The caste wise composition of Gujarat population shows that the upper castes mainly consisting of Vanias (3%), Brahmins (4%), Rajputs (5%), Patidars\(^1\) (13%) account for nearly 26 per cent of the total population. Traders, businessmen, industrialists, big landholders, and professionals come mostly from these castes. Baxi Commission covered 82 castes under the category of Other Backward Castes (OBCs), which is the largest caste segment in Gujarat accounting for nearly 40 per cent of the total population. Largely poor or small peasants, agriculture labourers, blue collar workers in urban areas, these castes groups with their numeric strength wield substantial political power. The Koli Patels comprising the single largest caste group among the OBCs in Gujarat have played important role in KHAM formation.\(^2\)

Scheduled Castes who account for 7.4 per cent of the total population, consisting mainly agricultural labourers, marginal land holders, blue collar labour in urban area, engaged in traditional manual work of cleaning, and so on. Scheduled Castes of Gujarat are divided into thirty groups. The five sub-groups, i.e. Vankars, Chamars, Bhangis, Garoda and Senva, form about 80 per cent of the total Scheduled Castes in the state. The Vankars followed by the Chamars are the most advanced groups among the Scheduled Castes. Bhangis are on the extreme, the most backward among the Scheduled Castes.

The Scheduled Tribes concentrated in north-east-south belt are 15 per cent of the total population and the Muslims largely urbanized account for around 9 per cent. Others count for nearly 4 per cent of the total population (Patel 2002).

\(^1\) Originally Kanbis (Pate/s) now popularly called Patidars were part of OBCs. They were better than other OBCs in education and they owned land and rose to dominance during the Maratha rule. The British encouraged them to develop commercial agriculture. As a result, they progressed well. Today they are counted among the upper castes with their social, political and economic mobility. Considering their social, political and economic dominance in the state of Gujarat, they have certainly acquired the status of a ‘dominant caste’ in the caste hierarchy of the state.

\(^2\) Up to the Seventies the powerful Patidar (Patel) community had the total control over the Congress and the state politics in Gujarat. In order to displace the hegemony of the Patidars, Jinabhai Darji, Madhavsinh Solanki, and Sanat Mehta formulated the KHAM alliance, an alliance of Kshatriyas (OBCs), Harijans, Adivasis (Tribals) and Muslims. This effective coalition of the underprivileged groups paid rich electoral dividends to the Congress. The Congress swept the assembly polls in 1980 and 1985.
CHANGING CASTE RELATIONS IN GUJARAT

Gujarat has undergone rapid urbanization in the last 50 years and the demographic composition of urban centers in Gujarat has radically changed. There has been a massive influx of OBCs, Dalits and Tribals into the towns and cities of Gujarat (see Sheth 2002). This reflects in the social composition of Ahmedabad too. ‘The rising middle class of Gujarat, unlike in the 1950s, is no longer dominated by the upper castes. A number of communities from the intermediate castes and socially and educationally backward castes, as well as Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, have moved upwards and become part of the middle class’ (see Yagnik 2002a). This led to a massive mobilization of the subaltern communities into politics and economic life of the city and the state. This was one of the factors that led to a dramatic turn about in the caste relations in Gujarat.

The patron-client relationships of the upper castes with Dalit groups, which were earlier based on the principle of purity and pollution, seem to have changed. These relations are increasingly becoming “competitive” in nature. The ex-untouchables have become threat for the upper castes in economic and political domains, which used to be the absolute monopoly of the upper caste groups. To them, their political power was slipping away and being transferred to the ‘backward castes and communities’. The educated middle class, mainly the Brahmins, Banias and Patidars, reacted sharply by starting an agitation against the reservation system (the result was extreme forms of caste violence in 1981 and 1985). The clashes between the savarnas and the Dalits in the industrial periphery of Ahmedabad gradually evolved into a caste war that spread to the towns in 18 out of the then 19 districts (see Yagnik 2002a).

Mobilization and Politicization of Caste

Politically Gujarat used to be a stronghold of the Congress Party: from 1952 to 1967 it won in all the elections held. The domination of the Congress was slowly substituted by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which in November 1989 gained a significant political victory. The role of caste in Gujarat politics in general and for the shift from the Congress to the BJP in particular has been crucial (see Shah 1998). However with the emergence of the BJP, the political landscape of caste politics began to undergo
significant changes. In the early 1980s, Shankarsingh Vaghela, the then president of the BJP, to counteract the older *Gujarat Kshatriya Sabha* supporting the Congress, founded a new *Rajput* organization, the *Kshatriya Sabha*. One of the pillars of the famous KHAM alliance of the Congress began to totter and *Rajputs* entered into new alliances with the *Patidars* and *Kolis*. The formation of a common base among these three caste groups provided the BJP with sufficient numbers to break the stronghold of the Congress.

Throughout the 1980s, besides wooing the OBCs, the BJP started a mobilization campaign among Dalits and Tribals. The RSS floated the organization *Samajik Samrasata Manch* (Social Assimilation Platform) to attract Dalits for the purpose of extending Hindu unity. The BJP formed *Harijan* and *Vanjati* (Tribals) cells in 1980 in order to take up the problems of these social groups. A number of Dalit and tribal leaders were not only recruited by the Party, but were also given important positions in the organization. The BJP made deep inroads into the traditional Congress vote-bank in different regions of the state (Shah 1996). The systematic and continuous build up of the Party cadres in the state helped the BJP to capture power in 1995. Other than the Congress and the BJP, no third formation has made any significant inroads in political life of the state.

