

UNTOUCHABLE

Brutal Attack in India Shows How Caste System Lives On

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KHAIRLANJI, India -- Not long ago, the Bhotmange family was a showcase of how Dalits, the former "untouchables" at the bottom of India's caste ladder, are improving their lot amid the nation's economic boom.



Forgoing his ancestral occupation of handling rotting cow carcasses, Bhaiyalal Bhotmange set up a tiny wheat and rice farm in this village. The income enabled him to buy a cellphone and educate his three children. His 17-year-old daughter learned English, a rarity here. A son studied computers and enrolled at a local college. "I knew that only through education can we uplift our status," Mr. Bhotmange says. "This was my dream."

Last year, the dream ended. A mob of higher-caste neighbors, angered by the family's refusal to accept their destiny as the lowliest of the low, attacked their home. Mr. Bhotmange's wife and children were dragged out and murdered, their bodies dumped in a canal. Mr. **Bhaiyalal Bhotmange** Bhotmange, who had managed to flee, is now a refugee in a nearby city, afraid to venture into Khairlanji.

The killings and their fallout show how the rising aspirations of India's most downtrodden can exacerbate age-old social tensions. A prolonged economic boom has improved the lot of millions of the nation's poorest, including Dalits. Still, despite a ban on "untouchability" and decades of affirmative-action aid to Dalits, the rigid stratification imposed by the Hindu caste system is proving resistant to change, sometimes violently so.



In parts of rural India, in particular, the upward mobility of some is causing tension along caste fault lines. "The actual practice of caste is strengthening, and the [Dalits] are still the main victims," says Buta Singh, an official who heads a federal commission on Dalit issues. The murders at Khairlanji ignited weeks of Dalit rioting that further deepened the divide.

Following the protests, India's federal government took over the investigation late last year. It is only now, as a murder trial moves ahead, that a full picture

of what happened here on a rainy fall afternoon is beginning to emerge.

Mr. Bhotmange moved to Khairlanji from a nearby village almost 20 years ago. He claimed a five-acre plot that belonged to his relatives and that, until then, was illegally farmed by higher-caste villagers.

Unwelcome From the Start

Most of the 800 people in this remote village, set on a dirt road amid palms and tamarind trees, hail from the farmer and trader castes known as "kunbi" and "kalar." Pegged below Hindu noble castes such as the priestly Brahmins and the Kshatriya rulers and warriors, they are considered "backward" by the government and entitled to affirmative-action benefits. Their standing, however, is well above that of the Dalits, who are viewed as unclean by the Hindu tradition and who have been confined for millennia to the most demeaning of occupations.



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The Bhotmange family's hut and the clearing in front of it where the killings took place. A police tent is visible in the rear of the photo.

Mr. Bhotmange's family, one of only three Dalit households in Khairlanji, was made unwelcome from the start, he says. The village council refused to recognize him as a resident and barred him from building a permanent home. His hut at the village edge is made of bricks piled atop each other without mortar.

Villagers, he says, usually addressed him as "mahar," a caste slur meaning carcass handler. "I would tell them, 'Please don't call me this way, I have a proper name,'" Mr. Bhotmange says. The village chief, Hasan Dhande, says Dalits are treated with respect here.

Mr. Bhotmange's little farm was a good earner, bringing in almost \$2,000 a year, a hefty sum in this area. His wife, Surekha, earned some more by rolling homemade cigarettes. This success and the children's schooling aroused dark envy from higher-caste neighbors, he says: "I earned more from my five acres than they did from 10-acre farms, and they were jealous. They couldn't forgive me."

Worse, his plot lay on the way to some other villagers' holdings. Instead of using a roundabout access road, many drove their tractors and bullock carts straight through his property, and through his crops. He lodged several complaints with the police but got no help. As the dispute escalated, Mr. Bhotmange finally asked a relative of his wife from a nearby village to intervene.

