

# Caste-ing Space: Mapping the Dynamics of Untouchability in Rural Bihar, India

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## Abstract

B. R. Ambedkar, the scholar, activist, and chief architect of the Indian constitution, in his early twentieth century works, referred to the untouchable quarters in India as ghettos. He recognized that untouchability was manifested through combining social separation with spatial segregation. Ambedkar's theorization of untouchability can be applied along with feminist and Dalit scholars' theories of the relationship between dynamic spatial experiences and the reworking of caste hierarchies to understand how securing control over productive assets, such as land, has altered social and spatial segregation in rural Bihar. Combined with narratives of the past and present, maps drawn by *Bhuiyan* Dalit women depicting the physical spaces they occupy in their village (i.e. housing, community center), the locations of sources of water and electricity, and the quality of the resources to which they have access demonstrate that gaining control over land following the Bodhgaya Land Movement (BGLM) of the late 1970s helped end the most overt and readily discernible forms of caste-based discrimination. Nevertheless, resource discrimination and spatial and social segregation continue, albeit more covertly. The logic of untouchability still undergirds social interactions in rural Bihar, preventing Dalits from fully realizing their rights as guaranteed by law.

## Keywords

Bihar, Bhuiyan dalit, spatial segregation, caste discrimination, Bodhgaya Land Movement (BGLM)

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## Introduction

Spatial and social segregation is intrinsic to the caste system and the continued practice of untouchability in India. ‘Untouchability’ refers to the Hindu religious and caste sanctioned ostracization of Dalits (former ‘untouchables’) within a system of ‘graded inequality’ (Ambedkar, 1989, p. 101; Simon & Thorat, 2020). In the caste hierarchy, each level is defined according to relative purity or impurity, with Dalits occupying the bottom position. According to this ancient Hindu logic of caste, Dalits were born into a state of impurity from which they could not escape, such that their touch (or even their shadow) was considered a source of pollution to others in the caste hierarchy.

Any conceptualization of untouchability as merely a form of caste-based social discrimination fails to capture its debilitating impacts on those who have been most negatively impacted. Dalits have historically been assigned labor intensive menial tasks that were deemed ‘impure’, even though such work was critical to the maintenance of Hindu society (Moon, 2001; Kumar, 2012; Rao, 2015; Cháirez-Garza, 2014). The complex code of social and spatial avoidances that developed as a result of the logic of untouchability had and continues to have serious consequences for Dalit survival and assertions for basic human rights. A committee formed by the Government of Bombay in 1928 to investigate the social conditions of the Untouchable observed:

We do not know of any weapon more effective than this social boycott which could have been invented for the suppression of the Depressed Classes [Dalits]. The method of open violence pales away before it, for it has the most far reaching and deadening effects. It is more dangerous because it passes as a lawful method consistent with the theory of freedom of contract. (Cháirez-Garza, 2014, p. 42)

The chief architect of the Indian constitution, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar (1891–1956), who was a Dalit, recognized this when he compared untouchability to racial slavery (Ambedkar, 1989, p. 15; 1990, vol. 7). While he viewed both as examples of unfree social orders, he considered untouchability particularly difficult to root out because it is practised indirectly as part of a system of social obligation. He argued that, unlike slavery, untouchability does not offer the possibility of emancipation (Ambedkar, 1989, vol. 5, pp. 17–18).

Even though defining some groups as ‘untouchable’ was formally abolished by the Indian constitution in 1950, and a host of legal safeguards were introduced to obliterate caste-based discrimination, the centuries-old practice of untouchability remains a reality for over two hundred million Dalits, and segregation on the basis of untouchability continues to shape social relations to this day, especially in rural India (HRW, 2007; Teltumbde, 2010).<sup>1</sup> Since Ambedkar’s time, many Dalit scholars have sought to address the problem of the perniciousness of untouchability as the basis for social, economic, physical, temporal, and spatial segregation and examined

<sup>1</sup>The 1950 Constitution of India mandated Equality before Law (Article 14); prohibited discrimination on the basis of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth (Article 15); ensured equality in public employment (Article 16); abolished untouchability and made its practice a punishable offence (Article 17); ensured protection of life and personal liberty (Article 21); prohibited forced labor (Article 23); and mandated living wages for all citizens of India (Article 43). Later laws intended to protect and ensure equal rights for Dalits include: the Untouchability Offences Act of 1955, renamed Protection of Civil Liberties Act, 1955 in 1976; and the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, amended in 2015 and 2018 (also see Simon & Thorat, 2020, p. iii; HRW, 1999; Rao, 2015, p. 163–181).

the ways in which such exclusions shape Dalit subjectivities to this day (Guru, 2017; Rege, 2006; Prasad, 2004; Pawar and Moon, 2008; Rawat, 2013). In 2000, Dalit scholars and activists began promulgating the term ‘hidden apartheid’ to make explicit the similarities between untouchability and racism and draw attention to the normalization of spatial segregation throughout the rural areas of India (Kannabiran, 2006; Omvedt, 2001).<sup>2</sup> Despite empirical evidence, scholarship, and media reports, the Indian government continues to refute allegations of caste-based discrimination. In a scathing critique of India’s civil society, Human Rights Watch reported that:

Although there is no *de jure* policy of segregation in India, Dalits are subject to *de facto* segregation in all spheres, including housing, the enjoyment of public services and education. This widespread segregation has led to a description of the practice of “untouchability” as India’s “hidden apartheid”. (HRW 2007, p. 45)

Despite being illegal, ‘untouchability’ thus retains conceptual valence as a critical tool for understanding how Dalit mobilizations and gaining control over productive assets, such as land, have disrupted and reconfigured discriminatory practices in rural Bihar. Even modest gains by Dalits are of great importance given the historical, socio-economic, and political contexts of inequality and discrimination in which they are registered (Prasad, 2021). Dalit access to land and other economic resources can be read as overt signs that caste-based discrimination is being undermined, at least in terms of spatial segregation by untouchability. A closer scrutiny of Dalit experiences of improving material circumstances may, however, indicate that the social exclusion in rural areas has only been rendered more ‘hidden’ over time.

