Chapter VIII

CITY AND THE POLITICAL LIFE OF CASTE

The emergence of caste as a significant factor in political life is recognized as an accepted reality in India. This study makes an attempt at an empirical level to unfold the significance of caste and its implications for Bhangis, the caste of the scavengers in Ahmedabad.

In the broader socio-political context of Gujarat (see chapter VII) this chapter deals in details with political life of the caste of the scavengers. As a caste community, are they accommodated in political structures of the state and the city? Where and how? Is there a political mobilization among them and what is the nature of their participation in the political life of the city? The chapter also highlights the development of political landscape over the last two decades, which experienced dramatic change in relations between caste and communal aspects in Gujarat. In this context, the last section focuses on the political mobilization of the Bhangis and their changing relations with the Muslims in the city.

POLITICAL MOBILIZATION AMONG THE BHANGIS

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the political life of Gujarat was by and large dominated by the upper castes. The OBCs and the lower castes, although participated in political processes, remained as vote banks. Over the last three decades political scenario has changed drastically. Dalit groups, who supported a political formation for a long time without any substantial agenda, have begun to assert for position and power. In this context it is important to look at the political life of the caste group of Bhangis who neither have influencing social position nor numerical strength to affect the political equation in the state.

Bhangis in the Political Structure

The political graph of Bhangis of Ahmedabad shows that although 16 per cent (47) of the total respondents do not support any specific political party or political organization,
a large majority of 82 per cent (247) has clearly indicated that they support one or the other
political formations in the state. The responses on the voting behaviour show that the
Bhangi community, reflecting the overall trend in the state, is divided politically among
two major political parties, i.e. the Congress and the BJP. Among those who opt to support
a political Party, 59 per cent (146) expressed their support for the Indian National Congress
and 35 per cent (87) for the BJP. Nearly 6 per cent (14) of the respondents did not reveal
their choice of a political formation.

Initially, due to Mahatma Gandhi and later on due to the engagement of the
Gandhians, the Bhangi community was predominantly with the Congress Party in rural as
well as in urban areas. However, as the data shows, with nearly 35 per cent of the
respondents tilting towards the BJP, the shift is perceptible.

When asked, what the reasons for such a shift were, Puroshttam Macwana, a local
Congress leader gives mainly two reasons. 1) This shift was due to the decline in the
organized work of mobilization of the cadre as it used to be and the politics within the
Congress Party. The Party has deserted the Bhangis, and has taken them for granted. This
has discouraged the Bhangis to continue the support. 2) The BJP is much more organized
at the grass root level in the city in residential localities, where Bhangis reside in large
numbers. He was of the opinion that the BJP was able to pump in a good amount of
financial resources to mobilize people.

Mahindrabhai Parmar, a BJP leader of the community outlines how the Party
managed to mobilize the Bhangis to its fold. According to him, the Bhangis who had
supported the Congress all these years had lost hope and interest in the Party, as the
promises given to them were not fulfilled. The BJP leadership\(^1\) by that time had understood
the arithmetic of KHAM alliance of the Congress and its significance as the winning card.
They said, 'unless and until we have Dalits with us we cannot come to power'. On this
basis, mobilization among Dalits and especially among the Bhangis was systematically
carried forward by the BJP.

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\(^1\) He specifically mentions of the two BJP leaders, who have shown special soft corner for Bhangis, viz.
Fakirbhai Vaghela (prominent political leader of the BJP at the state level) and Sanjaybhai Joshi (a RSS leader).
"Sanjaybhai always had special feelings for the development of the Bhangis. He wanted the community to stand on their
feet and organize themselves. He made concerted efforts to give representations to Bhangis in various elected bodies by
issuing tickets to our people."
Shankarsingh Vahgela, who was then the President of the BJP, masterminded the building up of the Party in the state. As part of the strategy, the process of political inclusion of the Bhangis in the BJP began in 1989. By this time, other Dalit communities were already a part of the BJP, and the Bhangi Samaj was, till then excluded from the Party. During the same year, around 5000 Bhangis joined the BJP.

Mahindrabhai further elaborates the strategies adopted by the BJP in mobilizing and including the community in party politics. The process of political mobilization of the Bhangis began earnestly all over the state, by making concerted efforts at each districts and Taluka level. These efforts were finally brought to a culmination in “Bhangi Chetna Rally”, where around 25,000 people came together under a political banner for the first time, at Kankaria Lake in the city of Ahmedabad, in February 2000. This process brought a large-scale political awareness and mobilization among the Bhangis all across the state.

During this period the Bhangis entered the political structure in a decisive way. The strategic mobilization by the BJP helped the community as a whole to send a strong message to the Congress that they can no more be taken for granted in politics. Their support deserves a place in political structure through proper representation. The BJP understood this inner inclination of the upwardly mobile urban Bhangis to a great extent.

**Political Representation and Participation**

The Congress was in power in the state till 1971 and the Bhangis always stood for the Party, but they were never given a prominence in the political power structure. However, from 1970s the Bhangis begin to gain political representation in state politics through the Congress Party. After the independence till 1990 there were seven Members of the State Legislative Assembly from the Bhangi community. They were mostly elected from the Saurashtra region, and Central Guajarat. All of them were the candidates of the Congress Party. Since 1990 till 2002 the Congress Party did not have any Bhangi MLA, however, during this period the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation had three Bhangi Corporators from the Congress.

