11

Society and Politics

Inertia and Change*

11.1 Introduction

In this chapter, we examine the village as a society. We will look at structures and stories emerging from Palanpur that describe how quickly things are changing in some areas, and how they remain static in others, sometimes painfully so. Through the analysis, we seek to understand how the relations between different social groups have changed, recalling that gender has been discussed in Chapter 10. We examine how the interactions of institutions and politics with economic change can help explain the nature and evolution of village society and relationships.

As we have shown in Parts 1 and 2, the last seven decades have brought a transformation in the village from being a place that was largely based on agriculture to one that is increasingly diversifying into non-farm activities. Currently, a major part of the income in Palanpur comes from the non-farm sector, and much of this is from outside the village. Improved transportation and communications with the development of roads and rail, and increased ownership of motorcycles, television sets, and mobile phones, have opened up new dimensions of engagement with the outside world.[1] The flow of information has become easier and faster.[2]

* This chapter has been written by Himanshu and Dipa Sinha.

[1] On the role of the communications revolution and its impact on social life in a western Uttar Pradesh village, see Kumar (2016).

[2] We note several relevant changes in Palanpur even though the penetration of television and other social media is limited in the village. While it is difficult to attribute changes in village society to the influence of television, we did find in our discussion that women in Thakur and some Murao households were regular viewers of television serials. The younger generation used the television to watch films on rented DVD players. There was only limited use of television for gathering information or keeping track of news.

Commuting is now the primary mode of accessing outside jobs, and the radius of the catchment area for jobs has increased in recent decades. The relative decline of agriculture and the emergence of non-farm outside jobs have contributed to altering social relations which were earlier centred around the agrarian economy. The changing occupations have influenced the way various caste groups interact with each other. Recent literature on caste in rural India has highlighted how, on the one hand, traditional caste structures are changing radically in relation to occupational structures and economic activities, but, on the other hand, social hierarchies on the basis of caste remain strongly entrenched (Jodhka, 2016, 2017). Others have argued that what we see now is the beginning of the end of the village (Gupta, 2005; Jodhka, 2016). We explore the implications of these perspectives for Palanpur while also taking them a step further and interrogating how developments in institutions and politics in the village have affected changing caste relationships and economic structures, together with how a changing economy and caste relations have influenced politics and institutions.

Along with occupational diversification, we have also seen that there has been some decline in caste diversity in the village in the sense that smaller castes are slowly moving out of the village. The composition of the village is changing as the population share of the major castes is rising. Is it the case that the smaller castes have had problems integrating in the village, or is it that it is easier for them to leave because their ties to the village, both in terms of assets and relationships, are not as strong? Further, while the Thakurs and Muraos have mostly dominated political structures in the village, recently, scheduled caste (SC) groups such as Jatabs have been asserting their caste identity not only in the economic sphere by taking on new economic activities, but also politically. The emergence of caste-based political formations in the state, such as the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and the Samajwadi Party (SP), has also led to strengthening of political alignments within caste groups in the village as well as in neighbouring villages.[3]

While analysing these changing social relations, this chapter also looks at the state of public institutions. We find a decay in the quality and provision of public services and the absence of any significant collective action to change this situation. There is an increasing demand for the 'public services' of education and health amongst all the castes in the village. This is being manifested particularly in a higher number of children being sent to school. As seen in Chapter 9, the weakness of public provision is reflected in rising

[3] The emergence of caste-based parties and political mobilization along caste lines since the early 1990s has remained an important feature of politics in Uttar Pradesh. The two major parties which have ruled the state for the majority of the last two and half decades are the SP, which derives its strength from the other backward castes (OBC), mainly Yadavs, and the BSP, representing the interests of Dalits, mainly Jatabs.

numbers going to fee-paid, private schools. More people are accessing healthcare facilities, too, but through fee-paid, privately owned facilities. The seed store has now physically collapsed and is largely non-operational in terms of services; so too the cooperative function it housed.

This is not to say that the government has withdrawn completely from the village. In fact, the period after 1993 saw a major rise in the amount of funds being made available. The school, for example, has expanded up to the secondary level, and now has a number of classrooms, toilets, and a kitchen. Lakhs of rupees come to the *panchayat* every year under various government schemes including the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), social security pensions, school meals, and so on.[4] However, the funding does not always meet the articulated objectives, to put it mildly. Funds disappear, and the services remain of low quality and are hard to access. In Section 11.7, we analyse how the caste and gender relationships can explain, at least partly, the lack of accountability or demand for public services in the village.

11.2 Caste and Occupation

The changes in the occupational structure of Palanpur households are features of all castes. Traditional caste-based *jajmani* occupations are beginning to disappear, and newer kinds of jobs in the non-farm sector have emerged. These new jobs are both inside and outside the village. As a result, the relationship between caste and occupational structure is also changing with all castes being engaged in a wide range of occupations. While in the earlier rounds, one could identify a single major occupation as being of special importance for each caste, this is not the case anymore. From a situation where no Thakur or Murao was working as a casual labourer and very few Jatabs were anything but casual labourers, we now have a number of Thakurs also working as casual labourers, Jatabs leasing-in land for cultivation, and some Muraos moving out of agriculture. However, at the same time there is still some caste-based pattern in occupation, and therefore it is premature to argue that the relationship between caste and occupation structure has completely disappeared in Palanpur.[5] Further, now that the links with the outside are stronger than ever before, any analysis has to take into account processes

[4] Approximately 10–12 lakhs per annum is the figure we arrived at based on estimates of the amounts that came into the village for the major schemes such as MGNREGS, pensions, midday meals, and an untied grant of Rs 3 lakh.