This paper positions Ambedkar’s early twentieth century writing on untouchables alongside Dalit philosopher Gopal Guru’s (2017) theorization of the relationships between experience, space, and social justice to examine how the transformations in spaces occupied by Dalits have impacted their experience of untouchability. I draw inspiration from Black and feminist geographers who emphasize that the social and spatial domains of experience co-construct and co-produce each other (Massey, 1994; McKittrick, 2006; Wright, 2016). Just as ‘Black matters are spatial matters’ (McKittrick, 2006, p. xii), so are Dalit matters. McKittrick’s (2006, (p. xii) observation that ‘concealment, marginalization, boundaries are important social processes. We make concealment happen; it is not natural but rather names and organizes where racial-sexual differentiation occurs’ raises particularly pertinent questions concerning the interaction between untouchability as a social construct and the production of Dalit spaces and their ascribed meanings. The investigation of Dalit space helps uncover the power of geographic domination attained via the practice of untouchability as well as the pace of change in the experience of untouchability in rural Bihar.

Ambedkar addressed the spatiality of untouchability when he argued that ‘the Touchables living inside the village and Untouchables [living] outside the village in separate quarters’ was a kind of ghettoization (Ambedkar, 1989, vol. 5, p. 21). He explained that in order for non-Dalits to live near Dalits in rural villages, ‘the Touchables [non-Dalits] have a code which the Untouchables are required to follow. This code lays down the acts of omissions and commissions which Touchables treat as

<sup>2</sup>Such framings have the “creative potential of rearticulating, enlivening and rearranging the very social categories that peripheralize a group’s existence,” thus paving the way for transnational alliances amongst disenfranchised groups (Tsing, 1994, p. 279).

offences (p. 21). In short, the perverse hegemonic logic of caste Hinduism generates a normative behavioral code that keeps the vast Dalit population under control. The behavioral code not only puts up obstacles to political and social enfranchisement, it limits Dalit movements to particular spaces that Ambedkar described as the ‘Indian ghetto—The center of untouchability’ (p. 19). In rural Bihar, such Dalit-specific neighborhoods are known as the *dih*.

Such segregated spaces need not remain static, however. Although ‘old spaces normally put up a stubborn resistance to ... new concepts,’ Guru theorizes that ‘experience introduces dynamism’ into such spaces, which allows for old hierarchies to be reworked and ‘a new vocabulary of emancipation’ to develop (Guru, 2017, p. 78–79). Guru further reminds us that, ‘along with the expansion of social space, there is also the expansion of conceptual space, entailing the transformation of a particular person into a universal idea’ (2017, p. 103). Guru thus suggests that segregated spaces can be transformed by new experiences.

Emblematic of Dalit and non-Dalit perspectives in India, both Ambedkar and Gandhi took the village as a primary unit of analysis (Guru, 2017; Cabalion and Thivet 2019). Gandhi considered the village to represent India’s true democracy, leading Ambedkar to comment sarcastically, “*The average Hindu is always in ecstasy whenever he speaks of the Indian village. He regards it as an ideal form of social organization to which he believes there is no parallel anywhere in the world*” (Ambedkar, 1989, vol. 5, p. 19). Ambedkar (1989, vol. 5, p. 19), understood that *the ‘Indian village is not a single social unit’ because ‘it consists of castes’* (p. 20) *broadly divided into Dalits (untouchables) and non-Dalits (touchables). If, as Ambedkar declared, ‘the Hindu village is a working plant of the Hindu social order,’* then it is suitable for analyzing the mutating practices of untouchability in rural India.

Untouchability neither exists in a vacuum nor does it remain static or uncontested. Its successful re-inscription into various social, economic, and political milieu in the face of sustained Dalit assertions of agency requires careful examination. This article therefore analyzes some of the ways in which spatial and material aspects of untouchability have been altered (although not done away with completely) at the village level in the decades following Dalit activist movements to own land and secure other rights and resources guaranteed to them in rural Bihar.

## Research Context and Methodology: Mapping Village Spaces in Bodh Gaya, Bihar

As a feminist anthropologist interested in social and agrarian change, I concentrated research at the village level, conducting ethnographic fieldwork in villages in Bihar where *Bhuiyan* Dalits had secured rights to own land following the decade-long radical feminist Bodhgaya Land Movement (BGLM) (Prasad, 2021; Prabhat, 1999; Kelkar and Gala, 1990). In the late 1970s, land movement activists mounted a successful opposition to a Hindu monastic institution popularly known as Bodhgaya *Math* (BGM), which despite its religious outlook was the most powerful feudal landowner (*zamindar*) in Gaya. The BGM had controlled vast estates and people throughout the region for centuries and *Bhuiyan* Dalit *kamias* (bonded laborers) were forced to serve BGM officials and other landed elites well into the late 1980s. Their experiences of activism gained through joining first the armed Naxalite movement and later the

BGLM enabled Bhuiyan Dalits to obtain titles to and actual control over land formerly held by the BGM (Prasad, 2021).

There has been little documentation of how the redistribution of land to Dalits, particularly Dalit women, affected gender and caste social orders in rural Bihar following the conclusion of the BGLM. Many academics and journalists consider the state sponsored land reform to have failed because, instead of putting formerly landless agricultural workers on an even footing with traditional landowners and protecting women's rights to own land, it paved the way for ongoing, often violent, class-caste war and conflict (Jannuzi, 1974; Das, 1983; Chaitanya, 1993; Louis, 2003; Bhatia, 2005; Kantha, 2010). Scholarly analyses are often problematic because they usually group marginal farmers with caste status together with landless agricultural laborers (i.e. untouchable *kamias*) into the single category of 'peasants' and pitch them against the landed *savarna* (upper caste) elites (primarily *Bhumihars* and *Rajputs* in Bihar). This may contradict Dalit conceptualizations of caste relations. For example, Bhuiyan Dalits in Gaya distinguish themselves from other marginal farmers using local caste terminology. They recount their struggles against *grihasts* and *kisans*, including the Shudra castes, Other Backward Classes (OBC), dominant castes, and Bahujans, who have continually strived to take over the land that was distributed to Bhuiyan Dalits due to the BGLM.

To understand how securing control over productive assets, such as land, has transformed social relations and material conditions of Dalits in Bihar, I began conducting fieldwork in the summer of 2009 in the Gaya district and returned to two villages for extended periods from April 2012 through May 2014. Located approximately 18 miles from the town of Bodh Gaya, Kaari (a pseudonym) is one of the relatively small villages in which I conducted research. Kaari residents are categorized within non-Dalit castes (i.e. Yadav, Kahar) and Dalit castes (i.e. Bhuiyan, Dushad, Pasi). The total population of Kaari today is around 1500, the majority of whom are Bhuiyan Dalits. The dominant caste – the Yadav – ranks second in terms of numeric strength in the village.

