Why Dalit women should require higher attention from activists: Ahmedabad case study

By Rajiv Shah

“...At the stone’s throw distance from the Dalit basti, there were flats and bungalows of high-caste people. But none wanted to hire Mani as domestic help, even kachra-potawali. What their guests will say seeing her clean the floor of their drawing room, they thought! They must have a maid worthy of their caste status, fair in complexion and socially acceptable.

“Mani had no options but hard work and drudgery. Those, most refused by others. She was usually called for her patents’ work – seasonal milling of chilies for the families that like to boast of keeping yearly stock. She was also remembered by the mothers and mothers-in-laws of pregnant women in the chawl – yes, to wash those dirty diapers and bleeding rags. Rest of the days, she would sling a sack and go rags-picking for the whole day. Would spread and sort out the catch in her room – paper, plastic, iron scrap, tube, tyre, bones, horns, all and sell them to the godown-man. Would return with a bottle of cooking oil, a head-load of logs for fire and other provisions to make their family meal for the lucky day...”

From “Queen of Black” a short story by Jasumati Parmar, woman Dalit writer, about Mani, a Dalit woman living in a chawl in Ahmedabad city.†

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The Context

As gender discrimination and violence become an important focus of attention both nationally and internationally, the view has gone strong among Dalit rights activists that women from the vulnerable communities have rarely received the attention they should. In Gujarat, more recently, the vulnerability found expression in rallies and demonstrations in November-December 2014 following the formation of Gujarat Women Rights Council (GWRC), about the time when the world observed Human Rights day on December 10, 2014. However, much before the campaign, which included visit to hundreds of villages across Gujarat to make women aware of issues related to gender violence, Navsarjan Trust activists, including its founder Martin Macwan and director Manjula Pradeep, had strong reasons to believe that Dalit women should be the focus of much a higher attention than hitherto has been the case. A study in 2009 by Navsarjan Trust said, “In 1989 the Indian parliament passed the Scheduled

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§ [http://gujaratwomenrightscouncil.org/](http://gujaratwomenrightscouncil.org/)

¶ Gender-Violence and Access to Justice for the Dalit Woman, December 2011, Navsarjan Trust, Ahmedabad
Castes and Scheduled Tribes Prevention of Atrocities Act in a bold attempt to guarantee basic human rights to the most vulnerable in Indian society.”

While it noted that the Act “appropriately defined the economic, political and property-related offenses committed against the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes as ‘atrocities’ and set out a system whereby special courts would be authorized to bring to trial all matters under the Act”, 20 years later, in 2009, “many leaders in the disadvantaged castes felt less than enthusiastic about the achievements that the Act and pertinent Indian Penal Codes had promised to deliver.” The study underlined, “Of particular concern was evidence that Dalit women, that group of people situated at the very bottom of the caste hierarchy, continued to be victims of crimes of violence and received little protection under the law.”

This was one of the few systematic studies of gender violence in Gujarat. Conducted with support from Minority Rights Group International between 2004 and 2009, the research showed that Dalit women face two types of violence. “Violence is perpetrated not only by non-Dalit men, but also by members of the women's own communities and households”, it said. Addressing the issue in a special subset of violence termed “accidental deaths of Dalit women”, the study insists, “These deaths are classified as accidental, as no one is accused of direct responsibility for causing the death. Yet, historic precedent and anecdotal evidence link many of these suspicious or unnatural deaths to ongoing harassment which, in time, leads the victim to take her own life.” Data in the study, as also newspaper reports, prove this beyond doubt.

Rahi Gaekwad, writing in newspaper The Hindu (September 25, 2012) has quoted official data to say how Dalit women suffer: “Five Dalit women were murdered by non-Dalits (three in Tamil Nadu and one each in Gujarat and Maharashtra). There were 76 reported cases of rape or gang rape (20 in Gujarat, 35 in Maharashtra, 21 in Tamil Nadu). On the other hand”, she continues, “Violence on Dalit women by the community itself (including family) saw 15 women being murdered in the three states (eight Tamil Nadu, four Gujarat, three Maharashtra), and 37 cases of rape or gang rape (19 Tamil Nadu, 12 Gujarat, 6 Maharashtra) were reported.”

The context of violence against Dalit women has been further elucidated in a Briefing Note prepared by several international Dalit rights groups – International Dalit Solidarity Network, Cordaid, Justice & Peace Netherlands, National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights, and Feminist Dalit Organization Nepal. Referring to Forms and Frequency of Violence against Dalit women, the note underlines, “There are nine major forms of violence against Dalit women; six being violence in the general community – physical assault, verbal abuse, sexual harassment and assault, rape, sexual exploitation, forced prostitution, kidnapping and abduction; and three being violence in the family – female foeticide and infanticide, child sexual abuse and domestic violence from natal and marital family members.”

Dalits in Ahmedabad: A Peep Into Past

5 http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-miscellaneous/at-the-receiving-end/article3933704.ece
Very little literature, let alone research work, is available on Dalits in Ahmedabad, and almost negligible about Dalit women. Women, even if they are referred to, are mentioned only as a passing reference. More is known about the history of Dalits in Ahmedabad, as also Dalit women, in the form of anecdotes, personal interviews, and individual lectures in seminars, whose papers none has cared to publish. Presenting a paper in Apna Adda, one of the few discussion conclaves of Ahmedabad which meets regularly to talk about different contemporary issues nagging Gujarat, Chandu Maheria, a Dalit intellectual, regrets, “The large number of literature related to the history of Ahmedabad has, if at all, only peripheral reference to the history of the Dalits... Dalits of the city would have to wait a historian with the status of Makrand Mehta to do some research and write about them. However, whatever history that is available suggests a very pitiable condition of Dalits.” The same is true of Dalit women of Gujarat and Ahmedabad.