[5] Jodhka (2017), based on his survey of villages in Bihar, argues that the new economy dominated by non-farm activities is also characterized by persistence of differential incomes and discriminatory practices based on caste.

outside the village and their relationship with village structures to explain what is going on inside.

Overall, the contribution of agriculture to the economy of Palanpur has reduced considerably. While the Muraos are still strongly committed to agriculture, Thakurs, who were the first to move into non-farm occupations, are increasingly moving away from cultivation. On the other hand, more Jatabs now own or lease-in land. There are some Murao households now which have moved away from cultivation as their main source of income, and for a few non-farm casual labour has even become their main source of income. The Ansari report based on the survey in 1957/8 stated that between them, Thakurs and Muraos owned all the land in the village, and Jatabs were found to be exclusively tenants (Ansari, 1964). Now, although there is still great inequality in land ownership, some Jatabs own the land they cultivate. Further, while Jatabs cultivated (own land or leased) about 9 per cent of all village land in 1983, this proportion almost doubled to 17 per cent in 2009. This was in large measure associated with a decline in the Murao share from 41 per cent to 36 per cent and with smaller caste groups such as Dhimars and Passis moving out of the village and thus relinquishing their land.

The relative decline in agriculture has not only been linked with occupational choices in the village, but also changes in social relationships. Most of the caste-based relationships had deep roots in the agrarian production system. The system of sharing of produce as part-payment for labour was an integral part of the village labour market. With the emergence of widespread non-farm employment, piece-rated contracts are becoming dominant, with most transactions taking place in cash. For example, in the head-loading work at Moradabad, a group of ten workers are assigned a railway truck for unloading and paid for completing the task. Further, agricultural operations are also becoming increasingly monetized. One of the implications of these changes in occupation and payment structures is the decline in patronage that the higher castes and land-owning families had on lower castes and landless labourers. Gupta (2005), based on his visits to western Uttar Pradesh, argues that the decline in agriculture has not only affected occupational choices, but has also contributed to changing the culture in villages, which had been largely based on agricultural transactions. Similar observations are made by Harriss and Jeyaranjan (2016) using their analysis of longitudinal data of several south Indian villages.[6] Jodhka (2016), based on his re-survey of Haryana villages, also highlights the decline of structures of village identity centred on economic relations rooted in agriculture.

[6] Harriss et al. (2016) use the term 'post-agrarian' to define the nature of villages in the last two decades.

In Palanpur, too, the move towards non-farm activities has had an impact beyond the observed changes in income and occupation. Along with the weakening of agriculture, there is also a change in the caste-based norms on division of labour. In agriculture there were set caste-based norms on the roles households could play; for example, it was almost impossible for Thakurs to work as agricultural labourers or for Jatabs to own land. For the new occupations there is some amount of caste neutrality in the task itself, which has allowed people to diversify. In jobs outside the village, people are now working with those from other castes more than they did before. Further, the fact that many of these jobs are located outside the village also makes it easier for people to shed their traditional roles and undertake something new or different without feeling the intensity of social pressure that can arise within the village.

Notwithstanding these changes, we still see broad occupational patterns by caste, as we described in Parts 1 and 2 of this book. Wage labour remains the highest among Jatabs and cultivation highest among Muraos. While earlier these were maintained by social norms as well as asset ownership, now there is a further avenue through the role that networks and connections play in getting outside jobs. Therefore, a Thakur group leader in the railway sheds in Moradabad prefers to have other Thakur or upper-caste members in his group. The group leader contacts those of this own caste when there is a work opportunity. Mutual trust and teamwork are a key ingredient of this work. Thakurs who are seeking work would perceive that this activity does not imply loss of social status, in contrast to working as labourers in the village, which they find unacceptable. Other factors such as better education and more resources have also advantaged Thakurs in acquiring whatever few regular jobs might arise.

Such networks are seen to play a role in other occupations as well where other castes are dominant—such as marble polishing, repair shops, security guards, and so on. The Jatabs still continue to be at the bottom of the ladder, with many of them working in brick kilns as their main source of non-farm diversification. Work in the brick kilns is of the most unpleasant and often exploitative kind. In many cases, they have to move away from the village for a few months each year and all the members of the household have to work to make the most of this opportunity as the payment is on a piece-rate basis. That enables women and children to contribute, something which is more difficult in the village context. This feature of work opportunities for the whole family, together with greater regularity than agricultural labour, makes such work attractive, notwithstanding its unpleasant nature. Other than brick kilns, the Jatabs are also engaged in some other non-farm occupations but mostly as wage labourers. However, on the positive side, such access to outside jobs and cash incomes have now made it possible for Jatabs to lease-in land for cultivation and pay cash for necessary inputs, such as ploughing by tractor.