Like most villages in the Bodh Gaya area, Kaari had been under the control of BGM for centuries. When the state government first attempted to implement land reform in the area in the 1960s, the BGM handed control of its feudal land over to the Yadavs. Bhuiyan Dalits joined the BGLM in the early 1980s to agitate for their rights to the land. Their activism resulted in approximately 100 acres of land being redistributed to residents of Kaari, mostly amongst Bhuiyan Dalit women and men.<sup>3</sup> By the time I began conducting research in the area, the women who had been at the forefront of grassroots mobilization were in their 70s or 80s. They held a long historic memory of mistreatment by non-Dalits and decades of experience mobilizing to obtain and protect their rights to land and other economic resources. Although I am not a Dalit, we bonded over having struggled to maintain control over land. I lived with a Bhuiyan Dalit family whenever I was in Kaari and many of the women with whom I interacted became interested in participating in my research project as a way of telling their history of Bhuiyan Dalits and Dalit activism to the world at large.

Along with recording open-ended interviews and informal story-telling sessions, I asked these women to participate in a spatial mapping process (Praxis, 2009; Herlihy &

<sup>3</sup>Non-Dalit women and men whose economic situations were similar to those of Dalits in Kaari were also part of the movement and they also secured rights to redistributed land.

Knapp, 2003). I was inspired by other scholar-activists who have conducted indigenous land-mapping projects or used the participatory mapping method to undertake social audits in the Global South (Chapin et. al., 2005; Sletto, 2009). I had earlier taken part in a social audit mapping project in a village in Bihar's Saharsa district conducted by Praxis: Institute of Participatory Participation. In that case, the village maps were drawn by professionals based on inputs from the community and did not take into account power differentials along caste-or gender-mediated lines. I adapted the village mapping process to my research in Kaari in order to render visible the ways in which the ancient Hindu edict of untouchability has either been undermined or become more covert following Dalit women's successful participation in the BGLM.

I began by asking Bhuiyan Dalit women to draw their immediate social spaces (i.e. houses, locations of key resources in the neighborhood, farmland) on the ground using twigs or colored chalk, or on large sheets of paper using crayons, pencils, or colored pens. Apart from the initial demonstrations, the mapping project was thereafter led by Bhuiyan Dalit women with little input or direction from me. From four to six women collaborated on drawing maps on the ground during seven sessions held between May and December 2012. I photographed and audio-recorded the map-making sessions, each of which lasted roughly two hours. While some women drew maps independently, others worked in groups of two to four women to depict their immediate social spaces. Although Bhuiyan Dalit women preferred drawing maps to any other ethnographic method such as interviews or surveys, the number of mapping sessions that could be effectively conducted was limited by constraints on their time, economic hardship, and health issues exacerbated by poor monsoon seasons. Sometimes the older members of the group designated one or two younger women to draw the maps, expecting that they would incorporate their feedback and observations. Bhuiyan men usually gathered around to observe the women and often drew maps of their own off to the side; the women would then gather around to comment on their maps. Men mapmakers tended to focus primarily on the key routes leading in and out of the village and the village boundaries; their maps were also much smaller in scale compared to the maps drawn by women.

Some village grihasts also gathered to observe and ridicule the Dalit women as they drew maps. The women either ignored or rebuked them, saying sarcastically, 'If we can make barren land fertile, we can also learn how to do this;' or 'Looks like you were you born with a pen in your hand?' They thus, emphasized that learning takes time and effort, and that illiteracy was a sociological condition, not preordained for Dalits as the grihast onlookers had implied. Despite multiple challenges, including the difficulty of finding a suitable time and space for the project, the map-making exercises provided rich information about transformations in the social, material, and spatial dimensions of untouchability in Kaari. The maps drawn by elderly Bhuiyan Dalit women showed their present-day spatiality, that is, the spaces they came to occupy after the BGLM. Drawing these 'after' maps inspired them to narrate past experiences (referred to below as 'before narratives') of untouchability under the BGM and their activism during the BGLM. They linked their socio-spatial segregation to the material and social practices of non-Dalit caste Hindus and identified the BGLM as a catalyst for social transformation that had enabled them to challenge the ancient codes of association that separated Dalits from non-Dalits. Their maps and stories thus rendered visible approximately five decades of change in the practices of untouchability in rural Bihar.

## The Spatiality of Untouchability before and after the BGLM

Four key sites of untouchability and resistance to segregation emerged from their maps:

1. housing;
2. sources of potable water;
3. modern infrastructure (roads and electricity); and
4. a community center.

In this section, I describe where each of these features were presented on Bhuiyan Dalit women's maps and in their accompanying narratives and analyze the implications for how untouchability practices have changed over time. Figure 1 shows an incomplete map of Kaari hand-drawn by Bhuiyan Dalit women in one of the latter mapping sessions. I have added symbols showing the location of resources that were not depicted in this particular map but were marked in other maps drawn on the ground. This is to assist the reader in following analysis of these features below.



Figure 1: Map of Kaari drawn by Bhuiyan Dalit women showing spatial arrangements of housing, including the *dih* in the southwest (lower right), and location of resources east of the center of the village (vertical black line at left represents the naala [rivulet]) (December 2012)

### *Untouchability as social and spatial housing segregation in Kaari*

In depicting their physical spaces before the 1960s, when the BGM still controlled the village, Bhuiyan Dalit women always began by outlining their part of the village (the *dih*), then depicted its relationship to the location of Kaari's old *kachcheri* (court). Before the land movement undid the power of BGM, which was headquartered in Bodh Gaya town, its vast estate was managed from a network of *kachcheris* established

in and around Gaya district. As the village-level administrative and judicial units of BGM, the kachcheris housed local BGM officials as well as the most important village resources such as stored grain, and drinking water could only be accessed from within their grounds. Bhuiyan Dalit women usually marked the main well (*badka kuan*) and temple (*Devi staan*) on their maps of Kaari and explained that both these facilities were located in close proximity to the kachcheri building (Figure 1).

Even though the old kachcheri was torn down and new houses built on its foundations after the BGLM, for Bhuiyan women it continues to function as the center of a historical compass from which all other structures radiate in the cardinal directions. They described the location of living spaces beyond the kachcheri in terms of caste. Non-Dalit houses were always built west of the kachcheri, with the Yadav caste residing in closest proximity to it. The village *badka kuan* was located just west of the kachcheri building within its courtyard, while Dalit huts were located further west of the courtyard. The homes of *Dushad* Dalits, who served the kachcheri as BGM's *goraiths* (armed guards), were lined south of the western edge. They were responsible for the security of the village and controlling the bonded agricultural laborers, the Bhuiyan Dalit or *kamias*. Bhuiyan Dalit dwellings were farther located in semi-concentric lines northwest of the Dushad Dalits. In the *dih* the Dushad Dalit homes marked the boundary. Some of the women told me they were forced to live west (*pachhim*) of the center of the village so they would not pollute the *badjans* (grihasts, non-Dalits), which they would have done if they had had first access to fresh air (or any other resources). Since the *purva* winds always blow east to west, if Dalits lived on the east side of the village, they would have rendered the air impure to those living west of them.