The BJP, on the other hand, adopted the strategy to include the community in the Party by encouraging their representation in the state and city politics from the beginning.
One of the first moves was to issue election tickets to the members of the Bhangi community for Nagar-palikas elections in the state. Nineteen young persons from the community were elected on reserved seats in various Nagar-palikas and three of them were elected as the presidents of the Nagar-palikas.

The Party also began to give the share of the reserved seats of Scheduled Castes to Bhangis to contest elections in various Municipal Corporations in the state. The AMC had two Bhangi Corporators elected from the BJP in 1995. In the same year Mahindrabhai Zala was elected as the first Bhangi MLA from the BJP from Jamnagar Rural Constituency. There is no Member of Parliament so far, either in Lok Sabha or Rajya Sabha from Bhangi community from any Party (see Appendix 8.1 - List of elected political leaders).

The BJP also mobilized the women section of the community by giving representation to Bhangi women in the city politics, which the Congress had failed to do at the city level. Ranjanben Chawan, one of the first Bhangi women BJP Corporator in AMC represented the community from Shahpur area of the city.

She thus narrates her personal experience of initiation in the Party.

It was Fakirbhai Vagehla who took much interest in our community. I was educated and a bit active. I knew Mahendrabhai of our community, who was then the BJP leader in the city. Fakirbhai contacted me through him. He said, “We need to work for the progress of our women. They have never gone out; never talked about social or political problems. We should encourage them to be more progressive”. The Party used to have weekly meetings for women members at the headquarters in Ahmedabad. I began to go for ‘Wednesday meetings’. I had to escape from home, hide and go. I could not tell at home that I was going for meetings of a political Party.

I used to sit at the back, aloof from others, just listening. Anandiben Patel (now the education minister in Modi Government), used to conduct the meetings for women members of the Party. All

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2 The reservations of seats for Scheduled Castes in the Lok Sabha and the Legislative Assembly of the State of Gujarat have been made on the basis of Delimitation Order (Amendment) Act 1976. According to the recommendation of the Election Commissioner, there have been 2 Scheduled Castes seats out of 24 in the Lok Sabha (Patan and Dhanduka) and 13 seats out of 168 in Legislative Assembly in Gujarat. These reservations are proportionate to the population concentration in different regions and their constituencies. In local self-government such as Municipal Corporation, Nagar Panchayat, Jilla Parishad, Taluka and Village Panchayat, seats are reserved for Scheduled Caste candidates (Trivedi 1996: 26).

3 A Municipal Corporation garden in Khokara area was named after the first Bhangi Congress Corporator - Shanbhubhai Jagabhai Parmar of the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation (1969-75) in order to honour his services to the city and the area. This is the only place named after someone from the Bhangi community in the city. This initiative was taken by the BJP in 2001.
other women were from the upper castes. I used to feel very inferior. They did not have much interaction with me. I was feeling left out. I went and complained to Fakirbhai, I will not go for such meetings. However, the situation slowly began to change. I continued going for the meetings and other functions. It was in 1987-88 I joined the BJP. I was the first woman from the community to join the Party. Later on in 1995, I got the Party ticket to fight Corporation election, which I won.

The BJP established the first “Safaikamdar Cell” on the state level in order to include and provide an identity to the members of the community within the Party. Mahindrabhai Parmar was given the responsibility as the convener of the cell. The party also formed Gujarat Safai Kamdar Development Board in 1997. It was later converted into Gujarat Safai Kamdar Development Corporation in 2001 by Government resolution (19/06/2001).4

Similarly, the BJP has given positions to the members of the community in the organization (administrative matters) and in a forum called Dalit Adhikar Manch at the state level. Thus, the new awakening found among the upwardly mobile members of the community in the city was channelised by the BJP and made efforts to mobilize the community for political participation.

Caste Politics and the Bhangis

The political participation and representation of the Bhangis were greatly influenced by caste politics within both major political formations in the state.

Puroshttam Macwana, a senior Congress leader of the community in the city who has witnessed the political functioning of the Congress for years explains the internal dynamics in the Party causing political exclusion of the community.

I have been an active member of the Congress Party since 1975. In recent years, the community’s move away from the Party is due to its internal caste politics. The Vankars and Chamars have majority in Party positions. They distribute the tickets for various elections. So the tickets are issued to their community members and we are not even considered.

4 The Corporation is implementing various schemes of Government of India and State government for the rehabilitation of Safaikamdars. The Corporation undertook a number of schemes and programs for the rehabilitation of the scavengers in the state and in the city. Financial assistance was provided to begin self-employment for unemployed youth. Cooperatives - “Mandalis” began for producing and marketing sanitary products. Pujya Thakkarbapa Safai Kamdar Rehabilitation Scheme undertook the major repair works of the existing old health staff and slum quarters of the Corporation given to the Safaikamdars.
He then gives an example of the recent election (2001-02). There were five state level eligible candidates from the community. Four of them, who would have won the seats with the help of other communities, were not issued the tickets. But a ticket was issued to a bureaucrat, and from a place where he would not win the election. And so it happened, he lost the election. Similarly in AMC, for example, there are 17 seats reserved for Scheduled Castes but only two or three are considered for Bhangis. During the last election the Congress issued only one seat to the member of the community, Harshadbhai Solanki, which he won.