The work of disseminating the ideology of Hindutva by the *Sangh Parivar* began within six months of the birth of the Party in 1951. The anti-Muslim feelings, which prevailed among the upper-caste Hindus-mainly the *Rajputs*, *Brahmins* and *Vanias* were nurtured by the *Jana Sangh* and RSS in the 1960s. The *Jana Sangh* and particularly the students’ front, the *Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad* (AVBP) dominated by upper-caste urban students, participated actively in the 1974 *Nav Nirman* student movement, and received tremendous success during the *Mandal* agitations in the state.

The upper castes viz. *Vanias*, *Rajputs*, *Brahmins*, and *Patels* had strong hold over mainstream Hinduism. These groups who consisted of the bulk of middle class in Gujarat were the primary ‘vote bank’ of the BJP, the political party with strong Hindu ideology. Over last three decades an important change has come about in caste relations in Gujarat as a result of the political mobilization of various caste groups on religious basis. The BJP made concerted efforts to mobilize other caste groups from OBCs, Dalits as well as the Tribals on religious lines.
The inclusion of Dalits and Tribals (who were largely the vote bank of the Congress) into its political fold, not only changed the political equations but also the combination of caste and politics with religious propaganda has changed the communal relations. The Muslims and other minorities in Gujarat are projected as the common enemy or opponents of all Hindus (see chapter VIII). Following the demolition of the Babri Masjid, communal riots took place on a large scale in different parts of Gujarat; a fact that undoubtedly helped the BJP to sweep the state Assembly elections in 1995. Although caste rivalries within the BJP kept the Party out of power in the state Assembly from 1996 to 1998, it bounced back with the crucial role played by the Patidars from Saurashtra, and the Kolis. Anti-Muslim passions, which almost reached its climax in Feb-March 2001 with intense communal riots all over the state, had its political repercussion. The BJP swept the polls in 2002.

Thus, the social relations in the state have altered in many ways over last few decades. The role of caste and communalism in the socio-political life of Gujarat has been clearly highlighted by Priyavadan Patel:

The caste factor is here to stay. But the Hindutva card does not seem to have become redundant. It has so far proved successful in cutting across various caste identities at lower middle and lower level of caste hierarchies but if it continues to fail in rewarding the voters tangibly, its efficacy is bound to decline (2000: 2433).

The marginalized caste groups in Gujarat, as all over India, have not remained detached from the changing socio-political realities. With this discussion on socio-political context, this chapter examines the caste relations of the Bhangis with other caste groups in urban area. Do their relations with upper castes differ from the relations with other caste groups among Dalits? Is there a practice of untouchability in the city, and if yes what is the nature of the practice of untouchability experienced by the Bhangis?

CASTE RELATIONS OF THE BHANGIS

The members of the Bhangi community living in the city of Ahmedabad hail from different regions of the state and thus come along with experiences of caste relations with different caste groups of the region. Similarly, the population of the Bhangis is well distributed all across the city and thus, their lived experience of caste relations varies
according to the caste groups living in the locality. However, in order to capture the varied experiences of the caste community with other caste groups, all caste groups are broadly defined into two groups, i.e. 1) Other Dalits and 2) Non Dalits (upper castes).

Responses received for the question “if the respondents have close interactions with other caste people in the city” are quite surprising. Of the total, 84 per cent (253) of them said they interact with the upper castes; whereas only 42 percent (127) of them said they have interactions with other Dalits in the city (see table 7.1). This high proportion of the respondents having some interactions with the upper castes somehow refutes the general observation about the upper caste relations with ex-untouchables. However, further investigation reveals that the respondents’ interactions with the upper caste groups, consists largely of non-intimate, non-personal relations. Such interactions take place either at the work place, market place, in nearby localities or sometimes at public forums like celebrations, festivals and party meetings. The intimate and personal relationships are rare.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Do you have close interactions</th>
<th>With Upper castes</th>
<th>With Other Dalits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>253</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table: 7.1 - Close interactions of the Bhangis with other castes

**Everyday Caste Interactions**

The residential localities remain important locations for everyday interactions. The residential units selected for the survey indicate that many of the units are located around other Dalit communities and some areas with upper castes. Of the total, 90 per cent of the respondents have confirmed physical proximity with other caste groups in the locality, mostly other Dalit groups like the *Vankars* and *Chamars*.

Around 80 per cent of the total respondents (241) said that upper caste members do come to their locality or residence for various purposes or occasions. These visits of the upper castes to the Bhangi localities are mostly restricted to “asking for labour” - 43 per cent (128) or “just friendly visits” - 32 per cent (96). There are a few instances where high caste members visit Bhangi localities during some “festivals or celebrations” - 4 per cent (12) and for “Swadhaya meetings” or for “party work” - 2 per cent (5).
On the other hand, 75 per cent of the total respondents (226) said that members of other Dalit groups do come to their locality or residence. Of the total, 48 per cent (144) have said “friendly visits” and 21 per cent (63) have mentioned, “asking for labour” as the two most common reasons for the members of other Dalit groups coming to their locality or residence. In the same way 6 per cent (18) of the respondents have expressed that the members of other Dalit group come to the locality during festivals and religious celebrations (see table 7.2).

Table: 7.2 - Interactions with other caste members in and around residential localities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purpose of interactions</th>
<th>Upper castes</th>
<th></th>
<th>Other Dalits</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Count</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>Count</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asking for labour</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>42.6</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>21.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Just friendly visit</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>32.0</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>48.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>During festivals and celebrations</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For Swadhaya</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party work</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do not come to residential localities</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>19.7</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>24.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The relationship between the Bhangis and the upper castes is not intimate. As described by some of the respondents, one could call it a “working or professional relationship”. A large number of upper castes visit the Bhangi localities for the purpose of asking them for labour indicate that even in urban areas the upper caste groups depend on Bhangis for labour, especially related to traditional occupations, viz. sanitary work or playing drums on various ceremonies. However, interactions on the occasions of celebrations and festivals or friendly visits to the localities show signs of establishing more personalized relationship among some of them. Similarly, political parties and religious sects like Swadhaya provided open platforms for interactions between Bhangis and the upper caste groups in the city.