Thus, the new occupational structures have to some extent depended on and reinforced caste networks. Caste networks have also emerged as an important factor affecting migration behaviour, with migrants from the same caste often acting as a source of information by helping with contacts for jobs, arranging for accommodation, and so on. In many aspects of the new economy, and in managing change, trust plays an important role and caste remains a determinant of how much one person trusts the other. The power of social sanction is also greater within castes. Such intra-caste economic dealings based on trust are evident in not just non-farm jobs, but also in tenancy choices.[7] Similar issues arise in lending and borrowing.

Therefore, while changes in the occupational structure are driving a transformation in the dynamics between the castes, it is still too early to claim that caste does not play a role in determining a household's economic opportunities or its social status. The phrase 'greater equality' amongst the castes can be overdone. If we look at the big sectors into which non-farm diversification is taking place—brick kiln (Jatabs), repair services (Muslims), working in railway yards or *mal godam* (Thakurs), and marble polishing (mixed, with Muslims playing a strong role), there is still some caste concentration, and caste networks are used to bring people into the net. In 1983 such networks were seen to be working for the Thakurs but not for others; they have now become of use for other castes as well.

11.3 The Village as a Residential Unit

The changing nature of the village economy, with its declining share of agriculture and the emergence of the non-farm sector, also has implications for the village as an economic and social unit. One of the reasons that anthropologists as well as economists were attracted to villages as the unit of observation was the nature of village society. The village was seen as an autonomous unit centred around its economy, which was primarily agrarian.[8] Mahatma Gandhi considered villages as the unit of economic planning and a strong society for his conception of economic growth and development.[9]

Many villagers now have jobs outside the village, and it is seen that commuting and not migrating is the most common form of accessing these jobs. The rise in commuting should be seen in the context of a population which is

[7] See Chapters 5 and 6 for details.

[8] Even in official statistics and administrative rules, villages continue to be seen as agriculture-dominated units. One of the important criteria of reclassifying a village into a census town is that more than three quarters of workers in the village should be engaged in non-farm occupations.

[9] The Gandhian model was based on self-reliant villages with most of the consumption and production happening within the village.

mobile but yet rooted to village life. With most non-farm outside jobs being informal in nature and wages higher than in agriculture but not greatly so, the cost of staying away from the village in the urban areas is certainly a reason why commuters prefer to stay in the village. However, the choice of village as a residential unit for those who prefer to work outside—with only a small share of their economic transactions in the village—is not just an economic one. It is also a reflection of the uncertainty of the informal job market outside the village. The village continues to provide social networks and some form of community security or insurance.

Our discussion with migrants outside the village suggests that most either continue to maintain strong links with the village or would like to re-establish links with it. It not only remains as their roots or identity in an anonymized urban world, but is also the fall-back option in case of economic difficulty or uncertainty. For most social engagements, be it marriage or religious and social events, the identity of the village is still important. For most migrants, marriages are still arranged by relatives in the village and, for some of them, they do hold the ceremony in the village. Overall, there has been a recasting of the role that village society used to play in an individual's life. While it is less important than earlier as far as economic relations are concerned, the social relations which define identity and the notions of home and belonging remain strong.

11.4 Changing Social Relations: Caste

Within the village, both the changing occupational structure and the development of institutions such as elected village *panchayats* are contributing to changing social relations between castes. The Ansari report on Palanpur observed that the 'inter-caste differences in the economic plane in the village are much less marked than in the social plane' (Ansari, 1964:30). This could be said to be more or less true in the village even today. However, in a comparative perspective, economic differences are much smaller than earlier, and social hierarchies are also undergoing change. From an outsider perspective, the village seems to be fairly calm, with no apparent inter-caste or inter-religious tensions. In terms of living arrangements, the households of major caste groups are not fully segregated. Further, Muslim households are scattered throughout the village. Although the majority of Jatab households are situated at the northern side of the village around the pond, some Thakurs and Muraos have also built houses there. The Thakur and Murao households otherwise mostly live near the railway station. There is also no apparent restriction on drinking water from public handpumps. Different (male) caste

members can be seen chatting and gossiping with each other. There are no visible signs of the kind of untouchability which was practised earlier in the village.

Nevertheless, amongst the major castes the Thakurs are still considered to be top in the social hierarchy, followed by the Muraos and then, with a substantial perceived gap, the Jatabs. The Muslim castes such as Dhobi and Teli are placed slightly higher than the Jatabs. While overt forms of untouchability are not practised any more, many subtle differences remain. For instance, a person of a lower caste is still not offered food in a Thakur household. Those belonging to higher castes attend weddings in Jatab households, but will eat food there only if it is cooked by a professional cook (*halwai*) of a different caste. They do not eat in the Muslim households either. During marriage ceremonies, an invitation is given for all members of the household of the same caste; but in the case of households of other castes, only one member from each family is invited. It was rare in the earlier survey periods for a Jatab to sit at the same level with a Thakur or Murao and discuss politics, but such political discussions and negotiations are now common in the village.

Women of one caste barely interact with women of other castes. While the interactions amongst men have definitely increased over the years due to the changing economy in the village, restrictions on women's mobility and the fact that very few women in the village are engaged in jobs outside their household or farm greatly limits opportunities for such interactions. At the same time, with almost all children in the village now going to primary school and many even to high school, in the younger generation the chance of meeting and socializing is greater.