The relative, Siddhartha Gajbhiye, embodied Khairlanji villagers' worst fears about Dalits upending India's age-old social order. A bulky man with thick, meaty fingers, Mr. Gajbhiye had become one of the wealthier local figures, accumulating 47 acres and even

employing some higher-caste villagers. He was the "patil," or auxiliary policeman, responsible for settling small disputes in his own village.

Riding his motorcycle into Khairlanji, Mr. Gajbhiye became a frequent visitor to the Bhotmanges, checking on them and arguing with villagers on their behalf. "I never wanted any quarrel," he says. "But what the other villagers wanted from the beginning was to drive them out and to take over their land."

Things came to a head on Sept. 3, 2006. As Mr. Gajbhiye passed through Khairlanji that evening, he was attacked by several men armed with thick bamboo sticks used as cattle prods. The reason is in dispute. Some villagers testified at the murder trial it was retribution for his slapping one of them during an argument over unpaid wages. Mr. Gajbhiye says there was no provocation and that the attackers hurled caste insults and said it was because of him "that Bhotmange has become so arrogant."

Hearing the commotion, Mr. Bhotmange's daughter and wife ran out and confronted the attackers, using the family cellphone to call Mr. Gajbhiye's brother for help. Two weeks later, out of the hospital, Mr. Gajbhiye filed a complaint against the villagers under the Scheduled Caste Prevention of Atrocities Act, which prohibits bail for those accused of crimes against the Dalits.

The local police station, however, registered the incident as simple assault. The officer in charge is now on trial for allegedly taking a bribe to do so. According to witnesses in the murder case, higher-caste villagers told Mr. Bhotmange's wife, Surekha, that the men who beat up Mr. Gajbhiye had the backing of police and politicians, and warned her against testifying.

She defied the threats. The morning of Sept. 29, 2006, 13 village men named by her and her daughter were arrested and taken to court. All were quickly freed on bail. As they set out for home in a tractor-drawn cart, one of them called a Maharashtra state legislator representing a nearby district, Madhukar Kukde.

Mr. Kukde says he was told the villagers believed Mr. Gajbhiye was organizing a gang who would avenge his beating. Mr. Gajbhiye says he had no such plan.

By the time the released villagers reached Khairlanji, they were ready for battle. Unable to find Mr. Gajbhiye, they turned their fury on the Bhotmanges, whose testimony had



Dalit protesters hurled stones at vehicles, forcibly shut down shops and briefly blockaded roads in sporadic incidents in Mulund in Mumbai in November 2006. Observers blamed the simmering anger over the killings of four members of the Bhotmange family.

caused their arrest. The rampage began just as Mr. Bhotmange returned from his field about 6 p.m. Converging at his hut, the gang yelled, "Let's finally cleanse our village of the mahars," according to neighbors interviewed.

Mr. Bhotmange escaped out the back. "I thought that if I weren't in the house, they wouldn't touch the womenfolk," he says ruefully. From Khairlanji, he ran to Mr. Gajbhiye's home in the nearby village. Mr. Gajbhiye says he quickly phoned the police and asked them to rescue the family.

The crowd around the Bhotmanges' hut swelled to some 60 villagers, who by now bayed for blood. Trying to scare them off, Mr. Bhotmange's wife, Surekha, went outside waving a torch and set a cattle shed on fire, according to trial testimony. This only further enraged the mob. One man pulled her by the hair and smashed her head against a drain wall, according to the prosecutors' charge sheet. Then the crowd closed in, pounding her with bamboo sticks, bicycle chains and axes.

'Save Us!'

"First there were shouts of, 'Save us! Save us!' and then just, 'Kill them! Kill them!'" says Gayabai Khandate, a woman whose hut is a few dozen yards away.

The Bhotmange children were dragged out next. "I didn't do anything to you -- do not beat me," 21-year-old Sudhir pleaded before he was bludgeoned at the cow-dung pit, according to witness testimony. After killing him, the mob turned to his brother Roshan, 19, cracking his skull.

The 17-year-old daughter, Priyanka, who tried to hide in the burning cattle shed, was the last to be discovered. After the first few blows of bicycle chains, she lay on the ground, calling out, "Mamma, they killed me," according to witnesses' testimony. "Mamma, I am dead."

