THE MAKING OF DEMOCRATIC INEQUALITY
Caste, class, lobbies and politics in Contemporary India (1880-1995)

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INTRODUCTION

"This knife has been with our family for generations. We did change the handle several times and the blade, sometimes, yet it is still the same knife."*

By a strange irony of history, at the same time as the organisation of castes in India was undergoing unprecedented change, during the years at the turn of this century, European sociology and ethnology were engaged in creating a category which was to owe more to the normative, so-called traditional, sense of caste, than to its actual structure in the midst of change.

While Max Weber, in his vast project of comparative sociology (1958 [1920]), set forth the notion of caste as an ideal type of group status, and Célestin Bouglé, in France, defined its three main characteristics as separation, division and hierarchy, contrasting caste with the idea of democratic equality (1908 [1899]), in India, caste was being restructured under the imprint of Western ideology and the politico-economic transformations ensuing from colonisation. Only in the 1960s would sociology catch up with history, showing that, far from representing an archaic form on the verge of disappearance, or constituting an obstacle for development, as Karl Marx (1968) and Max Weber (1958:112) respectively had thought, there was an incessant re-shaping of the indigenous institution of caste throughout the twentieth century. This was particularly to be seen in the form of "caste

* Extract from a "folktale told about Aristotle in Europe and about a philosopher in India" (Ramanujan 1990: 2).

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associations" which were gradually transformed into interest groups and lobbies, testifying to what social scientists refer to as "the modernity of tradition" (Rudolph & Rudolph 1967). But, there were also both economic and political metamorphoses such as confederations and movements in alignment with or opposed to the dominant strata, coalitions or aggregations of social groups comparable to "vote banks", parties mobilised for or against patronage and, more recently, communities in the process of ethnicisation for electoral motives or separatist aims. These are combinations constructed on the basis of caste, the re-organisation, or indeed reinforcement, of which has occurred in response to the combined transformations of the state and of civil society under the rule of the British Raj, and then, following the attainment of Independence (1947), during the consolidation of the world's largest parliamentary democracy with its ensuing crises. For, to speak of caste in contemporary India is to refer less to the specificity of its hierarchic ideological principle, that is to say, of a certain mode of social access to the sacred, than to its politisation on the basis of universal suffrage. There are thus not less than five hundred million voters whose choices are still guided by caste. It is caste which provides a basis for social stratification and competition on the subcontinent, where it represents a resource for both identification and differentiation. Caste is an instrument in the hands of politicians and, finally, an inspiration for the assertion of identity in this young nation, but very old civilisation.

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THE POLITISATION OF CASTE

1.1. A SYSTEM OF 'TRADITIONAL' CASTE?

It has been said countless times: the Indian social system is characterised by the notion of caste (jati), determined by birth and perpetuated through endogamy, that is, through marriage within a definite group. It is added that this system is not to be confused with the ideological quadripartition in "classes" or "colours" (vāpaśrama): Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, Shudra. This is foremost a scholarly product, whose texts constitute a social model (Srinivas 1962), as well as a cosmic paradigm of the ideal hierarchy (Smith 1994). Nonetheless, the presentation of Indian society through the ubiquitous concept of caste obscures regional differences and induces the representation of the subcontinent as an immutable hierarchic order derived from Brahminical religiosity. It could even be that the global interpretation of the caste system according to substantialist, functionalist or structuralist schemata would have given rise to or reinforced the bias of what is called traditional India: that which corresponded to the colonial phase of the caste system severed from its royal dimension, and thus from its political character (Dirks 1987). The idea of

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an immobile society in an Asia without history asserted itself against the
background of accelerated change.

Of course, there still exists a caste order in South Asia, and a majority of
the inhabitants continue to identify themselves in terms of caste. However, one
must remember that this identification is related to several "zones of
reference" (Marriott 1968: 109). There is, firstly, the village with its local
hierarchy, regarding which numerous monographs have underscored the
complexities of exchanges and interdictions (Dumont 1957, 1966; Mayer 1970;
Parry 1979; Raheja 1988a); then, the region, which merges with the marriage
network. And, there is the zone of (Indian) civilisation, defined by the
categorical order of "classes" (varṇa). To these must be added castes having a
numerical majority in a linguistic zone and solidarities among groups with
comparable status or which practise the same profession. These perspectives do
not exclude other levels of interpretation concerning, for example, rules more
or less consciously incorporated in individual and collective behaviour, whether
daily or exceptional, rural or urban, etc. The significance given to caste
identity is all the more dependent on the choice of scale of observation, as it is
a matter of segmentary organisation and is, therefore, favourable to fission
(prevalent in medieval India [Stein 1968: 80]), as well as to fusion (dominant
in modern India [Srinivas 1962: 54]). For, the extent to which these
mechanisms continued to sanction and favour a slow or precipitous social
mobility, the caste system was only seldom and in a few regions a monolithic
order. In the long run, the fluidity of its organisation leads to its complex
relations to clan, sects and to communities, among which examples of
confrontation abound. To recall how much the implications of the notion of
caste have varied in terms of time and space, it is thus necessary to look back
much earlier than Independence (1947).

