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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.

Ritual 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.

"I am friendly towards all people, whether of high or low caste, or whether Hindu, Muslim or Buddhist. Everyone is mortal, everyone has been created by God. All people do their own work, they live in their houses, and feed themselves. We all have come the same way and will go the same way. We live together. Religion or caste is not written in our blood, nor in our appearance. If God had meant these differences to be important he would have given someone horns and someone else four hooves so you could distinguish them."

Across Awadh, the equation between the upper and lower castes varies enormously from village to village. Thus, even in villages neighbouring Baba ka Gaon, the power of the upper-caste landlords, and their monopoly on land, is almost as absolute as it was before the abolition of *zamindari* a half-century ago. Their hold is reflected in their being able to keep wage rates for labourers very low, in some instances three times lower than in Baba ka Gaon. Generally, these are villages where the upper castes outweigh the lower castes in number.

But despite this diversity, one constant across Awadh and most of UP is that upper-caste violence and brutality against the scheduled and lower-middle castes is unrelenting. Much of this violence is a continuation of the old pattern of subordinating the lower castes; some of it also reflects heightened assertiveness on the part of the lower castes. According to Ram Dass and others in Baba ka Gaon, upper-caste violence against the scheduled castes is commonplace in the region.

To comprehend the scope of the violence, consider that on consecutive days, within a radius of 35 km from Baba ka Gaon, there were brutal attacks by the upper castes on the scheduled castes. On 1 July 1995, an adolescent scheduled-caste girl was raped by a young Thakur. A day earlier, a young scheduled-caste man had his forearms lopped off by a Thakur landlord.

The village of Pithi, some 25 km from Baba ka Gaon, is cut off from the mainstream of Pratapgarh district by the river Sai, which must be forded to reach the village, as paths from other directions are impassable most of the year. (The names of the village and people have been changed to maintain privacy). The village seems idyllic: groves of mango and other fruit trees cascade down small hillocks to the river, and peacocks call in the dark. It is about half the size of Baba ka Gaon.

Ramesh Pasi's family lives in a rudimentary hut at the edge of the village. He and his family sit in a tight, tense knot outside, whispering. According to the report filed at the police station by Ramesh Pasi, his daughter Champa, aged 15, went at 7 am to the fields to defecate. While she was pulling up her *salwar* (stringed pajamas), she was attacked by Prahlad Singh, the 25-year-old son of an important Thakur landlord, who 'caught hold of her hand with bad intentions', reads the text of the report. Champa's mother says, "He was hiding somewhere and when she was pulling up her *salwar* he attacked her from behind. Then she started screaming and he covered her mouth. So she bit him and screamed again, which is when we heard her. And then he ran away. We all saw him running away."

In fact, Champa was raped by Prahlad Singh, said Shrinath, who found this out because he is of the same caste as her family. Shrinath explained that the father did not write this in the complaint to the police — and the mother denies it in public — because it would ruin his daughter's marriage prospects. But as a result of the parents' reluctance to state that Champa

had actually been raped, their complaint was classified by the police under a statute that is far less serious than rape. This makes it unlikely that Prahlad Singh will go to jail for any length of time, even if the case reaches the courts, which is itself improbable.

Champa's father says: "The case was written up right away by the police. The station officer came the next day for one hour. He did not meet the boy; he only went to the place where the incident took place, took my daughter with him, asked her a few questions and wrote something. Then he said he would come back, but it's been a month and he hasn't done so. We went a week later to see the officer, who said, "Why are you worrying, your case is registered and we will do what is needed."



His wife interjects angrily: "They then went to Ram Lakan [The Bahujan Samaj Party candidate for MLA; the party represents a large section of the scheduled castes]. He took them to Lucknow to meet Mayawati at the rally. But the crowd was so great that they couldn't even get close to her. What can we do if no one listens to us? [A scheduled-caste woman, Mayawati, was UP's chief minister for a few months in mid-1995. She is a leader of the Bahujan Samaj Party]. My husband has sent a registered copy of the FIR to the police in Lucknow to Pratapgarh and to Allahabad. [The head of the district police is based in Pratapgarh, the head for the region in Allahabad, and the state head in Lucknow]. But the Thakurs went to see Pramod Tiwari, the Congress MLA, and perhaps gave him some money, this is what some people told us,

which is why this case is not progressing."