Only 16 per cent (49) of the total respondents have attended some function or ceremony at upper caste houses “if invited”, that is largely restricted to the occasions of marriage, death or birth celebration. Here it is important to note the clause “if invited”. The Bhangis are engaged in traditional activity of playing drums at upper caste houses on occasions like death, marriage or birth ceremony. In return for their services they are either paid in cash or kind (leftover food). Similarly, 5 per cent (45) of the total respondents
saying that they have had food at upper castes houses have to be taken in a context. It is mentioned by a number of respondents that food transaction between upper castes and Bhangis is one of the main areas strongly restricted by the upper castes.

The members of other Dalit groups visit Bhangi localities more for friendly interactions and less for business or work related reasons. The interaction between these groups increases during socio-religious festivals. However, the data points towards variations in relationship and interactions among Bhangis and other Dalit groups at different localities. It should be mentioned here that the sampled respondents selected for the study are located at different geographical settings and thus in some areas the relationship is cordial and interactions are intimate. However, at some mixed caste localities the relations have ruptured and tension exists between Bhangis and the other Dalit community living in the area.

For example, when asked about the religious celebration in the locality, 82 per cent of the total respondents (245) said that they do celebrate socio-religious festivals with other Dalit groups, such as Diwali, Navratri, Ramnavmi, Krishnajayanti, Ganesh Chaturthi, and Uttarayan. However, 18 per cent (55) of the respondents said they do not celebrate any socio-religious festivals with other Dalit groups in or around the locality.

Beyond Day to Day Relations

Caste rivalry with other Dalits

The rivalry between Bhangis and other Dalit groups especially, the Vankars has a historical development that goes beyond day-to-day interactions. There are a number of reasons that explain the dynamics of present strained relationship between progressive Dalit groups and Bhangis in the city. The following accounts highlight how in reality the rivalry is much beyond the practice of untouchability.

Becharbhai gives the following explanation.

We are not able to face the competition with other progressive Dalit groups like Vankars and Chamars, mainly due to two reasons, 1) lack of education and 2) lack of information. The Vankars

There is a myth among Bhangis that a Bhangi person is invited by the upper caste for food on important religious "ceremony" to get some punia (religious merits), which is normally avoided by a "sensible" Bhangi.
and Chamars hold the important posts in Scheduled Caste Development Board in social welfare department of the state government. There are only a few members from Bhangi community in the board. In such situation those representing us are not able to push forward projects that would favour our community. On the other hand, the Vankars try to push and bring in their own community people. So most of the favours meant for Scheduled Castes go to them. Secondly, our people are not aware of the information about so many schemes and programs of the government being implemented for Scheduled Castes. The Vankars and Chamars keep that information away from us and our people are not in a position to get the required information on time.

The rivalry between Bhangis and the other two progressive groups among Dalits, has surfaced in public forums in recent years. It was the anti reservation movement (Anamat Andolan) of 1982 and 1985 that brought clear differences between Bhangis and other Scheduled Caste communities in the state. It was perceived by the other Dalits, that the Bhangi community did not support the “Dalit cause” during anti-reservation riots (although it is confirmed that individual leaders had taken active part). Hence, the other Dalit groups took revenge against Bhangis by social boycott of all the Bhangis, particularly in urban areas. Although, this social boycott was only for a short time, the message was clear that ‘they are not with us’.

Only 8 per cent (25) of the total respondents said that the other Dalit groups consider Bhangis as part of Dalit community, whereas, 26 per cent (78) of the respondents said “never”. On the other hand, nearly 54 per cent (161) of the respondents perceive that other Dalit groups consider them as part of the Dalit community only “when they need or when it suits their interests”. Similarly, 12 per cent of them said it is only “official”.

The fact of the tense relationship among Dalit groups is now being recognized. The caste relations between various Dalit groups also indicate the replication of caste ideology among Dalits. The Bhangis being the lowest in the category are at the receiving end.4

4 The Bhangis have been kept out of larger Dalit movement in Gujarat systematically. Even the Dalit Panther, which is active in Gujarat, did not include Bhangis in their agenda. The untouchability model followed by the upper castes also continues among the ex-untouchables. The higher Dalits communities keep the lower Dalits like the Bhangis as untouchables. It is against this practice of untouchability, the Navsarjan Trust, which works for Dalit movement in Gujarat, took to a “Padyatra” (march on foot) program in 473 villages to create awareness among Dalit communities about the evil practice of untouchability and to bring unity among the Dalits. It was an effort to bring back the Bhangi community in the fold of Dalits. The slogan for the Padyatra was Rampatra Chodo, Bhimpatra lo (leave the practice of keeping separate saucer (tea vessel) and take up to Ambedkar way of life). It was for the first time that different Dalit communities had tea in the same cup and water from the same glass (Narrated by Martin Macwan, The Director, Navsarjan).
Some of the respondents see “Vankar-Bhangi” rivalry as political game than a caste war. It is true that, Vankars have made tremendous progress in the fields of education, economics, politics as well as social. The Bhangis are unable to avail the benefits of reservations, as they have not yet made sufficient progress in any of these spheres. But the politicians are playing different games of divide and rule. Traditionally all Dalits were the vote bank of the Congress Party and for years they were loyal to the Party. The leaders from Vankar community have also taken advantage and have established their position in the Party. In recent years the BJP has intruded into Dalit vote bank and in order to divide the Dalits certain maligning propaganda is made so that one community sees the other as the enemy (see chapter VIII on political life).