Satish Mistri, another active Congress worker from the community had a similar observation to make about the caste politics in the Party.

There are no concerted efforts made by any political party or organization to give adequate representation to Bhangis in political positions. When we meet in the Party forums there is no visible distinction between various caste groups. We interact freely and even eat together. But deep down and in private life (under currents) untouchability and caste system (gnativad) strongly works even in party politics. In reserved quota, candidates belonging to other Schedule Castes i.e. Vankars or Chamars are made to contest against the Bhangi candidate. They know well, that our community is economically weak, and the candidate would have no financial backing either from his personal pocket or from the community. Secondly our Samaj is not united, and we do not have the required number. In such a situation, it is almost impossible to face the opponent. We take back seat. This is the case not only in the Congress but also in other political parties.

The BJP is not an exception or different from the Congress as far as the caste politics in the Party is concerned. Ganpatbhai* a young BJP worker narrates his personal experience of how he was eliminated from electoral politics a few years ago.

During previous election of Corporation, a group of BJP leaders met for finalizing the names and to issue tickets for Corporators’ seats from the Party. I was an active member and popular in my locality. Some of the members suggested my name to be a BJP candidate from our area. This meeting took place in the late evening. By late night, the news reached the Party workers belonging to the Vankar community in the area. They immediately went to the Party leaders and objected to my name. Their argument was that, in this area (there are quarters for Class III and IV government employees working in different departments) 80 per cent are Vankars and only 20 per cent are Bhangis. How could we issue a ticket to a Bhangi candidate? We will not get the support from 80 per cent of other Dalits. They should be given a ticket. By early morning, the decision was changed. My name was cancelled.
This was a political calculation, as some senior party leaders were going to stand from this
cconstituency for state assembly and needed the support of all. They thought that any miscalculation
now, would affect them in later election. However, the caste factor also played against me. The
Vankars did not want a Bhangi to fight the election. On the next day, I too called a meeting of our
community leaders of the Party from the locality. We discussed all that had happened during the
previous night. We took the matter with the higher ups, but nothing happened.

Nevertheless, he concluded that, the seats reserved in political field could only be
possible with some patronage of a political party or organization. In case of Bhangis, the
political participation is very limited and that too a very recent phenomenon. The Party
should have given special preference to the community on this ground. But the Party was
more interested in its future prospect and did not see the good of the community in the
larger context.

Radhaben* of the BJP, explains the larger game plan of the process of exclusion of
the Bhangis in the party politics. She observes that, as the Bhangi caste community falls in
the Dalit category, they have a right to ask for reserved seats kept for Scheduled Castes.
But it is observed, that in AMC councilor election, the two main opposing political parties
(the BJP and the Congress) give tickets from reserved quota for the members of Bhangi
community in the same constituency. So that one person would be eliminated
automatically. Last time the Congress gave a ticket from the reserved quota to Harshadbhai
Solanki and the BJP issued a ticket to Nimeshbhai Vaghela, both belonging to the Bhangi
community in the same constituency. Nimeshbhai of the BJP lost and thus the community
lost one seat.

In politics there is not much space for the Bhangi community alike Vankars and
Chamars, who are more politically conscious. Being numerically large among Scheduled
Caste category, they have claimed more political space in the major political formations in
the state, and the city. Along with education and better economic position, the Union of
Mill Workers (Majoor Mahajan) has fought for them in the past. They have the strength of
13 MLAs and 2 MPs at present.

The upwardly mobile members of the Bhangi community are well aware of the
political game played by Vankars and Chamars to keep the Bhangis excluded from holding
any party positions. Numerically, Bhangis are the third largest group and is the only caste
group in Dalit category that can be a threat to the other two. "There are strategic efforts (buddhipurvak chal) by the leaders of the upper castes and the progressive castes among Dalits to exclude the Bhangis from political fields" says Kamalben Gurjjar.

People's Representatives and Political Parties

Based on the listing of a number of individuals who act as leaders among the Bhangis at the city level, the leadership can be classified into four types: 1) Traditional caste leaders (panch patels, leaders of parganas, elders) 2) Religious leaders (head of the sects, gurus) 3) Social leaders (social workers, persons actively engaged in social issues at the locality level), and 4) Political leaders (MLAs, Corporators, party leaders, trade union leaders). The information received from various case studies reveals that there is a lack of central leadership among the Bhangis at the city level. There is no single leader among them with a mass appeal who can stand for them, or who would have a total backing of the community. Some of the respondents describe the community as "leaderless community".

Of the total, 17 per cent (52) of the respondents stated that there is "no" leader who represents the community, and 20 per cent (61) respondents said they "do not know" if there is any leader at the city level. However, 62 per cent (187) respondents said, there are leaders among the Bhangis at the city level, as well in their residential locality. There was no consensus on a single or a few names at the city level.

