

# Socio-spatially Segregated Experience of Urban Dalits and their Anti-caste Imagination: A Study of the Balmiki Community in Delhi, India

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## Abstract

Over the last three decades, India has experienced rapid economic development and social and cultural transformation. Questions arise as to how minorities secure their livelihood and what strategies are being devised for the same. And, what vision of the future do they have in mind? In this article, I will focus on the Dalit community in North India. Fieldwork conducted on one such disadvantaged group, the urban Balmikis (known as the sweeper caste)<sup>1</sup> in Delhi, is drawn upon to examine as a case study. Balmikis have a high rate of migration to urban areas, which is due to their historical background of being employed in the sanitation sector of municipalities and the Ministry of Railways since the colonial times. The name of the community, Balmiki, is derived from worshipping “Bhagwan Valmik,” a legendary saint and composer of *Ramayana*. It began to take root as a name with positive connotations among the sweeper caste in North India around the 1920s and 1930s. Because of this historical development, it is often accused of discrediting Dalits who dissent from Hindu values and for hindering Dalit solidarity. However, if one listens to the claims of the Balmikis, they do not necessarily consider themselves “Hindus”. For example, during my research, a frequent response to questions about religion was the statement, “We are forced to be Hindus”. In contrast, the words that immediately follow, “We are Balmikis,” are restated. By focusing on the beliefs and ambiguity of self-identity of the Balmikis, this article attempts to examine their anti-caste imagination. It then poses the question as to how that imagination is intertwined with everyday experiences and collective grassroots movements.

## Keywords

Delhi, Balmiki, sweepers, segregation, urban Dalits, anti-caste

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<sup>1</sup>In this article, the terms “Balmiki” and “Valmiki” are used almost interchangeably as community names. The caste name “Balmiki” reflects the pronunciation of the prevailing vernacular language, Hindi, and Panjabi, and is in widespread usage among local Dalits.

## Introduction

Over the last three decades, India has experienced rapid economic development and social and cultural transformation. This includes considerations of how minorities secure their livelihoods and strategies devised for the same. This article focuses on the Dalit community in North India. Fieldwork conducted on one such disadvantaged group, the urban Balmikis (known as the sweeper caste) in Delhi, is examined as a case study. This article is based on data collected from a survey conducted among 135 Balmiki households chosen from three districts (New Delhi, Northwest and South) of Delhi between 2006 and 2014 and recent interviews with Balmiki sweepers conducted in February 2020. To consider and protect privacy of informants, personal and regional names are pseudonymized in this article.

Balmikis have a high rate of migration to urban areas, which is due to their historical background of being employed in the sanitation sector of municipalities and the Ministry of Railways since colonial times. According to the 2011 Census, though the Balmiki caste (577,281/20.5 per cent) is the second-largest scheduled caste (SC) group after the Chamars (1075,569/38.2 per cent) in Delhi, yet the Balmikis do not have a significant presence in contemporary Dalit movements. While Ambedkar's ideology is supported by the community, they do not actively participate in the Buddhist conversion movement or BSP's [Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP)] political activities.

The name of the community, Balmiki, is derived from worshipping "Bhagwan Valmik," a legendary saint and composer of the *Ramayana*. The name Balmiki began to take root as a name with positive connotations among the sweeper castes in North India in the 1920s and 1930s. Due to this historical development, it is often accused of discrediting the Dalits dissent against Hindu values and hindering Dalit solidarity. However, from the claims of the Balmikis, it emerges that they do not necessarily consider themselves Hindus. For example, during my research, a frequent response to questions about religion elicited a seeming hesitancy to be a Hindu. Alongside, words that often followed were, "We are Balmikis."

From a historical perspective, Prashad's (2000) study deals with the social history of the sanitation labor castes in Delhi. Prashad details the history of the caste before and after Independence, drawing on the pre-Independence census, geography, and rare government reports on the living and working conditions of the sweeper castes. His study explores the community history when a particular group had joined the municipal sanitation department. Lee (2015) historically illuminates a religious identity and naming of the Lal Begis in Lucknow. These studies reveal the history and identity formation of how multiple caste groups came to call themselves Balmikis.

By focusing on the beliefs and ambiguity of self-identity of the Balmikis, this article attempts to examine their anti-caste imagination. It then poses the question of how that imagination is intertwined with everyday experiences and collective grassroots movements. The research question raised here is about how spatially segregated experiences and stigma affects their sense of "us" and enhances solidarity among the communities.