**The restricted relations with Upper castes**

The kinship terminology commonly used by Bhangis to refer to the persons from upper castes is the “Mai-Bap” (mother and father). This expression springs from relationship of patronage and dependence. Similarly, the norms of untouchability were strictly followed in villages and anyone from the lower castes crossed any of the norms set by caste hierarchy, he and his household suffered severe consequences.

These two types of caste relations have moved to the urban areas, albeit with variations and less intensity. There is a sense of fear especially among those who are engaged in private scavenging and those who depend on the upper castes for their work and the left-over food in the evening. For example, Dhanabhai who stays in Chandrapur slum said, “It is very difficult to run the family. My wife and I both work as private scavengers. We cannot interact freely with the upper castes. We have to maintain distance from them”. He further elaborates saying, “if I sit down to tell you everything about the instances of untouchability then our work will stop, as well as the leftover food we get”. The patron-client relationship and the traditional caste restrictions that existed with it in rural areas continue in the city.

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5 Maria Perez (2004: 89) in her anthropological study in a village of Dholka taluka of Ahmedabad district specifically focused on Vankars briefly mentions of Bhangis as one of the disqualified groups among untouchables. She notes that the Bhangis in the village get preferential treatment from the Rajputs (Rajput is a dominant caste in the village). The Rajputs are the most generous of all in their gifts to the Bhangis who play drums on various festivals. Secondly Bhangis who are agricultural labourers get preferential posts if not exclusive ones with the Rajput, who retain them in their fields and are, in fact the ones who, more than any others, extend economic protection to the Bhangis (taking care of their ritual expenses and giving them loans). The reason she gives is “thus inhibiting their aggression”. 

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A group of respondents said, "we are not sure if they will insult us; will they say something when we approach them". Another set of respondents said, "we are afraid because we are untouchables (Bhangis), they may get polluted by our touch and so we keep mariyada" (restrict ourselves) and a third group of respondents said, "our way of life is different than theirs". The reasons provided by the respondents for not having close interactions with the upper castes indicate internalization of subjugated self (we are not worthy).

Some of the respondents reporting the fear of the upper caste narrated real life situations of such interactions. "During Navratri most of us celebrate the festival; they come to see in our locality; we go to their locality too. But we cannot participate in the dance with them. During Holi they would throw colours on us but we cannot throw colours on them... impossible" says, Jillabhai Vaghela of Khodiyarnagar slum. Tulsibhai who stays in a slum locality in central zone confirms the fear of upper castes among Bhangis, "Yes, different caste groups live here together. But if there is a fight with the upper castes, they would “finish us off” (Dhoi nakhe), and especially, if they are Darbars”.

However, the settled and upwardly mobile sections of the Bhangis show a change of attitude. This points towards the changing context of urban area, where the respondents belonging to the same caste group do not continue the patron-client relationship with the upper castes and appear to be free of the oppression caste relations of the past.

**THE QUESTION OF UNTOUCHABILITY**

When the issue of untouchability or caste discrimination was brought up for discussion, the respondents tended to evade the issue. One of the first reactions of the respondents was “forget about it”. However, the discussion on the issue was focused at two levels, i.e. the practice of untouchability in public sphere and the untouchability practiced in private sphere. When asked for their experiences and perceptions about the practice of untouchability in the city, all the respondents except one, expressed that there is less untouchability compared to past. However, a large majority of them seem to agree that it was still being practiced, either in private or in public spheres, in different forms and the Bhangis continued to be its victims.
Untouchability in Public Spheres

Of the total 300 respondents only 7 per cent (20) said that untouchability was being practiced mostly in public sphere not in private. The practice of untouchability in public sphere is most noticeable in areas like entering temples, social transactions of inter-caste dinning and inter-caste marriages. In these three public domains the practice of untouchability with the Bhangis is more stringent and very little change is perceived even in the city.

Narayanbhai Vaghela, says,

In reality, the social boycott of the community, which is expressed in the practice of untouchability, still continues. There is no doubt that in urban areas upper caste groups relate with Bhangis on numerous occasions at work place or in the market or on common platforms. We can say that there are increased economic transactions between Bhangis and other upper castes today than what was in the past. However, when it comes to intimate social transactions there is a distance, which is maintained strictly. There are no Roti-beti transactions (inter-caste dinning and inter-caste marriages). It is very rare that an inter-caste marriage takes place among Bhangis and the upper caste group members. This is the strongest wall of untouchability. Although there was a state-wide agitation for Dalit's entry into temple under the leadership of a Bhangi woman (Kamalaben Gurjar), it is a fact that we are not allowed to enter the Saminarayan mandir in the city of Ahmedabad.

A large majority of 72 per cent (217) of the respondents mentioned that there are no instances of inter-caste marriages that they know about. Only 6 per cent (18) respondents said there are occurrences of inter-caste marriages in the community. It is difficult to make any conclusive observation on patterns of inter-caste marriages among the Bhangis in the city. However, 12 respondents said that the instances of inter-caste marriages are mostly between Bhangis and "someone from upper caste"; 3 of the respondents mentioned that it is "with someone from other Dalit communities" and another 3 of them said "someone from non-Hindu communities". The other sources confirmed that there are more inter-caste marriages between persons from Bhangi community and members of the upper castes than with the members of other Dalit groups.

Further investigations into the reactions or outcomes of such inter-caste marriages revealed that in most cases the Bhangi family was at the receiving end. There were
instances reported that when such marriages take place, often the upper caste party threatens the Bhangi family of serious consequences. Ganpatbhai says,

We, in our community do not take objection to such practices too rigidly. In fact, we encourage such interactions. But the real difficulty comes from the other party. There is not a single case of inter-caste marriage where the upper caste party has accepted a Bhangi family. The settlements have not taken place within both the families. At times, the upper caste family may accept the boy or girl but they never establish relation with her or his family from the heart. They just do not accept us as equals.

