mobility’ may be explored further with reference to our census survey data. Between 1990 and 2001 there was a sharp increase in the number of Chamar young men in the 25–34 cohort (Table 2). Furthermore, the number of Chamar young men in this age group who had more than eight years of schooling more than doubled (from 24 in 1990, to 57 in 2001). These increases have taken place against the backdrop of public sector retrenchment and few emerging white-collar opportunities in the private sector. There is an inverse temporal relationship between the number of secure posts available to Chamars and the number of young men trying to find such jobs.

Rapid changes in young men’s employment, over time and seasonally, means that the census surveys only provide a snapshot of what is a highly dynamic scenario. Nevertheless, these surveys suggest that there has been a rapid decline in the proportion of educated Chamar young men entering service employment. In 1990, 29 per cent of Chamars aged between 25 and 34 with more than eight years of schooling were in service employment, 8 per cent in government service and 21 per cent in private posts. In 2001, just 9 per cent of educated Chamars in this cohort were in service, only 2 per cent in government and 7 per cent in private jobs. In 1990, 7 per cent of educated Jats in this cohort were in salaried jobs, 3.5 per cent in government and 3.5 per cent in private positions. By 2001, 16 per cent of 25–34-year-old Jats were in service jobs, 8 per cent in government and 8 per cent in private posts. Jats, particularly from richer households, have been able to improve their access to service jobs in the 1990s by investing agricultural profits in their sons’ education, exploiting close social links with local government officials and paying bribes in employment competitions.

*Table 2. Principal Occupations of 25–34-year-old Chamar Men by Schooling, Nangal, 1990 and 2001*

	Up to 8 years schooling		At least 8 years of schooling		All schooling	
	1990	2001	1990	2001	1990	2001
Farming	1%	1%	8%	3%	3%	2%
Labour: in Bijnor	88%	89%	50%	49%	80%	78%
migrant	2%	3%	0%	7%	2%	4%
Business or semi-skilled	9%	5%	13%	18%	10%	9%
Service	0%	2%	29%	9%	6%	3%
Student, unemployed	0%	1%	0%	14%	0%	5%
<b>N</b>	<b>98</b>	<b>149</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>122</b>	<b>206</b>

*Notes:* Totals do not all add up to 100% because of rounding.

*Source:* Village censuses conducted by authors, Sept–Oct 1990 and February 2001.

In the case of applying for a single government post, the process of registration, taking an exam, seeking out relevant social contacts, researching possibilities to bribe key officials and attending an interview may require extensive travel and stretch over several years. During this period, young men seek to avoid recourse to manual wage labour, which would have a negative impact on their social standing and sense of self worth. As a result, young educated Chamar men are forced to move between insecure and poorly paid forms of clerical employment in the informal sector — jobs that approximate to their image as ‘educated’ men. These fallback occupations are characteristically ‘semi-bourgeois’ (Bourdieu, 1984) and concentrated in newer areas of employment, such as car repair and phone booths, where it is easier to invent ‘respectable’ jobs. Young educated Jat men, who have better access to credit and superior social contacts outside the village, tend to find more remunerative, secure and socially valued ‘fallback occupations’ than the Chamars.

Table 2 shows that very few Chamars have migrated outside Bijnor district for labouring work. Similarly, most of the Chamars in business or self-employment remain in Nangal. In this respect, the Chamars in Nangal differ from the Muslim Sheikhs in Qaziwala, many of whom have moved to urban centres for artisanal work. Unlike the Sheikhs, the Chamars in Nangal do not have a tradition of migrating to urban centres for work, nor do they have a developed set of social networks in nearby cities. Chamar young men said that they feel socially isolated when they travel to major urban centres.

Manual labouring work in the village is slightly more lucrative and regular than most forms of non-manual work within the urban informal economy. Thus, often under financial pressure from their families, many educated young Chamar men who have been in irregular ‘semi-bourgeois’ employment are forced to return to exploitative and demeaning manual wage labour in Nangal. The continued tight grip exercised by rich Jats over local labouring opportunities exacerbates the humiliation of this return to wage labour.

Chamars explained their exclusion from government employment with reference to the sheer numbers of people applying for these posts. We heard many stories of over 100,000 young people arriving at written examinations for fewer than five government posts. Chamars pointed to the crucial importance of money, social contacts and knowledge (*jānkārī*) in determining access to government jobs, and to the relative irrelevance of positive discrimination, aptitude and educational qualifications. Chamars of all ages distinguished between the 1960s and 1970s, when it was relatively easy for educated Chamars to obtain government employment through taking advantage of reservations, and the 1980s and 1990s when recruitment to government service has become corrupt (*brushī*) (Jeffrey and Lerche, 2000).

