

Abstract

This research attempts to understand the manifestations of caste in an urban context, through a qualitative field study of a residential locality in the city of Delhi. It primarily focuses on Dalits, the members of marginalised castes, who have been residing in Ashanagar for over four decades. It explores various aspects of their lives and seeks to understand the manner in which caste exerts influence on their everyday interactions, experiences, opportunities and economic mobility in the city.

Scholars continue to debate the nature, presence and persistence of caste in contemporary times. Some argue that caste has been de-ritualised and domesticated under the modern conditions, and, as a result it ceases to exert influence on sociopolitical and economic life. Others, in contrast, underline caste based socio-economic disparities and discriminations and insist that modern structures conceal its role even as it reinforces inequalities. In the light of these broader debates, this study examines the modes of operation of caste and the ways it appears in urban landscape. More specifically, this study provides a descriptive account of the nature of quotidian intercaste interactions in Ashanagar; it explores aspirations of members of various castes, especially the youth, and the realities of socio-economic mobility; and, it analyses local politics including electoral representation and Dalit politics. The study underscores that rather than being domesticated, caste occupies public spheres, and influences intercaste relations and interactions. It also fuses with different forms of modern hierarchies and plays a significant role in shaping urban inequalities.

This study is based on data collected through qualitative research methods, including observation of various activities, interviews of individuals and groups, and case studies. This fieldwork for gathering information extended over a period of one year to understand the interactions and dynamics in the locality and individual/family life courses. It covered members from across caste/community, age and gender groups.