Ranjanben, describes the problem of leadership of the Bhangis in a graphic local phrase "Dhani vagarno Samaj" (a community without any patronage). She explained that the community has always been at the mercy of others. In traditional village set up, they called the high castes as their "mai-bap" (father and mother), on whose mercy their existence depended. In urban areas, the Bhangis received patronage of the mill owners and various housing localities of the upper castes under the jajmani system of employment (gharaki). Later on, this patronage to some extent, shifted to Corporation, as many of them were employed as Safaikamdars. She concludes, "As we have always been under the

5 Similar expressions have been used by a number of respondents while analyzing the overall situation of the community. Sheep without shepherd (there is no head of the household or "father" in the family). "Anoth Samaj" (an orphan child, totally left out, no one caring, no one bothered about them). "Niraadhar samaj" (without any support base to stand on, i.e. of education, economic, social status or skills). "Ormayu Varian" (step-motherly treatment). "Chavivalu ramakadu" (toy with key; wherever they are led they go).
shadow of someone else’s patronage, people have begun to feel the absence of leadership in the community now”.

Apart from this historical development, 87 per cent of the respondents (260) have identified four main reasons for the present situation of leadership among the Bhangis. Among those who responded, 23 per cent (60) said “nepotism and corruption of the political leaders” have disappointed the community; 27 per cent (70) perceived “too much of internal competition” among themselves causing the lack of leadership, and 42 per cent (110) said “lack of education and unity” among the members of the community. According to 8 per cent (20) of the respondents, the “poor economic conditions” of the individuals and of the community do play a role in discouraging persons to take up leadership.

One of the political leaders says the following:
There are a few political leaders showing interest in the community. But for them party (political affiliation) comes first, and the community later. Each leader has his or her selfish interests and they work for personal motives more than the community development. Our leaders often use (hatho banave) the community for personal gains (vote bank). Just to illustrate my case, thousands of our people were brought together at Kankaria Lake (in the city of Ahmedabad) a few years ago (in 2002). What was the purpose? An important BJP leader wanted to get a ticket for the state assembly and a leader of our community had his eyes fixed on an important political post. How would you otherwise explain a large number of sweepers of the Corporation mobilized for such a political gathering! There has been no meeting that has taken place specifically on some issues related to the development of the scavengers.

Narayanbhai Vaghela, a social worker sees the situation of leadership as follows,
We have the strongest and biggest weapon with us, the occupation of Safaikam. If we wish, we can shake up a government but we cannot do. There is no unity and cooperation in the community. There are divisions on the basis of region, language and also thinking. We fall apart because of these divisive elements. There is a desire at least in urban areas, to come together but there is no single leader who could hold hand and lead. There are just a few, who contribute in their small way but there are no collective efforts. Politically, it is possible to come together but there is no one tall leader in the community to bring all on one platform. Once the community members elect a leader, he forgets the community and gets entangled in his small village, pargana (region) or relatives. It is also possible for the religious guru of various gurugadis to bring the community together. They can play the role of social mediators because people look at them with reverence. But each guru too has his own ideology and approach.

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Apart from the reasons mentioned above for the lack of 'central leadership' the very nature of the composition of the community at the city level pose challenges to the emergence of a single or a few leaders acceptable to all. There are many socio-cultural and political sub-divisions and differences in the community. Hence, lack of a central leadership is also a reflection of the segmented community or lack of centripetal community of the caste of scavengers in the city.

Nevertheless, over the last few years younger generation of the Bhangis have found some place in political parties to represent their community. However, the three elected leaders of the Bhangi community who were actively engaged in the city politics some time or the other, expressed their disappointments, as their individual and collective aspirations were not fulfilled.

Lataben* the ex-Corporator has a number of issues to support her disappointment against the political party she is part of.

As councilor, I wanted to use my position to do something for the community. I used to visit different muster stations and make inquiry about their problems. I brought the issues of rights of Safai kamdars in different forums. I often met the Municipal Commissioner on a number of issues related to Safai kamdars. When it comes to the issues of Safai kamdar the files are not forwarded until they come through some other channel. During my term as a councilor, I was appointed as a member of various committees at different times. Finally, I was made the Chairperson of the solid waste management committee. During the first year, I almost worked as a “rubber stamp”. The Party decided everything. The attitude of my seniors was “she belongs to Bhangi Samaj, what she would understand?” Then I decided not to remain as a puppet in their hands. I told them, ‘either you allow me to do the work, or allow me to resign’. I have realized that if you accept the pressures and behave like an inferior, you will remain like that forever.

Anandbhai, the Congress councilor in AMC says,

Politics is very discouraging field. I know something has to be done for the community, but when I take initiatives, neither the leaders of the Union nor Safai kamdars themselves support. I tried to bring a number of new resolutions like Warasdar age limit to 55 and voluntary retirement without unfit certificate, which would stop the exploitation of Safai kamdars. But the Union protested against such resolutions.