The nature of this corruption is hotly debated. Many educated Chamars maintained that bribery is now so widespread that there is a ‘price list’ for

government posts: Rs 40,000 for a low-ranking job and up to Rs 400,000 for a prestigious post, even within the reserved quota.<sup>7</sup> These large sums are beyond the means of most Chamar households in Nangal. Nevertheless, Chamars argued that their exclusion from government employment was mainly attributable to their relative social isolation. They maintained that to obtain a government job one must build relationships of trust with a 'source' inside a government institution. This person supplies information (*jānkārī*) about employment opportunities, provides a recommendation (*sifārish*) for an applicant and acts as a facilitator in the payment of a bribe. Where the source takes money in return for assistance they are often referred to as brokers (*dalāl*). Chamar young men emphasized their exclusion from these social networks and the relative advantage of urban Chamars and Jats within this field of competition.

Chamar attempts to compensate for their historical lack of social connections through building social links have been largely unsuccessful. Discussions with educated Chamar young men suggested that, even within the few local schools where there is a good mix of pupils from different castes and classes, Chamars cannot foster effective social contacts that might later be useful in employment competitions. Schools did not act as melting pots in which Chamar boys could compensate for their household's social exclusion by building lasting relationships with friends from more powerful households. Moreover, the efforts of educated Chamar young men to buy social influence through paying employment brokers had largely failed. Chamars, and some of the poorer Jat respondents, reported angrily that brokers had tricked them into giving money by making the false promise that a government job would be forthcoming. Chamars said that they lacked the knowledge required to make an informed judgement about whom to trust, and the money to finance prolonged periods building a network of reliable contacts.

Caste-based social connections have not been an effective tool for capturing jobs for Chamars. Chamars, who are low down within government bureaucracies, fear losing favour with bureaucratic superiors and have little influence within their organizations. In the face of these difficulties, members of a small government-employed Chamar élite only tend to help very close relatives in obtaining government service.

Formal education cannot compensate for Chamars' lack of money and social capital within the field of recruitment to government employment. The efforts of urban Chamars and dominant Jats to obtain better qualifications, usually in private institutions, have resulted in the devaluation of the rural Chamars' educational credentials. Young Chamar men complained about the worthlessness of their degrees. They also said that notions of 'educated' behaviour that provided cultural capital in Nangal failed to

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7. In 2001, 72 rupees were roughly equivalent to £1.

signal distinction to key officials outside the village, such as interviewers in competitions for secure white-collar jobs. In particular, these men said that they lacked the competence in English characteristic of those people schooled in private English-medium institutions. Some men referred to open efforts on the part of higher caste Hindus to exclude Chamars from government employment and associated corruption in the allocation of reserved posts. It was more common, however, for educated Chamar young men to attribute their failure in employment competitions to an absence of the social connections, money and performative skill borne of entrenched class privilege.

Our study shows that education combined with reserved employment has not led to a virtuous circle of Chamar development through access to secure jobs. Structural factors, particularly class, prevent Chamars from converting educational credentials into economic security. Indeed, young men's experience of competing for government employment is so negative that it threatens their sense of the confidence and capabilities that education can provide.

## **REACTIONS TO THE CRISIS**

Chamar young men experience their failure to obtain a white-collar job as a personal loss. Chamar parents identified dissatisfaction amongst young men as an important contributing factor in a perceived rise in alcoholism, suicide and criminal activity in the local area, including murder, assault, sexual harassment, rape, bullying and vandalism. It is important, though, not to caricature the 'protest masculinities' (Connell, 1987) and social role of educated Chamar young men. As the statements of these young men in relation to education suggest, many young educated Chamars distanced themselves from aggressive and criminal behaviour.

Some of these men channelled their frustration into political work and local community improvement initiatives. Known in the village as 'new leaders' (*naye netā*), they played an important role in mobilizing opinion and circulating political ideology. They are not always formal members of the BSP, but they often derived their local standing from an assumed link with BSP politicians. These men circulated political discourses that mixed heroic tales of the former achievements of Dalit 'great men', with contemporary social critique aimed at exposing the discriminatory attitudes and practices of village élites. These narratives were often interposed with optimistic assessments of the BSP's capacity to improve the lives of Chamars and statements regarding the power of the BSP's leader, Mayawati, to end problems of social deprivation.