Radhaben Chawan* says,

The inter-caste marriages would be the only solution to the problem of untouchability. But it is very difficult. I have an example of my son. He was in love with a Patel girl and she too loved him. But it failed. The Bhangis face resistance in these social interactions not only from the upper caste groups but also the other castes groups among Dalits like the Vankars and Chamars. A number of attempts towards breaking of this social wall have met with “deadly end”.

Ranchodbhai* who took initiative of inter-caste marriage and fought the family and the community, has different perception of inter-caste marriages.

I had an inter-caste marriage in 1980. I am married to a Vaniya girl. It was my choice (love marriage). I am a SSC pass; she is a graduate. She has distanced herself from the family and near and dear ones for me. The Bhangi Samaj should have taken pride in such marriage. On the contrary, my family and my community boycotted us for a year or so. Then they slowly accepted us. Now the Patels accept me too. Why not? My daughter is married to a Patel boy.

A few respondents do not accept the idea of inter-caste marriages in the community. They argued saying, “our customs and traditions are very different that do not match with others, especially with the upper castes.” There were others like Haribhai who said, “An inter-caste marriage is always a problem. There is always a fight when someone from our community marries with someone from other caste groups. We believe our wealth and our daughters should remain in our Samaj itself”.

The respondents do not perceive the practice of untouchability in other public domains as rigid as it was earlier. Some of them while giving instances said, earlier days the practice of untouchability was “crude” and “rampant” in the city as it was in villages. Drinking water, for example was not easily accessible for Bhangis in public places or in offices where they worked; children had to sit outside the classroom, distance had to be
maintained in public transport and services. Even hair saloon, tailors and hotel owners would not entertain the Bhangis. One of the elderly members of the community said, "The practice of untouchability was rampant. We were not allowed to enter hotels or restaurants, temples or any house and could not get water to drink during our work" (see table 7.5 for details on untouchability in the past).

S.A. Solanki gives an example of untouchability of earlier times in the city of which he was a victim.

This was my childhood experience. I was studying in Sabarmati School in fourth standard – eight or nine year’s old. We were just five students from lower caste community. The rest of the students were from upper castes – savarnas. In the school there was a pitcher from which we were allowed to drink water and a mug was kept outside for us to take water. The upper caste boys used that same mug to carry water to toilet. One day, seeing such discrimination I was angry and upset. I broke that mug with stone during the recess time. Some of our caste boys (because of the fear) went and complained to the class teacher. Annoyed with my action the teacher began to beat me cruelly. I shouted three to four times, "kya hum insan naih hai kya?" (Are we not human beings?) The master, who was a Muslim stopped beating me and was stunned. He then took me in his hand (embrace) and asked me what had actually happened. He could not complain about the incidence to the authority as it was British time and other students would have been punished for their behaviour. He then made all the students stand up. And as a way out he asked all the students (savarnas and Dalits) to drink water from the same pot. Everyone had to drink water, not by a mug but water was poured in his or her hands.

The work place is another public domain where, although the respondents have reported instances of untouchability, its rigidity is being relaxed compared to earlier times. Of the total, only 28 per cent (84) of the respondents said that others keep untouchability with them because they are engaged in scavenging work. The instances and experiences of untouchability at work places mentioned are: they are not allowed to enter into the house by the upper caste employer, keep a distance while interacting, give water from top, if glass is given then of a different type or separately kept for them, left over food (Valu) is given (thrown) from far, sometimes tea is served in the house where they go to work, often tea served is black (without milk). Some of the respondents who go rag picking described that generally people look down at them and at times shout at them.
A large number of respondents are of the opinion that the situation of untouchability with Bhangis in the city has improved substantially. One of them remarked, “Things are not as bad as they used to be. A few years ago when Safaikamdaras traveled by Ahmedabad Municipal Transport (AMT) buses people would not allow them to sit next to them or would not sit near them. But now they do not carry cleaning equipments along with them. They keep them at work place itself. So conditions have improved” (see table 7.5 for details on practice of untouchability now).

The caste based residential segregation is well-accepted pattern of space distribution in the city (see housing profile in chapter III). In such localities occasions for interaction between caste groups and conflicts among them are limited and are well restricted within physical boundaries. However, at some places Bhangi families reside in common localities with other caste groups. During day-to-day life situations they come into face-to-face interactions with other caste groups. Often such interactions become confrontational.

In residential localities the discrimination and untouchability experienced by Bhangis is mostly from other Dalit groups, who are their immediate neighbours. Vejalpur Housing Board locality is an example of a mixed-caste locality, where a number of Bhangi families reside with other caste groups i.e. Marwadis, Vankars and Chamars. The chairman of the housing board is a Patel who stays in a nearby village. The locality has no drinking water facility from the Nagar-palikas. The chairman provides the water from a bore well to a common water tap post for which every household has to pay Rs. 75 per month.

Manjulaben, a Bhangi resident of the locality says,

Our community had to suffer the most, because they (the upper castes and other Dalit groups) did not allow us to take water till they stored enough for themselves. Sometimes water came for a short time and we remained without water for the entire day. One day we all got together and protested against the blocking of the water. Now the Marwadi families have taken private water connection in their houses. But still there is much harassment in the area by the Vankars and Chamars. We hardly have any interactions with them.

Keeping these trends in mind, respondents were asked about the chances of their getting a house, if they wanted in the upper caste residential localities. Only 3 per cent of
the respondents (8) said they would get "easily" and around 30 per cent (88) of them expressed, "why not if we have money?" However, a large majority of 67 per cent (204) was of the opinion that they would not get a house in upper caste residential localities.6

This is what Kamlaben Gurjar, an active social worker of the community had to say,

Most often when our people go to new up-coming housing complexes to book a house, there is no problem. Even the contractor or a person in charge says, "Yes, you will get it". But as soon as they come to know from some other sources that the person belongs to Bhangi community, they change their mind. They would find some excuses to say there is no place. If one tells his or her caste in the beginning itself, then there are very little chances. The segregation of Bhangis in residential ghettos based on practice of untouchability has remained the same (Jaise thi).