1.2. CASTE AS ASSOCIATIONS

Particular evidence of the flexibility of caste is given at the end of the
nineteenth century by the emergence and proliferation of its modern
embodiments, "caste associations". It was, in fact, around the 1880s that a vast
reform movement crystallised in Indian society, in the institutionalised forms
of sabhā, sangha and samiti in response to the "steel frame" imposed by British
domination. At an earlier time, these organisations, conceived on the model of
castes, aimed at the preservation of the status of their members. However, they progressively served to defend interests in the wider sense, that is, to support social advancement. Although this phenomenon did not affect the various regions of the peninsula simultaneously or in a homogeneous manner, the list of castes which were organised in the manner of associations is long: the Iravas (Untouchables) of Travancore (Jeffrey 1974), as well as the Gauda Sarasvatas (Brahmins) on the west coast (Conlon 1974), the Nairs of Kerala and the Kayasthas of the northern provinces (Carroll 1978), the Nadars (Hardgrave 1969), Kongu Vellalars (Arnold & al. 1976) and Vanniyars (Rudolph and Rudolph 1967: 52ff.) of Tamil Nadu, as well as the Vokkaligas and Lingayats of Karnataka (Manor 1975). To be included in Bihar were the Ahirs (Rao 1964), in Uttar Pradesh, the Noniyas (Rowe 1968) and the Chamars (Bhatt 1954, Lynch 1968), in Orissa, the Telis, oil-pressers (Bailey 1960), and the Rajputs in Rajasthan (Rudolph and Rudolph 1967: 63) or in Gujarat (Kothari & Maru 1965). Even in Bengal, where associations played a lesser role (Bandyopadhyay 1990), one can note the Rajbanshis (Mukherjee 1994), the Jogis and Namasudras (Bose 1959). And finally, for the town of Kanpur (Uttar Pradesh) alone, a series of associations is to be noted, including Khatris, Kayasthas and Vaishyas, barbers and latrine cleaners (Nandi 1965).

Whatever may have been their individual fate, all of these institutions were involved in linking traditional geographical units – from marriage network to very small local kingships – with the more extensive networks that developed through the proliferation of communication means and the expansion of the monetary market. Through their intervention, the segmented social entities of the subcontinent were reformed, ensuring mediation between the colonial régime and a framework in the process of democratisation. And, because they provided the common base for mechanisms of representation and election, and more generally for collective and political life, these institutions eventually contributed to the success of parliamentary democracy. For this reason, these "para-communities" have been qualified as "social adapters" (Gould 1988), although one might prefer for them the expression "agents of modernisation" (Rudolph 1960; 1967), as they reveal a type of social change which challenges the control held by the historic actors. By means of these associations, the Indians transformed the colonial situation into levels of participation from which they were, however, a priori excluded.

The impetus to form these associations at the time when India was becoming integrated in the British Empire, upon which "the sun never set",

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must be understood in the light of the reforms which developed in the second half of the nineteenth century. Firstly, in a socio-religious form, such as the Arya Samaj (1875), which suggested in 1931 that the Untouchables of the Punjab improve their status in the Hindu hierarchy by means of "purification" (śuddhi), or such as the Ramakrishna Mission (1897), which created schools in which the teaching of Vedanta was combined with Western science. Then, in a militant and political form, such as the independence movement (1885), which was also a vehicle of social mobility. It was the establishment of courts, the constitution of jurisprudence, of a corpus of Anglo-Indian law, and primarily the response evoked by the decennial censuses conducted by the British coloniser, beginning in 1881, which led to the re-organisation of castes in associations. From that time, the bureaucracy of the Raj was more concerned with the enumeration and classification of its subjects, than with the cadastral survey to establish a basis for land assessment, as had been the case until 1850 (Smith 1985), although this concern was to arise at the first census conducted in the South in 1823 (Ludden 1988). Cutting short academic debates, the administration considered that only an acknowledged and socially efficient unit such as caste (Pant 1987) could make the "over-abundant and complex" mass of the Indian population which "lack[ed] all rational arrangement" comprehensible, to quote E. J. Kitts, author of Compendium of the Castes and Tribes found in India (1855), extensively compiled by the census of 1881.