The village code of untouchability prescribed that Dalits must not only reside further away from non-Dalits to the west, they also had to be located south of the kachcheri, since south was considered the most inauspicious of the four cardinal directions. One elderly woman explained that '*harijans* [untouchables, Dalits] were placed on the external boundaries of the village as it was believed we could cast off the evil eye or be the first to bear the brunt of any untoward incidents.' In a sense, Bhuiyan Dalits were located at the outskirts so they could filter out bad luck before it entered the village proper.

Until 1955, such ancient 'terms of associated life' (Ambedkar, 1989, p. 21) not only spatially segregated Dalits from non-Dalits within the same villages, it also made it an offence for Dalits to possess land, cattle, or wealth in any form, including owning well-constructed houses built of brick and tiles. Bhuiyan women described their pre-BGLM dwellings as cold, damp mud mounds, no better than '*suaar kae bakhhor* (pig sties).' One woman explained that they were also prohibited from wearing shoes or clean clothes:

We barely had enough to cover ourselves. Our children would roam naked until they attained puberty [*seyan*]. Just like the summers, the winters in Gaya are harsh. So, we would all crowd next to the small fire to keep ourselves warm. We were not only covered in ash, but also smelled like ash.

Such restrictions forced Dalits to somatically inhabit the logic of untouchability, which reinforced the imperative of physical and spatial segregation.

The spatial arrangement of the village under the BGM not only compartmentalized people into neighborhoods according to the Hindu religion's caste logic of purity and pollution, it prevented Dalits from socializing with non-Dalits by restricting their movements through village spaces. Bhuiyan women explained that the location of their mud dwellings vis-à-vis the kachcheri ensured that they never had to cross into the non-Dalit (located east of Dalits households) part of the village. Even when undertaking work demanded of them by local kachcheri officials, they always bypassed the non-Dalit section. They either walked from the *dih* in the far southwest corner of the village northeast to the kachcheri or west to work in BGM's agricultural fields, orchards, and cowsheds, and maintain the rivulet (*naala* or *pyne*) that connected the indigenous irrigation system (*ahar*) to a nearby river (Figure 1). In 2013, upon noticing my entry as a non-Dalit into the Bhuiyan Dalit space, one of the map-making participants commented that the reverse situation, Dalits freely walking through non-Dalit spaces, would have been impossible before the BGLM: 'You could not just wander into the spaces of the landed castes.' Indeed, I observed non-Dalits (particularly men and elderly women) traversing Dalit parts of the village while I was conducting fieldwork in Kaari, but the reverse almost never occurred. I noticed that when Dalits walked into non-Dalit areas to perform specific tasks for grihast households, or collect wages, or seek a loan from them, it appeared customary for non-Dalits to inquire about the presence of 'other caste' or 'outsiders' in their space although the reverse never occurred in my presence. However porous spatial segregation becomes, it still renders the social segregation of untouchability.

The kachcheri as center of control ceased to exist when the BGM ceded its fertile agricultural lands, irrigation systems, and village courts to grihasts, ostensibly to comply with the state-mandated redistributive land reform policies of the 1960s, but mainly to win their support. Power over rural villages also diffused to the grihasts as they took over the kachcheri premises. In Kaari, the location of non-Dalit spaces with respect to the old kachcheri became obscure as influential grihasts began building their homes there. Women used black lines to mark grihast homes along the edges of the old kachcheri foundations (in pencil) just northeast of the *dih* (Figure 1). A Dalit woman told me that 'the only way you can tell that there was a BGM kachcheri in Kaari today is by looking at the foundation of the building on which the grihasts have constructed their homes. They build their houses on the foundation of the kachcheri because it was very strong.' Non-Dalits then built more houses adjacent to the old kachcheri as far west as the walls of the courtyard, but never crossing into Dalit space. Thus, they continued to maintain the caste mandate of spatial segregation.

The physical distance between Dalit and non-Dalit homes has nevertheless been reduced over the past five decades by a few Dalits who constructed houses northeast of the old *dih* (Figure 1, middle to upper left). One of the women mapmakers told me that before the BGLM:

It was overcrowded in the *dih* as our families were expanding, but we could not move out. We were not allowed to. Anytime there was a disease, it would take a toll on the community. [But] after we secured the land, some of us moved out.

Thus, one of the results of the BGLM was a closing of the west-east gap between residential neighborhoods in Kaari. A couple of new Dalit and non-Dalit dwellings

constructed since the 1990s even share boundary walls. However, I observed that the shared walls are nearly twice as high as other boundary walls that do not connect Dalit with non-Dalit spaces. The taller walls present a visual and physical barrier to interaction between neighbors and prevent Dalits from crossing the line of segregation.<sup>4</sup> Even as the borderlines seem to have become blurred and the caste logic of complete segregation between Dalits and non-Dalits has been undermined, the village core retains the old spatial manifestations of untouchability.

Despite the visually obvious reduction in spatial segregation, untouchability has continued to be covertly re-inscribed in the structure and quality of new Dalit homes in Kaari. Even though Bhuiyan Dalits challenged the old 'terms of associated life' by using government grants to construct 'homes made of bricks' and plastered roofs, their houses were built very poorly compared to the non-Dalit houses. Most of them are a simple one-story structure with four brick walls, often without windows or a sturdy ceiling. Where brick ceilings were constructed, many of them caved in under their own weight. One map-making participant complained:

Look at the way they construct our houses. Do you think they would build the houses of grihasts who are in a similar economic situation like ours or their own homes like this? No. For Dalits, they think that four walls and a ceiling are enough, but for grihasts, they make sure it looks like a proper house.

I found evidence supporting these charges when I interviewed a non-Dalit widow who had taken part in the BGLM alongside the Bhuiyan Dalits and like them been granted title to an acre of redistributed land. Her house had been built with funds from the same government housing assistance scheme that the Dalits had tapped, but unlike theirs, hers had two rooms with storage shelves built into the walls, windows with sills, a small hallway at the entrance, and outside stairs leading to the roof. She told me she planned to add more stories to her house later on.