Respondents mentioned a number of instances, where upper caste people left the residential localities when a Bhangi family moved in. Narayanbhai gives an example from Puneet society in Raneep.

A Patel built Puneet society and in the beginning there were Patels, Vankars and Chamars living in. However, since the land was reserved for Harijans, a few seats had to be given to Bhangis. This is how some of us got inside the locality. After some time a few high castes left the place, so we brought our people in. However, more and more Vankars and Chamars began to leave the place and we took advantage of the situation to fill in our families. Today 90 per cent households are Bhangis.

Untouchability in Private Spheres: the Undercurrents

A large majority of 93 per cent (279) of the respondents perceive untouchability more in private sphere. This indicates that the practice of untouchability is real and present almost in every Bhangi's personal life in the city. Radhaben, shares the following personal experiences and perceptions:

It is true that untouchability is less, and has reduced its cruel forms in the city. I remember, as a councilor I had an officer from UP, Mr. Yadav; sometimes he used to come home for some official work. Whenever I offered him water he wouldn't take it at my house. One day I asked him, if he was not drinking water in my house because my mother is a Safaikamdar. He tried to defend

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6 There are different perceptions and opinions of those presently living in slum areas about shifting to better or mixed localities. When asked if they would like to shift to better housing, Keshabhai Vaghela said, "we will stay in better localities for two days or so, maximum two months. Then I would come back to my locality (slum) because we will not be able to adjust there. We will not like to stay there. We are used to children shouting around, roaming around half naked. We do not want to go away. Our way of life is different, eating habits and food is different, how can we live together with the high caste?"
himself with other excuses, but I knew the reasons well. Here is another example of a Jain friend. I used to go to her house, and at times eat food with her. But she was not allowing me to take water from the pitcher (Matlu) myself. She used to always serve me water in a glass, never allowed me to touch the pitcher. On the other hand, whenever she came to my home, she did not take water under various pretensions. I knew she had many restrictions from her family, although we were good friends.

There is a general practice in Gujarat that when the caste of the other is not known, they would always ask the person’s name or surname. The inquiry reveals the caste identity without directly asking. The interaction or relation with the other would depend on his or her caste identity.

Madhuri Vaghela* shares the following experience of caste prejudice of a friend who otherwise did not relate to her as a girl from Bhangi community till her caste identity was revealed.

After completion of my 12th class, I did not get admission for diploma. So during that year I worked in a private school “Shardha II” as a teacher for four months. It was a school for poor children, and I had interest in teaching. So more than earning, I joined the school for experience. As per the special provision, there were two seats reserved for candidates from Bhangi community. But since there was no one else from the Bhangi community, the school authority appointed a Brahmin girl as a teacher along with me. She did not know that I was from Bhangi caste. She was very friendly with me. She must have thought that I belong to some other caste. Since she never asked me, I too never told her. And I never felt the need of telling the same. She used to come to our house. Although she was a Brahmin, her economic conditions were poor. So at times I carried food for her; we helped her financially, and even supplied food grains for her family.

At the end of a month, she was asked by the school authority to sign on the name of a Bhangi girl as the seat was reserved for Bhangi candidate. When she was asked to sign with a Bhangi name she felt ashamed. Then she said, “one whose face I do not intent to see in the morning, I have to sign in her name!” When I heard that, something happened to me. I asked her, “Would you not see my face too?” After knowing the true story she felt ashamed, and begged pardon from me. We continued to be friends thereafter, despite knowing who we were.

Manish Chawan tells the following incidence from his life:

Often I do not reveal my identity to others, except on very specific occasions. But there is a constant caste label. I have best of education. I have my school time friends from all castes, and religions like Hindus, Muslims and Christians. We meet regularly; they come to my house, and I go to their homes. But you do find some persons who have not changed their perceptions about caste. Recently
I had gone to a tailor shop, there was a person from upper caste (a *Darbar*), and while talking he asked me my name and surname. I said “Chawan!!” He was a bit taken aback. Then, in order to identify my exact caste background, he made further inquiry “Keva”, (asking which caste group, from which village). I told him, I come from Udaipur from a *Rajput* family. I told lies, but I felt he should change his attitude.

The respondents do not by any chance give impression that the practice of untouchability has totally disappeared. The principle of untouchability has not gone completely from the minds of upper castes including the progressive Dalit groups. New forms of untouchability have replaced the old practices now. A number of respondents accept the fact that the practice of untouchability has been reduced to a large extent in urban areas, but it is only in external matters. They say, physical touch or sitting together for a cup of tea is possible; however, there is no change of heart. There are instances of friendly interactions, meetings, discussions, etc. However, there are no personal relations like inviting home for food or family ties. It is all only working relations. In that sense, age-old untouchability is still maintained, but in different forms.

The respondents mentioned that they see a change in public appearances of such practices, viz. untouchability of a different kind. For example, *Vankars* take away opportunities reserved for Dalits. They do not reveal information even in the offices where they work along with Bhangis. There is no Dalit feeling; Bhangis are treated as outsiders. While talking about the practice of untouchability, Dahiben who is engaged in private scavenging says, “earlier they used to keep the physical distance, but now they keep us at a distance from their heart”.

Das Bariya gives a concrete expression to what many other respondents said in different words.

Earlier we were totally kept outside. Now there is some change in the practice of untouchability. Now untouchability is not just about touching; it is more than that. They (the progressive Dalit groups) know that if we are given our share, and our rights, then they will be deprived. They do not want us to come up. They do not express this on the face but they have hidden agenda that ‘we should be kept where we are’.