The only visible reference to Dalits in past literature on Ahmedabad Maheria could find is from the book “Amdavadno Itihas” written by Maganlal Vakhatchand in 1851. Writing for the Gujarati Vernacular Society, it was the same wealthy merchant who characterized the British rule as “Ram Rajya”. Providing some description of who lived where in mid-19th century in Ahmedabad, Vakhatchand said, those belonging to the higher caste lived near Manek Chowk, which was in the centre of the city, in the southern region Bhausars and Kanbis lived, the eastern region Banias, Kanbis and Muslims lived, in the northern region, especially in Kalupur region, Muslims lived, and in the western region Muslims and Parsis lived. Comments Maheria, Vakhatchand’s description suggests that Dalits were “without any status” in the city – they were not important enough even while recalling who lived where!

The only reference to Dalits in Vakhatchand’s book is regarding how a Dalit boy (referred to derogatorily by Vakhatchand as “dhed”) went to study in a Christian missionary school, running in Valanda Ni Haveli in the city. “The master admitted him to the school”, Vakhatchand is quoted as saying. “Other boys of the school objected, saying if this dhed comes to study, they would have to leave. This made the master ask the dhed to sit outside the classroom... Such incidents took place twice or thrice, making Nagarsheth Himabhai and others to represent to the British collector to start an English school.” Comments Maheria, “One can see how a separate English school was sought to be started only to bar Dalits from entering into school.”

In yet another reference, the Times of India (May 18, 2013) featured the contribution of an affluent Parsi, Dr Motibai Kapadia (1867-1930), the first woman to pass out from the Grant Medical College, Mumbai, who joined a hospital for women founded by industrialist Ranchhodlal Chhotalal in Ahmedabad and was instrumental in ensuring treatment to a Dalit woman in 1896, despite resistance. “As head of the Victoria Jubilee Hospital, she worked there for the next four decades”, the newspaper reported quoting historical sources, adding, “Motibai was not only the first lady doctor in Gujarat, but

7 “Hu, Amdavad and Abhadcched (I, Ahmedabad and Untouchability)”, in Gujarati, by Chandu Maheria; read out at Apna Adda, Ahmedabad, November 22, 2014
8 http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in:8080/jspui/bitstream/10603/19382/11/11_chapter%204.pdf
also a social reformer. In 1894, a Dalit woman came to the hospital for the first time. Upon her entry, other patients immediately left the hospital. They even abused and cursed Motibai and 'Ranchhod Rentio'. But Motibai remained adamant. 'This is a public hospital, and we are dead against the practice of untouchability,' she said. There was no other hospital for women, and the patients who had boycott ed it retuned in a few days.”

Maheria in his paper notes how, despite such exceptional cases of benevolence, in the 19th century untouchability ruled the roost in Ahmedabad. Referring to a book jointly authored by Dadaseb Mavlankar and Chandulal Bhagulal Dalal, “Rashtraiya Chalvalma Amdavad Municipalityo Phalo” (Contribution of Ahmedabad Municipality in National Movement), Maheria quotes the authors as saying, “There was a plea from Mandvi Ni Pol which said that earlier only Shraviks and Vaniyas (dominant castes) would fetch water from the nearby tank. However, now persons of all castes fetch water from the tank. This has polluted the water. There should, therefore, be a separate arrangement for upper caste people to fetch water.” In the same book, there is also the reference to how it was decided to “construct separate toilets for dhedas.” Notes Maheria, “Whether it was water, or toilet, or clothing, the Dalits were discriminated against; they were harassed. If those Dalits living in Hathijan, bordering Ahmedabad, wore dhoti from one end, they would be beaten up by Patels, saying ‘Have you become Patels or what?’; and if they wore it from the other side, Thakores would object. Hence, they would wear dhoti in such a way that their knees were visible...”

Perhaps the best reference to the way Dalits’ lowest sub-caste, Valmikis, lived in 19th century Ahmedabad can be found in Stephanie Tam’s research paper, “Coprology and Caste: The Status of Sewerage in Ahmedabad, India”10, where the scholar describes how Ahmedabad’s “sanitation workers, Bhangis, a caste of Untouchables”, privately employed by neighborhoods “to manually remove faeces from dry latrines” worked. “Prior to flush toilets, Bhangis went from door to door, accessing dry latrines through a cleaning entrance so as not to pollute the house and its occupants. They half-crawled into pits to retrieve faeces, loaded them onto leaky baskets atop their heads, emptied them onto carts and trekked to the Sabarmati River or outside of Ahmedabad’s walls to dispose of them. Physical exertion characterized their occupation as much as contact with faeces. Despite their toils, they were stereotyped as ‘feeble of mind and body’, undercutting the athletic power that their work entailed.”

Tam said, the construction of first gutter line in Ahmedabad, undertaken in late 19th century, was resisted on caste lines: Proposed by Ranchhodlal Chhotalal, Tam says, “Opponents to Chhotalal’s proposal described sewerage as ‘unpractical, doctrinaire’.” And, the reason was, “Sewers made excreta invisible and dynamic, doing away with the security of tangible and locatable faeces that was handled by humans. Even though it was contained within pipes, excreta became immanent in Ahmedabad’s environment, making defilement difficult to assess.”

Tam also notes the manual scavengers’ first strike took place on September 14, 1911. The “Bhangis went on strike, letting Ahmedabad’s streets and sewers overflow and fester. They had not received their salary in two months. Bhangi leaders Kashiya Deva, Mafatiya Mana and Dhana Balu were arrested and

10 http://www.bcics.northwestern.edu/documents/workingpapers/CHSS-12-002-Tam.pdf
sentenced to one month of imprisonment with hard labour, but the strike did not end until the municipality brought in sanitation workers from other municipalities. Despite the demeaning and dangerous nature of their work, Bhangis were keen to preserve their monopoly over the sanitation industry. Sanitation work was their only source of income, and the threat of being replaced by out-of-town Bhangis was enough to send them back to work. The municipality did find the funds to pay them back their salary, but not before it had made it clear that the Bhangis were at its financial mercy.”

