

Relegation of Ex-Untouchables in Urban India

A Study of Socio-Spatial Segregation in Ajmer

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Résumé

Cities have been thought of as spaces where the ex-untouchables of India can escape discrimination and ostracization. However, their segregation remains endemic in Indian cities. This PhD explores how caste and urban space interact to segregate ex-untouchables. Through a mixed-methods approach consisting of 130 interviews, ethnographic observations, a geo-referenced survey of 700 households, and cartographic analyses, the work uncovers what I call the "concentric contiguous" form of segregation. This form of segregation is characterized by upper castes residing closest to main roads, while ex-untouchables, segregated by subcastes, reside in the core of the neighbourhood farthest from the main roads. Spatial boundaries are hyper-visibility through toponymical, topographical, and olfactory mechanisms. In this thesis, I argue that caste is spatialized and etched on urban space: when markers of identity are invisible, spatializing identities becomes the mechanism of maintaining status hierarchies. Segregation organized in such a manner affects inter-caste interactions, ritualistic practices of ex-untouchables, and even upward social mobility across ex-untouchable subcastes. Thus, caste-based inequalities are reproduced through spatial segregation. This work contributes to the theories of segregation, caste, social stigma, pollution, social visibility, social mobility and the organisation of inequality.