It is also true that the simultaneous development of means of transport and the diffusion of modern education offered new professional opportunities which no longer corresponded to the forms of knowledge of the former legitimate authority-holders, while the transformation of modes of sociability, under the effects of increasing exchange and Western cultural integration, did not at all lead to the dissolution of caste. In a period of adjustment, it was inconceivable that social interactions entirely independent of caste could be established, as caste continued to give form to behaviour and values, as well as constituting the main orientation of identity. It fell to the associations to effect a transition, not however without tension, which was structured both according to birth and choice: born into caste, one chose to identify oneself with the (caste) association. This meant, quite concretely, an appeal for a financial support and participation in its activities, and on assurance that one concurred with its conventions, shared its values and echoed its slogans; briefly, this implied one ratified the decisions taken by an elite of leaders who were often educated according to the Western model: jurists,
medical doctors, urban businessmen and government officials. Although the association presented itself as the representative of the entire community, there were not many members combining both activity and competence within the framework of the bureaucratic structure.

The sabha had procedures which determined the conditions of membership and adherence, volunteers for demonstrations, etc.; it had, in fact, a formal bureaucracy and an entire series of publications. Its leaders were generally unpaid, but derived great prestige from the social and missionary work which they accomplished for the well-being and prosperity of those whom they represented. Initially few in number, the sabha-s endeavoured to obtain the support of traditionalist leaders so as to reduce the diversity of occupations and the disparities in fortune within the community. They also worked to put forward an ensemble of values and shared symbols. The efficacy of these strategies depended on the distance separating the new elite and the majority of the group thus constituted. But, following the second generation, the new elite, reinforced in status and having consolidated its power by attaining some of its objectives, tend to disregard the subordinate members. This transpired even though it had to establish the loyalty of its clientele so as to ensure the re-election of its representatives, once key political positions had been captured. Thus, associations were undeniably instrumental in promoting members of the elite who sought to secure new "white collar" jobs (Washbrook 1971). They, nonetheless, did express certain aspirations of larger groups (Arnold & al. 1976), obtaining for them numerous economic and social advantages (Rao 1968: 779-782).

Although developed between 1880 and 1935, associations were formed on the potentialities of very old caste councils, known as pañcayat-s (Ahmad 1970). They were distinguished from the latter however, as much by their structure, as in their objectives for these were modern organisations of a rational type (Khare 1970: 131) incorporated secular values.

Whereas the pañcayat-s were indigenous institutions responsible for the regulation of customs within a caste or sub-caste, associations were modern products ensuing from Western ideas regarding association, society and "corporations aggregate". Because they were founded on democratic principles, associations derived their power and authority from a (purportedly) collective general will of caste members to provide an organisation having the ability to bring about social advancement. Not being equivalent to a repressive apparatus with the intent to punish behaviour which failed to conform to (caste)

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tradition, the *modus operandi* was more persuasive than coercitive. Finally, while the *pañcayat* was usually confined to the village or levels of endogamous lineage groups, the association brought together an entire series of more or less heterogeneous castes or sub-castes, the members of which were of diverse origins (Mandelbaum 1970: 19-22). Thus, Maravars and Kallars in the extreme south of Tamil Nadu were first re-grouped with others under the same name of Vanniyar. This category, which probably absorbed the most disparate elements, was a result of both the censuses and of Dravidian diversity. By uniting a larger number of groups spread over a more extensive area than that over which the *pañcayat* held sway, the leaders of associations promoted a unified and defensive awareness in order to create conditions favourable to regional development (Kothari & Maru 1965). Evidence of this is the difference in orientation, which in the *sabhā* was not the exclusive prerogative of those qualified by heredity, but rather of those who showed a particular ability to represent the projects of the organisation publicly (Rudolph 1967: 34).