These perceptions of the practice of untouchability in private spheres in the city lead to understand what many of the respondents have described as “white
untouchability”. It is perceived by some members in the community that the practice of untouchability kept with the Bhangi community is not in very obvious form but is expressed in a subtle way. The term “white untouchability” is not so popular but it is in circulation among educated members of the community, and is used as a code word.

Some of the members of the community termed it as “refined version” of untouchability (Sudhreli abhadchhet) and some have termed it as “sophisticated-elite” untouchability. The term is also vividly expressed in phrases commonly used, for example as one respondent said, “There is one set of teeth to show and another set for biting” (Batavana dat alag ane chawana alag). Some of the respondents have referred to it as “prejudice or hidden agenda” of the upper castes or other Dalit groups to keep the Bhangis at their place.

The examples of white untouchability provided by the respondents are:

- a person from Bhangi community is by-passed, avoided and ignored by progressive Dalit group members or by an upper caste, such as at work places
- do not pass on information about official announcements, schemes, or opportunities that would benefits a Bhangi member in their offices
- give them the job of Safaikamdar but do not promote them to higher up posts to which they are eligible; do not give jobs in secular occupations although qualified
- do not allow Bhangi members who can afford to buy a house in upper caste localities or in localities of other Dalits
- do not invite Bhangi friends at home for food or for important functions
- during friendly visit do not take water or food at their houses
- they are recruited as party workers but do not issue them any ticket for elections or do not promote them in responsible political positions, etc.

As one of the respondents explained that ‘the colour ‘white’ does not hurt your eyes, neither does it strike easily to the naked eyes. But it is there. Secondly, white is also something that stands opposite to crude. Crude is distasteful. This is what white untouchability is all about. For many of us it appears that the practice of untouchability is
disappearing in the city; for many it is less crude than the past or than what it is in rural areas. But for many of us it is still hurting, even though it is manifested in forms which are not very crude’.

CITY AND CHANGING CASTE RELATIONS

Change and continuity in social institutions has become a characteristic in urban India. So, one observes similar patterns of change in caste relations in cities. This section explores some of the details of caste relations of the Bhangis in the city and the practice of untouchability with comparison to the past relations. Following table provides important data on the changing caste relations of the Bhangis in the city.

Table: 7.3 – Perceptions on present relations with other castes (compared to past)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nature of Relations</th>
<th>Upper castes</th>
<th>Other Dalits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Count</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remained same</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>48.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has improved</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>45.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has worsened</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NR/A</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. Nearly half of the total respondents perceive that their relations with other caste groups, either from the upper caste or other Dalit group, in the city have remained the same as compared to the past.

2. A large majority of them do see an improvement in their relations with other caste groups in the city. In this context, it is important to notice that 35 per cent of the total respondents (106) perceive their relationship with other Dalit groups improved, whereas those who perceive their relations with upper caste improved in the city is much larger (45 per cent of them)

3. A substantial number of respondents 17 per cent (51) seem to perceive their relationship with other Dalit groups as worsened over the years in the city. But it is not the case with their relationship with the upper castes. Only 5 per cent (14) of them said it is worsened.

These perceptions need to be seen in the context of the past relationship with other castes. The perceptions of the respondents on relations with other caste groups in the past are clubbed into six sets of relationships (see table 7.4).
Table: 7.4 - Relations with other caste groups in the past

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nature of Relationship in the Past</th>
<th>Upper castes</th>
<th>Other Dalits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Count</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Good relations: sometime tea transactions; treated as equals</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Working (professional) relations: related only for work</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>40.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talking relations: related superficially</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Patron-client relations: had to respect them; maintain distance; serve them</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>17.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Relations of untouchability:</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>11.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Tense relations: group fights</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 No interaction / could not interact (without being invited)</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>19.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NR/A (Not responded / Not answered)</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>10.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The range of relationship indicates that the Bhangis have not perceived their relationship either with upper castes or with other Dalit groups as intimate or close knit. Except 21 per cent of the respondents who have perceived their relationship with other Dalit groups in the past as “good relations”, all other sets of perceptions are more negative (see table 7.4).

As many as 41 per cent of them perceived their relationship with the upper castes as “superficial”; either just working relations or talking relations. They related with the Bhangis only for work. Adding to these perceptions, nearly 18 per cent of them said that their relations with the upper castes were that of patron-client. They had to respect them, maintain distance and serve them. Some of the respondents mentioned instances of how they had to fold their hands and cover faces when a higher caste person approached. Or how they had to look down with humiliation and the women had to pull purdah as the members of the upper castes passed by. It was not possible for a Bhangi to cross the road while an upper caste was on his way.

Similarly, 11 per cent of the total respondents mentioned that their relationship with the upper castes were that of the realm of “impurity”, one that maintained physical distance. They were always treated in the past as untouchables of the “lowest order”. The respondents narrated their experiences, for example, how they had to stand far from shop and the upper caste shopkeeper would accept the money only after sprinkling water on it in order to purify. They never accepted anything, where there was direct touch possible. In fact the distance between the Bhangis and the upper caste is well expressed by nearly 20 per cent of the respondents who said, there were no interactions at all, and if there were, then it was only when they were invited by the upper caste for such interactions. In such
situation one can well understand that no respondents have perceived their relationships with the upper caste in the past as “tense”.

Little over 20 per cent of the respondents perceived the past relations with other Dalit groups as tense. Some of the respondents mentioned that since they lived closer to other Dalit groups, there were often fights and situations of conflicts in day-to-day interactions. Although other Dalit groups were treated as untouchables by the upper castes, in turn they looked at the Bhangis, the lowest among Dalits as untouchables and polluting. As many as 10 per cent of the respondents said, other Dalits maintained relationship of untouchability with them and even hesitated to interact with them. Same number of respondents also mentioned that other Dalit groups considered themselves higher than the Bhangis, and kept patron-client relations with them like the one maintained by the upper castes.