Be that as it may, the early 20th century saw some change in the way Dalits were treated in Ahmedabad by dominant caste persons, especially after Mahatma Gandhi arrived on the national scene. Gandhi began set up his Khochrab Ashram in a rented building next to river Sabarmati in 1915. The most famous incident at Kochrab, an Ashram he abandoned followed a plague in 1917, was Gandhi admitting a Dalit family, consisting of Dudabhai, wife Daniben and daughter Lakshmi, despite protests from some of his followers. This upset a neighbouring community, which refused to allow the Ashram's Dalit members from using the public well. The Vaishnav businessmen stopped funding the Ashram. Gandhi threatened to leave the Ashram and shift to a Dalit colony. Things changed following a businessman, Ambalal Sarabhai, expressed his desire to help Gandhi and left Rs 13,000 to ensure that Gandhi's first venture in Ahmedabad did not go bankrupt. The national movement later saw participant-reformers from dominant castes seeking to make “common cause” with Dalits in some way, a sharp departure from the past. They would participate in taking meals with Dalit colonies, and there were cases when freedom fighters from dominant castes sharply defied their conservative and casteist family members by taking part in “activities” which were considered “impure”.

During his Ahmedabad days, which lasted till 1930, the year when he began one of his biggest movements against the British rulers, Salt Satyagraha, Gandhi gave Dalits – who were identified as “untouchables” or “antyaj” till then – a new name, Harijans (children of god). In 1919, Gandhi he took over “Navjivan” from Indulal Yajnik, a firebrand freedom fighter from Ahmedabad, and converted it from a Gujarati monthly into a Gujarati weekly. It was renamed “Harijan Bandhu” (Friend of Harijan) in 1933. In its first issue (March 12, 1933), Gandhi explained why he chose the word Harijan. He said it was first used by well-known Gujarati poet Narsinh Mehta, Gandhi said, “Harijan means dear to God, or God’s devotee... There should be a special place for the Dalit community before God. That is the reason why I think that the word I have used for the antyaj (born in lower castes) brothers, Harijan, is proper.”

As Maheria has explained in his paper, there is little reference as the origins of Dalits, though there is reason to believe that in those days they must have been living in the periphery of Ahmedabad, in some of the dirtiest areas. The only thing that is known is that they must have come as migrants from other parts of Gujarat, as told this writer by a resident from a Dalit-dominated area of Amraiwadi in Ahmedabad. The person interviewed, her mid-50s, quoted her grandparents as telling her that her

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11 This happened with Vanlila Kinariwala, who defied the verdict of the parents to repent, and was expelled from the house. Interview.
12 http://www.mkgandhi.org/articles/salt_satya.htm
13 https://www.gandhiheritageportal.org/journals-by-gandhiji/harijan-bandhu
14 Interview
family had come to Ahmedabad in search of jobs in textile mills from a rural area of North Gujarat’s Patan district. “My grandparents would tell me that, around the turn of the 20th century, not only they, but also other Dalits came to Ahmedabad and got job in textile mills came. They migrated mainly from North Gujarat, but also from such areas Central Gujarat’s Charotar region and Saurashtra region in the west.

Academics have noted this in some of their writings, though they do not say from where the Dalits came. In a working paper15, Neera Chandhoke notes that by the late-1800s, Ahmedabad had already “become the centre of the textile industry in India, with the number of mills increasing from nine in 1891, to 27 in 1900, and 52 by 1910. In 1920, 51 mills were employing 43,515 workers... In 1941, the city recorded the highest percentage growth of population (90.43 percent), having almost doubled since 1931, from 310,000 to 591,267... By the time the state of Gujarat was formed in 1960, Ahmedabad housed 24.9 percent of the working factories and employed about 48.2 percent of the labour in the whole state. The textile industry formed the base of the city’s economy, and about two-thirds of its industrial production was in the textile and allied industries.”

Referring to Dalits, Chandhoke underlines, “Within the industry, allocation of tasks was on the basis of caste and religion. The workers in the spinning department were mainly Dalits belonging to the lower castes. The weaving department consisted, among others, of Muslims, whose traditional occupation had been handloom weaving.” The scholar further notes, “The revival of business and manufacturing activity in the city, the introduction of railways that connected Ahmedabad with markets in the rest of India, the development of ports that allowed textiles to be shipped to Europe, particularly during the time of the American civil war, and the general intensification of trade created favourable conditions for the growth of the textile industry. This attracted migrants, and the population of the city swelled... Though the first cotton mills were established within the walled city, subsequent mills were located in the east beyond the railway line, with this district becoming an industrial area.”

Referring to how Dalits lived, Chandhoke says, “Here, working people lived in group housing units, or chawls, built by the mill owners in villages like Saraspur, Rakhial, and Gomtipur, which subsequently became absorbed by the expansion of Ahmedabad. The chawl, which consisted of one-room housing, common toilets and a common playground, was generally under-serviced, and marked by acute deterioration of the environment. In these chawls, caste Hindus lived in clusters; and other residential clusters consisted of low-caste Hindus and Muslims. Muslim chawls were located close to the Dalit chawls, and both the communities were excluded from upper-caste houses.”

The scholar goes on to add, “Given the juxtaposition of textile mills, chawls, narrow streets and market places in the industrial belt, as well as congestion in the walled city, some of the wealthier inhabitants began to migrate across the river to the western part of the city. By the late 1960s, three Ahmedabads had been established: the first, the old walled city in which the upper castes, Dalits and Muslims lived cheek by jowl but in their own Pols; the second, the industrial townships growing around the textile mills in the eastern periphery of the old city, mainly inhabited by Dalit and Muslim textile workers who

15 “Civil Societies in Conflict Cities”, Neera Chandhoke, University of Delhi, November 2009
together formed two-thirds of the working population; and the third, separated from the earlier areas, which grew across the river Sabarmati.”