However, there are strict rules and customs as far as inter-caste relations are concerned. Marriages are still strictly within the castes. Caste endogamy and clan exogamy is practised among Hindus.[10] Most of the marriages are arranged, with relatives playing the role of intermediator or matchmaker.[11] Dowry is still prevalent, and the rate depends mainly on the asset position of

[10] Standard marriage practices such as caste endogamy, village and clan exogamy, hypergamy (the groom's economic status to be higher than of the bride), and patrilocality (the wife moves to the husband's house after marriage) still remain in Palanpur as in most parts of rural north India. Among Hindus, marriages are arranged amongst the same caste (caste endogamy) and many times even subcastes are important. However, at the same time, amongst most upper-caste Hindus in north India the bride and the groom must not be related to each other in any manner or belong to the same *gotra* (clan). This refusal to allow clan endogamy is in contrast to south India, where cross-cousin marriages are allowed. In north India, amongst Muslims, clan endogamy is usually allowed.

[11] Most marriages are still decided without asking for the consent of the girl. While the parents still made the decision on who their daughter should marry, in some cases women did mention that their parents would ask them for their consent before finalizing the match. However, this does not yet mean that the girl and boy get to meet and talk before the marriage, as is now happening in the case of 'arranged' marriages in urban India. One change that people did mention was that now there was a 'greater' demand for 'educated' girls, especially among Thakurs, and this was one of reasons why parents felt it was important to send their daughters to school.

the groom. The richer the groom's family is, the higher the dowry demanded. The dowry is also higher if the groom has a regular job, irrespective of asset position. The norm is also to marry a girl into a family which is economically better off or comparable. Most of the brides and grooms are from a catchment area of 40–50 kilometres from the village. However, there are some cases where men have had to go a long distance to find a bride. There are now five married women in the village from the Midnapore district of Bengal. These are women from poor backgrounds, and the marriage often involves payment of money by the groom, in other words a bride price. There is a middleman in the village who arranges these marriages. These marriages are generally arranged for men who are unable to get married, usually because they are very poor, physically handicapped, or elderly. These women are kept under veil during the initial years and are allowed to move within the village only after their children are grown up. During the initial years, these women are not allowed to participate in customary caste events, with most of them generally confined within the household.

11.5 Changing Social Relations: Religion

Muslims comprise 16 per cent of the population in the village, and their population share in the village has increased over the years. There are two main types of Muslim families in the village, Dhobis and Telis.[12] As mentioned in the previous studies on Palanpur, there are no overt tensions between Hindus and Muslims. The village has never seen a communal 'riot', and the two religious groups are linked to each other economically in several ways. At the same time, there are some undercurrents which do exist.

One of the issues of silent friction between the two communities is to do with the discomfort that many Hindu households feel with the Muslims exerting their religious identity. The nearest mosque is in the neighbouring village Pipli, which has a large Muslim population. This mosque also has a *madrasa* (religious school) where a number of Muslim families send their children for some initial learning of religious texts. The Palanpur Muslims have been demanding that they be allowed to construct a mosque in the village but so far the Hindu families have resisted any such proposal. They have no formal right to forbid construction of a mosque, but the social pressures can be overwhelming. Therefore, while there are four temples in the village, there is not a single mosque. This has led to some acrimony in the recent past, but there has not been any violence between the communities.

[12] Traditional occupational associations for Dhobis and Telis are washing and oil pressing. There are substantially more Telis than Dhobis in Palanpur.

An incident where these differences came to the fore was during the *panchayat* elections of 2012. The *pradhan* post was for women (only women could contest). One of the contestants was the wife of an influential Muslim man who was quite active in the village. Many appreciated his work, particularly in taking up village-related issues at higher levels, as he had some contacts with the local MLA.[13] However, when his wife decided to contest the elections, there was a consolidation of a Hindu position, especially amongst the upper castes, where one of the issues they campaigned on was that there would likely be a mosque in the village if she became the Pradhan. There is also some discomfort brewing because a number of Teli families, including this aspiring politician, have been amongst the most successful and entrepreneurial households that have diversified into non-farm occupations and seen an improvement in living standards. On the whole though, in spite of the changing environment between religious communities in the state of Uttar Pradesh and this western region in particular, Palanpur has, fortunately, not yet witnessed any major communal clashes.

11.6 Democratization and Participation

As seen in Sections 11.2, 11.3, 11.4, and 11.5, there has been some democratization of power relations and activities in the village with occupational diversification, greater monetization, and decline of agriculture. One of the institutional factors that has contributed to giving greater voice to the weaker sections in the village is the introduction of regular *panchayat* elections after the passing of the 73rd amendment to the Constitution.[14] Since 1995 the village has seen regular elections. Due to the system of reservations for SCs and women, by rotation, during the last two survey rounds Palanpur had first a Dalit Pradhan and then a female Pradhan. Further, recent years have also seen a huge expansion in the quantum of funds coming into the village *panchayat* as a result of central government policies favouring greater decentralization. Both these processes have led to more people being involved in public affairs. The caste *panchayats* which were earlier more influential than the village *panchayat* are now almost non-existent. At the same time, caste hierarchies, coordination, and politics still continue to influence both the outcomes of *panchayat* elections and decisions around allocations of funds. This was reflected in the way the upper castes in the village first supported a

[13] Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA). The Legislative Assembly is the legislature at the state level. The local MLA belonged to the Muslim community.