The objective of these internal reforms was, in effect, to convince outside interlocutors, notably British officials, that behind the leaders stood a united community. In traditional language, that meant that the association certified that its members were genuine Hindus whose status claim (the highest possible in the local socio-religious order of things) was based on homogeneous social conventions and rituals. This activity was thus bound inextricably together with, on the one hand, the more general development of "communalist" sentiment and, on the other, with the increasing will of groups to form a representative identity recognised in an increasingly competitive social context. Employing modern methods of political agitation — newspapers, pamphlets, printed matter (mail), meetings, petitions and official commissions to the government —, the leaders bargained for concessions with provincial or state authorities, and played the roles of both promoters and arbitrators. Furthermore, it was not so much because of their newness, as because of the similarity in their organisation (of caste and association) with a political system which oscillated during the first quarter of the century between autocracy and a system of partial government representation, to which the lobbies owed their success. In effect, the associations prepared the way for the transfer of powers to the economically dominant castes which were most capable of advantageously controlling the instruments of indirect democracy. This was, however, a success which authorised the pragmatic politics adopted by the colonial legislator: the extension of franchise enabled a type of popular
representation which precluded the menace of universal suffrage and democratic control (although one might doubt that the administrators of that time would have envisaged such a possibility!).

Although castes and associations each continued to work in their own areas (Atal 1968: 248), they could converge when the jati-s tended to constitute horizontal solidarities and regional networks. In addition, the British themselves invited the indigenous representatives to standardize the castes according to the varṇa schema, although this was only customary among a minority of them. In 1901, Sir Herbert Risley, the tenth Census Commissioner, decided to arrange the local hierarchies on the basis of the quadrupartition in "classes" (varṇa-s). This was an idea highly valued by Orientalists, but to which Risley gave a racial orientation in conformity with the bias then prevalent in Victorian evolutionist anthropology (Stocking 1987). Such a codification did not fail to provoke diverse reactions.

Taking note of the precedence accorded to Brahmans by the authorities of the Raj, the élites of the associations, notably those of intermediate and low castes, exhorted members to adopt the customs and symbols of the "twice-born" (dvijā-s): vegetarianism, abstinence from alcohol, ritual purity, interdiction of widow re-marriage, etc. This is a process described today by the term "sanskritisation" (Srinivas 1962) in reference to the emulation of behaviour particular to the Brahmans. It was through this manner of purifying their conventions that the Lingayat-Virashaivas (whose rigorism in these matters led to their appellation of "Puritans of India", and to the comparison to Protestants made by Max Weber) raised their status in Kannadiga society. This case is remarkable for more than one reason. This sect of "heroic Shivaite", issuing from an anti-hierarchic movement in the twelfth century, is today composed of hierarchised castes embedded in Hindu society (Assayag 1994). In addition, it profited from the dense network of monasteries committed to the educational advancement of its members to strengthen its influence by bringing together varied clientele on the condition that they become "sanskritised" (Assayag 1986).

In North India, the borrowing of a socially enhanced ethos most often assumed the form of "Rajputisation", in this case by emulating the Kshatriya class. Involved in this, with more or less success, were the Ahirs, Kurmis and Koeris of Bihar, the Kathis in Saurashtra and the Briyas in Gujarat, to mention only a few. But, this alignment with a martial ideal also spread in South India. The dominant peasant castes, Marathas (Maharashtra), Reddis (Andhra
Pradesh), Vellalars (Tamil Nadu), Nayars (Kerala), as well as the Coorgs (Mysore), all claimed for themselves the status of Kshatriyas (Srinivas 1966: 42). These few examples will suffice to illustrate the fact that there are in South Asia several types of hierarchy (Burghart 1978), without even considering that which results from the emulation of Western usages which accompanied or intruded upon the indigenous models of social advancement (Caroll 1977). In fact, it is still possible to refer to several models at the same time - westernisation sometimes accords well with "sanskritisation" (Srinivas 1962; 1966). Statements like, "At the office I remove my caste which I again put on at home", were still very recently to be heard. However, it also happened that this plurality led to paradoxical social developments. The Brahmins among Brahmins, the Nambudiris of Kerala, who were not westernised like their counterparts in the east and north, were consequently supplanted by the Nayars, while even the Izhavans, Untouchables and toddy-tappers, "sanskritised" their customs under the leadership of their guru, Shri Narayan (Srinivas 1962: 34).