Economic crisis resulting from closure of the textile mills has been noted as the main reason behind a rift which came about between Dalits and Muslims living side-by-side in Ahmedabad’s chawls. During the 1960s, seven large mills in Ahmedabad shut down, and around 17,000 workers lost their jobs. Dalit workers faced a greater sense of insecurity, as the local Muslim workers were said to be more skilled in weaving. Several violent clashes involving the textile workers took place in the slums of the city, mainly between Dalits and Muslims. This found its reflection in the rift between the first big communal clashes in Ahmedabad, which took place in 1969. However, this did not permanently sour relations between the two, something that was to happen in the 2002 riots.

In early 1980s, the dominant caste persons, perhaps for the first time, reacted violently against the Dalits being provided with special reservation quota in government jobs and education. Barbara R. Joshi notes how “caste war” broke out in Ahmedabad as a result of “agitation by medical students of the BJ Medical College for the removal of 'carry forward system' of unfilled seats reserved for scheduled caste (SC) and scheduled tribe (ST) students. “The agitation started from BJ Medical College on January 4, 1981. On January 5, 1981, the agitating students resorted to stoning, damaged furniture and raised slogans to abolish the reservation system for SC and ST. On January 24, 1981, the SC and ST students were beaten by the agitating students while they were going to attend a conference at BJ Medical College. On January 26, 1981, the caste Hindu agitating students addressed a caste Hindu meeting in Asarwa Chakla and thereafter attacked Harijan (Untouchable) Chawl (tenement building), Aryoday Mill Chawl, with burning missiles and legal weapons. On February 5, 1981, the agitating caste Hindu miscreants attempted to topple the statue of Dr BR Ambedkar (the late untouchable leader) at Sarangpur Darwaja (near Ahmedabad railway station) and the statue's spectacles were knocked down. Thereafter riots followed on a large scale.”

The book lists “many riot-hurt areas” which were affected, pointing out all of them had a “high-density of Dalits” -- Rajpur, Gomtipur, Omnagar, Champura, Meghaninagar, Girdhar Nagar, Pritampura, Bialiya, Limbi, Asarwa-Hasipura, Nirmalpura Chawl, Fulchand Chawl in Saraspur, Naroda and Behrampura, Majoor Gaon, Gitamandir Road, Ramapir Tekra, Vaday, Ranip, Rupa Pari of Dariyapur and Patni Sheri. The scholar suggests how the press, “instead of giving the correct situation, twisted the matter in police reports and published the news 'Harijan mobs attack on caste Hindus'; 'Police were forced to open fire and burst tear gas shells to disperse attacking mobs of Harijan', etc. Incited by this ‘news’, caste Hindus attacked and murdered Harijans, and threw stones on Harijans. Police too rushed to Harijan streets and chawls and severely beat the Harijans.”

Giving a graphic picture of anti-Dalit riots, the author says, “In Girdharnagar Pritampura, police opened fire. In Girdharnagar Parsini Chawl, police rushed into the chawl, dragged the Harijans and beat them

17 “Untouchable!: Voices of the Dalit Liberation Movement”, edited by Barbara R. Joshi, 1986
severely with lathis. In Meghani Nagar, the Harijans were beaten by caste Hindus. In Bhimraonagar, the police opened fire – one dead. In Ganpatnagar, police beat innocent Harijans. The Tirupati Society of Harijans in Ranip was attacked by caste Hindu Patels and burnt. In Rajpur Gomtipur, police fired and created a scene of terror to crush Harijans. One young boy (SC) died.” Further: “From Shivanand Nagar, Harijans fled their houses and their furniture was burnt by caste Hindus. In Baherampura, Majorgaon, police beat up Harijans of the chawls and resorted to firing – death of two Harijans. Police and caste Hindus entered Saraspur Nirmalpura and beat Harijans. Five persons were stabbed to death on the road by caste Hindus in the presence of police. In Saraspur Fulchand chawl, Harijans fled the locality. One Harijan social worker was murdered with a knife by caste Hindus. In Saraspur Vankarvas – New Cloth Market was attacked by caste Hindus and Harijans were severely beaten. In Bharadia police beat up Harijans. Women and children were not spared.”

During the 2002 Gujarat communal carnage, whose intensity was the highest in Ahmedabad, apart from Muslims, Dalits suffered the most. An analysis by Rajesh Solanki18, a social activist, suggests that between March 1 and June 4, 2002, the period during which the rioting continued, “The police arrested a total 2945 persons in areas under 33 police stations in and around Ahmedabad city. Out of total arrested persons 1326 were from Dalit areas like Amaraiwadi (133), Kagadapith (150), Gomatipur (380), Danilimada (390), Haveli (186) and Shaherkotada (87). Thus, 45.05 percent (1326) of total arrests were from Dalit dominated areas. In the areas of Dalits-Muslim neighbourhood, viz Gomatipur (380), Danilimada (390), Shaherkotada (87) and Haveli (186), total 857 were arrested. Thus, 35.41 percent of total arrests were from Dalit-Muslim areas.” He wonders, “Caste Hindus including Brahmin, Bania and Patel, were only 33 out of arrested 1577 Hindus. Had caste Hindu camaraderie of Narendra Modi (then Gujarat chief minister, Pravin Togadia (international general secretary of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad) and Ashok Bhatt (a senior Cabinet minister in the Modi government) instructed police not to arrest caste Hindu rioters, who looted big stores like Pantaloons riding in Maruti cars or those who had gutted the hotel Down Town just opposite Judges' Bungalows?”