Secondly, the state government has granted a number of Cooperatives (mandalis) to the families of Safai kamdars to start economic enterprises as part of rehabilitation program. A number of these mandalis have started sanitary related production and shops to sell such products. I had suggested
that the AMC should buy at least 50 per cent of sanitary related items from these Cooperatives so that they can be encouraged. However, the standing committee has cleared a proposal to buy only 25 per cent sanitary materials from sanitary cooperatives run by Safai kamdar and 75 per cent from others. This is a decision taken by the AMC run by the Congress Party. How do I understand this? Is there no Brahmanvad, who has control over the Party? Even today, the Brahmanvad is very strong.

Mihirbhai, of the BJP expressed similar disappointment with the Party and the leadership from the community.

People are totally dissatisfied with political system and parties because their demands are not fulfilled. Some of the leaders, whom the Party had entrusted the responsibility of the community, have betrayed both, the Party and the community. I have often taken matters to the Party forum, but I did not find proper response. Yet I have to work within the Party restrictions. As a member of the Party, disciplinary measures are applicable to me too. Therefore I cannot talk against the Party. But sometimes it is disheartening.

However, I believe without politics no change can come and it is only the government who will be able to do something for the community to give them some dignity. If any political party has done something for the community then it is the BJP. This Party has encouraged leadership in the community with total support and financial assistance. I have faith, that in the long run, I will be able to do something for the community through the Party.

The narratives above manifest strongly that although the caste factor at the state level played a positive role in bringing the Bhangis in active political participation, their representation in party politics did not go too well with other caste groups. The caste within political parties play decisive role in “politics of exclusion”. Those of the Bhangis who have entered the party politics have no illusion that their belonging to a particular caste groups can still restrict them reaching their political aspirations, as well as the aspirations of those they represent.

The common factor expressed by all three leaders is that, while attempting to do something for their community they have found “disagreement” with the political party

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6 The scheme of Pandit Dindayal Upadhyay Antyodaya Sanitary Mart has been implemented under Government Resolution Dt. 14-7-2000. It provides that a cooperative society of 25 members of sweepers and their dependents and it shall be registered and will produce sanitary materials and sell it to the Government Hospitals, Municipal Corporations and Municipalities on commercial basis and also sell material for construction of latrines and sanitation wares. In order to make the cooperatives viable the Municipal Corporations and Municipalities shall have to purchase their sanitary needs from the mart worth Rs. 2,00,000 or 50% of the cost, whichever is higher from the sanitary mart (as details given in the scheme – Gujarat Safai kamdar Development Corporation (the undertaking of Government of Gujarat).
they are part of. There is a realization that the 'caste politics' still dominates the party politics and perhaps it might not be that easy to break the socio-political domination of the higher castes within the political set-up. There is another aspect highlighted by them, that when it comes to lower castes, the party interest dominates over the issues of lower castes. This aspect is slowly becoming part of the political consciousness of the Bhangis in the state.

**POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS AMONG THE BHANGIS**

Over the last two decades, the process of political mobilization has picked up the momentum among the Bhangis in the city of Ahmedabad. However, the general field observations show that, 1) the mobilization is done more by the external agencies, like the political parties than the internal i.e. mobilization from the community. 2) The mobilization process has also remained around external or larger issues, like religion and caste but has not made intense attempts to address the day-to-day problems of the Bhangis in the city. Therefore political mobilization has not found large scale support among all sections of the community, and 3) the political mobilization by political parties is concentrated among those sections of Bhangis who are residents of the city, and are living in clustered housing localities in *mohallas* and quarters.

The population of Bhangis living at the peripheries and in slums is left out of the mobilization process. Thus, the political consciousness and participation varies among the respondents of different geographical localities in the city. In order to assess the level of political consciousness and participation of the Bhangis, three aspects were taken into consideration i.e. perceptions on the political say of the community, community as the vote bank and political power and change in the community.

**Political Say of the Community**

The level of political consciousness and participation of the Bhangis in the city is expressed through the perceptions of the respondents about the political say the community has in the political life of the city or the state. Only 8 per cent (23) of them feel that the community has “some say”, either in the city or the state politics. They perceive that some
people, among those who are educated have begun to take initiatives in political leadership. On the other hand, 42 per cent (127) of the respondent are of the opinion that the community has “very little say”, and 45 per cent (136) of them say, “no say at all” in the political life. The respondents supported their perceptions with reasons i.e. lack of unity among Bhangis, lack of education and the poor economic conditions.

Thirty five per cent (104) of the respondents are of the opinion that the community has very little say in political life, because there is no unity among the members of the community and the community is not organized. Some of the members of the Ahmedabad gnatipanch elaborated the factors affecting their influence in politics. There is no political strategy among the leaders of the community. The members of the community do not try to cross party lines to fight for the community issues. On the other hand, the main problem in the city is that, the community is spread all across the city. Therefore, neither can they show the number strength at one locality by supporting a candidate from the community, nor are they able to select a candidate of their choice from other communities. Political parties need numbers and they do not see the community of Bhangis with numerical strength.

Twenty per cent (60) of the respondent point to lack of education, as one of the reasons for no or very little political say of the community. They emphasized that those educated do not take interest in political mobilization and in public life. Lack of good jobs and poor economic conditions are mentioned as other reasons for being politically ‘powerless’ by 10 per cent (29) of the respondents.

