

Dalits of Doda

[Daulat Ram Bhagat is a retired school teacher from Doda. He belongs to the Scheduled Caste Megh community. In this interview he talks with Yoginder Sikand about the Dalits of Doda and inter-community relations in the district.]

Q: What impact did the Partition have on inter-community relations in Doda?

A: I was fourteen years old in 1947, when the Partition took place. There was almost no violence in Doda tehsil, nothing compared to what happened in some other parts of Jammu. When the massacres began in Jammu and Punjab, Dalits and Hindus, who were a minority in Doda town, were fearful. But the local Muslims told us that they would protect us and they insisted that we should not leave. The situation was very tense, because many Muslims from Chamba, Udhampur, Chenaini and Bhaderwah had fled to Doda to escape the violence there, out of fear, some Hindus from Doda town shifted to Hindu-majority villages on the other side of the Chenab.

One night, some Muslims who had recently fled to Doda came to our house. They came secretly. The local Muslims did not know about this. Some members of their families had been killed by Sikhs. They accused us of having hidden Sikhs in our house. My father denied this and told them that they could check. Then, as soon as he got the opportunity my father jumped out of the window and rushed to the house of his Muslim neighbour, Muhammad Salim Kicchhoo, and told him what was happening. Kicchhoo Sahib ran out of his house, shouting, 'Oh Muslims, have you died? These men are threatening to harm our Hindu and Dalit brethren. Don't let them do so'. Hearing this, a huge crowd of Muslims rushed to our locality to save us and the men who had entered our house fled.

The situation was very tense, so our neighbours advised us to shift temporarily to Bhela, a Hindu-majority village across the river, till things improved. Most of the people of our locality went across, but my father continued to stay on for some days in the house of a Muslim neighbour. A few days later the Home Guards of the National Conference arrived and restored peace and we returned to our homes. When we came back we found that almost everything had remained intact, including our houses and animals, although some personal things like blankets had been taken away.

Shortly after, the Indian Army came. I remember they killed eight or ten innocent Muslim civilians in a Muslim-majority village close by, including one man who was physically handicapped. He did not have any feet. He used to play the tabla in the Ram Li la celebrations. I feel very bad when I talk or think of this.

Q: How do you view inter-communal relations in Doda now?

A: Contrary to what newspapers might claim, inter-communal relations in Doda are generally very harmonious. In Bhaderwah and Kishtwar, which are also in Doda district, Hindu-Muslim relations are not so good. One possible reason for this is that there both are roughly equal in number. But in Doda tehsil, Hindus and Dalits are in a small minority and our relations with our Muslim neighbours are good.

Unfortunately, this is not widely known and people outside think differently. My daughter married a man from Kathua, which is an area almost entirely populated by Hindus and Dalits. Her in-laws told me, 'How can we come with the marriage

party to Doda?'. They thought Doda was infested with militants and that the local Muslims were all anti-Hindu and would not spare them. But, eventually, 70 of them came and they were so impressed with the hospitality of the local Muslims that they had to completely change their opinion. Many of them stayed in the houses of our Muslim neighbours, who insisted that they should do so. They treated them as honoured guests. Even the bridegroom stayed in a Muslim neighbour's home. This sort of love you will never see anywhere else. I have taught in various schools for more than forty years in different parts of Jammu and Kashmir, but I have never seen such close relations between Hindus and Muslims elsewhere.

True, some terrible incidents have happened in recent years, but I must say that these are largely instigated by outsiders, who are bringing new and alien ways of thinking. We do not fear the local Muslims at all. We trust them completely. But I cannot speak of Muslims from outside. The BJP propaganda about Muslims wanting to drive Hindus out of Doda is wrong. At least in Doda tehsil the local Muslims would never want us to go away. As far as I know, most militants generally do not touch people who have not informed on them or opposed them. There have been some massacres of Hindus in Doda in recent years, but local Muslims have condemned these and have said that Islam does not allow for the killing of innocent civilians. No true religion can.

Q: Which are the major Dalit groups in Doda? What forms of social discrimination are they still subjected to?

A: Maybe a third of the Hindu population of Doda are Dalits, but they are hardly talked about. In fact, few outsiders know that there are Dalits living in Doda. Most Dalits here are poor. Many of them are small peasants and manual workers. A small number of Dalits are government employees.

The Meghs are the largest Dalit community in Doda, followed by the Mahashays or Doms and Jogis. Although they are all treated as 'low' by the so-called Savarna Hindus, there is no unity among these Dalit castes, who practise forms of untouchability among themselves. So, for example, many Meghs do not eat food cooked by Doms.

