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EPW Commentary

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Dalit or Harijan?

Self-Naming by Scheduled Caste Interviewees

The terms harijan and dalit have evolved over the last many decades, with the latter more or less replacing the former in published works of recent years. What do members of the scheduled castes call themselves?

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The most socially and politically acceptable name for the most disadvantaged members of Indian society has changed over the years. Outcaste and untouchable have become unacceptable (although, sadly, still having some descriptive validity). They were replaced, chronologically, by harijan in the middle of the 20th century and subsequently dalit in last decade or two of the century. These names are closely associated with M K Gandhi and B S Ambedkar, respectively and the shift in the status of the names is linked with changed attitudes in the broader political environment as the relative standing of Gandhi and Ambedkar has altered. However, although these changes in usage have clearly occurred among politically aware commentators it is not so apparent what members of the least privileged social groups in Indian society (officially, and perhaps neutrally identified as scheduled castes) call themselves. This study examines the results of a survey in which interviewees were asked to give the name of their caste.

Naming in Published Work

Dalit is now almost universally preferred among researchers and writers. In the *Economic and Political Weekly*, for example, there has been a marked increase in the number of papers with dalit in their title from the 1980s. There were just 13 papers between 1981 and 1990 compared with 62 in the following decade – including a veritable rush of 33 papers in 1995-97. Harijan appeared in just two titles – in 1981 and 1986.

The pattern in academic journal papers in general is similar. Dalit outnumbers harijan by only 21 to 12 in the 1980s; by 110 to 3 in the 1990s; and by 24 to 0 so far since 2001. In addition there were more papers (six) which used untouchable in their titles. Outcaste was used once. These data are derived from the Web of Science index of academic papers funded by UK higher education institutions.

Books show a slightly later but very sharp shift at the start of the final decade of the century. Of the seven Indian-published books in the Cambridge University library, UK, with harijan in their titles only one was published after 1990. (This was as late as 1999.) Of the 22 with dalit only one pre-dates 1990 – and that was published in 1989. It is not just the preferences of book-writing community as a whole that changed, so did one author who used harijan in 1987 and dalit in 1999.

Self-Naming

But how do the SC people name themselves? The data from the National Family Health Survey of 1998-99 suggests they strongly prefer harijan to dalit. The NFHS is a large-scale survey, conducted as part of the global programme of Demographic and Health Surveys funded by

USAID implemented by ORC Macro of Maryland, US, and organised by the International Institute for Population Sciences, Mumbai.

The focus of the survey – and most of the questions in the questionnaire – was, of course, about demographic and health matters. But there were also a range of questions which established the social and economic status of the respondent. These included the two questions used in this analysis. In one the respondent was asked "What is the caste or tribe of the head of the household?" The name of the respondent's caste was to be written in. The next question was "Is this a scheduled caste, a scheduled tribe, other backward caste, or none of them?" For this the relevant pre-coded answer had to be recorded. 92,486 households were sampled in the whole of India but not all had usable answers to the two relevant questions.

The responses to the second of these questions are given in [Table 1](#). Note that multi-stage stratified sampling processes were used in both urban and rural areas with random selection of households at the final stage. The final results incorporated appropriate weighting of the individual responses. Responses were not weighted in this study and the caste structure of the sample may not necessarily reflect the proportions in the population of the states.

Table 1: Caste Category of Interviewees

State	Scheduled Castes	Scheduled Tribes	Other Castes	Backward Castes	Other Castes	Total
Andhra Pradesh	776	191	1681		1145	3793
Arunachal Pradesh	191	968	177		37	1373
Assam	333	559	392		1103	2387
Bihar	1324	605	3189		1219	6337
Delhi	492	25	409		1827	2753
Goa	101	5	106		1077	1289
Gujarat	577	770	929		1492	3773
Haryana	606	3	608		1624	2841
Himachal Pradesh	723	16	543		2156	3438
Jammu	391	63	301		2025	2780
Karnataka	715	241	1724		941	3621
Kerala	256	30	1164		1059	2509
Madhya Pradesh	1100	1428	2711		1493	6732
Maharashtra	711	440	1140		3448	5739
Manipur	86	640	76		673	1475
Meghalaya	26	1111	15		14	1166
Mizoram	6	1350	2		2	1360

Nagaland	61	950	38	30	1079
Orissa	993	952	1392	1312	4649
Punjab	856	2	499	1610	2967
Rajasthan	1167	846	1448	2841	6302
Sikkim	91	361	439	404	1295
Tamil Nadu	1219	46	3824	171	5264
Tripura	292	204	312	394	1202
Uttar Pradesh	1713	216	2160	3702	7791
West Bengal	957	240	202	2767	4166