The contractors put in charge of building houses under the government scheme were almost always non-Dalits. They would drop off construction materials in the *dih*, but were rarely seen again thereafter. They almost never showed up to explain how to design a house, supervise the construction work, or check that the building was sound. Bhuiyan women explained that non-Dalit laborers viewed working for Dalits as an *insult* (insult) that undermined their social status in the village hierarchy. Non-Dalit laborers also refused to eat food that had been prepared for them in a Dalit house. Overt practices of untouchability that stigmatized the consumption of food cooked in Dalit houses or working for Dalits made it very difficult for them to hire skilled non-Dalit laborers. Bhuiyan Dalits told me that even when they could afford to hire non-Dalits, the laborers often failed to follow their stipulations. Consequently, Dalits usually relied on unskilled laborers from within their own households or the extended Dalit community to construct their houses; this usually meant only a single room dwelling being constructed.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup>In Ghanshyam Shah, Harsh Mander, Sukadeo Thorat, Satish Deshpande and Amita Bavikar's (2006) *Untouchability in Rural India* it has been noted that of the 565 villages' in 11 major states of India surveyed, more than 70 percent of the villages' Dalits were denied entry into homes of higher castes and in 63 percent of the villages, Dalits are denied access to public places of worship.

<sup>5</sup>Houses built by Dalits who had worked in the construction sector in the cities tended to be better designed than those built by Dalits who only had experience making bricks at the kilns.

Although the codes and practices of untouchability became illegal in 1955, the comparisons between the location and quality of Dalit and non-Dalit housing before and after the BGLM demonstrate that segregation has not only been retained but it has become more covert. While some Dalits appear to live alongside non-Dalits with their houses abutting each other, the old west-east demarcation has never been crossed. Furthermore, though their houses are no longer mud huts, they are still poor quality compared to houses built for non-Dalits under the same government grants. Similar changes from overt segregationist practices to more covert forms of untouchability are revealed in women's marking access to potable water on their maps of Kaari, discussed next.

### *Untouchability and water access discrimination in Kaari*

Exerting control over access to water has long been used by non-Dalits to institute and maintain the caste hierarchy and boundaries of touchability (Joshi, 2011). This form of control is very obvious in the history of where sources of water were placed in Kaari. When the BGM was still in power, the only source of potable water in the village was the *badka kuan* located just west of the kachcheri building (Figure 1). The code of untouchability dictated that Dalits were not allowed to draw water from the well on their own volition; they were also prohibited from digging a well within the *dih*. To obtain fresh water, they approached the western edge of the kachcheri courtyard, set their buckets down at some distance from the main well, then backed away and waited until a non-Dalit took pity on them and filled their buckets with water. Distance between the Dalit buckets and *grihast* pails around the well was always maintained to ensure that no drops bounced from the Dalits' buckets into the *grihasts'* pails. Bhuiyan Dalits rarely failed to adhere to these ancient rules about drawing water from the well; they knew that the entire Bhuiyan community would be punished with extreme violence if they violated the code of untouchability.

When the BGM transferred the kachcheri and agricultural land to the *grihasts* in the 1960s, the power to allocate critical resources such as water also shifted to the *grihasts*. Bhuiyan Dalits were now allowed to draw water from the *badka kuan* using their own pails, but only after the non-Dalits had drawn water first and vacated the area. Thereafter, when Dalits openly began mobilizing their demand for land rights in the 1980s, *grihasts* retaliated by refusing to share the village well water with them at all. Bhuiyan Dalit women told me that the *grihasts* put a 24-hour guard on the perimeter of the *badka kuan* and lay thorny branches on and around it to prevent Dalits from obtaining water. They depicted this on their maps by drawing twigs and thorns covering the mouth of the well (Figure 2). Elderly Bhuiyan women told me stories about walking many miles, often on empty stomachs, under the scorching sun to draw water from nearby villages or the river, but recalled that they did so with *kranti* (revolutionary) songs on their lips.

The 'after' BGLM maps of Kaari and women's narratives show that sources of potable water proliferated as Dalits mobilized to assert their rights from the 1980s onwards. In 1993 or 1994, Bhuiyan Dalits obtained government funds to dig two wells in the *dih* and one in the newly established neighborhood northeast of the *dih* that had mixed caste composition. Ambedkar (1989, p. 38) once observed that untouchables 'having a *pucca* [permanent] well for themselves' held socio-religious implications, since it was read as 'an attempt to raise themselves to the status of the Hindus, which is contrary to the established order.' While the Bhuiyan Dalits of Kaari may not have

intended to make any such statement, their construction of a well certainly challenged the terms of associated life and undermined *grihast* control over resources necessary for survival. Unfortunately, the wells in the *dih* were much shallower than the *badka kuan*, so they dried up every summer. By the time I was conducting field research, they were no longer in use.



Figure 2: Bhuiyan Dalit woman sketching *badka kuan* (main village well) covered with thorny branches (May 2012).

Similarly, the government approved five hand pumps (for pumping water up from the aquifer) to be installed in the *dih* between 2005 and 2014. Only three of them were functional at the time women were drawing maps of the village. Two more hand pumps were then installed in the newly settled mixed-caste area of the village, one near the primary school and another closer to the non-Dalit neighborhood (Figure 3). The location of these two pumps adhered to the rules of caste segregation in rural Bihar. My host Dalit family, which had moved out of the overcrowded *dih* to the new section, asked me to obtain my drinking water from the mixed-caste area. They claimed that the hand pumps used by non-Dalits provided sweeter, cooler water than the hand pumps meant only for Dalits.

While the proliferation of hand pumps in Kaari has made drinking water more accessible to Dalits, and thus somewhat diminished the power of the untouchability code, it has not completely ended this ancient form of segregation. Non-Dalit women continue to occupy the space around the old *badka kuan* and use its water to wash their clothes or for other cleaning purposes, but Bhuiyan Dalit women never go to the old well (Figure 4). Dalit women told me they prefer to use nearby hand pumps over entering spaces traditionally reserved for non-Dalits even though they consider the water from pumps in Dalit spaces to be inferior to the water from pumps used by non-Dalits.