[14] The 73rd amendment to the Constitution was passed in 1992. It provided for a three-tier *panchayat* system in rural areas.

particular Dalit candidate in the village for the post of Pradhan and later themselves led a revolt against him.

The introduction of *panchayat* elections in the village has also led to a realignment of caste groups, in particular because a certain proportion of seats are reserved for OBCs and SCs. The post of the village Pradhan was reserved, for the first time, for SCs during 2005–10. During 2010–15 it was reserved for a female candidate. The village elections are generally fought along caste lines with large caste groups dominating the election process. During the 2005 election, the Thakurs aligned with Mahesh, who is a Balmiki,[15] in order to defeat the Jatab candidate, Ramjit. Balmikis are a small minority among the SC households in Palanpur that are otherwise dominated by Jatabs. The support to Mahesh was basically given to prevent the Jatabs from having a dominant role in village politics. Ramjit was supported by other caste groups including Muslims but lost by 13 votes to Mahesh.

After a couple of years Mahesh became so unpopular with his supporters that they eventually lead a mobilization to get him removed. The charges against him were that he did not do anything for the village and that he was very corrupt and usurped a large share of the funds earmarked for the village. The antagonism, however, was not purely because Mahesh did not undertake any development work; the previous headmen had not done much either. Nor was it that he showed favouritism in allocating government benefits. This was also the practice earlier. For example, many villagers reported that under the previous Pradhan one of the richest persons in the village, owning a tractor, thresher, mentha plant, and so on, got a grant under the Indira Awas Yojana (IAY) because of his close relationship with the Pradhan.[16]

Previous Pradhans had been both ineffective and corrupt without being thrown out. Two additional factors worked against Mahesh. First, he did not include any of the powerful people in the village in what he was doing, not even those who got him elected as Pradhan. It was during his tenure that the school midday meal was completely stopped, while most people knew that grain continued to be supplied for this purpose. It was rumoured that this was one of the main reasons for the fallout between the Pradhan and the local schoolteacher, another influential member of the village.

Second, he also indulged in petty corruption and offensive behaviour, with almost no patronage to anyone in the village. He asked for money or liquor even for the smallest things, like signing a document or certificate. He was also drunk most of the time and would pass lewd comments on women passing by.

[15] The Balmikis (also known as 'Bhangis') are traditionally 'sweepers' and are ranked very close to the bottom of the hierarchy.

[16] IAY is a scheme that provides a subsidy to help those who are poor and do not have a house construct one.

As a result, the level of anger among the entire village community was very high, and when a campaign began that he should be impeached there was widespread support for this. This became the principal topic of discussion in the village for a few weeks, with almost everyone except four or five households being against the Pradhan. Many women were vocal about how he needed to be removed, and many of them campaigned against him.

While a large number of people in the village wanted him removed, the process of impeachment was drawn out and required much effort by some of the villagers over more than four months. The villagers collected details of funds that came to the village using the Right to Information Act and filed complaints against the Pradhan at the Block Development Office (BDO) with detailed charges of irregularities.[17] An enquiry was ordered, and the team found that even on the date of enquiry, no midday meal was served at the school. Following this, an application for a no-confidence motion against Mahesh was submitted to the district magistrate in Moradabad, signed by 530 people from the village including all the *gram panchayat* members. Simultaneously a similar process was undertaken towards the removal of the Public Distribution System (PDS) dealer in the village. A vote was then held on this motion, and the Pradhan was finally 'impeached' by an overwhelming majority of 416 to 27.

Elections, which the impeached Pradhan contested, were held for a new Pradhan after three weeks. The post continued to be reserved for SCs for the remaining two years of the original five-year term. While there were a few other candidates in the fray, once again the 'elders' decided who would have their support. Ramjit, the Jatab candidate, who came a close second in the previous election, was chosen. There was intense campaigning by the earlier Pradhan, where he not only apologized for his previous misdeeds and promised to reform but also distributed a lot of liquor and allegedly cash as well. Nevertheless, out of 491 votes cast, Ramjit got 401 and was elected as Pradhan.

While the Jatabs felt increasingly empowered due to rising relative income and a favourable political environment in state politics, which was then ruled by the BSP, they could never establish a dominant role in village politics. Even Ramjit, who was elected after the impeachment of the previous Pradhan, was dependent on Thakurs and Muraos for the day-to-day running of village affairs. This was evident also in how the money for MGNREGS was spent; much of it was used to improve village roads around the Thakur and Murao households.

Ramjit completed Mahesh's term. At the end of this term the Pradhan's post was once again reserved, this time for a female candidate. Other than formally filing the papers in a woman's name, the entire contest and campaign was for

[17] Every state is divided into districts and districts are further divided into blocks. A BDO is the highest administrative officer at the block level.

and by the husbands. While one of the active persons in the village (Naseem, a Muslim), with a reputation of being honest and hard-working, filed a nomination in his wife's name, the post was ultimately won by a Thakur woman who lives outside the village. Naseem claimed that although he was promised support by many of the powerful people in the village, who also worked with him closely for the removal of the earlier *pradhan*, they ultimately ended up putting their weight behind an ex-army employee from the village who lives in Moradabad. In our discussions with some of the key people in the village, they said that they favoured the army officer because he lived outside, had worked in the army, and was already rich and therefore did not need to make money from the *panchayat*.