It should be noted that the emulation of the most prestigious sections of communities also involved the one hundred million Indian Muslims. The functional quadripartition of their "castes" (zāt-s) has sometimes been compared to that of the varṇa-s. The "castes" are, in ascending order of dignity, Pathans, Mughals and Shaikhs, emulating the "noble" and "pure" (ashraf), that is, Arabs in direct descent from the Prophet Muhammad (Ahmad 1966). Even the lowest among them, the "ashraf", Untouchables so to speak, thus attempted to raise their status, as a census official noted in 1911: "Those who are known as Puijaras (cotton carders, Pinjaries) want to pass themselves off as Dhunak Pathans; and the Taïs (weavers) claim to be Panni Pathans".

As for the Hindus, the adjustment to the conventions of the dominant groups was far from being always successful, and frequently provoked the hostility of the recognised possessors. Thus, notwithstanding the conversion to vegetarianism of the Holerus (of Karnataka) and their refusal to remove animal carcasses or to provide wood for the funerals of the Havik Brahmins, they failed to raise themselves in the local hierarchy, even though they would have acquired greater self-esteem by having done so. The prosperity which accompanied, and no doubt explains, these refusals was not sufficient in the eyes of the Brahmins to efface their polluting character (Harper 1968: 63). When the Ahirs of Bihar adopted, in 1931, the wearing of the sacred thread because they claimed to be Kshatriyas, they became victims of repeated violence
on the part of the Rajputs and Bhumihars (Brahmins). More generally, a myriad of castes addressed a deluge of petitions to the censuses from 1901 to 1931, as they claimed a higher status than that which had previously been granted to them. When viewing the organisation of castes accomplished from 1881 to 1931, one is, however, struck by the arbitrariness and inconsistency of the classifications.

They appear to be arbitrary, for example, because the Kunbi-Maratha peasants (Maharashtra), Vokkaligas (Mysore), Kapus, Kammans and Telagas (Andhra Pradesh) were recognised, isolated and consolidated in castes on the basis of vernacular names which meant nothing other than "peasant" (kunbi, kāpu, vokkaliga) in the different languages (Manor 1978: 34-35). The case was similar as regards the peasants in the North, called kurmi-s. Moreover, within one and the same caste, more particularly those of intermediate rank, the members did not always agree regarding the status which they had, or rather would like to have had, above all if they were scattered over a vast region. A member of a census committee lamented that while a "Sonar (jeweller) in Maharashtra can claim that his status is that of a Brahmin, the same Sonar in Assam can say that his caste is Harijan". It also happens that a caste changes its pretensions, its claims, and thus its appellation from one census to another, and is consequently accorded a different status. Thus, the Jogis of Bengal, who say they are Brahmins, became known by the names Brahmins, Rahris and Mailik Srotiyas. In 1911, the former Bedar tribals of Mysore called themselves Valmikis: they claimed to be ancient Brahmins who were descended in direct line from the author of the Ramayana (who was not a Brahmin but a Kshatriya!) ! More radically, the Mahars in Maharashtra began to claim to be Dalits in the 1920s, inspired by their leader, B.R. Ambedkar, who converted to Buddhism so as to escape "untouchability" (Zelliott 1992; Omvedt 1994).

The classifications further strike one as being erratic because several superintendents revealed in 1911 the increased number of castes which claimed a higher status than what had been accorded in 1901. Thus, during the course of the censuses of 1911, 1921 and 1931, covering the northern provinces, the Kamars (smiths) became Kshatriyas and then Brahmins, the Nais (barbers) were Thakurs and later Brahmins, while the Telis (oil pressers) were Kshatriyas and subsequently became Vaishyas (Ahmad 1977: 175). Such advancement was orchestrated by the associations and testifies to the skill of Indian groups in responding to the representation of Indian society which produced the state power (Caroll 1978). Far from being neutral instruments for collecting

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information, the censuses, as well as subsequent judicial acts to correct a given injustice in classification (Galanter 1978), contributed to the reification of caste groups, each provided with a particular appellation and inheriting specific attributes. Endowing in this way the caste system with a rigidity it did not have, the British colonial survey gave rise to rivalry between castes (Srinivas 1966: 94-100), creating at the same time a small number of categories defined by a homogeneous identity (Cohn 1987). The emphasis on education and the links, desired or maintained, with supra-local political power served to orientate the castes toward aims which were alien to them. Thus, in Tamil Nadu, the Nadar community succeeded in making its "leaders" kingpins through a process of status elevation. They were able to acquire a political influence which, as Untouchables, they had never had prior to the first decades of this century (Hardgrave 1969). Such a transitional role assumed by associations in the same state was also evidenced by a non-Brahmin caste, the Kongu Vellalars (Arnold & al. 1976).
CASTIFICATION OF POLITICS: FROM ASSOCIATION TO FEDERATION