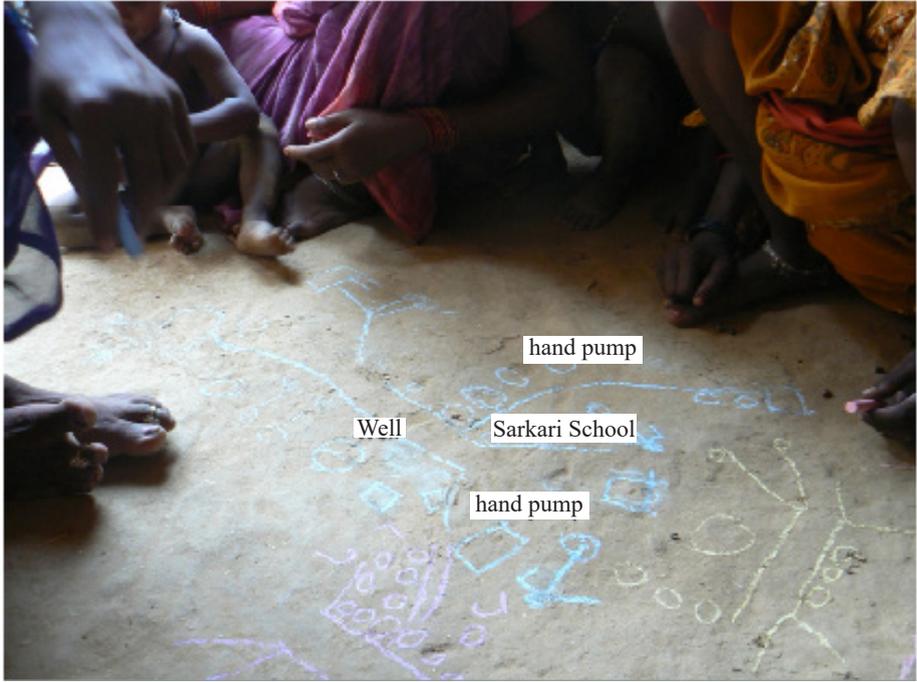


Figure 3: Map showing location of two hand pumps in the new mixed-caste neighborhood in northern Kaari. Each of the three mapmakers in this session had their own chalk color (May 2012).



Figure 4: Non-Dalit women washing clothes at the *badka kuan* (March 2014)

Meanwhile, Dalits who are still living in and drawing water from hand pumps in the *dih* often get sick by waterborne diseases. In the summer of 2013, diarrhea and dysentery, probably caused by fecal contamination of the groundwater, led to the death of at least one child and the hospitalization of several others from the *dih*. Non-Dalits and Dalits such as my host family who lived outside the *dih* in less caste-segregated spaces were not as impacted by these illnesses. Although it is not uncommon in rural Bihar for groundwater to become unpotable, the disproportionate numbers of Dalits who were sickened as they had drunk water from pumps located within the *dih* raises the possibility that public works undertaken in Dalit spaces are substandard. Just as the houses built for Dalits were poorly designed and constructed and even became uninhabitable when their roofs caved in, the non-Dalits who installed pumps in the *dih* may not have bored the wells as deeply into the aquifer as they did when boring wells in other parts of the village. Thus, water from *dih* pumps is more easily contaminated.

The Bhuiyan Dalits living in the *dih* did not voice this suspicion to me nor did they start going to the *badka kuan* or pumps outside the *dih* to obtain water. Instead, Dalits and non-Dalits alike continued to draw on the Hindu logic of untouchability to explain away Dalit illnesses and deaths. They attributed Dalit deaths to the wrath of local deities, thus signaling the need for immediate propitiation. My host family told me that if Dalits failed to make offerings to these deities, the entire village would suffer. Just as residing in the least propitious corner of the village (southwest of the old *kachcheri*) prevents misfortune from happening to non-Dalits, Dalit deaths perform the caste-related task of protecting caste Hindus.

Dalits voluntarily excluding themselves from spaces containing water resources, while claiming that water from non-Dalit pumps is sweeter and cleaner than water from nearby pumps and explaining away preventable Dalit illnesses and deaths as the result of supernatural forces, demonstrates the perniciousness of covert practices of segregation in Kaari. Self-exclusion ensures that any resources located in purely non-Dalit spaces remain out of bounds to Dalits. Locating hand pumps in Dalit and non-Dalit residential spaces alike represents an ostensible democratization of space and access to basic survival necessities, yet segregation by untouchability continues to be justified and covertly practised.

Although the struggle to obtain resources the state has earmarked for them remains the same irrespective of the type of resource, Dalits have found it somewhat easier to gain access to modern resources (e.g. electricity) that were not covered by the ancient terms of associated life.

### *Reinscribing untouchability in modern infrastructure*

While women's narratives of the past provided a window into the spatial arrangements of Kaari according to the terms of associated life under the BGM, maps of the present depicting key markers of modernity such as paved roads, electrical poles, solar-powered streetlamps, schools, and a community center seem to suggest that the traditional logic of untouchability has been disrupted. A closer scrutiny reveals that the untouchability principle still permeates modern infrastructure. For example, Dalits asked me if I had ever paid attention to where the paved road ended in Kaari. I then noticed that I always walked into the *dih* on footpaths, since no roads entered the area. Similarly, the high-tension electrical wires that carried electricity into the village from distant power plants always swerved past Dalit homes, but were connected to nearby non-Dalit homes.

Electricity came to Kaari only in the early twenty-first century, with the first transformer being installed in Kaari in 2006 or 2007 near the village primary school. Non-Dalits were the first to benefit from this resource, which they used to run household utilities and agricultural machinery. They did not pay for the electricity; instead, they drew power illegally by running a wire held up on wooden or bamboo sticks to the main lines. The first transformer soon broke down. Dalits recounted subsequent stages of electrification of the village. By 2012, electric poles had been installed along all the main routes within the village; some of the poles in the *dih* did not have power lines attached to them, however. The few Dalit houses that were attached to a line primarily used the electricity to charge a mobile phone or light a single bulb after dark. Bhuiyan women told me that even though there were vast discrepancies in access and usage of electricity between Dalits and non-Dalits, Dalits were initially expected to contribute as much as non-Dalits to the repair fund (for maintaining the transformer) and pay the same monthly fee for the utility. They later negotiated to have charges based on consumption, which resulted in much lower payments. They attributed their success to previous experience in grassroots activism during the BGLM.