Therefore, while reservations seem to have given some voice to the Dalits, with first Mahesh, then Ramjit being a Pradhan in the village for several years, it is too early to suggest that this has led to a mainstreaming of the Dalits in the decision-making process.[18] While the village came together to overthrow the Dalit Pradhan, no such public outrage has been seen against the female Pradhan who was running the *panchayat* through proxy through her nephew. The female Pradhan lived outside the village. The nephew seemed to be as corrupt as the earlier Dalit Pradhan, but there were barely any protests against his inefficiencies and corruption in running the *panchayat*. Nor has the election of a female Pradhan changed anything materially as far as participation of women in the political process in the village is concerned.[19] They continue to remain marginalized in village politics.[20]

What both examples of *panchayat* elections in the village in the last decade show is that the regular conduct of such elections (with reservations), together with the large amount of funds (grants and centrally sponsored schemes) that are now directly handled by the *panchayats*, have contributed to changing caste dynamics in the village. While the Thakurs and Muraos still continue to

[18] On the role of caste in *panchayat* elections in Uttar Pradesh, see Kumar (2016). Kumar argues that the reservation in the *panchayat* system has given Dalits representation in the local politics, but has failed to change the caste relations in the village, with upper castes dominating the political process or colluding to capture it.

[19] Sathe et al. (2013) find a positive impact of reservation on availability of public services in Maharashtra in female-headed *panchayats* compared to male-headed *panchayats*. Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004) also report greater investment in infrastructure in female-headed *panchayats*. While most studies (Bardhan, Mookherjee, and Torrado, 2005; Duflo and Topalova, 2004; Lindberg et al., 2011) report that reserved female political roles have a positive impact on village public services, Palanpur has not seen improvements in performance of the village *panchayat* during the term of the female Pradhan.

[20] Although they remain largely invisible in village politics, they were seen to be vocal during the impeachment of the earlier *pradhan*. Some even joined the protest demonstration to the district magistrate's office, travelling on tractors.

pull the strings, they now have to negotiate hard with the Jatabs and Muslims.[21] These two groups have become more confident; some of them have seen economic successes, and they have benefited from the wider UP political environment which, around 2009, the time of the most recent detailed surveys, was much in favour of these groups.

One of the reasons why the caste arithmetic within the village has such a great impact on village politics is that no political party has any significant presence there. There was some political consciousness among the Jatabs that they belonged to the same caste as the then-Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, Mayawati. Many in the village (including Jatabs themselves) observed that the Jatabs had become more vocal and were generally more confident in voicing their opinions after the BSP won the state elections with a large majority in 2007. However, there is no organized group or branch of the BSP in the village. Some Dalit households did paint their houses blue, a colour symbolizing their affiliation to BSP. Also, some villagers have access to political leaders and can call on them for help. For example, some of the Muslims have access to a minister from the same caste and they approach him sometimes, taking along villagers from other castes, when they need help. The general feeling in the village is that because it is a small place with not many votes, political parties are not interested in investing any time there.

We should note that the role of Pradhan was largely ceremonial when Bliss and Stern first came to the village in 1974. Politics around the role were not intense as it carried little power and dispensed very few resources.

11.7 Collective Action and Public Services

The increased flow of funds has certainly increased the interest of the villagers in the *panchayat*. Some impact of the increased financial status and strength of the *panchayat* is visible in the form of better roads and improvement in school meals. Most villagers admit to the increased public spending being useful but also complain about corruption and favouritism in the implementation of government schemes. Despite continuing failures of the public services, there has been no serious attempt to collectively set things right and demand accountability.

Palanpur was selected as part of the Agro-Economic Research Centre (AERC) surveys because of the presence of cooperatives in the village. The only

[21] Anderson et al. (2015) documents the role of elite minorities in the village in subverting pro-poor redistributive policies, in their analysis of *panchayats* in Maharashtra. Also see Bardhan and Mukherjee (2012).

element left now is the primary cooperative society, which does some lending. The cooperative seed store, which was the residence of the research investigators during the surveys in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, and was then quite active, is now in a dilapidated condition. But even other cooperative institutions such as the sugar cooperative are now absent from the village. The decline of these formal cooperative institutions has partly been due to the government but also because of an absence of any institutional ownership among the villagers.

Although successive Finance Commissions have increased the money available to the village as untied grants,[22] these have rarely been used in the case of Palanpur; it would require calling a formal *gram sabha* (village assembly). The functioning of other programmes such as the MGNREGS, PDS, and social pensions, has been weak, with corruption still a major problem. Issues of exclusion of those who are genuine beneficiaries are often discussed informally by the villagers, but hardly ever become an agenda for public action. The same is true in the case of the functioning, or malfunctioning, of the village school and *anganwadi* centre.[23] The village school has seen large investments in infrastructure, being upgraded to offer education up to middle school (class 8), but there is little in the way of public discussion or pressure on the quality of teaching. Similarly, there is no discussion on the functioning of the *anganwadi* centre, which has no real presence, existing largely 'on paper'.[24] Other than the impeachment of a Pradhan, which, as explained, had as much to do with political power plays and corruption as with other considerations, there has not been any collective action taken by the villagers towards improving the state of their public services.