## Socio-spatial Segregation in Cities

It is not uncommon to see streets and localities named after communities, such as Harijan Basti, Balmiki Colony, and Chamar Mohalla. These are known as low-caste names and may cause stigmatized experiences and discriminatory sentiments against the residents of the locality. In addition, stereotypes of insecurity, gambling, drinking, and odor seem to be deeply rooted in these areas (Ganguly 2018a). Using ethnographic research in the cities of Lucknow and Benaras in the north Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, Lee (2017) highlighted how the segregation of the sanitation labor caste is inscribed in space and sensoria. Therefore, local residents and activists have often demanded that governments change the caste-related names in the form of collective protests.<sup>2</sup>

Social and spatial segregation along caste lines is not just a past phenomenon, especially for Dalits. Recently, there has been a significant amount of scholarly literature on caste-based segregation and exclusion in major socio-economic areas, such as residential patterns, rental housing markets, labor markets, and higher education (Deshpande & Newman 2007; Dupont 2004; Ganguly 2018a, 2018b; Jodhka & Newman 2007; Kamble 2002; Madheswaran & Attewell 2007; Thorat & Attewell 2007; Thorat et al., 2015; Vithathil & Singh 2012). In previous studies, caste-based discrimination and exclusion were largely assumed to be the future of rural areas. However, recent studies have collected data from metropolitan cities, including the National Capital Region where it appears that caste favoritism and the social exclusion of Dalits and Muslims have entered private enterprises (Thorat & Attewell 2007: 4144).

The concept of segregation opposes that of cohabitation, but it is noteworthy that the common experience of segregation can serve to enhance the feeling of “us” or togetherness among disadvantaged communities such as Dalits who live together (cohabit) in the same colony. Place is important in the history of Dalit protests and movements. This is because a place can function not only as a home for living, eating, and conducting religious ceremonies (including marriages, births, and funerals) of community members but also as a source of collective action and protests.

In the case of the Balmikis, their place of residence has also been a source of (union) leaders and activists. Balmikis working in government (central/state/municipal corporation) sanitation departments are generally entitled to a flat in government colonies (known as “sweeper colony”) to live in until their retirement. They share time and space, mostly within a homogeneous caste group. In this context, inhabitants construct their socio-spatial environment and sense of security and solidarity. In the

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<sup>2</sup>Apart from grassroots protests, the Maharashtra government announced in December 2020 that it would be abolishing caste-based names of localities across the state and replacing them with names of freedom fighters, social reformers, and ideologues. Social Justice Minister Dhananjay Munde explained that the aim of this decision was to solidify the notion of national integrity. The Maharashtra government has already dropped the usage of the word “Dalit” from official communication, papers, and certificates. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/maharashtra-to-drop-caste-names-from-localities/article33234784.ece> (accessed on 17 December 2020).

next section, I discuss the Dalit neighborhood in Delhi from a case study based on a relatively old municipal colony of Balmiki sweepers.

### *Residential Patterns of Balmikis in Delhi*

Delhi is divided into nine districts: Northwest, North, Northeast, East, New Delhi, Central, West, Southwest, and South. Based on the 2011 census data and her field study, Ganguly (2018b) points out that when we compare Balmikis' presence in each district with the population of SCs in the district, New Delhi has the highest concentration (49.2 per cent), followed by the South (27.4 per cent) and South West (26.5 per cent). This pattern is in close agreement with Suzuki's (2015) findings. In the next section, I will describe a municipal colony located in the New Delhi district.

#### *A Municipal Sweeper Colony*

Colony A, located near the center of Delhi, close to the president's residence, combined government offices, and the Parliament, is surrounded by collective dwellings for central government employees, Delhi City, and New Delhi City. As the percentage of SCs among the residents (23.4 per cent) was higher than the average value throughout Delhi (16.7 per cent), many people of SC backgrounds are likely gathered in this colony as government employees. Two interesting characteristics of the SC composition in the New Delhi District are that it is the only district in which Balmikis outnumber Chamars to form the largest SC group, and many SC government employees are Balmikis.

Colony A was constructed as New Delhi Municipal Council (NDMC) employee housing in 1969 and 1970, and nineteen four-story buildings are located in the district. Each building comprises approximately 15 flats, for a total of 288 flats. The residential population is estimated to be at least 1,440 people based on the average household size in the colony.

Only NDMC employees qualify for residence; therefore, at least one member of each household must be an employee of the NDMC. About 20 per cent of the monthly wages of each household head are deducted as rent, and the family may live in it until the NDMC employee retires. In Colony A, opinions concerning homeownership differed between officials and residents, causing severe problems dating back to their construction. This reveals the relationship between the sweeper community and the Indian National Congress, the governing party, when they were constructed. Since this is considered a case of the appropriation of Gandhi's view of the sweeper caste, the author wishes to include historical episodes in Colony A based on interviews with residents.

The name of Colony A, *Bāpū Dhām*, means a "place where Gandhi stays or lives" in Hindi. This suggests that Gandhi was somehow linked to events leading to the establishment of the district. In 1969, the movement to celebrate Gandhi's 100th birthday grew among Gandhians. Colony A was established to improve the lives of poor lower-class government employees (sweepers in particular) as part of the SC support policies. On April 9, 1970, attendees of the celebration of the district's

completion included prominent Indian Congress Party parliamentarians, such as the then Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi (1917–1984) and President V.V. Giri (1894–1980).