Chanabhai Vaghela, a resident of a housing society says, “It is the Vankars and Chamars who keep more untouchability than Patels and Vaniyas. Many of them who have migrated from rural areas treat us badly. Often they address us as “bhangiya” (a derogatory expression for Bhangi), which was more prevalent in villages”.

Solanki further gives examples to say how Bhangis have been segregated, and kept at a distance in public spheres, especially by other Dalit groups like Vankars. He says,

Today, Vankars would like to be closer to Patels and Vaniyas then to lower Dalit groups like Bhangis. They do not want to keep relations with us. They do not like to live with us. For example, in Kamdhenu society Vankar and Bhangi households were living together. But over the years Vankars sold their houses to other Bhangi families and left the society. In that society Bhangis were hardly 25 per cent, now they are around 80 per cent of the total households. Similarly, a few Vankars living in Rudraprayad society are uncomfortable with Bhangi families staying in the same locality. They do not have any transactions or contact with them.

The distance maintained by other Dalit groups, the practice of untouchability, the ideology of pollution, etc with the Bhangis appears to be the replication of what ex-untouchables would experience from the so called upper castes. Thus, the relations with other Dalit groups are also perceived by 14 per cent of the respondents as “superficial” and they related to the Bhangis only for work or when they needed.
Only 24 per cent (72) of the respondents see “substantial change” in the situation of untouchability now in the city compared to the practice of untouchability back in the villages. Similarly, 57 per cent (170) of the total respondents perceive “some change” in the situation in the city. However, 19 per cent of the total respondents (58) do not see “any change”. The differences in the practice of untouchability and caste relations in the village and in the city are detailed in table 7.5.

The important difference underlying in the perceptions is that the rampant and crude type of practice of untouchability being prevalent even today in the villages is not so in the city. Even today in the villages people of the community have to stand far away during upper caste wedding; women cannot keep the head open (they have to keep veil); they have to bring their own glass for water; wash the used glass by themselves; water is given from top, etc.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Past / in villages</th>
<th>Now / in city</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Open untouchability</td>
<td>Hidden practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Common and intense untouchability</td>
<td>Not so common and less intense untouchability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Segregated totally from others</td>
<td>Living together with other castes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Had too many prohibitions and restrictions</td>
<td>More interactions on many occasions/less restrictions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Close interactions were not possible, had to keep oneself physical far consciously</td>
<td>Water, tea transactions take place. Filling water from common stand post possible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Older/traditional generation / strictly followed oppressive practices</td>
<td>Generational change / more education / less untouchability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Treated as the untouchables / kept distance or we had to maintain distance</td>
<td>Anonymity in the city / large population so others do not normally ask caste</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

However, 12 per cent of the respondents (37) perceive that being in the city has made difference to a “large extent” to forget or overcome the caste oppression they would face back in the village. A large majority of 76 per cent of them (229) has said “somewhat”, and 11 per cent (34) of the respondents expressed that they see “no change” in the situation.

While comparing untouchability and caste relations in the villages and the city some of the respondents said, ‘Earlier, we couldn’t even talk to them (upper castes). Now here we can stand with them and talk to them. We had to turn back if we saw an upper caste person approaching on the other side of the road or we had to stand aside folding our hands till he passed by. But in the city no one knows who is high and who is low. We can
walk together without any problem. In the past and especially in the villages when we went to shops owned by upper castes they would ask us to keep the money down and then they would sprinkle water over it before they took the money but such things are becoming past'. These perceptions confirm what has been said so far in the previous section about the caste relations and the question of untouchability.

Some of the respondents feel that the urbanization process would help in eradicating untouchability. They perceive that the relaxation in the practice of untouchability experienced now is the beginning of the process. As many as 47 per cent (141) of the respondents said, that in future their children probably will not face the problem of untouchability in the city. On the other hand, although 53 per cent of the respondents (159) said that their children too will face untouchability in future, almost 95 per cent of them (151) said it would be lesser than what they have experienced or what they have been experiencing. The urban context has certainly contributed in bringing about such change.

None of the respondent thinks that their children would have to face untouchability more than what they have been experiencing. One could draw a general observation from this set of perceptions that the Bhangis in the city do not perceive a total discontinuity of caste; however, they do see the trend towards change in the nature of caste and less intensity of the practice of untouchability in the city.

Conclusion

The urban social life of Bhangis does indicate that caste makes a complicated web of social relations, and as a historically marginalized caste community, they have to live with it, albeit with its changing nature and form. However, the changing significance of caste has brought about awakening and awareness of the oppressive dimensions of caste relations among Bhangis living in the city. The emerging assertion processes among upwardly mobile Bhangis are seen as threat to the monopoly positions held so far by the upper castes and the progressive Dalit groups. The notion of ‘caste relations’ cannot be put in tightly bracketed category as ‘changing’ or ‘continuing’.
The practice of untouchability continues for some as an expression of 'purity - pollution' dimension and for others it is no more a purity–pollution continuum but one of rivalry in socio-economic and political life. The Vankars and Chamars, two progressive Scheduled Caste communities have begun to perceive the Bhangis as competitors in political and economic spheres. The upwardly mobile members of the Bhangi community feel that the untouchability practiced today, especially in urban areas, is not only to keep them at a distance physically but also to suppress their economic and political assertion in some way. What they have labeled as “white untouchability” or a “refined version” of untouchability is as painful as maintaining physical distance.

The following chapter on the politics of caste will describe the changing caste relations in the political life of the Bhangis in the city.