For the second question referred to the expected answers were, no doubt, the name of the interviewee's 'jati'. Most respondents gave this. Thus there were large numbers of chamars in Himachal Pradesh, Punjab, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh; parayars in Tamil Nadu; bhats in Jammu; and jats in Punjab, Rajasthan and Haryana. In larger states hundreds of different names were recorded – there were 1,389 in Uttar Pradesh although many of these were simply alternative spellings. Even in Nagaland, which had the smallest sample, there were about 177. Not all of the replies were jatis however. A significant number of respondents gave a generic name: a 'varna' (brahmin was common in most of the states, and there were some kshatriyas) or other religion (Muslim, Christian, Catholic, Buddhist, for example).

While most of the scheduled caste respondents gave their jati, a proportion recorded a generic name, but while harijan (or harizan or some other spelling) was used by 1351 respondents in 18 different states, and a number of respondents used scheduled caste, not one respondent chose dalit. In addition some respondents gave harijan qualified by their jati, e g, harijan parayar in Tamil Nadu ([Table 2](#)).

Table 2: Percentage of SC Respondents Using Harijan

State	Number of SC Households in Sample	Caste Name Given		Percentage of SCs	
		Harijan	Harijan Plus Jati	Giving Harijan	Giving Plus Jati
Andhra Pradesh	776	167	16	21.5	23.6
Arunachal Pradesh	191	0	0	0	0
Assam	333	3	0	0.9	0.9
Bihar	1324	47	3	3.5	3.8
Delhi	492	48	0	9.8	9.8
Goa	101	21	0	20.8	20.8

Gujarat	577	0	0	0	0
Haryana	606	7	1	1.2	1.3
Himachal Pradesh	723	4	0	0.6	0.6
Jammu	391	39	8	10	12
Karnataka	715	135	0	18.9	18.9
Kerala	256	6	1	2.3	2.7
Madhya Pradesh	1100	158	9	14.4	15.2
Maharashtra	711	38	0	5.3	5.3
Manipur	86	0	0	0	0
Meghalaya	26	0	0	0	0
Mizoram	6	0	0	0	0
Nagaland	61	0	0	0	0
Orissa	993	28	0	2.8	2.8
Punjab	856	2	1	0.2	0.4
Rajasthan	1167	70	2	6	6.2
Sikkim	91	0	0	0	0
Tamil Nadu	1219	124	5	10.2	10.6
Tripura	292	0	0	0	0
Uttar Pradesh	1713	408	15	23.8	24.7
West Bengal	957	46	0	4.8	4.8

There is a large variation in the proportions of SC interviewees using harijan in the states – from none to 25 per cent. But – except for the strikingly low values in the north-east – relating these differences to the social characteristics of the states is difficult. Not one of the smaller northeastern states have any SC respondents who used harijan, although this may be partly because most of them had very small numbers of SCs. There is a tendency for the more demographically and socially progressive southern states to have higher values (e.g. Andhra Pradesh, Goa, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu) and the more conservative central northern states lower (including Gujarat, Punjab, Himachal Pradesh, Haryana, Orissa and Bihar). But the tendency is weak. The notable exceptions are that Uttar Pradesh has the highest percentage and Madhya Pradesh's is also high, while Kerala's is among the lower percentages.

Discussion

The data used here were derived from a survey focused on another matter. This is both a strength and a weakness. The weakness is that the survey was not designed to address issues about group identity and questionnaire design, interviewer training and sample selection may all have been different if that were the case. The strength is that neither the interviewers nor the interviewees had their awareness raised regarding the broader political implications of the replies – responses were less influenced by a consciousness of political correctness. The order in which

the questions were asked is also relevant. If the question to establish membership of SCs had been asked first an even higher proportion of respondents would have opted for their jati rather than the generic harijan. That the interviewees were younger women may also have had an impact on the replies.

Inevitably, the possibility of interviewer-interviewee interaction exists and may have affected replies given. The interviewers were all graduates and they received extensive training and close field supervision. But one might guess that few were SC and if the use of dalit implies a political statement lower caste interviewees may have been intimidated into using the less assertive harijan.

Whatever the reservations about the data the scale of the difference in the use of dalit and harijan suggests that there is a real contrast in the preferred name chosen by external commentators and SC people themselves. Ambedkar may be winning the posthumous rivalry among the scribbling classes but Gandhi remains the dominant opinion-former among the SCs themselves.