The supply of electricity in rural Bihar is quite erratic with electricity often unavailable for hours or days at a time. This has led to a demand for solar panels. In 2014, two solar-powered streetlamps in Kaari were installed using *sarkari* (government) funds. Both were located in new mixed-caste section of the village (Figure 1). One was installed near the house of the most influential Yadav and the other was located near the house of the most influential Bhuiyan Dalit in the village. Dalits credit their own mobilization efforts and the integrity of the recently elected Mukhiya (local governmental representative), a Yadav from a neighboring village, for arranging to have a solar lamp set up in a space accessible to Dalits. Dalits noted that of all the candidates running for electoral office, only this Mukhiya followed through with his campaign promise, despite opposition from members of his own caste. Even though candidates running for office often promise to work for the benefit of Dalits, breaking with one's caste after being elected, particularly to side with Bhuiyan Dalits is rare. The disbursement of infrastructural resources that have been marked for Dalits by successive state governments have almost always been controlled by non-Dalits. They have often appropriated or hoarded these resources for their own caste groups. Governance in rural Bihar mimics this model wherein future votes are secured through the careful disbursement of *sarkari* funds, which sustains the inequality endemic to the caste system. The lamppost near a Dalit home thus represented an exception to the rule, as non-Dalits usually succeed in appropriating resources meant for Dalits. As a Bhuiyan woman in the map-making group noted, 'Money or resources are allocated to us by the sarkar (government), but we never get to see it. The grihasts take it.'

The Bhuiyan Dalit community is proud of having secured a solar-powered lamp in their living space. Dalit neighborhoods are usually characterized by complete darkness at night, but now at least one place is illuminated. Despite the hordes of insects, it attracts, the space around the lamppost has become a social gathering spot for Dalit women and their children, who often complete their schoolwork or play under its light. Notably, children from nearby non-Dalit households never join them, nor do non-Dalit adults. Sharing resources in Dalit spaces – which would transgress ancient implicit habits of spatial segregation – remains inconceivable for the majority of non-Dalits in Kaari.

### *Community facilities as failed challenges to untouchability*

In 2007, the Bihar government led by Nitish Kumar launched 19 social and economic programs intended to benefit groups identified as Mahadalits, which now include 21 of the most socio-economically marginalized Dalits such as the Bhuiyan (Government of Bihar, 2020). One of the programs provided funds for constructing a ‘community hall cum work-shade,’ or *samudaya bhavan* as it was referred to locally, to make a place for Bhuiyan Dalits to hold social and cultural events. As the village *panchayat* (village council) in Kaari refused to make land available, a widowed Bhuiyan Dalit woman donated her own plot in the *dih* to the project. This meant that Bhuiyan Dalit homes would adjoin the community building or *samudaya bhavan* (Figure 1). The government stipulated that the building would have one large meeting room, a smaller room, verandah, and a bathroom with an adjoining water pump. A non-Dalit contractor from Kaari began construction late in 2012, but by 2013, had only laid the concrete foundation and erected brick walls. The building still needed a roof, window frames and glass, doors, external and internal plastering, and paint; it remained unclear when the contractor would resume work.

The women who participated in map-making sessions in 2012 admitted that the structure was unlikely ever to be completed properly, but still viewed having one constructed in the *dih* as a significant win for Bhuiyan Dalits. They asserted that the new structure filled a void in the village by providing a space dedicated to Bhuiyan Dalit social events and gatherings. Furthermore, locating Kaari’s *samudaya bhavan* within the *dih* violated the ancient code of untouchability, since it was a form of property that had not been made available to grihasts. Mapmakers repeatedly commented that if the community center had been built on the eastern, non-Dalit side of the village, it would have been impossible for Dalits to access it.

In July 2020, I telephoned my Dalit consultants to confirm some information and noticed that they now referred to the building as the ‘Bhuiyans’ *samudaya bhavan*’. The caste label had been absent in our exchanges in 2012 through 2014 implying that caste identities were firming up in Kaari. They told me that the only social event that had ever been held at the community center was a song recording session I had arranged in March 2014. They also told me that the widow who had donated the land in the first place was residing in the building (which has now been completed) with her young daughters and a son. No one expressed surprise or concern that the community center was being used as a residence. They explained that the structure still served Bhuiyan Dalits in that it provided a safe place for children to play and everyone in the *dih* could draw water from its hand pump. One of my key interlocutors commented drily, however, that ‘the only thing that all the caste members of this village share is the primary school; the rest have caste labels.’ His words and tone of voice seemed to suggest that even the most well-meaning government welfare programs intended to benefit Dalits by desegregating resources always ended up etching the line of untouchability more deeply into the social fabric of village life. The only public building in Kaari wherein Dalits might encounter non-Dalits is the primary school (Figure 1 & Figure 3); however, the school does not benefit Dalits much since it is rarely in session. At best, it provides free mid-day meals to their young children. Non-Dalits and relatively financially secure Dalit parents seek education for their children by other means. In 2014, most of the non-Dalit boys from Kaari were enrolled in private schools located across the river and Dalit and non-Dalit parents hired a local

tutor to instruct their girls (and young boys) in a makeshift thatched structure (private school) located in the new northeast section of the village (Figure 1). Thus, neither having a public school nor a community center built in areas to which Dalits have access has done much to weaken the hold of untouchability in Kaari.

### **Discussion: The Shifting Nature of Untouchability in Rural Bihar**

Maps drawn by Bhuiyan Dalit women and their accompanying narratives reveal that Dalit assertions of their rights to resources, in conjunction with state-led land reform and welfare initiatives, have altered the spatial arrangements of village life and Dalit experiences of socio-economic discrimination. Some salient points that emerged from the mapping process include the ways in which caste segregation is both challenged and reinscribed over time, as Dalits repeatedly attempt to assert their legal rights, only to be met with the threat of violence or have the resources promised to them by the government appropriated by non-Dalits.

#### *Untouchability challenged and reinscribed*

Each change to Dalits' material circumstances has been excruciatingly slow and heavily contested. Bhuiyan Dalits' narratives of their experiences prior to the 1960s suggest that the BGM's kachcheri functioned as a sort of Foucauldian Panopticon to control Dalit agricultural laborers (Foucault, 1995). The location of the kachcheri in the most propitious (eastern) part of the village reflects its centrality to the lives of village residents. It circumscribed their movements to specific parts of the village and regulated who had access to survival resources such as water. The spatial arrangements of housing and resources around the kachcheri mirrored the graded inequalities of the caste system and reified the concepts of purity and pollution. By this logic, it made sense to house Dushad Dalits (the BGM's armed guard), to mark the southwestern boundary of the village. Such ghettoization facilitated surveillance and prevented Bhuiyan Dalits from shirking duties or deserting the village altogether.