Community as the Vote Bank

One of the reasons for the shift from the Congress to the BJP was that a section of the community perceives that the Congress had taken the Bhangis for granted as their reserved ‘vote bank’. However, there is perception now that newfound patron, the BJP, does not meet their hopes and aspirations either. The general feeling expressed is that the Party has made use of the situation and has taken the advantage without keeping the promises made to the community. A large majority of 78 per cent (234) of the respondents
is of the opinion that both political parties have used them as a vote bank. Only 22 per cent (66) of the respondents do not perceive the same.

Rajeshbhai Harijan, for example, who hails from Kheda district, relates politics to his day-to-day life.

We have been the Congress supporters for many years. What Mrs. Indira Gandhi has done for Harijans and for the Bhangis in particular, no one can match it. She and her son Rajiv Gandhi have done a lot of good work for us. She had Harijans as her priority. The BJP promised so many things during the last election and now prices have shot up. Nowadays, the Congress and the BJP both are same. All politicians are corrupt and they have neglected the poor.

Parulben who shifted to the present locality six months ago from another slum nearby in Vejalpur gram-panchayat shares similar perceptions.

The gram-panchayat authority demolished the slum where we were staying. The BJP gram-panchayat president, who is also a builder, has masterminded the project to vacate the slum dwellers and sell the land to a private builder. The residents have filed a court case and the court has ordered a stay. We will not be surprised, if within a few years we may have to vacate this slum too for a builder to come up with another residential complex. Now we will have to think about our support to the Party.

Kesubhai Patel, who was then the BJP Chief Minister of Gujarat, had made a statement during his speech at the Bhangi Chetna Rally in Ahmedabad, that “the BJP is with the Bhangis”. Referring to his statement, Lataben* the ex-Corporator of AMC says,

It was a political gimmick. Our people are getting a sort of feeling that even the BJP has made use of us as the vote bank. They have taken our advantage. We know they have played the Hindu card to get our votes and to retain our community with the BJP. During the last election, the BJP made clear propaganda among the Bhangi community against the Muslims.

There is a visible sense of regret among the Bhangis who have shifted to the BJP at the grass root level. Some of the respondents expressed a sense of “made a mistake” in shifting from the Congress to the BJP. More and more Bhangis are losing faith in the Party. The recent Assembly by-election in Jamalpur constituency is a proof of turning back. The constituency has a large number of Safaikamdars residing in the area, where the BJP candidate lost.
Political Power and Change in the Community

In this context, respondents were asked if political power was necessary to bring about socio-economic change among Bhangis. Nearly 61 per cent (184) of them did not see it necessary to improve their situation. However, 37 per cent (111) respondents perceived the need of it. Those respondents who think political power is necessary to bring about change suggested a few steps that community must take. Among them, 61 per cent (68) suggested the foundational slogan of Ambedkar that the community must educate, unite and organize to get political power. Another 14 per cent (16) feel that that the community members should get into better jobs and 24 per cent (27) suggested that people should get into politics to create a space for Bhangi population in the city and the state.

Only 8 per cent (25) of the total respondents did not share the perceptions of the 92 per cent (275), who perceive a substantial change in political situation of the Bhangis over the last one decade. The perceptions on the changing political situation in the community were seen at four levels, 1) shift in political alliances, 2) political consciousness, 3) political participation, and 4) political say of the community (see table 8.1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sets of Perceptions</th>
<th>yes Count</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Very little Count</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Total Count</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Earlier we were Congress loyalist now turning to BJP</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>65.5</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>34.5</td>
<td>275</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Earlier we were used as vote-bank now it is not like that</td>
<td>191</td>
<td>69.5</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>30.5</td>
<td>275</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Now our community leaders are interested in politics</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>44.0</td>
<td>154</td>
<td>56.0</td>
<td>275</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Now political parties are paying attention to Bhangis</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>42.2</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>57.8</td>
<td>275</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The perceptions of the respondents on the four levels of political change among the Bhangis help in summarizing what has been said so far. The community of the Bhangis is certainly turning towards the BJP from the Congress. Secondly, the increased political awareness and mobilization among the Bhangis have restricted the political parties from using them as vote bank. However, the community does not perceive political parties interested in them and their day-to-day issues. Similarly, although a sizable number of respondents see their leaders participating in political processes, it is perceived as not sufficient.
BHANGI-MUSLIM RELATIONSHIP IN THE CITY

The development in political life of Bhangis in the city of Ahmedabad explains to some extent, the changing nature of Bhangi–Muslim relationship in the city.

Close-Knit Relationship with Muslims

Referring back to the history, respondents give details of a special relationship between the Bhangis and the Muslims in the city. In the older part of the city, the Muslims and the Bhangis lived in physical proximity of residential localities. In some parts of the city, living together over the years had established cordial relations between both the communities. Occasionally the Muslims and Bhangis would eat at each other’s houses and exchange food as well. The Muslims, known for cooking special food would come to cook food on special occasions like weddings and other celebrations at Bhangi localities.