Traditionally, and till fairly recently, the dominant caste Hindus, including Rajputs, Brahmins and Baniyas, used to practise strict untouchability towards not just the Dalits, like us, but also with Muslims. A few orthodox Hindus continue to do so. Before 1947, many Muslims and most Dalits were poor agricultural labourers and tenants. Dalits had to remove their shoes if they passed an 'upper' caste person. They were forced to render begar or unpaid labour. My father was forced to carry pipes all the way from Batot to Kishtwar, which took him many days. Dogra Raj was a period of great oppression for the Dalits and also for many Muslims, most of whom were peasants. So, the Dalits are really grateful to Shaikh Abdullah as he saved the people from the Dogra oppression and 'upper' caste domination. He instituted land reforms, because of which we gained ownership over some of the lands we tilled as tenants. That is why most Dalits have always voted for the National Conference.

Q: But now, as you were saying, caste discrimination has declined.

A: After 1947 efforts were made by Hindu leaders to stop the practice of untouchability. Perhaps there was a realisation that if Dalits continued to be suppressed they might become Muslim, in which case the Hindus would be reduced to an even smaller minority. Wherever the Muslim population is more you will find that the degree of untouchability and discrimination practised by the dominant caste Hindus vis-a-vis the Dalits is less. So, in Doda Muslims are a majority and

untouchability is not that severe now. But I've had to face caste discrimination myself, despite having been a government school teacher. Once I was posted in a village which had only Hindus living in it and no Dalits. Because I was a Dalit no Hindu would let me stay in their home, so I had to live in the school building itself, in many villages in Doda Dalits are still treated or thought of as lesser beings. In towns things are changing now somewhat because our people are going in for education.

But in the plains of Jammu, where there are very few Muslims left, discrimination against Dalits by dominant caste Hindus is fairly common. In Doda we have this massive Muslim population, so it is not possible for dominant caste Hindus to treat us the way they might want, because they know that if they do we might join hands with the Muslims.

So, today, we can eat in Rajputs' homes and they come to our houses too. But even now some 'upper' caste people are opposed to our progress, and though they may not say this openly they still regard us as inferior. Some 'upper' caste people would call me 'Masterji', but behind my back would say, 'Oh, that wretched China! [a term of abuse for Meghs], he has the gumption to wear shirt-pant!'. Even now many 'upper' caste people cannot tolerate the thought of a Dalit in a position of authority over them.

Today, there is much talk of Hindutva and Hindu unity. The RSS and BJP are talking about this. They want Dalits to also join their camp. But you know, in Hindu Raj we will be made to wash the feet of the Brahmins and other so-called 'upper' caste people again. We will be forced into slavery again. That we cannot allow. Here in Doda the BJP tried to woo some Dalits, but they were not very successful. They managed to get only very few Dalit supporters. I tried to convince some of these brainwashed Dalits to abandon the BJP. I told them, and I keep telling my people, that the BJP has never raised the severe economic, educational and social problems of the Dalits, if they do, their 'upper' caste base will be angered.

Q: Is there any sort of independent Dalit movement in Doda?

A: Not really, although the Bahujan Samaj Party has a slight presence here. There is hardly any Ambedkarite movement among the Dalits of Doda. A few educated Dalits have heard of Babasaheb Ambedkar. I came to hear of him very late in my life. One problem is that there is hardly any Dalit literature available in Doda. There are no Dalit organisations here. It seems that some educated Dalits do not want our own people to rise, fearing that they might compete with them.

I think, as Babasaheb Ambedkar insisted, conversion to an egalitarian religion is essential for Dalit self-respect. Can Dalits gain self-respect while still being treated as Hindus for political purposes? Personally, I don't consider myself a Hindu. How can I be a Hindu if the Hindu scriptures tell me that I am 'low' and 'inferior' to a Brahmin just because of my birth? The Hindu books say that because I am a Dalit I don't have the right to read the *vedas*. So, how can I call myself a Hindu?

But our people still cling to Hinduism because they have been conditioned like this for centuries. They have been made to believe that by holding on to the tail of the cow they can attain heaven! Our people have been made to believe that they are inferior and so they want to hide their identity. Several educated Dalits try to pass off as 'upper' caste Hindus, if they do that, of course they cannot work for their own people, because when 'upper' caste people see them doing that they will know that they are actually Dalits trying to pass off as something else. That is the bane of many of our educated people, who received education and other facilities precisely

because of their caste. My own daughter was studying in a college in Jammu and staying in a hostel there. She clearly told me not to mention our caste name, Bhagat, on my letters to her, fearing that her colleagues would come to know that she is a Dalit. Such is the fear and the urge to deny one's identity, in this situation, mobilising as Dalits for our rights and identities is, as you can imagine, an uphill struggle. ~~del del~~