Relegation of Ex-Untouchables in Urban India

A Study of Socio-Spatial Segregation in Ajmer

Jusmeet S. Sihra

Thesis supervised by Christophe Jaffrelot, Directeur de recherche CNRS at Sciences Po and Nurit Stadler, Professor of Anthropology and Sociology, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

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 georeferenced 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-visualised 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.