The vast network of kachcheris sustained the BGM's governance of southern Bihar, so its dismantling diffused feudal-monastic power in the region. When the BGM handed land to the grihasts, the power of the kachcheri declined. New houses were built on its foundations and then on land north of the former kachcheri where BGM orchards and cowsheds had been located. Some Dalits and non-Dalits who could afford to build houses in the northern area eventually moved there, creating a mixed-caste settlement. Other non-Dalits expanded their houses through the center of the village until they reached the walls that separated the east from the west sides of the village. Non-Dalits have never moved south of the village center, however, and the old *dih* at the southwestern boundary of the village remains a segregated space. Although these spatial changes – moving north and reducing the distance between Dalit and non-Dalit homes – give the impression that the ancient terms of association have been undone, the logic of untouchability (and thus segregation) has been retained.

#### *Threat of collective violence undergirds untouchability*

The mapping process demonstrated the fragility of purported amenity between Dalits and non-Dalits, as every productive resource remains a site of contestation between grihasts and Bhuiyan Dalits. The grihasts attempted to thwart Bhuiyan Dalits' initial efforts to mobilize against them by preventing the entire community from accessing

the *badka kuan*, which was the only source of potable water at that point of time. This demonstrates that punishment for violating the code of untouchability is always collective, even when the offending action is committed by a single individual. Non-Dalits targeting the entire Dalit community for the perceived faults of an individual Dalit reinforces caste-mediated social and spatial boundaries.

Although such violence has become a little less frequent, Bhuiyan Dalits continue to be targeted as a community. For example, in February 2013, a Dalit youth was asked by a non-Dalit youth not to dance too close to a vehicle carrying the idol of goddess Saraswati to a nearby river for ritual immersion. The ensuing argument led to physical violence against the Bhuiyan Dalits of Kaari, who were forced to retaliate as a group. After this incident, Bhuiyan Dalits told me that they avoided entering non-Dalit areas even more than usual until the incident cooled off and only dealt with non-Dalits very cautiously, to avoid escalation of violence. Similarly, the hand pump the government installed close to a Yadav house became a contested site in the new northern section of Kaari (Figure 1). During times of conflict, grihasts have threatened Bhuiyan Dalits with violence to prevent them from drawing water from this pump. The Dalits have to travel farther from their homes to fetch water from a hand pump located near the *sarkari* (public) school (Figure 1 & Figure 3).

When confronted with violence, Dalits seldom complain to the police or take perpetrators to court; they prefer to settle matters with their non-Dalit neighbors directly. They acknowledge that despite laws that have been established to protect them, the administration rarely favors Dalits. As one of my key interlocutors noted, ‘Everything revolves around money here. We don’t have the resources to hold the grihasts accountable through the administration,’ because it mostly works in the interests of non-Dalits.

### *Appropriation by non-Dalits of critical resources allocated to Dalits perpetuates untouchability*

The mapping process and Dalit narratives provide evidence of the persistent efforts by grihasts to usurp state resources intended for Mahadalits (Mosse, 2018). Grihasts deliberately fabricate documents to suggest that their socio-economic status is much lower than it actually is so they can obtain government funds. One of the Bhuiyan women commented ironically, ‘*Ab badjan Harijan ban gayel aur Harijan badjan* [Now the grihasts pose as Dalits and present Dalits as grihasts]’ to the government. Non-Dalits also arrange to have Bhuiyan Dalits in need of assistance stricken off from government beneficiaries lists. An elderly Bhuiyan woman solicited laughter from other women when she pointed to her shriveled hands and commented:

Each time I’ve asked the officials to list my name for the old-age pension, they say I am not eligible. I tell them, “Look at me, my hair and my hands; if this does not look like old-age, then what does?”

The fact that some resources such as brick houses, water, and electricity have become available in Dalit spaces suggests that the most dehumanizing aspects of the old code of untouchability (i.e., when it was a punishable offence for Dalits to own land, build houses with tiled roofs, wear clean clothes, or draw water from the community well) have been undone. The qualitative experiences of Dalits are more complex, however. Although their living conditions have certainly improved over the past half century,

the infrastructure in Dalit spaces remains inferior to that enjoyed by non-Dalits: their homes do not have windows and their roofs caved in soon after construction; water from their pumps is often contaminated; and their community center was not completed by the government contractor.

These facts are evidence of a practice of untouchability wherein Dalits are still prevented from fully enjoying the resources and rights for which they have so long struggled. With non-Dalits in charge of welfare programs, every attempt to improve the quality of Dalit lives becomes hijacked by the very officials meant to implement them. Although the socio-spatial segregation of Kaari has evolved from being readily discernible in the layout of the village (i.e. segregated housing quadrants, inaccessible well water) to being hidden from view (i.e. by the proliferation of hand pumps, location of a solar lamp, development of a mixed-caste housing area), it continues to inform and shape all interactions between Dalits and non-Dalits. Dalits must remain vigilant and constantly prepared to mobilize to improve their physical conditions because each such attempt challenges a deeply ingrained code that forbids Dalits from rising to the same social status as non-Dalit Hindus. Bhuiyan women are well aware of this discrimination. They recognize that Dalit labor is the basis for all economic activities in the village, yet they are not permitted to use their expertise or skills to advance their own situation if doing so gives the appearance of behaving as equals with non-Dalits. As one of the mapmakers put it, 'It is our labor that made the houses, the clothes, the grain, and yet we are [still] forced to live among animals, naked and hungry.' Although the outlines of the Dalit ghetto have changed, the underlying principle of untouchability has not—it has only mutated.

## Conclusion

Refusing to openly acknowledge the ongoing discriminatory practices of untouchability in rural Bihar undermines the ability of Bhuiyan Dalits to fully gain control over productive assets that could ensure sustained socio-economic gains and changes in their social status. The evidence suggests that Dalit assertions of their legal rights do not translate into an equitable distribution of material resources or mitigation of social segregation, even when the state attempts to redress their historical socio-economic marginalization by building facilities that should have given them equal access to water, electricity, housing, and schools.

The maps drawn by Bhuiyan women depict the results of many decades of Dalit agency. At the same time, they provide insight into the interplay of social, economic, and political powers of non-Dalits vested in segregating themselves from Dalits and appropriating and regulating all resources that might allow Dalits to make a qualitative and quantitative shift in their circumstances. As Guru (2017) predicts, however, Dalits' activist experiences in the land movement (coupled with state programs intended to democratize resources) have introduced dynamism into segregated spaces. This dynamism has mitigated but not entirely undone the structural (and physical) violence that still undergirds the spatial and social milieu of rural India. Dalits and non-Dalits continue to operate in a caste hierarchy that keeps everyone in their place, physically and socially. Although Dalit villagers have successfully asserted their rights to access basic resources and thereby altered the more blatant enforcements of the untouchability code and blurred the edges of spatial segregation, every gain they make remains precarious and their autonomy threatened in rural Bihar.

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