Solanki notes that these were the places where Dalits and Muslims lived together without any clashes. They were in numerically equal proportion. However, he says, thanks to frequent rioting over the last two decades, “more than 20 Dalit ghettos were deserted in Muslim-dominated areas, like Jamalpur, Raikhad and Shahpur.” Giving political reason, he says, “Neither Dalits, nor Muslims, were responsible for the migration, because, after the anti-reservation movement of 1981, Hindu fascist forces decided to target Muslims and planned communal riots. Muslims turned back to the walled city for safer habitats, as upper caste dominated western side of the city was becoming increasingly intolerant of Muslims. This process ultimately resulted in Dalit migration from walled city areas.”

**Condition of Dalit Women in Ahmedabad**

What one notices is that, while historical references to Dalits in Ahmedabad, who form about 11 per cent of the population of the city, are quite sketchy, there is virtually no visible mention of the condition of Dalit women in Ahmedabad, about how they lived, what were their activities, what were their aspirations, and if they participated in any social movements, including the movement for India’s independence. A recent paper by a senior professor, Dr Vibhuti Patel, notes how those championing the cause of the underprivileged have failed to highlight women’s issues in Gujarat. She says, “There is individuation (a process of transformation whereby the personal and collective unconscious are brought into consciousness to be assimilated into the whole personality. It is a completely natural process necessary for the integration of the psyche) of women’s issues in the name of rights based perspective. Failure to see the larger picture has disempowered women in general as seen in increasing violence against women and women from Dalit and minority communities in particular as witnessed in recurrent communal carnage and caste riots in the recent times.” In an interview, noted social scientist Achyut Yagnik explains, a possible reason behind this could be that in “Gujarat there was “no left movement, no Dalit movement, no tribal movement and no trade union movement. In the absence of such movements Hindutva filled the void…”

The Census of India 2011 puts Ahmedabad district’s urban population – which is what most of Ahmedabad city is -- at 6.06 lakh. An analysis of the figures provided by the Office of Registrar General and Census Commissioner, Government of India, reproduced in a Government of Gujarat report gives separate figures for Dalit males and females for urban areas of Ahmedabad district. As Ahmedabad city makes up most of the urban Ahmedabad, we have used these to suggest overall demographic characteristics Dalits women in Ahmedabad city. The Dalit male literacy rate in 2011 was 91.7 per cent in urban Ahmedabad, while the Dalit female literacy rate was 78.0 per cent – indicating a 13 percentage point gap, wide from any standard. The sex ratio of the Dalits in urban Ahmedabad city is 902 females against 1000 males, as against the overall Dalit sex ratio of 931 females against 1000 males in entire Gujarat.

A further breakup suggests how vulnerable Dalit females are in Ahmedabad: The sex ratio in the age-group 0-6 in urban Ahmedabad is quite low, compared to most of Gujarat’s important urban centres – it is just 852 Dalit female infants to 1000 Dalit male infants, as against the overall Dalit sex ratio in the state’s urban areas in this age group – 919 Dalit female infants to 1000 Dalit male infants. Dalit sex ratio in urban Rajkot is 886, in urban Jamnagar 882, in urban Bhavnagar 898, in urban Surat 872, in urban Junagadh 932, and in urban Vadodara 870.

There are, no doubt, women’s organizations working in Ahmedabad which champion the cause of women. The most prominent among them are the Self-Employed Women’s Association (SEWA), founded by a Gandhian woman activist, Ela R Bhatt, in 1972 to work a trade union among unorganized working women; Ahmedabad Women’s Action Group (AWAG), founded by human rights activist Ila

19 “Women, Equality and the Republic: Her Story of Gujarat (1810-2010)”, by Dr Vibhuti Patel, professor and head, Post-Graduate Department of Economics, SNDT Women’s University, Mumbai.
20 http://www.cpiml.org/liberation/year_2002/april/special%20feature%204.htm
21 Socio-Economic Review, Gujarat State, 2013-14
Pathak in 1981 in order to empower women by counseling them on how to fight against the oppressive social structure, even as providing legal aid wherever necessary; and Jyotisangh, founded by well-known freedom fighter Mridula Sababhai in 1934 on advice of Mahatma Gandhi. While AWAG and Jyotisangh deal with issues related with violence against women in their own way, there is little specific focus on issues related with atrocities against Dalit women by SEWA.

Be that as it may, SEWA, from available details, has under its wings the largest number of Dalit women compared to the other two. Claiming a membership of around 2 lakh poor working women in Ahmedabad, a profile of SEWA suggests that religious minorities, mainly Muslims, make up 14 per cent its members; as for the rest (majority community), 40 per cent are Dalits. Among its members are hawkers, vendors and small business women like vegetable, fruit, fish, egg and other vendors of food items, household goods and clothes vendors; home-based workers like weavers, potters, bidi and agarbatti workers, papad rollers, ready-made garment workers, women who process agricultural products and artisans, and manual labourers, construction workers, contract labourers, handcart pullers, head-loaders, domestic workers and laundry workers. “Majority of these poor women are either Dalit, Muslim or from other backward classes”, says a member. Interviews suggested that while SEWA periodically trains its members on issues of sexual violence and harassment, being a trade union, it avoids taking up human rights issues related to atrocities against Dalit women.

There is, however, some evidence to suggest that the plight of Dalit women in Ahmedabad particularly worsened following collapse of the textile mills between 1980s and early 1990s. A SEWA study carried out in 1990 had said that virtually no women worked in textile mills, though many of them were involved in petty trading or skilled work like tailoring or embroidery. Interaction with Dalit rights activists made things even clearer.

Madhuben Koradiya, a Dalit women rights activist with the Navsarjan Trust living in one of the chawls in an old city area of Ahmedabad, told this writer, “Closure of mills led to large-scale joblessness among men, following which Dalit women were forced to do any job they could lay their hands on, even as construction workers, in order to help family. A huge demand-supply work in the job market meant less wages.” In her mid-50s, according to Madhuben, “I could from my naked eyes see how things have further worsened over the last 10 to 15 years. Dalit women are doing such jobs which I could even imagine when I was young. They are ready to work as guinea pigs for pharmaceutical companies which use them to experiment the reaction of medicines on human body. They are ready to become surrogate mothers for money. Meanwhile, young boys, failing to get any unemployment, fall into the trap of bootlegging, gambling and extremist organizations like Vishwa Hindu Parishad.”