The activity of these 'organic intellectuals' (Gramsci, 1971) must be seen in context, however. Very few educated Chamar young men styled themselves as local politicians in the making and most were resolutely pessimistic about the capacity of the BSP to improve their access to secure employment. Outside a

small circle of young *netās*, Chamars argued that improvements in their access to government employment would require a radical redistribution of resources that could not be achieved by the BSP, or any other political party. Rather than expressing their frustration through established political channels and in the language of Ambedkar, educated Chamar young men tended to voice their resentment in informal contexts and with reference to their own predicament as educated ‘unemployed’ young men. The informal nature of this protest reflects the necessity of concealing resistance from higher castes (Scott, 1985) and protecting a core of self-esteem through maintaining the decorum associated with educated cultural distinction.

During informal discussion, educated Chamar young men frequently emphasized the gap between their sense of self worth based on school education and the reality of their social and economic position. This occasionally manifested itself in quite explicit attacks on the notion of social progress through education. In the words of an educated Chamar young man running a small transport business:

The educated are useless. Educated people are trapped. They are restricted in the work that they can do. Uneducated men are free; they can do whatever they like: labour, farming . . . whatever. So I think that in today’s world, given the nature of unemployment, it is right to be illiterate [. . .] In India there is hopelessness [*nirāshā*]. As a result of unemployment, people have lost the desire to live [*jīne ki tamannā*].

This man also referred to the opportunity costs associated with spending long periods in school education: the skills and habits that he had failed to learn at school. Several young men said that schooling saps people’s strength, encourages laziness and reduces a person’s capacity to perform agricultural tasks requiring dexterity or physical toughness.

Educated Chamar young men expressed their resentment in discourses that suggested their separation from a rural world of physical violence and an association instead with ‘modern’ forms of disenchantment. The guiding idea in these Chamar discourses is that of wasted potential. Educated Chamar young men frequently made reference to being useless (*bekār*), empty (*khālī*), wandering (*ghoom rahe hain*) and unemployed (*berozgār*). In making these statements, the Chamars were not claiming that they were incapable of performing useful work, or that they lacked employment: many of them would refer to themselves as ‘unemployed’ while engaged in wage labour. Rather, they used these terms to signal the disjuncture between their present occupational status and their educated standing (see Heuzé, 1996), and to signal their own sense that ‘something better must be just round the corner’. These statements often emerged during angry and heartfelt outbursts regarding the nature of poverty. Yet at other moments, educated Chamars joked about their predicament and made semi-humorous references to their status as wanderers (*ghoomnewale*). Humour, joking and horseplay are also important elements of young men’s reaction to a sense of personal crisis.

These discourses of 'uselessness' were often linked to a notion of lost time. Chamar young men occasionally referred to their activity, work and leisure, as forms of 'timepass'. Jat young men who had failed to find work consonant with their ambitions also spoke of their activities as 'timepass'. This word served both as a sign of resentment and as an expression of pain, highlighting young men's sense of the provisional status of their current work but also connected to their frustration at the many years wasted in applying for white-collar employment. 'Timepass' also suggested young men's acquaintance with the English language and urban college life, where such phrases are popular.

The educated Chamar young men who circulated discourses of modern disenchantment had a powerful symbolic effect in Nangal. The conspicuous failure of many educated Chamar young men to convert their educated 'cultural capital' into economic wealth and social capital, and the energy and inventiveness with which young men expressed the tragedy of their position, appears to be influencing parental perceptions of education. Several Chamar parents said that they now believed it best to educate boys up to Eighth Class (junior high school) and then send them for vocational training or an apprenticeship. These parents argued that there is little point in investing money in formal education beyond Eighth Class given the virtual impossibility of obtaining government employment.

Such a shift in thinking is already having an impact on Chamar educational strategies. While school education amongst Chamars between 1990 and 2001 in the cohorts aged 8–12 and 13–17 increased markedly, the proportion of young men aged 18–22 in formal education *declined*, from 22 per cent in 1990 to 11 per cent in 2001 (Table 1). The total number of Chamar men of all ages in higher education fell from ten in 1990 to three in 2001. Figures for enrolment in formal education amongst 18–22 year old men rose amongst Jats and other castes over the same period. The fall in the number of Chamar young men studying into their late teens and twenties may reflect increasing pressures on the household economy, but this hardly squares with the large *increase* in school education within the younger cohorts of Chamar boys and among girls. It appears more likely that the widespread failure among Chamars to obtain service employment in the 1990s encouraged members of this caste to re-evaluate their approach to the formal education of boys. This concurs with our interview data, and also with the fact that amongst the Jats, who have been more successful in obtaining service employment during the 1990s, enrolment in formal education within the 18–22 cohort increased between 1990 and 2001. The new Chamar strategy focuses on concentrating resources in primary and early secondary schooling to obtain key skills and some measure of cultural capital for their sons.