One of the complaints that women have expressed in recent years is the increase in instances of 'eve-teasing' or harassment of women around the liquor shop in the village. The liquor shop is located opposite the railway station, and, as a result, a number of outsiders also hang around the shop in the evening. Women have complained that the presence of the liquor shop in the village has led to men from the village spending more money on alcohol and gambling. However, their demand that the shop be removed has never become a strong or effective village issue.

Drèze and Sharma (1998), based on their work on the surveys of 1983/4 and 1993, had pointed to a few obvious, in their view, opportunities for collective

[22] These are established under the Indian Constitution to allocate financial resources between the states of India.

[23] The *anganwadi* centre is the early childcare centre at the village level. This is run under a centrally sponsored programme called the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) and provides health, nutrition, and education services aimed at pregnant and lactating women, adolescent girls, and children under six.

[24] See Chapter 9 for further details on the *anganwadi* centre in Palanpur.

action that could have helped to improve the quality of life for all. These included improving the village drainage system and coordinating in relation to sowing times. During this round of survey we observed failures of public services such as the stopping of the midday meal in the school, the irregularity of the nurse coming to the village, and other weaknesses of public services. These would seem to be situations evidently waiting for active engagement by the people of the village. Strong collective action could bring important improvements in the public service provisions for the village. Drèze and Sharma (1998), as well as Drèze and Gazdar (1997), postulate that one of the reasons for such lack of collective action is that the social stratification in the village limits the ability of people to come together around key issues. That also raises the question, however, of whether the stratification in Palanpur is any stronger than in other villages where collective action is more effective.

There exists in the village a small group of about 10–12 men who sometimes visit government offices at the block or higher levels if there is something that the village needs.[25] The group also exert some influence on how people vote at the *panchayat* elections and so on. It is also generally seen that anyone who has the support of these people can get away with a lot as well (for example, the schoolteacher). This is, of course, a simplistic presentation, and even within this group of persons there are differences and power struggles, often determined by caste affiliations. The balance of activity or strength differs from time to time depending on the issue and the personal interests of these individuals. When action on the issue in question could be beneficial to all the castes, collective action by villagers is more likely.

Other than the impeachment of the Pradhan, one instance where we saw the village come together collectively was their effort to get rid of the monkeys in the village. Monkeys were a major nuisance when we arrived for our survey in 2008. Villagers estimated that the number of monkeys in the village was almost double the human population. This was not a problem at the time of the previous survey held in 1993, and only developed later. The monkeys seem to have been attracted to Palanpur because of the presence of the station, as train passengers often fed them. It was also surmised that people from nearby villages got rid of monkeys from their own locales by bringing them to Palanpur. While this might appear to be a trivial issue, it in fact was causing severe disruption to daily lives. The monkey menace even changed the cropping pattern in Palanpur. People could no longer grow vegetables or groundnuts. Farms had to be constantly protected by humans before harvest. Someone

[25] The researchers involved in the 2008/10 fieldwork made a list of people they would put under this category. It was a list of 11 persons that everyone agreed upon. The group included one Muslim, one Gadariya, and one Jatab. The rest were Thakurs and Muraos. They were all male and heads of the households which were economically amongst the strongest in their respective caste groups.

had to stand guard all the time when women were cooking; this was usually the duty of children (with sticks). Eighty-four cases of monkey bites were reported in the one-year period before the survey. The monkeys were a constant menace even for those visiting the village for the survey; we always had to be careful if we were carrying any food with us.

Given this great inconvenience, it was surprising that there was no attempt to arrive at a collective solution to the problem. Villagers did not even try to stop those from other villages leaving monkeys in Palanpur. Some temporary solutions were worked out by those who could afford it. For example, in some better-off upper-caste homes, they built barricades around the cooking area, and for some farms people bought big guard dogs.

Through newspapers and the researchers, the villagers came to know that some neighbouring villages had managed to get rid of their monkeys. If the forest department was effectively petitioned, officials would come to the village, round up the monkeys, take them away, and release them in a natural habitat conducive to their survival. This motivated the village community to get together to tackle this issue. Under the leadership of a few influential people, the village collected funds from every household. A detailed formula was worked out where each family contributed according to their means. Many villagers volunteered time and joined the professional monkey-trapping team when it arrived. Trapping was done under the supervision of forest department officials and a doctor. The whole operation went on for a few days and according to the forest department's count, over 900 monkeys were caught by them and moved to a forest.

Both these examples, the Pradhan impeachment and the monkey story, show that collective action is possible when the issue affects most of the village population and also gets support from influential people.[26]

Currently, the one event that the entire village gets excited about and contributes to collectively is the Ram Katha that they organize once a year. The Ram Katha is an annual religious event organized jointly by the village, in which even Muslims contribute and participate. During the seven- to ten-day event, sermons are delivered by a priest who is invited from outside the village. He speaks on religious matters, good moral deeds, equality among men and women, and other related matters, and tells stories about the lives of Rama and Sita and how they are relevant in today's changing society. There is a segregated seating arrangement for men and women, and women have to keep their veils on. The villagers have to make individual contributions for the grand feast (*bhandaara*) organized on the last day, and the names, along with the amount of the contributions, are announced over a microphone.