There are two stone monuments: one is beside a small temple where the saint Valmiki is enshrined near the entrance to the colony, and the other is constructed on land deep within the colony. The quadrangular stone monument placed on the grounds of the Valmiki Temple is engraved with inscriptions and pictures, and the three sides display the words of Gandhi concerning anti-untouchability and the three-monkey design (see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil) is engraved.<sup>3</sup>

Gandhi viewed untouchability as the worst stain on the Hindu religion and launched a movement to abolish it (the Harijan movement) in the mid-1930s. From this stone monument, it is possible to discern the situation in 1969, when the Congress Party Government, which inherited Gandhi's Harijan movement, constructed Colony A as a project to commemorate Gandhi's centenary celebration. Another stone monument constructed inside the colony bore an engraved epithet (in English) with the following words (Figure 1):

“Keep your house clean.  
Frontage of your house clean.  
The whole city shall be clean.”  
– V. V. Giri



Figure 1. Stone monument was established in Colony A. (Photographed by the author)

The engraved text of the message from the then President Giri contains the word “clean” three times, perhaps indicating a message to the municipal sanitation workers. Was this message, addressed to municipal sweepers, inscribed merely to encourage them in their labor? Or can we say this call for cleanliness possibly reflects on the

<sup>3</sup>The three-monkey design is seen around the world, but in India, it is said to have originated from the teachings of Gandhi, who always carried an image of the three monkeys and taught people to not see evil, hear evil, or speak evil; these tenets are extremely familiar to Indians as Gandhi's three monkeys. This stone monument is now in extremely poor condition and is severely damaged. Most of the engraved text and pictures is covered with sand and is illegible, but they can be seen if the monument is washed with water.

unclean status of Dalits? The author asked the residents about this interpretation, but did not get a clear answer.

The author's survey revealed that most residents of Colony A were employed as municipal sweepers. They reported that before the construction of Colony A, they lived several kilometers to the north in a slum that then existed around NDMC employee housing, known generally by the name Mandir Marg.<sup>4</sup> Residents of Mandir Marg were also municipal sweepers, and in this connection, this colony was well known as the place in which Gandhi stayed temporarily to publicize the Harijan movement in 1946.

As asserted by the residents of Colony A, during the 1960s and 1970s, the government forcefully implemented a slum clearance project, removing slums from Central Delhi. The government offered people employed as sweepers by the NDMC, Colony A as a relocation site situated close to their workplaces. The aspect that invited confusion was the speech by President Giri at the completion ceremony in 1970, in which he stated, "I dedicate this land to you who are poor," and the attitude of the authorities who urged the people to relocate. According to Chouhan, who had lived there since the beginning, almost everyone relocated; this was interpreted as meaning that they could obtain their own house. Chouhan retired from the position as the post-assistant sanitary inspector in the NDMC sanitary division and participated in negotiations as a representative of the organization conducting a movement to restore ownership to residents of Colony A, called the Harijan Society Improvement Committee (Harijan Samaj Sudhar Samiti) (formed in 1970).<sup>5</sup> The leadership of the resident movement for ownership was formed by union members, arising from the homogeneity of municipal Balmiki sweepers who shared the Balmikis' plight and a sense of neighborhood formed in Colony A.

Balmikis in Delhi, regardless of whether they undertake sanitation jobs, try to maintain their caste solidarity by celebrating several anniversaries, such as Safai Mazdoor Diwas (sweepers' day, on July 31) and Valmiki saint Jayanti (in October). They also hold meetings and organize collective protests when atrocities against the Balmikis occur. In 2020, serial rape-murder cases occurred in Uttar Pradesh (UP), followed by protests by Balmiki organizations. These incidents and anniversaries have become an opportunity for Balmikis to work together and shape a sentiment of "us" and neighborhood beyond the physical geographical locality.

## **The Plight of Balmiki Sweepers**

Caste is a crucial contributing factor towards social inequality, as can be observed between non-Dalits and Dalits and amongst Dalit caste groups. In Delhi, Balmikis often experience the poorest circumstances in terms of education and employment opportunities (Suzuki 2017). According to the 2011 census, the population of Balmikis in Delhi is approximately 5.8 lakh, and they constitute 21 per cent of the SCs, being the second largest population after Chamars (approximately 1 million, 38 per cent of

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<sup>4</sup>Residents of the colony were interviewed by K.L. Meena, former assistant sanitary inspector in the NDMC sanitation division (October 1, 2005, Bāpū Dhām).

<sup>5</sup>Interview in Bāpū Dhām on October 1, 2005.

the SCs). Balmikis have a literacy rate of 67.4 per cent, the lowest among all SCs (78 per cent) in Delhi (Government of India 2011).

Additionally, economic mobility among the Balmikis has also stagnated. According to an article published in 2005, 99 per cent of Delhi's government sanitary workers were from the Balmiki community in 1995 (Labor File November–December, 2005, p. 11). During the author's fieldwork from 2003 onward, comparable information was collected from local Balmiki sweepers, residents, and sweeper union leaders at the Municipal Corporation of Delhi.

The privatization of the government sanitation department, in which sweepers are employed by municipal corporations and central/state governments, has accelerated since the 2010s, leading to the de-regularization of employment and weakening of trade unions. Many Balmikis who have been engaged in government sanitation departments are now facing insecurity and fear of unemployment in the near future.