Madhuben says, her father-in-law told her that her husband’s family shifted to Ahmedabad from Kantheria village in Surendrangar district’s Limdi taluka. “At that time, my in-laws’ family lived in a

22 “Empowering Women in an Insecure World”, by Renana Jhabvala, Sapna Desai and Jignasa Dave, 2010
23 http://www.sewa.org/About_Us_Structure.asp
25 Interview
thatched hut – which dotted all over from Amraiwadi to Gomtipur area of the city. While men found jobs in textile mills, women did not go to factories but worked in jobs related with textile colouring, and also public works. She pointed out how at the turn of the Independence, their situation improved, and they were able to shift in chawls or small tenements. As time passed, thanks to reservation to scheduled castes, many of Dalits, including women, got government jobs, albeit in the lower rung, in class three and four. Saying that all this totally changed following the collapse of the textile mills, she added, “Even government jobs are not there. The government has stopped recruitments. Women have nowhere to go, except to work as daily wage or home-based workers.”

Dalit women activists in Ahmedabad noted how, following the 2002 communal riots, things turned from bad to worse for women. Preeti Vaghela26, also with Navsarjan Trust, told this writer that there was a time when in areas of Khanpur and Shahpur, Dalit and Muslim families lived side-by-side. “Women interacted with each other. However, following the riots, Dalits have fled many of these areas, and got scattered to different places. The social fabric which women had built around themselves, even among Dalits, has broken apart”, she said. Confirmed Madhuuben, “While the 2002 riots saw maximum number of Muslims suffer, the next biggest casualty was among Dalits. Out of more than 1,000 killed, 110 were Dalits. The young Dalits were misguided by the saffron brigade. Now no one takes care of the families of many of the Dalits who were arrested for the riots or those who died. The condition of women is particularly in bad shape. Many women have been pushed into such illegal activities like brewing country liquor and prostitution, and there is little anyone doing.”

A recent evaluation of slum-dwelling Valmiki women in Ahmedabad’s five locations – Hatkeshwar, Thaltej, Sola, Gota and Sanjaynagar -- carried out by an NGO, Human Development and Resource Centre (HDRC), has said that the condition of the lowest category Dalit sub-caste may not be as bad as it was several decades ago, and Valmikis, including women are more acceptable than before, but this is because of the of the “need of the dominant sections of the city to keep neighbourhoods clean.” It adds, “The Valmikis, including women, remain mostly confined to their traditional job of sanitary workers, and have failed to diversity themselves in other occupations.” Based on a group discussion with Valmiki women, the evaluation quotes Ankitaben, one of the participants, as saying, “I live in Naranpura’s Lakhudka Talav area and belong to the Valmiki community. My parents work as sanitary workers. It is extremely difficult for Valmikis, especially women, to study in order to lead a healthy future. Yet, I fought all the way, and managed to complete higher secondary school. While earlier I also worked as a sanitary worker, I am currently doing a job in a private enterprise. I have experienced untouchability and derision in my daily life. This is the main reason why we are unable to move forward.”

Ramilaben Babubhai Parmar, who was involved in another survey of sanitary workers of Ahmedabad in late 1990s for Navsarjan Trust, told this writer28, many of the young Valmikis work even today enter into gutters “without wearing mask” and live in “highly insanitary conditions.” She insists, “The situation is

26 Interview
27 “Valmiki Samaj ane Amdavad Shaheer in Valmiki Bahenonu Vartaman ane Bhavishya” (Valmiki Community and Ahmedabad’s Valimki Women: Present and Future”, Human Development and Research Centre, Ahmedabad, 2014
28 Interview
such that there is a higher incidence of widows among the gutter workers. Our survey said, about 20 to 25 per cent of young Valmiki women were widows, and I don’t think that the situation has changed much even now. Malnutrition is widely prevalent. Most girls are married very young, even before attaining adulthood.” Ramilaben further said, “Things are particularly terrible as large number of Valmiki localities are devoid of any toilet facilities. There is a pay-and-use toilet in several localities, like Bootbhavani and Chandranagar areas, where they live, yet it is in poor shape, or are often locked, and never cleaned up because of lack of water, and women are forced to go out in the open, often sitting next to the railway station nearby, to defecate.”

Ramilaben further says, most of the Valmiki women work as sanitary workers, whether it is the municipality or housing societies. “In housing societies, they are paid to work as sweepers. They sometimes also allowed to work as sweepers inside individual houses and clean up individual toilets. However, they are generally not employed as housemaids to clean up utensils or cook food. The latter work is mostly done by women from other backward classes, who do not have the stigma of being ‘impure’. There are Valmiki women who work in private offices. But they mostly work as sweepers”, she says, adding, “Within Valmiki families, their condition has worsened. Our impression is that, cases of their suicide have gone up drastically, and so have cases of violence by men. I come across such at least three to four cases of this kind every month. Working in insanitary conditions, dejected and depressed following day-long work, men drink a lot of illicit country-made liquor, which wasn’t generally the case earlier. This tells heavily on women. Women, who work in insanitary conditions, also become tobacco addicts.”

