

Atrocities: a gross asymmetry of power

[Sociology](#), [Social Issues](#)



Atrocities are essentially human rights violations with the added association of unbridled cruelty, brutality and inhumanness. Atrocities are thus also enabled by the prevailing judicial process – the perpetrators operate on the assumption that, by virtue of their caste standing, the police investigation and the trial in court will be weighted in their favour – the crime may indeed not even be deemed cognizable as an offence.

Earlier, atrocities were committed in the arrogance of impunity, for untouchables had no means of resistance; now they are committed in vengeance against dalit assertion. Earlier, atrocities were a manifestation of contempt; today they are a manifestation of the deep resentment of the ‘privileges’ Scheduled Castes get from the state. Notwithstanding these differences, what lies at the root of atrocities in any time is a gross asymmetry of power which precipitates either as routine, when it is legitimated as in earlier times, or in the event of social crisis, as it does now.

There is also a difference between the nature of atrocities earlier and now. Previously they were committed as an integrated part of the interaction between savarnas and avarnas, and hence tended to be casual, more humiliating than injurious. Today, they are far more violent, more physically destructive and more brutal than before. Earlier caste violence was mostly committed by individuals in a fit of rage. Now it is carried out collectively, in a loosely planned manner, as a spectacle of demonstrative justice. The increasing number of atrocities against dalits in recent years has been alarming enough, but this change in their intensity also needs to be noted.

The ancient ideological framework of caste had been materially supported by the organization of production in the form of an interlinked two-tier structure of land relations – a framework that survived through history in all its variations. Its economic content lay in the institution of serfdom, where peasants were attached to the soil held by landed intermediaries placed between tiller and king. Of the two tiers, the upper was composed in medieval times (the earliest these relations are found detailed) of various ranks of landowning nobility – deshmukhs, mansabdars, jagirdars, etc. – going up to the Mughal emperor or regional ruler, and all standing above the village system. The lower tier, which determined intra village relationships, lay in the balutedari (also known as the jajmani) client-patron system, 1 under which labouring groups were assured a steady supply of work with payment in kind, usually grain, rendered in return for the produce/fixed hereditary service each caste was expected to provide to those higher in the caste order.

This system was structurally threatened by the change introduced by the British colonial regime in land administration. The British knocked off the top half of the two-tier structure and in its place either institutionalized the zamindari system of revenue-collection through landlords, 2 or, as in the Deccan south, inaugurated the ryotwari system, wherein the cultivator paid revenue directly to the state. Land was no longer owned by the village as a whole but by individual landlords. Firmly tied to their piece of property with no obligation to the village community, the new landlords were bound to develop a worldview that saw the previous jajmani interdependence as parasitical upon agricultural produce.

This structural change coupled with the absorption of surplus rural labour (mostly of the lower shudras and untouchables) into capitalist production in urban centres shook the traditional caste system to its roots in colonial times, affecting both caste relations and conflicts. The nineteenth-century rise (discussed in the Introduction) of the shudra-led antibrahmin movement and the anticaste movement of the dalits can be traced to these developments. In postcolonial times, the zamindari system was abolished, but caste antagonism was left intact by the developmental paradigm operated by the bourgeois-landlord combine running the state. Srinivasulu captures this post-Green Revolution moment well

The political economy of development in the post-Independence period . . . brought about a perceptible change in the physiognomy of social class-caste structures, giving rise to a new class of rich landlord and peasant landowners, who replaced the old zamindar class. A new generation of market-oriented upper caste and backward caste landed peasant proprietors thus emerged in place of the old upper caste landed gentry.... This broad generalization, with slight variations, captures the picture of socio-economic change in different parts of the country.

Since the 1960s, prominent cases of atrocities have involved organized attacks on dalits by caste Hindus mostly of the shudra category, mobilized on caste lines to attack specific dalit groups. These atrocities were overwhelmingly committed by neo-rich, landowning, Backward Class (BC) castes, their mainly agricultural wealth directly traceable to state land reform policies, the Green Revolution and the concomitant processes leading

to commoditization and a money economy in the countryside. In many places, the occurrence of atrocities appears to contradict normal sociological expectation that the countryside undergoing capitalist transformation of its production base correspondingly displays capitalist relations – and certainly does not manifest as the exemplar of intense feudal expression.

Jadirdari System in Mughal Period

The land tenure system of the Mughal period has been known as 'Jagir System'. In the system, the king has the right to transfer power to certain people to collect revenue. The areas whose revenue was assigned were termed as Jagir and the assignees were called Jagirdar. This Jagirdari system has better known as 'Mansabadri system'. A Mansab had two things: (1) his Zat (personal pay) (2) his Sawar (size of cavalry). The Zat and sawar ranks were made by his pay-claim. The Jagirdars could formally collect only authorized land revenue and other taxes. The ruling class consisted of a man appointed to the imperial service by the emperor at his pleasure. But in the practice, the principle of heredity and birth received considerable importance. So the posts of Jagirdars were appointed mostly a particular class or caste and they comprised the rural aristocracy. Jagirdars or Zamindars enjoyed more rights other than the peasants. They started claim to a share in produce of soil as intermediary between king and peasants. It was called Malikna and it differed state to state.

The Zamindars had a close association with their castes and clans. The Zamindars belonging to the same clan generally supposed each other as members of the village aristocracy. According to the Venkatachari Committee, the Jagirdari tenures prevalent in Rajasthan can be grouped

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under eight categories namely, Jagir, Juna Jagir, Bhom, Charitable Grants, Bhomichara, Inam, Service Grants and permanently quiet- rented estates and land. The term ' Jagir' is used both in generic and specific senses. In generic sense, it connotes all ' non-khalsa' area while in its specific sense it means grants in land consisting of a whole or a part of a village.