At the time of the author's survey in 2019–2020, the monthly income of household heads was approximately 40,000 rupees (about 560 USD) for *pacca* (permanent) sweepers and ranged from 10,000 to 12,000 rupees (around 140 to 168 USD) for *kaccha* (temporary) sweepers and 4,000 to 5,000 rupees (about 56 to 70 USD) for contract-based sweepers.

A *pacca* sweeper is a regular or permanent sweeper who is paid as per the pay scale fixed by the government. Along with a salary, they are entitled to government facilities, such as housing, gratuity, promotion, pension, and medical care. *Kaccha* sweepers are those who work with the government or municipality or any agency of the state government. *Kaccha* sweepers are engaged temporarily but are supposed to be regularized in service after a certain period. Contract sweepers are those engaged by a contractor under a written agreement for a short period and are paid according to prevailing wage rates in the state. Private contractors, to whom work is outsourced by the government or local agencies, are called government contractors, which include many NGOs such as Sulabh International. The contract sweepers are paid according to the wage rate fixed by the government. However, contract sweepers with private contractors lack the scope to obtain regular/permanent employment in the future because they are not entitled to a permanent job by the government.

The author's interviews with the sweepers demonstrated that each category of sweepers faced difficulties. For example, because contract-based and *kaccha* sweepers need to pay a proportion of their wages to their contractors, they are not paid their full wages and receive half of their wages. While permanent sweepers are officially supposed to receive proper benefits (family allowances, medical care, and other necessary supplies), they claim they have not received them. Safety gear such as gloves, gumboots, and masks, along with the timely payment of salaries, cashless medical cards for treatments, and the clearing of pending arrears, have been the demands of sanitation workers.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup>“Amid Covid-19 outbreak, Delhi's sanitation workers demand safety gear, masks,” *Indian Express*. <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/delhi/coronavirus-lockdown-few-masks-no-gloves-or-sanitisers-complain-med-sanitation-workers-6336100/>, accessed on April 4, 2020.

These difficulties seemed to worsen after the COVID-19 outbreak across the country. Joginder Bahot, president of Akhil Bharatiya Safai Mazdoor (ABSMS) and a sweeper of the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD), said, “After the outbreak of COVID-19, we are forced to clean (the whole) city, but how can we work safely without protective suits and masks? *Kuch nahin* (Nothing)!” Bahot continued to explain to the author, “We used to be provided uniforms, soaps, and oil by the MCD before; but now, nothing. We need to work with our own clothes, and they get easily dirty and unusable.”<sup>7</sup> Although Bahot and other members of the ABSMS and the MCD sweeper union have raised the issue to the corporation and the Delhi government and have gone on several strikes, their demands have not yet been met. Meanwhile, there is an ongoing political battle and disagreement over matters of the sweepers’ unpaid salaries and needful supplies between the AAP-led Delhi government and the BJP-led MCD.

Many ABSMS activists concur with the opinion that the plight of Delhi’s municipal sweepers has worsened since the MCD was replaced by three new bodies in 2012: the North, South, and East Delhi Municipal Corporation.<sup>8</sup>

Considering these Balmiki sweepers’ plight, when the costs of rent, food, electricity, water, and other life essentials were deducted from their salaries, they had almost no money left in hand. They set the balance aside for their daughters’ dowries or religious rites, and there was almost none left to invest in the education of their children. In 2007, electric meters and yellow cables were installed throughout the city under the pretext of “preventing the theft of electricity” to run the electrical industry more efficiently. The people of the colony studied in the survey looked up at the cables reproachfully, saying, “Those have doubled electricity prices. I have to pay up to 3,000 rupees every alternate month. What can we do, who do not have steady jobs?”

Along with complaints about daily expenses, the author often heard people express uneasiness about their homes. Employees working as sweepers may live in housing for public employees in the center of Delhi to be close to their workplaces as they qualify for public housing if even one member of a household is an employee. The author’s survey confirmed three residential patterns among the Balmiki people of Delhi. The first is the government (municipal) employees’ housing pattern, namely, continued residence by generations of people who work as sweepers. The second pattern is ensuring housing by obtaining land in a resettlement colony after removal from a slum where people live. In the third pattern, when a government permanent employee from a sweeper household (which has been occupying government employees’ housing) retires, the family purchases a public dwelling in the city with their savings, taking advantage of the housing support policy of allotting funds to SCs. Turning to links with the Balmiki movement discussed later, many movement leaders obtained assets using the third residential pattern.

<sup>7</sup>Interviewed on March 7, 2020, Delhi. Here is another similar case in the COVID-19 pandemic: <https://www.hindustantimes.com/delhi-news/north-corporation-sanitation-workers-not-paid-salaries-for-march-civic-body-says-govt-yet-to-release-funds/story-QDmKuNDcPZvTxVty8qVQ2I.html> (accessed on December 16, 2020).

<sup>8</sup>The Delhi Municipal Corporation (Amendment) Act 2011(Delhi Act 12 of 2011).