Suresh Khandate, in front of whose hut some of the killings occurred, says the frenzied villagers shouted that they had to find and kill Mr. Bhotmange, too. When they noticed that Mr. Khandate -- who, as a member of an aboriginal tribe, falls outside the caste system -- was watching, he says one told him: "Go indoors and keep your mouth shut or you will be next."

As darkness fell and a downpour began, the mob piled the four bodies in a bullock cart and took them to an irrigation canal. The next morning, according to trial testimony, one villager asked a tea-stall vendor for free tea. He explained that he had accidentally destroyed some of his money when he burned a shirt stained with the Bhotmanges' blood.

Mr. Bhotmange returned before dawn to search for his family. Finding only a ransacked hut, he went to the police station. In late morning, while he was waiting, the police received a phone call: The body of a young woman, naked and with the name Priyanka

tattooed on her arm, had been spotted floating in a canal. The three other bodies, partly nude, were retrieved from the canal the next day.

Even though Priyanka was found naked, a doctor who performed a post-mortem exam didn't check for signs of rape. Local politicians played down the slaughter. "It had nothing do with caste. It was just a small village conflict about a road. There is no problem between Dalits and others here," says Mr. Kukde, the legislator.

But as the news filtered out, often exaggerated with even more gruesome detail, Dalit neighborhoods exploded throughout the state of Maharashtra. The big industrial city of Nagpur was brought almost to a standstill as protesters set vehicles and storefronts on fire, and at least three people were killed in the area. Days later, Dalit mobs stopped a train between Mumbai and the city of Pune, forcing passengers out and torching the cars.

As Dalit activists from all over India arrived in Khairlanji, they accused the state government of complicity, citing the lack of police response to the Bhotmanges' complaints and the flawed post-mortem. Maharashtra Home Minister R.R. Patil rejects the accusation. He says that, while at least five law-enforcement officials in the Khairlanji area have been suspended for alleged misconduct related to the case, there's no reason to believe their actions were caused by caste prejudice. Some of these officials, he says, are of Dalit origin themselves.

The riots died down only after the Central Bureau of Investigation, India's equivalent of the FBI, took over the case. Its agents had a hard time collecting evidence as a pall of silence descended over the village. The CBI filed charges against only 11 of the 47 villagers arrested by local and state police. Ranging in age from 21 to 56, most had lived all their lives in Khairlanji, seeing the Bhotmanges every day. The other suspects, including Mr. Dhande, since elected village chief, have denied wrongdoing and are back in Khairlanji.

The trial has been going on for six months in a dingy, cream-colored room in the district capital of Bhandara, an hour's drive away. On a recent morning, a session in an empty courtroom was quickly adjourned at the request of witnesses who said they needed to work their fields. Lawyers for the 11 defendants say the investigators have charged the wrong men. That's a view partially shared by some Dalit leaders, who contend the main conspirators have escaped because of their political connections. A verdict is expected in around three months.

No Apologies

Mr. Bhotmange has been given a government job as a watchman at Bhandara's Backward Boys Home. He spends his days by a broken window, guarded by a plainclothes policeman who also rides on the back of Mr. Bhotmange's bicycle when he pedals home. Not a single villager from Khairlanji, Mr. Bhotmange says, has come to see him to express regret about the killings. "I think they're happy. They got what they wanted," he says.

Back in the village, dozens of policemen camp in tents around the Bhotmanges' hut, looking out for the property and for the few villagers who testified for the prosecution. Still visible at the hut's door post are pencil marks that recorded the changing heights of the children. Tattered pictures of their favorite Bollywood stars, Sanjay Dutt and Aishwarya Rai, are still on the wood.

Otherwise, life in Khairlanji has returned to normal. "The village is very peaceful these days," says Krushna Titirmare, whose bullock cart was used -- without his knowledge, he says -- to dispose of the bodies. "There are no quarrels anymore."

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