The Muslims rarely practiced untouchability with Bhangis unlike the upper castes. The Bhangis could always approach their Muslim neighbours during social and economic difficulties. They even provided financial assistance during the time of crises and occasions of emergency. Being neighbours and friends they would not get involved in communal riots against each other. On the contrary, they have protected each other during the recurring riots in the city. In some of the communally sensitive areas, for example Rajpur, both communities exhibited mutual understanding between them on occasions of communal tension in the area.

Three important observations are commonly brought to explain the close-knit relationship between Bhangis and Muslims in the city. Historically, the rich Muslims sought the services of scavengers in their houses, especially as their women did not go out for the purpose of defecation. These scavengers were given remunerations and annual gifts. Thus, the rich Muslims kept Bhangis close to their localities.

Secondly, over the years the patron-client relationship turn into cordial as the Muslims did not keep them at a distance by the practice of untouchability. The Muslims
did not keep untouchability with the Bhangis is also explained by the fact that “the major converts to Islam do come from the Shudras.”

Thirdly, the Bhangis were kept away as untouchables by the upper castes and the Muslims were known to be the enemies of the upper caste Hindus. So the mutual need for support and protection brought both the communities closer. The Congress, as its political strategy, was close to Muslims and the lower castes. There were greater cooperation and exchanges among the lower castes and the Muslims within this political alliance.

**Changing Relationship with Muslims**

The fieldwork was conducted soon after the communal riots in the city after the Godhra Carnage in 2002. The communal carnage witnessed in Gujarat had disturbing trends of Dalit participation in riots against Muslims, especially in urban areas. Soon reports were also circulated establishing active involvement of some Dalit groups in the riots. The participation of Dalits in the genocide of Muslims in Gujarat in alliance with Hindutva forces has been perceived as a ‘shocking phenomenon’ by many and has not been analyzed with its seriousness of far-reaching implications (see Breman, 2002; Macwan 2003; Teltumbde 2005).

Similarly, much was talked about the tense relations between Bhangis and Muslims that had surfaced during the riots. In this context, specific inquiry was made regarding the

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7 A rough estimates will show that 95 per cent of Indian Muslims came from this category. Barring the aristocratic sections of Muslims, the majority of Muslims shared their plight with the low caste Shudras. Both low caste Hindus and the majority of Muslims shared a common cultural and social life” (Puniyani 2005: 94).

8 The closure of the textile mills in the 1980s and 1990s meant not only the loss of more than 100,000 jobs, but the collapse of a whole social infrastructure and culture, and the growth of pauperisation and destitution among Ahmedabad’s working class. “It comes as no surprise that the front organizations of the Sangh Parivar were able to mobilise mercen-aries from the lumpened milieu of subaltern castes to assist in the operation of killing, burning and looting” in the latest episode of violence (Jan Breman 2002). The role played by Dalits in the recent anti-Muslim riots, Macwan says, “Today, in 2002, after 19 years, some Dalit youth calling (them)selves Hindus, have been itching to cut Muslims with the sword held by (the) BJP and its allies. The reason is that no one has taught them 19 years old history of 1981” He reminds the events of 1981 and 1985 of anti-reservation riots that saw upper castes against the Dalits. He further brings to notice that very little knowledge exists within the community that Muslims as a community do not practice untouchability and they are the ones who supported Dr. Ambedkar in his campaign for separate electorates for Dalits (Macwan 2003). Teltumbde wonders, “How the people who have been the victims of inhuman oppression of the systemic order created by a creed for several centuries could become foot soldiers of the forces that openly profess and uphold the essence of that creed. What made Dalits give up their egalitarian aspirations and fall prey to the vile allurements of hierarchical integration of Hindutva? (Teltumbde 2005: xii).
relationship of Bhangis with the Muslim community in the city. Almost every respondent talked about the cordial relations shared with the Muslims over the years.

The rupture in the relationship was visible over the last one-decade or so and it had almost reached a climax during the then communal riots in the city. At some places, the Muslims and the Bhangis came in direct conflict, especially in old city areas. It is observed that Bhangi families living in quarters close to Muslim dominated localities (e.g. Jamalpur) vacated the houses and some of them sold their houses to the Muslims for reasons of fear. At some places, Muslim has now occupied the entire locality, which was traditionally dominated by Safai-karmacharis.

Little more than 30 per cent (91) of the respondents said, they were affected in some way by the communal riots in the city. However, 70 per cent (209) respondents were not directly affected by the riots. Among those who mentioned that they were affected, 55 per cent (50) of the respondents said their work was affected due to fear of going in tense areas, especially in the Muslim dominated localities. Another 28 per cent (25) of them expressed that, although there was no tension in the area, the tensed environment in the city affected their day-to-day life, especially the non-availability of household things.

Only 18 per cent (16) of the respondents said that some members of the community were directly affected or involved or became victims of the riots. (Our huts were burnt and houses looted in some areas / one person of our community was killed / some of our community men were used by upper caste in riots).

However, one striking response was that, many of the respondents “did not feel secure going for work in the Muslims dominated localities”. Knowing well the cordial relationships that existed between them, this response certainly comes as a surprise. This illustrates the level of change in relationship between Bhangis and the Muslims in the city. How has this change come about?