During the 1970s and the 1980s, it was comparatively easy to obtain a home in the city using the second and third patterns; however, in recent years, heavy investment in land has rapidly increased land prices to levels beyond the reach of the Balmiki people in the low-income class. Life in Delhi is becoming increasingly harsh. At the same time, the first pattern, government employees' housing, is not homeownership but offers convenience—they are close to their workplaces and their children's schools—and motivates the Balmiki people to choose to work as sweepers in successive generations.

### **“We are Balmikis”: As a Recognizable Self-identity**

In this section, I will focus on the history of the worship of Sage Bhagwan Valmiki in the Balmiki community and examine how it has become critical in forming the community's identity. The name of the community, Balmiki, is derived from the worship of Bhagwan Valmik, a legendary saint and composer of Ramayana. It began to take root as a means of positive self-identification among the sweeper community in North India in the 1920s and the 1930s. Due to this historical development, it is often accused of discrediting the Dalits who dissent against Hindu values and hinder Dalit unity. However, during my fieldwork in Delhi, it is clear that they do not necessarily consider themselves Hindus. For example, a frequent response to questions about religion was the statement, “We are forced to be Hindus.” In contrast, the words that immediately follow, “We are Balmikis,” have been restated. Considering these responses, it is important to examine the ambiguity of self-identity in the historical context.

### *Demographical Transition*

Table 1: Scheduled Caste Population by Religious Community in Delhi (2001 and 2011)

	2001			2011		
	Hindu	Sikh	Buddhist	Hindu	Sikh	Buddhist
All SC	98.69%	0.90%	0.50%	98.88%	0.92%	0.20%
Chamar	98.57%	0.40%	1.10%	99.24%	0.33%	0.43%
Chuhra/Balmiki	99.89%	0.10%	0.00%	99.93%	0.05%	0.02%
Kathik	99.78%	0.20%	0.00%	99.86%	0.11%	0.03%
Koli	99.87%	0.10%	0.10%	99.84%	0.11%	0.05%
Dhobi	99.82%	0.10%	0.10%	99.89%	0.11%	0.01%
Balai	99.92%	0.10%	0.00%	99.95%	0.03%	0.02%

Source: Government of India, Census of India 2001 and 2011: Delhi: SC Series-14: Tables on Population by religious community

Table 1 illustrates the percentage of the majority groups of SCs in Delhi by religion. Of the total SC population in 2001 and 2011, Hindus (98.69 per cent in 2001 and 98.88 per cent in 2011) constitute the majority. Compared with other SCs, the relatively high percentage of Chamars in the Buddhist<sup>9</sup> population ratio (1.10 per cent in 2001 and 0.43 per cent in 2011) suggests that the community followed Ambedkar's ideas and his conversion movement. Ambedkar, the icon and leader of the Dalit movement,

<sup>9</sup>Indian Buddhists are often referred to as “Neo-Buddhists,” and some criticize that this terminology creates discrimination by distinguishing them from Buddhists outside of India.

renounced Hinduism and converted to Buddhism shortly before his death. Census data on Buddhist beliefs in Delhi demonstrate that believers are heavily skewed towards certain castes, suggesting regional and caste differences in the spread of the conversion movement.

Table 2 illustrates the population trends (1961–2001 census) of the various castes that are known for sweeper castes in Delhi. The figures demonstrate that the proportion of Chuhras (renamed Balmikis) tends to be overwhelmingly high among the five caste groups: 68.0 per cent in 1961, 79.57 per cent in 1971, 89.54 per cent in 1981, 94.81 per cent in 1991, 96.67 per cent in 2001, and 97.25 per cent in 2011. However, the number of Bhangis<sup>10</sup> declined significantly: 27.9 per cent in 1961, 18.27 per cent in 1971, 8.75 per cent in 1981, 3.94 per cent in 1991, 2.47 per cent in 2001, and 1.97 per cent in 2011. Although we have not been able to obtain data to determine the reasons for the decline in Bhangis, it is difficult to consider any likely reason to leave Delhi, where non-agricultural employment opportunities can be expected and migrate to other regions. Rather, what the author assumes is the possibility that the caste name of Bhangi, which has been condemned as a derogatory term, may have been changed to Balmiki by collective choice. Further research is required to clarify this issue.

Table 2: Population of Sweeper Castes in Delhi (1961–2011)

		1961		1971		1981		1991		2001		2011	
		Population	Ratio of population among five castes	Population	Ratio of population among five castes	Population	Ratio of population among five castes	Population	Ratio of population among five castes	Population	Ratio of population among five castes	Population	Ratio of population among five castes
1	Chuhra (Balmiki)	52743	68.0%	107680	79.57%	222638	89.54%	367303	94.81%	500221	96.67%	577281	97.25%
2	Bhangi	21637	27.9%	24720	18.27%	21752	8.75%	15277	3.94%	12773	2.47%	11665	1.97%
3	Chohra (Sweeper)	3088	4.0%	2551	1.89%	3272	1.32%	2854	0.74%	2567	0.50%	1638	0.28%
4	Mazhabi	107	0.1%	338	0.25%	858	0.35%	1802	0.47%	1814	0.35%	2829	0.48%
5	Lalbegi	28	0.0%	36	0.03%	134	0.05%	192	0.05%	85	0.02%	167	0.03%
Total		77603		135325		248654		387428		517460		593580	