## CONCLUSIONS

School education has given Chamar young men a sense of their individual dignity and entitlement to equal treatment in different social scenarios, and provided them with the confidence to advance arguments critical of caste discrimination. This does not constitute a broad, Chamar-wide redefinition of the caste's position in the ritual hierarchy akin to caste-based 'sanskritization' (Srinivas, 1987). Rather, we have identified a more fragmented set of 'family-centred' ambitions. This conclusion broadly supports Pai's work on Dalit social empowerment in western UP. It also points to strong discourses at the grassroots level that link education to social capabilities (Drèze and Sen, 1995; Sen, 2000).

This study departs from Pai (2000, 2002), however, in its focus on the failure of educated Chamar men to obtain secure work. Social domination based on landownership and dominance rooted in access to social networking opportunities tend to be mutually reinforcing in rural Bijnor district. As a result of poverty and a lack of influential social contacts, educated Chamar young men in Nangal have found that they are out-manoeuvred in the search for secure government jobs, and many men have been forced to return to exploitative manual labour in the village. An emerging culture of resentment amongst educated young men has caused some Chamar parents to rethink their educational strategies.

Two broader conclusions follow from these points. First, the failure of formal education to alter the economic position of most Chamar young men in rural Bijnor district highlights the enduring nature of social and economic inequalities based on class and caste. The problems of Chamars in many parts of western UP are too entrenched, varied and acute to be solved by a development strategy focused solely on improving access to formal education. Genuine 'social opportunity', in Drèze and Sen's (1995) sense, is a contingent not a necessary outcome of prolonged participation in formal education. Drèze and Sen are aware of this, but their emphasis on education as a basis for emancipation risks drawing attention away from the equally pressing need to challenge entrenched privileges in UP directly, for example through land reform or improved agricultural taxation. Institutional reform of schooling will fail to improve the economic security of Chamars to any significant extent in the absence of a profound redistribution of material resources and social networking opportunities or sustained broad-based economic growth. Both these scenarios look highly unlikely in liberalizing north India. As in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa (see Bryceson, 2002), the UP government continues to withdraw from credible investment in state education, but has been much slower in retracting financial support for propertied classes.

In coming to this rather pessimistic conclusion, we do not wish to neglect the multiple ways in which the skills and credentials that come with education improve the lives of Chamar young men. Education may enhance

Chamar men's capacity to question higher caste dominance, through providing literacy and introducing new notions of dignity distinct from caste, even if it fails to result in salaried employment. Rather, we wish to suggest that development efforts must grapple with the enduring nature of pernicious social and economic inequalities, the multiple means through which power is expressed (Bourdieu, 1984), and the energy with which upper castes/classes 'revolt against' (Corbridge and Harriss, 2000) or 'counter-resist' (Lynch, 1990) social threats.

Second, our study suggests that the educational strategies of formerly disadvantaged social groups in South Asia may not follow a simple line of increasing investment over time, but be subject instead to reassessment and reversal as the expected gains from formal education fail to materialize. Evidence from other areas of the global South (see, for example, Demerath, 1999; Oni, 1988) suggests that rural people may rapidly withdraw from investing in formal schooling when educated young men fail to obtain secure jobs. By contrast, in his observations on educational strategies in France in the 1960s, Bourdieu argued that the working classes, formerly excluded from school education, continue to imbue educational qualifications with 'false value' even after these credentials cease to provide leverage in employment markets: 'Relegated agents collaborate in their own relegation by overestimating the studies on which they embark, overvaluing their qualifications, and banking on possible futures which do not really exist for them' (Bourdieu, 1984: 155). The Chamars in rural Bijnor district have not abandoned formal education as a vehicle for improving their social position, and are keenly aware of the continuing value of educational credentials and skills. But neither are the Chamars being duped into educating their children. As awareness of formal education has spread, and educated Chamars come to be parents, a more cautious evaluation of formal education has become apparent.

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