The father says: "The Thakurs are constantly threatening us now. They pulled off the thatch from our roof. And they have threatened to burn our house down. We don't work for them anymore, but we work for anyone else who will employ us. All of the Thakurs are allied with each other, so it's very difficult for us to find work. Our house is surrounded on all sides by fields belonging to the Thakurs. So they say that unless you work for us we won't let you cross our fields. We have one-and-a-half acres between my whole family, but it's near the river and gives just one crop every year. It's 1 kilometre from here, but it's flooded most of the time. We don't get any rice from it. We plant some things but not much."

Only ten per cent of the scheduled caste and lower castes have land. Earlier none of the scheduled caste had land. Then some went out and with their earnings bought some; others got a little bit from land reform. The majority of land is with the Thakurs. They have at least eight acres each. One has about 30 acres, and this family also controls all the village common land, which they've taken over. This family has even taken over the village burial grounds for use as fields!

You get Rs 5-10 for a day's labour [one-third to one-half of the wage rate in Baba ka Gaon]. The Thakurs are shameless, and despite these wages don't pay us even when we go to ask for it. There are so few lower castes here in the village that we can do nothing against the Thakurs, unless the police help us. If any action is taken on my daughter's case, the tension will increase. But the Thakurs will try to oppress us further if nothing happens. If on this thing we cannot get anything done, how will we ever manage to fight them again? We wish and hope that they get as severe a sentence as possible."

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The village of Kachwahan ka Purwa — literally, the hamlet of the Kachwahan Thakurs — is in Rae Bareilly district, which was for two decades the pocket borough of Indira Gandhi. But these years of being a 'VIP constituency' and having millions of rupees poured in for 'development' has made the situation of the poor in Rae Bareilly no better than in Pratapgarh. The village is 35 km or so from Baba ka Gaon.

The hovel is ragged even by the standards of the poor in Awadh, the thatch torn and the mud walls crumbling. Outside the hut is an emaciated, hunched, small male figure, the limbs skeletal, a bony neck supporting a face across which course, transparently and almost without break, waves of agony. The figure wears small shorts and a sleeveless vest, both tattered and dusty. Across the tense shoulders is a thin cotton towel, the ends just hiding the stumps of his arms, both of which end just above the elbow in dirty bandages. This figure, slack-jawed, empty-eyed, shrouded in despair, tries to prevent the towel from slipping off by touching at it with the stumps of his

arms. The movement is unpractised, tentative and elicits even more anguish; the wounds are less than a fortnight old. Jerking in pain, the figure screams at the two toddlers who come out from the shack and try to approach him. Though his stick-like figure and dress make him seem just a young boy, Samar Bahadur Koeri is 18 years old, married, and the father of the two toddlers. He speaks blankly, softly, so gently that it is almost a mumble.

"My father and my uncle were not here. Some relatives had come so I decided that I would not work today. I was at home and then Om Prakash Singh came and ordered me to work, to come and chop the fodder. This is the work that I always have to do for the Thakur. When I told him that I couldn't work because there were relatives visiting, he abused me and said I had to come, that he would beat me up. He forced me to go; he always terrorised me. So I started chopping fodder, and he said, 'Why are you feeding the machine so slowly?' It is a diesel fodder machine, not a hand-powered one. And I said, 'This is the best I can do.' And then Om Prakash said, 'Come, I will show you how the machine is fed,' and he caught both my arms and pushed them into the machine.

"I screamed and then fainted. When I screamed and my hands had been cut off, Om Prakash ran away. And then two of my caste people were passing by and they came running when they heard me scream. They told me later that they were carrying sticks in their hands and they pushed this into the machine to make it stop, or otherwise even more of my arms would have been dragged in and cut off. They told me that my hands and cut portion of the arms came out from the machine like strips of fodder."

Samar Bahadur's father, Juggu, is a visibly worn, exhausted man; short, thin, grey-haired, with eyes streaming with mucus from some infection. "I was in Ambala (in Punjab province) working at a brick kiln when this happened. I only came to hear about it two weeks later. Because my son was alone anyone could coerce him into doing anything they wanted. When I got back and saw what had happened to my son, I went in anger to Om Prakash. He made me stand outside the door because my family is untouchable. He told me he was very worried about my son, that my son had cut his arms while using the thresher, and that he would pay for the treatment. He then said, 'If you file a case against me I will ruin you all.'

"I saw that the boy cannot support himself; he is incapable now. So I took his wife and young daughter, and the three of us walked to the police station and filed a case. The police wrote everything down and then they came here and arrested Om Prakash on the same day. This was on 19 July. He is in jail now. The senior policeman at the Jagatpur station is a Verma, a backward [middle] caste man. He wrote down our complaint without any problem."