Source: Government of India, *Census of India 1961; 1971; 1981; 1991; 2001; 2011*

### From Chuhra to Balmiki

In choosing the name Balmiki as self-identification, rather than “Hindu” or “Dalit,” we can also read an attempt to distinguish themselves from other Dalits. When and how did the self-designation “Balmiki” become widespread among the community? This dates back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and events in northern India and Punjab. Through British colonial policy, Indians were classified according to religion and quantified as a population group. This trend was accelerated by the Morley-Minto Reforms of 1909, which introduced a system of separate elections by religion. This marked the beginning of the religious affiliation of the people of the Indian subcontinent. As British rule spread throughout India and society entered a

<sup>10</sup>The caste names are not used to derogate the feelings of any person or community.

period of social change, there was a growing movement among the Dalits to convert to other religions so as to escape discriminatory practices within the Hindu caste hierarchical society. Among Bhangis and Chuhras, some converted to Christianity and Sikhism.

Activists of Hindu reform groups, concerned about this, developed a movement to incorporate the Dalits into the Hindu community in north India. Among the most famous are the activities of Arya Samaj (AS). One of the AS activists was a Brahmin, Amichand Sharma. In 1936, he published a pamphlet entitled *Śrī Bālmīki Prakāś*, which he distributed among the Chuhra community, explaining that the ancestors of Chuhras originated from Bhagwan Valmik. Thereafter, the legend of the community's origins in Rishi Valmiki became widespread among the Chuhras (Leslie 2003; Prashad 2000).

The impact of AS's activity among the Chuhra community was reflected in the census data of the time: according to the 1881 census, Chuhras listed the names of Islamic saints, Lal Begh and Bala Shah as the gurus they followed. Gradually, however, the name Bala Shah was replaced by Bal Mik or Bal Miki, and by the 1930s, Chuhras were identified in the census as Bal Miki or Hindu, and such self-identification was formed (Hase 1994; Ibbetson 1916; Leslie 2003; Prashad 2000; Saberwal 1976).<sup>11</sup>

### *Establishing Faith*

While Valmiki worship was spreading, especially among the Chuhras of Punjab, Balmikis as a caste group was consolidated through the census and other colonial schemes. Under these processes, Valmiki worship was developed through the following activities. First, Valmiki temples began to be erected in North India. Caste associations called Balmiki Sabha were formed under the influence of the Arya Samaj and organized in Jalandhar (Punjab) in 1910 and Delhi in 1926. Today, every year in late October, the Balmikis of North India celebrate the Maharishi Valmiki Jayanti,<sup>12</sup> occurring between the festivals of Dussehra and Diwali. Valmiki temples in Delhi attract devotees from all over India and abroad. As the time of the year approaches, cultural events and gatherings are held by Balmiki organizations, especially in North India.

In Delhi alone, there are as many as 500–700 Valmiki temples, both large and small. The main venue is a temple on Mandir Marg Road in the center of Delhi. On the occasion of Maharishi Valmiki Jayanti, religious leaders gather to perform rituals for the worship of Bhagwan Valmiki. A large number of Balmikis visit temples with their families and relatives, including small children to older adults (Figures 2, 3).

<sup>11</sup>With regard to the Chuhras worship of the Valmiki saint, previous studies have suggested the possibility that it might have existed prior to the arrival of the Arya Samaj. In any case, there is a strong possibility that the worship of saints was enhanced by the activities of the Arya Samaj (Leslie 2003: 195).

<sup>12</sup>Some states recognize it as a legal holiday (such as Delhi). India is a multi-religious country and has established various sectarian holidays at the central and state levels. The establishment of statutory holidays is considered such an important issue that it can itself become a campaign goal for religious organizations.



Figure 2, Figure 3: The celebration of Valmiki Jayanti at Bhagwan Valmiki Mandir of Mandir Marg of Delhi. (Photographed by the author)

### *Valmiki Temple in Delhi with Gandhi and G.D. Birla*

The main Valmiki Temple (Bhagwan Valmiki Mandir) in Delhi was built on Mandir Marg, central Delhi, around 1937.<sup>13</sup> An interesting episode concerning G.D. Birla (1894–1983), a famous Indian businessperson and supporter of M.K. Gandhi, must be noted, as it provides insight into the historical connection between Gandhi and Balmikis in Delhi.

G.D. Birla is known to have financially supported Gandhi's independence movement and the construction of the Valmiki Temple in Delhi. Considering that Gandhi made this temple the basis of his Harijan movement, as described below, it can be inferred that Birla's donation was made at Gandhi's request. At about the same time that the Valmiki Temple was built, Birla built the Lakshmi Narayan temple (popularly known as the Birla Temple) on the same street, only 500 meters away, in 1938. This temple is currently one of the most famous Hindu temples in Delhi, attracting numerous worshippers and tourists.