An interaction with a dozen Valmiki women in an irregular slum area in a posh locality situated in the Satellite area of western Ahmedabad suggests their pangs even more clearly. Even while claiming that they are “not subjected to untouchability” as was the case in the past, all of them admitted that they, at best, work as sweepers in individual households, and none of them is employed as regular housemaids to clean up utensils or cook. Valmikis have called their slum “Bapa Sitaram Kamdar Nagar”, named after Lord Ram and Goddess Sita. In all, there are 69 huts, in which they have been living for the last 15 years, yet none of them turned into concrete houses. Reason: local government officials has destroyed their houses thrice, saying their slum is “illegal.” Here, there are no toilets, no water, no electricity, no below poverty line (BPL) cards to get subsidized food from fair price shops, and identity cards, not even election cards to vote. Threat of eviction looms large over them, and though they live on government land, and therefore are entitled to getting government houses at the same place (under the in situ rehabilitation29), they are frequently threatened eviction. The locality is flanked by elite flats, whose owners employ some of the women as sweepers30. The situation of other slums in Ahmedabad, where Valmikis live, is no better.31

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30 Interview
31 http://www.counterview.net/2014/12/vibrant-ahmedabad-survey-shows-78.html
On being asked whether they are allowed to work in these houses, and if untouchability plays a role, Manjula Vaghela, told this writer, “Frankly I don’t feel untouchability as our ancestors did, but I do not do any other work in inside the houses except sweeping and cleaning the apartments. I am allowed into the kitchen also, but I do not cook food or clean utensils. In fact, nobody has asked me to do these jobs, which others do.” Three of the women said they worked in the nearby local government (municipal corporation) office as sanitary workers. “If people defecate in the open, which is quite frequent, who else we will clean up the area next to the public toilet situated a little way?”, one of them, Niruben, wondered. When asked why she does not refuse to work as a manual scavenger as it was prohibited by law, she smiles: “Do you want us to lose our job? If we do not do the work, we will be replaced by others.” Among the more educated is a ninth pass girl, recently married, who said, “I, with my husband, work as a sweeper in houses in the nearby areas, and also collect and clean up the societies of their garbage. I also get work as a sweeper in individual houses.”

Yet another young Valmiki woman, Sushila Manubhai Bahonia, who is also ninth pass, says, she works as a construction worker at one of the housing sites. “I lift building material such as sand and bricks to the mason. I am able to earn Rs 200 at the end of the day.” Asked whether there were any other educated women around and what was their work profile, she replies, “There is one who is 10th pass, and is the most educated among us all. She goes to work in a local woman’s beauty clinic.” Probing further, she adds, “No, she does not assist the beautician in the clinic. She begins her work by sweeping the clinic in the morning. Her job is to clean up the muck which is gathered frequently in the clinic.”

It was quite clear: Even if women study, they generally continue doing manual labour their ancestors were forced to. Though there are NGOs which come and help them when municipal authorities seek to displace them, there has been no effort to either rehabilitate them.

However, for most of the Valmiki women, clearly, it was the man’s world in which they must live in subservience. One of the examples was that of Samila Ramanbhai, a nine year old girl, who said she did not study in the school because her parents wanted her to help in earning a livelihood. “Currently, I work in construction sites to help my mother in delivering sand and other material to the mason”, she said. When probed further, her mother, Kantaben, who was standing next to her, said, “How could we send her to study? She had to look after her three other younger brothers when I and my husband would go out to work.” Illiteracy was found to be quite widely prevalent, especially among women, while men could read a few words of Gujarati and called themselves literate. Manuben, said, “I am totally illiterate. I eke mine and my family’s living by picking up rags. I begin my work early at 8.00 in the morning, and continue till the sunset.” All through, while during interaction with the Valmiki women, the presence of men made the women not to speak out openly about their day to day life.
Working condition of non-Valmiki Dalit women belonging to “higher” sub-castes such as Rohits, Vankars and Garos is clearly better than Valmikis. Says social worker Madhuben Koradiya\(^\text{38}\), “While illiteracy is widely prevalent among Valmiki girls, most of the non-Valmiki girls are literate and study at least up to 12th standard. However, there are rarely any women doctors or advocates or engineers among them. Of course, you do come across Dalit women advocates, and there they also Dalit nurses, teachers, in bank employees who sit on counters.” Asked if they face issue of untouchability, she replied, “It is rarely visible, but one can feel it does prevail in the dominant caste behaviour. In an interaction, Dalit teachers complained to us that while they would sit together to take afternoon meal, non-Dalit women as a rule would not like to share food with them, nor would the non-Dalit women ever offer them water. The feeling of distance was always visible.”

Leena Patel\(^\text{39}\), a journalist and a social worker from the Dalit community, comes from a very well-known and respected activist’s family of Ahmedabad. Daughter of Valjibhai Patel, a veteran Dalit rights leader who has fought many a battle for the landless agricultural workers across Gujarat, Leena Patel said, some time back she interacted with Dalit women, who are taken in groups to work in marriage parties for cleaning up utensils. “Women freely suggested that there was sexual harassment, but felt helpless. In fact, few of the women considered sexual overtures as a normal behaviour of the contractors who offered them work. They said, if they protested against men touching them, they would not be taken in job the next time.” A similar harassment prevails in diamond polishing work where Dalit women work, as this is the place where they can earn more. “In everyday behaviour, untouchability is their motto. But the dominant caste diamond polishing unit owner doesn’t have any problem touching Dalit women. They are no more untouchable to them. What a hypocrisy?”

Recently, Leena addressed a seminar organized by a non-profit organization, Apna Adda\(^\text{40}\). She said, as a Dalit girl working in the government TV channel and later in a private television channel, she was always chosen last for an important assignment. “My surname is Patel, which is normally that of an important dominant caste. Till my colleagues did not know that I was a Dalit, and thought I came from the dominant caste of Patels, they would be quite frank. However, their attitude would totally change the moment they were told that I was a Dalit Patel. I could sense the change in behaviour”, Leena said, adding, “At one point, a Dalit was my boss. He worked as deputy director. He sympathized with me, and told me that, being a Dalit, I should work very hard, otherwise those belonging to dominant castes would seek to dub us as laggards. I would always ask him why was it that as a Dalit I should always prove myself, and he would reply, that was the Dalit’s life. As a journalist, I would often hear stories about how Dalits treated in the state capital, Gandhinagar, where government offices are situated. The general complaint was, Parmars, Makwanas and Vaghelas (usual surnames of Dalits) have vitiated the government secretariat’s atmosphere.”