Kachwahan ka Purwa is smaller than Baba ka Gaon. Of the 40 or so families, roughly a dozen are upper-caste, the rest middle and scheduled-caste. Between them, the middle and scheduled castes own only 5 per cent of the agricultural land in the village, substantially less than that owned by these groups in Baba ka Gaon. Though titles to plots were given to tenants and also to the landless during the several rounds of land reform, most of these people have not been able to occupy the land they had been given titles to.

Om Prakash Singh, the Thakur who assaulted Samar Bahadur, is not the village's largest landowner, but he is arrogant because he served in the army, where one of his sons is now, according to Samar Bahadur's father. He used to boast



that he would have anyone who dared defy him killed by the army.

Samar Bahadur's father says: "I work as a sharecropper because the Thakurs have not allowed us to take possession of the land that belongs to us. My father has half an acre of land near the pond but we have not got possession of it. The few times I cultivated the land the Thakurs prevented us from harvesting the crop. They beat us up, so we stopped trying to work it. And anyway it is useless land because it is most often inundated by water.

"What is the point of fighting, of going to the courts? We went to the court and won the case about our land but even then the Thakurs bribed the court people and got the case dismissed.

"My son has studied until the tenth class. Earlier, like me, he would work in the fields or do whatever else we could



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get. We have no other work. You can get work every day if you want, but the wages are only Rs 8-10 for a 13-hour day from 6 am to 7 pm and sometimes you will have to work even later [wage rates in Baba ka Gaon are nearly twice this]. But

even at these low wages the Thakurs will not pay us what we are owed! We are owed about Rs 2,000 in back wages, but the Thakurs have not paid us. I made that brick house over there, but they have not paid me yet. When we go to ask them they shout at us and say, 'We have no money so come back in four or five months.'"

The district magistrate of Rae Bareilly is sympathetic and intelligent. Commenting on Samar Bahadur's family being owed a huge sum by the Thakurs, he says: "No poor person in his right mind will go to the police to complain about this or other kinds of exploitation. They will either try to resolve it or will just forget about the money they are owed. Academics always emphasize how poor people in rural India are always in debt to rich people. But everyone overlooks how the rich owe money to the poor and never pay! This is just another way for them to keep the poor in their power."

In great part because of the district magistrate's conscientiousness, Samar Bahadur's family received Rs 100,000 from the state government, compensation given in cases where atrocities are committed against scheduled castes. The district magistrate also promised Samar Bahadur that his family would be given secure title to 2.5 acres of arable land. Three months later they had received most of the land. And a contingent from the state constabulary was posted at the village to prevent the other Thakurs from fulfilling their threat to kill Samar Bahadur and his father because of their defiance of Om Prakash Singh. Samar Bahadur's father put the cheque from the government in a fixed deposit in a nearby bank. The interest on the amount is about Rs 1,000 per month, which the family will use to survive now that they have lost their only young, able-bodied wage earner.

Samar Bahadur's father praises the district magistrate for his empathy, but reviles the local member of the state legislature, even though the latter is from the same scheduled caste as him. "The MLA who is from our caste, came and asked us to compromise with the Thakur, but we said we don't want to have any dealings with the Thakurs and so we don't want to have anything to do with you. The MLA asked us how were we managing for food and other things and we said we are managing because of our relatives. So he then asked us to come to the hospital in Rae Bareilly where he would meet us, but when we went there at the appointed time he wasn't there. Look, he told us, he would give us money for food but he didn't even give us a sip of tea! Then we just left and went to the district magistrate's office and when we got the cheque, the MLA arrived and told us to keep it carefully. So we got angry and told him, 'What do you think we'll do if not keep it carefully? Do you think we will put it in the fire?' He moves around in a car and has sentries with him. When the district magistrate told us to have tea before we left the district magistrate's office, the MLA said, 'Yes, yes, have tea before you leave,' but he himself left straight away! He had no time for us."

Samar Bahadur is helped by his father every second day to the doctor, where the bandages are changed and his amputated arms cleaned. The roughly 10-km journey is done on a pony-cart or a tractor's buggy, as Samar Bahadur cannot bicycle or walk this distance. His father says: "This kind of violence happens here all the time. Just five days ago a Brahmin landlord beat a Pasi man so badly that he lost six teeth. And this is when the army was already posted here! The police have also arrested the Brahmin, but he has now been released on bail. •

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