Thus, the two temples were built simultaneously on the same street. Why is this? Although both are Hindu temples, there are clear differences between the worshippers who gather there. While all Hindus, regardless of caste, visit Birla Temple, it seems almost exclusively the members of Balmikis who visit Valmiki Temple. This suggests that perhaps the reason that the two Hindu temples were built on the same street in 1937 and 1938 was to prevent the Dalits (Balmikis) and caste Hindu worshippers from being in the same space. Furthermore, this can also be understood in terms of indicating the limits of Gandhi's Harijan movement of temple entry for Dalits (Prashad 2000: 102–107) (Figure 4).

<sup>13</sup>Regarding the history of the temple's establishment, some informants claim that the temple was already in the same location before 1937. According to the priest of the temple I interviewed in 2010, there is a history of 150 years.



Figure 4: Bhagwan Valmiki Mandir at Mandir Marg of Delhi. (Photographed by the author)

What is the relationship between the Valmiki Temple in Delhi and Gandhi? Gandhi chose Valmiki Temple in Delhi as a place where he could effectively promote his Harijan movement. The room in the temple where Gandhi stayed was preserved and kept open for visitors. The desk, pen, glasses, and charkha (a manual spinning wheel)<sup>14</sup> used by Gandhi were displayed. In addition, the surrounding walls were decorated with portrait photographs of Jawaharlal Nehru and other Congress leaders who had visited Gandhi, as well as Stafford Cripps (1889–1952), Louis Mountbatten (1900–1979), the governor-general of India, and other prominent figures. Photographs of Indian and British politicians and activists adorn the walls. Little is it known today that the temple was not only a place where caste Hindus could highlight their connection to the upliftment of Dalits through the Harijan movement but also an essential space that perhaps determined the political landscape<sup>15</sup> (Figures 5, 6, and 7).



Figures 5,6,7. Pictures from Valmiki Temple, New Delhi (Photographed by the author)

<sup>14</sup>Aiming for the independence of India's rural economy, Gandhi appealed for production activities of handspun cotton yarn and hand-woven cotton cloth by charkha, which had been used in India since ancient times. The charkha is a symbol of Gandhi's anti-colonial movement.

<sup>15</sup>In addition to the Valmiki Temple in Mandir Marg, there were two other places that Gandhi chose to stay in Delhi before and after India's independence: Birla House, his private residence, where he lived from September 9, 1947 to January 30, 1948; from September 9, 1948 to January 30, 1948; and where he spent the last days of his life. It is also where he was assassinated. After that, Birla House was managed by the government and opened to the public in 1973 as the Gandhi Smriti (Gandhi Museum). The second site is Kingsway Camp in north Delhi (near Delhi University), where in 1932 Gandhi established the Harijan Sevak Sangh (HSS). Later, the name was changed to Valmiki Bhawan and it became one of the centers of the Harijan movement. Gandhi stayed there temporarily between 1934 and 1938.

### *Narratives on the History of Valmiki Temple in Delhi*

The above discussion of Valmiki worship and its establishment is based on previous studies and the author's field research. In the course of my fieldwork in Delhi, I noticed a difference in opinion between previous studies and the Balmikis regarding the history of temple construction. According to previous literature, the temple was built around 1937 with contributions from Birla. However, Balmikis, whom I interviewed, told a slightly different story. For example, Saint Krishna Vidyarthi, the temple's superintendent and Sadhu representative in 2010, after giving the author a tour of the temple and Gandhi's room, described the temple's history as follows:

The temple has a *history of 150 years*, including the period when it was a *kachcha* (unprepared, made of earth) and was *restored to its present state in 1937*. When the temple was a *kachcha*, it *housed a small school opened by Balmikis for the community itself*. When Gandhi decided to stay here, there was a suggestion to close the school, but Gandhi proposed that he himself participate in education (especially sanitary education) as a teacher, and the *school remained for some time afterward*.<sup>16</sup> [Emphasis mine]

What characterizes Sadhu's narrative is the historicity of the temple's 150 years and the subjective role of the Balmikis. He recognizes 1937 as the year the temple was restored and emphasizes the 150 years of history by noting that the temple had existed before the restoration. This also indicates that it is older than Birla Temple on the same street. In addition, he speaks of the "school opened by the Balmikis" and focuses on the cohesiveness of the community. It also provides the community's view that Gandhi is perceived as an outside participant.

Based on the objective of capturing the agency of Balmikis, this study attempts to focus on what people consider "fact" at present and how they narrate the past. From Sadhu's narrative, we can see spontaneous self-recognition rather than one who worships Bhagwan Valmiki only under the influence of Gandhi and AS.

### *Inter-caste Conflict over Valmiki Worship*

In the previous sections, I examined Bhagwan Valmiki worship in North India and Delhi from a historical context and its relationship with the AS, Gandhi, and Birla. It is necessary to understand that Valmiki worship within the community was formed in the context of such historical dynamics.

Finally, it is necessary to mention the conflict of opinion within the Balmikis over Bhagwan Valmiki worship, which was not accepted by all members of the Balmiki community. Even if one belongs to the Balmiki jati determined by birth, whether or not one follows Valmiki worship is a different matter. In particular, converts to Buddhism are negative about the name, saying that it is merely "a name that panders to Hinduism." For example, Bhagwan Das (1927–2013), a Buddhist convert and Ambedkarite, criticized Valmiki worship in his community as an influence of the

<sup>16</sup>August 8, 2010, at Valmiki Temple in Delhi.