**Hinduization and Politicization of the Bhangis**

A number of individuals while talking about the issue, referred to the political mobilization of the Bhangs, especially by the BJP and the Sangh Parivar organizations in
the state and in the city, as an important reason for the rupturing of relationship between Bhangis and the Muslims. The political mobilization among Dalits (including Bhangis) has witnessed a shift in political alliances. Some of the respondents were of the opinion that the Bhangi community is surely more Hinduised than before.

Natwarbhai* who shares a warm relationship with some of his Muslim friends says, this change has accelerated ever since the BJP came to power. They have systematically spread the hatred against Muslims among our youngsters and community members in general. The communal riots have broken our relationships with Muslims. The upper caste politicians (he mentions of Patels, Vaniyas and Brahmins) made use of us to fight against the Muslims. They have instigated our youth against Muslims. There were a lot of pressures on the members of our community to fight the Muslims.

Those who used us, do not stand by us now. People say that Bhangis were involved in communal riots and in killing Muslims. In such situation the high castes do not come to defend us. Secondly, at times we are afraid of Muslims, what will happen, who knows. Soon after communal riots even in some areas Safai-kamdors had to work in Muslim areas and they had asked for police protection. Some of them had gone on strike, saying they will not work in Muslim areas unless the AMC takes the responsibility of protecting them. This will be a problem for ordinary Safai-kamdors. On the other hand, they (Muslims) have been hurt and they have lost faith in us. They have begun to doubt. Sometimes, they tell us when we meet them in town, ‘what your people have done is not good’.

Harishbhai has similar perceptions. “During communal riots Bhangi Harijans suddenly become Hindus and once riots are over they become Harijan untouchables. This is the game the high caste Hindus play with us.”

The type of rumours spread during the time of riots and the propaganda made among the Bhangis against Muslims was on religious basis. Becharbhai provides an example.

The conflict came only when “they” (Muslims) attacked our religious places. During last communal riots we heard that Muslims had come to attack the Jagannath temple (one of the biggest and famous temples of Hindus in the city from where annual Rathyatra takes place). They had killed some cows in the area. One of our Safai-karmacharis was killed by Muslim mob when he was going to work along with other family members. He got caught in the crowd and got killed.
Some of the respondents referred to the riots of 1947 and 1969, bringing to light how Muslims had treated the Hindus in the city over the years. Ramjibhai who is around 75 years old says,

1947 changed all things and everything. The partition brought communal disharmony. If they (the Muslims) had gone to Pakistan, then there would have been no problem. There would have been peace. Now the constant recurrent incidences of communal tension have made our lives miserable. What we have is the broomstick (zadu-lakdi), how can we fight with the Muslims who have all the weapons? We face them with some stone throwing. We have no weapons to defend. On two sides of the quarters we have Dalit communities (Vankars, Chamars and Shenva) and on one side we have Muslims. The Bhangis are in small number. In fact the Dalit communities do not help us during communal riots and on the contrary they instigate Muslims against us. We are also Hindus. And in communal riots nobody is going to see if we support or do not support the BJP. Once they see us as Hindus, Muslims attack us.

In recent years a number of Bhangis living close to the Muslim areas have left the locality for the reason of fear. A good example is Kach ni Masjid (area in the old city now dominated by Muslims), from where the entire Bhangi population has vacated and the quarters are bought over by the Muslims. A number of families shifted to nearby Jamalpur quarters from Kach ni Masjid locality. Families are putting up in every vacant place in quarters and some of them have accommodated themselves on the roof of the quarters.

Ranjeet Chawan has his own stance against such political mobilization of the community.

No minister’s son has become martyr in the fight or in communal riots. Who have become victims? All are Harijans. Our community (Samaj) becomes the shield during all these fights. This is the problem with the community. Bhangis and Muslims have been eating in one plate; they have never kept untouchability. But wherever there are Muslims and Bhangi communities close by there are fights (Raipur, Raikhad, Jamalpur, etc.). Our community people are not foresighted. They just follow the others. There is no ideology of our own.
Conclusion

The political mobilization among Bhangis has mostly been around the issues of caste and religion and rarely around the day-to-day issues confronted by the community. The BJP tried to mobilize the Bhangis as part of their strategy to bring them into the fold of Hindutva identity. The other wings of the RSS contributed greatly in propagating and instructing the Bhangis at the grass root level. This process has, as it appears to be, helped in co-opting the Bhangis in the larger political formation, as well as in the Hindu fold.

However, Bhangis who have been the primary victim of the caste system and the oppression of the upper caste Hindus seems to have turned blind eye to the sociological history of exclusion and victimization of the past. The Bhangis appear to have gained consolation of being “included” in the political formation, the BJP (political identity) and the mainstream Hindu fold (socio-religious identity), on the other hand, they have lost cordial social relationship with Muslims, once known as the friends of the community in the city.

The caste politics has also brought to surface once again the rivalry among different Dalit groups. The caste of the Bhangis still acts as the blocking wall in the politics of exclusion. However, the policy of protective discrimination, at least to some extent, helped the upwardly mobile Bhangis in political participation, and their inclusion in the wider political processes. A section of the community is conscious of the role a major political formation can make in these processes. A shift from the Congress to the BJP over the last two decades is certainly a result of such political consciousness among the members of the Bhangi community.