



# Where the

*The story of caste oppression in a poor Indian village*

Siddharth Dube's book *Words Like Freedom* begins with a quote from Jawaharlal Nehru. "My mental picture of India always contains this naked, hungry mass," India's patrician first prime minister is quoted as saying in despair, distaste or condescension, depending on how you view Nehru today.

Dube's point is that nothing much has changed in India since Nehru made this observation. *Words Like Freedom* is subaltern history at its best, recorded through the testimony of an impoverished family living in Baba ka Gaon in Pratapgarh district of UP from 1947 to 1997. Dube traces the political economy of a village, a state and India, through the travails of this family which tells its story truthfully and simply. Between the narrative is Dube's own analysis of caste, politics and economic policy — how they reinforce poverty and erode dignity.

Not all of it is a bleak recounting of decay. Dube records faithfully the possibilities of upward mobility in rural India and the limits to it. But most of all, *Words Like Freedom* is about poverty and oppression and real people.

The author has studied in India and the US and is currently based in New Delhi where he is a writer and a health policy analyst.

In this extract, Dube talks about caste and how it works, especially in the wake of the implementation of the Mandal commission report.

**R**itual discrimination by the upper castes against the former untouchables has lessened in Baba ka Gaon, but is still pervasive. Fifty years of protective legislation and other safeguards have not made an enormous dent on untouchability in rural India, where the vast majority of the scheduled castes live, though the situation has improved radically in urban areas. In practice, discrimination is now muted in public arenas, such as schools or roadside hotels, but extensive in the 'private' sphere of the home.

Ram Dass says: "There were so many discriminations against the scheduled castes that it will take a long time for it to end. There are still upper-caste people in the village who believe in untouchability. If we touch something, they will sprinkle *Ganga-jal* [Ganges water] on it."

Durbhe, says: "We now treat the Thakurs the way they treat us. We might have eaten at their house once or twice during their weddings or festivals. Which is fine because they are bigger than us, but how many times can we allow this if we keep offering them hospitality in return and they never accept? We are also something after all, we are humans. However weak you are at some point you are going to rebel. If you are rich you don't eat gold and silver, you only eat wheat like we do!"

Ram Dass: "One old Thakur woman had fallen into the well, and a man of our caste pulled her out. And on coming out



# Thakurs rule

of the well she had a bath, saying that the man had contaminated her by touching her when he climbed into the well to pull her out! This happened about 15 years ago, in the well near her house. And then she goes and cries to her relatives. 'Bring me water, I need to bathe', even though she was soaked in water! When it came to saving her life then there was no question of untouchability, but when her life was saved she went back and said that she had been contaminated.

"Everybody makes dirt. But people think that the person who cleans the dirt is a dirty and polluted person. But this is completely wrong. It is the person who makes the dirt and does not clean it who is unclean. The people who clean not only their dirt but that of others should be considered great or god-like, because they do what parents do for their children. So why is it that people who clean for others are considered dirty? Even with officials it's like this. If the *patwari* is of the upper castes, if we go to him, we can't even sit on the *charpai*. We will sit like dogs on the floor. Only if there is a middle-caste *patwari* can we sit on the *charpai*."

**"An old Thakur woman had fallen into the well, and a man of our caste pulled her out. On coming out of the well she had a bath, saying that the man had contaminated her"**

Shrinath says: "Look at all the other religions, whether it is Christianity, Sikhism or Islam — there isn't as much discrimination in them as in Hinduism. The essence of any religion is '*Roti ya beti*' [bread or daughter] — you have to freely eat or intermarry with each other. It is important to have at least one of these relationships with another person if there is to be any equality. There might not be a relationship of marriage; that will only happen when we are equal. A poor person cannot have marital ties with a rich family because the question of status comes in. But at least you can eat together! But it's not like this in the Hindu religion where everyone is divided from the other by caste! And all these upper-caste people are the root cause of the problem."

Ram Dass: "My father would eat meat, but I stopped at about the age of 35. I got into the community of people who believed in the sanctity of life. We save ourselves from sin by not eating meat, because God is in everything. But even though I am a vegetarian, the upper castes will not take a smoke from my *chillum* [clay pipe] even though so many of them eat meat! Their sense of caste discrimination is still so strong that they still consider us unclean. But I give my *chillum* to people irrespective of whether they eat meat or not.