[26] Also see Sinha et al. (2016).

The rise of caste and religious identities, particularly since 2013 in national and state politics, in the ways described has led to some polarization within the village community, although this has not yet manifested itself in any form of violence.[27] One consequence of the strengthening of such identities has been the absence of popular mobilization by political parties on issues of health, education, and other social issues. Similarly, Kumar (2016) also noticed increases in religiosity and the emergence of new sects in his study of Khanpur village in western Uttar Pradesh.[28]

11.8 Conclusion

The village has seen significant changes in both economic and social structures, which are closely related. The changes in agriculture, including *zamindari* abolition and the 'green revolution', were powerful forces of change affecting not just institutional structures, but also social and political dynamics. A remarkable feature of the village society has been the changing nature of institutions, which have quickly adjusted to the new realities. The emergence of new non-farm opportunities and increased mechanization of agriculture has been associated with the monetization of agricultural markets. For example, we see some switching away from 50/50 sharecropping towards cash rent and wage labour. This is consistent, too, with outside activity leaving less time for the supervision that share tenancy requires. And potential tenants previously excluded by social convention from hiring-in ploughing services with draught animals can now hire tractor services.

Social institutions such as caste, gender, and group alliances are changing too, not only via labour and land markets, but also in politics. Making a general assumption that because caste relations were centred on agricultural production these changes will unambiguously weaken the village hierarchy, would, however, be to oversimplify. Rather, there has been a re-emergence of caste as a proxy for trust in an increasingly informal and anonymized outside labour market. This is manifested, too, in credit and land markets, where a counter party from the same caste is often preferred.

Exogenous, or externally created, changes such as the introduction of *panchayat* elections mandated by the 73rd amendment to the Constitution,

[27] Religious and caste identities were also in play in the general elections of 2014 and in 2017 when the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) swept the elections. Despite Uttar Pradesh being a state with a 20% Muslim population, the BJP won the general election in 2014 and the assembly election in 2017 without giving any representation to Muslims. The caste-based polarization has also led to emergence of various caste outfits such as the 'Bhim Army', representing the Dalits.

[28] Kumar (2016) also attributes it to the increasing penetration of television and other forms of communication.

together with reservations for elected positions, have seen new alliances being built both to attempt to preserve power and also to challenge the hegemony of the existing village elites. The devolution of financial powers has also seen demands for accountability and transparency in the functioning of village institutions and greater involvement in village political processes, particularly the *panchayat*.

This 'democratization' of village society has been centred on particular public issues such as resources for school meals and on the monkey menace. But while it has grown, it is still sporadic and weak. There is potential for this to develop further and to emerge as an important point of contestation as well as cooperation in a fragmented society. Overall, Palanpur has not been able to get out of the ditch of extreme social divisions, collective inertia, dismal public services, and very poor social indicators. On the other hand, demand for services such as education and health are increasing amongst all groups. If the state continues to respond poorly, and the private sector is inaccessible or very costly for many, it is possible that mobilization will get stronger. We speculate further about the future in Chapter 12.

In this chapter, we have tried to put in context the changing dynamics between social groups in the village. As with the case of the economy, these are also changing continuously. First, it has been seen that the village has become more concentrated into the three largest castes, with the share of other groups declining and some smaller caste groups, such as the Passis, moving away altogether. This demographic change will likely have an effect on inter-caste relations in the future.

Second, linked to economic diversification, the rise of non-farm activities, and the relative decline in agriculture, is also a change in the relationships between different caste groups. Traditional ways in which hierarchies operated are breaking down, and new forces are at work, including several important ones that are external to the village. While there is some decline in certain kinds of social inequality, the gaps are still very wide. It is the upper castes, especially Thakurs, who are most rapidly moving away from agriculture and the village. Increasingly, those with the biggest personal stake in the village are the lower castes. Currently, upper castes retain their roots in the village in order to provide the security which can help enable their mobility. But over time as they move on, it may well be that the Jatabs and Muslims become most strongly rooted in Palanpur, plus possibly the Muraos, amongst the upper castes, depending on how persistent their commitment to agriculture turns out to be. What this might mean for relations between castes as well as village institutions is an interesting subject for speculation.

The changes in the village economy, society, and politics are happening at various levels. While it is premature to argue that village society is disintegrating (Gupta, 2005), there are certainly rapid changes in the way it has been

organized. However, as Jodhka (2016), Harriss and Jeyaranjan (2016), and others have argued, village society is developing a changed identity for a new world in which the village is more closely integrated into the surrounding economy. It is difficult to characterize it solely on the basis of caste and class relations, but as they change they also remain strong. What is clear is that the structure of the village is changing and will change. As Kumar (2016) argues, the penetration of urban markets, communication and information flows, and the emergence of new networks have reconstituted the village into a multi-level and more open settlement. But more than the settlement, these profound external influences have changed the institutional structure which was the basis of economic, social, and political relations, with internal change being shaped also by culture and history. Old hierarchies are breaking down, class boundaries are becoming blurred, relations are changing, and new alliances and groupings are being forged.

Acknowledgement

This chapter was written by Himanshu and Dipa Sinha. We acknowledge the contribution by Dinesh Tiwari and Gajanand Ahirwal.

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