Hinduization of the Dalits by caste Hindus and opposed the name Valmiki (Das 2011: 54–56, 68–71). In addition to Das, other highly educated Balmikis have negative opinions on Valmiki worship.

However, both positions are recognized regardless of education, occupation, or region. It is also possible that for those who take the surname of Valmiki, this may be based on strategic motives. For example, regarding the adoption of the Valmiki surname by the author of *Joothan*, Ganguly (2009) analyzes the following:

His eventual adoption of the name “Valmiki” is *not* an endorsement of his community’s assimilation under a majoritarian Hindu ethnos and ethos. It is, rather, a defiant and ironic gesture, daring the upper-caste citizen to take him on as a “recognizable” Dalits, one who is not shamed of his identity but intent on “shaming” the privileged citizen into recognizing it as a legitimate one. The adoption of “Valmiki” as his last name is also a mark of his protest at his own community’s desire to hide behind an upper-caste bourgeois identity in its path to upward social and professional mobility (Ganguly 2009: 437, emphasis by the author, Ganguly)

In an interview with Omprakash Valmiki about his surname,<sup>17</sup> the author asked, “Do you worship Bhagwan Valmiki?” He pointed to the statues of Buddha and Ambedkar placed in the room and replied, “No, I only follow Dr. Ambedkar and Buddhism.” It seemed to indicate that taking the Valmiki surname and adhering to a religion other than Hinduism do not conflict but “coexist” and are acceptable to him, despite the contradiction. More specifically, this situation of coexistence is observed not only among individuals but also in Balmiki organizations as they adopt a method of reconciling different ideologies. The following photograph illustrates the proposed method. (Figure 8)

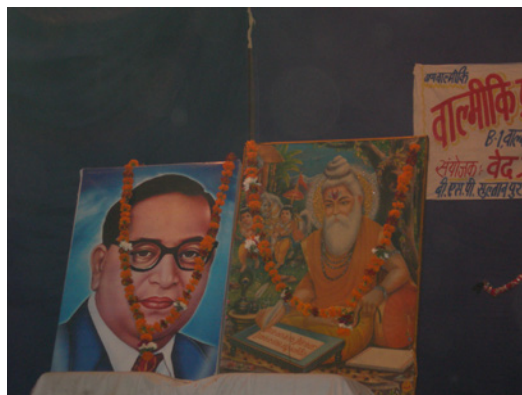


Figure 8: The portraits of B.R. Ambedkar and Valmiki saint at a Balmiki community function. (Photographed by the author)

The figure illustrates the portraits of Ambedkar and Valmiki displayed next to the stage during a meeting of a Balmiki organization. Thus, the movement attempts to unite its members and develop its activities by incorporating the leading symbols that conflict with each other in terms of ideology within the caste.

<sup>17</sup>August 30, 2011, at Omprakash Valmiki’s home in Dehradun.

In light of the above, the Balmiki identity can be summarized as follows: In contemporary North India, the caste name Balmiki as a self-identification is more widely established than Bhangi and Chuhra, and there is disagreement within the caste over Valmiki worship. Nevertheless, no other name can replace Balmiki for them, and it is certainly the name for community cohesion and collective identity in the current context. In everyday life, it is a source of self-respect for the community. Leslie's study of Valmiki immigrants in Britain persuasively points out that "Bhagwan Valmik is the community's God and guru, its *Jagat guru* or 'World Teacher.' He also represents everything that they have lost: earthly power, religious authority, personal honor, and pride." (Leslie 2003: 76).

Considering these situations, the case of the Balmiki as Hinduized should not be easily declared.<sup>18</sup> Rather than worshipping or not worshipping Valmiki as a paramount factor, we need to focus on how they strategically utilize the name Valmiki (Balmiki), which has already been established as a form of self-identification for their community development. After all, Balmiki identity can be considered in building interrelationships with others, despite contradictions, conflicts, and ambiguities.

## Conclusion

By focusing on the beliefs and ambiguity of self-identity of the Balmikis, this article attempts to examine their anti-caste imagination. For Balmikis with limited socio-economic capital, it is practically difficult to make a clear break with Hinduism or convert to another religion, such as Buddhism. Thus this community seems forced to obtain jobs in the sanitation department of the municipality as it is more secure. The case study of Balmikis in Delhi indicates the clear break-up may not be the only way to demonstrate the anti-caste imaginaries.

Discarding Hindu values (as Dr. Ambedkar and other Dalits follow) and strong anti-Hindu sentiment would be possible in a context of socio-economic ascent and the fostering of self-respect and solidarity within the community. The case of Balmiki in this study may show under what conditions it is possible to develop them.

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<sup>18</sup>Prashad's study (2000) provides excellent insight, but I disagree with his overestimation of the influence of Hindu supremacist forces on the Balmikis and his depiction of the 1984 massacre of the Sikhs as a Balmiki-oriented mob. See Kolenda's (2003) counterargument to this.



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