Case studied, carried out by several social organizations, suggest that Dalit women face three types of oppression – oppression as Dalits, sexual harassment at workplace, and domestic violence. The Self-

\(^{38}\) Interview
\(^{39}\) Interview
\(^{40}\) At Rangmandal, Akhada, Ahmedabad, November 22, 2014
Employed Women’s Association (SEWA), which works among poor working women in Ahmedabad, has gathered few of these case studies\(^\text{41}\) which suggest that Dalit women’s working hours of women are much more than that of men. Shantaben, who works as a rag picker, would leave at 5 am and return at 7 am, cook, wash clothes, do dishes, wash herself and children, and then eat. Then, she would go on rag picking at 12 pm, pick up paper till 3 pm, return home, sort and sell paper and then go and clean offices. She would return home at 7 pm, cook, finish off the rest of the rest of her work, and go to sleep. During Diwali festival time, she would work night and day. She would go out at 6 pm and return at 5 am. All night she would pick paper, earning more. In another case study, Bhanuben would get up at 5 am, eat and go to a factory. After returning from the factory, she would make bidis (cotage citarettes). At 7 pm she would go to deliver the bidis, take her pay and buy vegetables to return home. Then she would cook and after the meal would make bidis till 1 am.

In yet another case study, Nirmalaben Parmar, daughter of a Dalit Vankar, born in 1958, and one of the four sisters and a brother in the family, was married when she was in class seven. Her husband was a mill worker. He would get drunk regularly, beat her up on smallest of instance on complaint by her mother-in-law. When her son was nine months old, she again became pregnant. Beating continued even then. Finally, she moved to her parents’ house. She began working and looking after her children. At first she did a job with the Blind Children’s School, where she would get a very meagre salary, apart from leftover of food that others ate. She came in contact with SEWA, joining its Saundarya cleaning cooperative, and began working as a sweeper in Narayan Chambers, even as washing dishes in a private house. After the death of her husband, she got some life some life insurance money, which she put in SEWA Bank.

A post-graduate thesis\(^\text{42}\) notes a few other case studies of gutter workers’ families following their death due to suffocation. One of them relates to Kailashben Vaghela, living in Singhrotiya Vas, Sarkhej, Ahmedabad. Her husband worked to clean up sewage line of Callory Bread Company. Belonging to the Valmiki community, she became a widow at a very young age and she had no idea of the future of her family. She got the same compensation as received by her sister-in-law from the company. She received Rs 1.25 lakh another Rs 1 lakh from the social welfare department of Gujarat government. She has kept the amount received in the bank on her (Rs 1 lakh) and her daughter’s (Rs 1.25 Lac) name. Her father-in-law works privately as sweeper and rag picker and earns Rs 1,000 per month. Her brother-in-law also sometimes works as rag picker. Nobody has come to help her so far after the death of her husband to offer any job. She said, till her in-laws were alive, there was no difficulty in surviving, but she did not know what to do next. Being uneducated, the only work she can hope to do is to clean garbage.

Another instance in the thesis is that of Ramlaben Yogeshbhai, living at Vanjiyo Aambo, Near Mamco, Sejpur Bogha, Ahmedabad. Her husband, Yogeshbhai, died on June 16, 2008 while cleaning gutter as a manhole worker.

\(^{41}\) “Empowering Women in an Insecure World: Joining SEWA Makes a Difference”, by Renana Jhabvala, Sapna Desai and Jignasa Dave, 2008

\(^{42}\) A Study on Socio-Economic Condition of Families Affected due to the Death of Head of the Family Working as Manhole Worker, Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Mumbai, 2009
manhole worker by inhaling poisonous gas from the gutter. He worked for 20 years in the municipal corporation under contract, each time carried forward for six months. She dropped out of school after the fourth standard because there was none in family to look after children/siblings at home. While she hopes to get her children to be out of the filthy occupation of cleaning garbage and manual scavenging, she is currently working at Viratnagar, Vrundavan, Ahmedabad area, cleaning up roads and roadside footpath with broom and collects the garbage in a six box cart and then puts in the garbage spot. She has to work alone in morning and in the afternoon/evening. She works in a group wherever they are put for work as per requirement. She is given work every day at different places as a reliever. Thus she has to go to various places wherever required. She has to pay the fare to reach to the place of work as she doesn’t get any travelling allowance from the municipal corporation.

Dalit rights organization Navsarjan Trust has recorded several extreme cases of atrocities against Dalit women. One of them is that of Rekhaben Dipakbhai Baraiya, who lived in Vejalpur area of Ahmedabad. Belonging to the Valmiki community and hailing from Sayla in Surendranagar district, she came to Ahmedabad after getting married. Her in-laws would demand dowry, which her poor parents were not in a position to give. She was burnt alive. In yet another case, one Dakshaben Lavjibhai Rohit from Ahmedabad was forced to commit suicide as the in-laws found that she had delivered a baby girl instead of a boy. Even before she died, she would be frequently beaten up by her husband, who would frequently get drunk. In a third instance, Nikitaben Kishorebhai Jadav, a Vankar, suffered because, following a serious illness her uterus had to removed, and she could not become pregnant any longer. She was poisoned and killed. In yet another incident, Sangita Bhomaji Devaji Marvadi, 7 years minor girl, was abducted by from Bapunagar, near Shriji High School at Khodiyar Mandir. She was raped and murdered. While the father of the victim promptly field complain at Bapunagar Police Station in Ahmedabad, the police investigation was found to be very weak, and accuse were not arrested.

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File notings