Yet more remarkable than this adaptive function of the caste association was its proclivity to transform itself into a federation (i.e. an aggregate of associations). The latter could even develop into a broad social movement through a strategy of continued absorption of sometimes heterogeneous groups. The Kshatriya Sabha in Gujarat – founded in 1946 by liberal Rajput nobles whose Western education had inculcated democratic and secular ideas – proceeded in this manner and was able to enlarge its social base to bring reforms to a successful conclusion. Recruitment for the sabha was quite open, ranging from the Bhils, semi-tribals, by way of the Bariyas, Kolis of intermediate rank, to the Rajputs, the highest Kshatriyas. Even incorporating, in 1953, Muslims – Hindus converted during the Mughal period –, the sabha took the initiative of "purification" so that they could be integrated into the Kshatriya community. Initially, only poverty and privation from land had made it possible to bring these groups together. However, they gradually merged by assimilating the Kshatriya martial tradition, combining, as was imperative at the time, Gandhian symbols. The interdiction, in 1948, of this mass movement, which was accused of being "communalist" in nature, did not prevent it from further expanding its influence. In the 1950s, it played an important role on the level of the regional state by choosing to align itself with the political positions of the Congress (Kothari & Maru 1965: 35-37).
Very different, but not less indicative, is the example of the Waddars of Karnataka. Not yet known by that name in the 1940s, they constituted a myriad of tribal groups: stone-breakers, potters, salt merchants, ox-cart drivers, lac vendors, etc. But the settling process of a majority of them led to their grouping together and then to their fusion under the leadership of a local "saint" who went by the name of Yellamma of Kolar. After having adopted the way of life of the "twice-born", they devoted themselves to the establishment of educational institutions on behalf of a (Waddar) association. Through the élites, thus formed and actively mobilised, branches multiplied at different levels of the region. A few years later, the federation claimed the status of Kshatriya on the basis of a Waddar ethnic identity, which an autochthonous "caste" legend opportunely substantiated (Bhat 1978).

Although the associations in Kerala were a factor in the geographic integration of groups belonging to the same linguistic zone and engaged in identical professional occupations or bearing the same name, they went on to constitute strong and autonomous political units entering into competition with others (Bailey 1963). It is the Kammas, however, a peasant caste in Andhra Pradesh who undoubtedly provide the most unforeseeable example of the coalescence of caste and politics in the context of competition over the centuries. In fact, since the founding of the communist party in the state (1934), its leaders were recruited exclusively from one of the sub-castes of landowners who were dominant on the delta of the Krishna and Godavari Rivers; a zone, moreover, called the "Kingdom of the Kammas" (Kamarashtra). As for the rival Reddi caste, it was also dominant, but in the five western districts called Rayalseema, commonly referred to as "Reddi-seema". The Reddis supported the Congress Party from 1946 to 1983. Remarkably, this superposition of caste rivalry and political opposition represents the recurrence of a model dating from the fourteenth century. The members of the two castes were at that time engaged as mercenaries by the ruling kings (Reddy 1989).

Generally speaking, the transition from associations to federations marked a decisive stage in the history of the development from local relations of castes and village with rural dominant caste to class relations, connected with the state, which began to be fashioned on a larger regional level, in particular on the political plane. For, beside the parties and, to a lesser extent, the revolutionary movements which have existed since Independence, the associations have been progressively transformed in such a manner as to assume some features in common with the pressure groups abounding in contemporary
India. On the one hand, there are the "organised interest groups" (Brass 1990: 91ff.), analogous to those of Western industrial societies: unions, professional or employees associations on the local, regional or national levels, that avail themselves of a bureaucratic organisation. On the other hand, there are specific "demand groupes" (Rudolph & Rudolph 1987: 247ff), comprised of categories of people with less distinct identities, on occasion mobilised in 'student" and "peasant" movements, for example, or groups organised on a religious or linguistic basis. Thirdly, there were "influence groups" which operated in the non-public sphere under an informal leadership with the objective of mobilising groups for specific claims under discussion in parliament or in state assemblies. Finally, there are "protest groups", which, in the name of a more invented than transmitted tradition, revitalised old conceptions or brought old practices up to date in constructed forms apt to ensure publicity and wide support in civil society. The Arya Samaj was undoubtedly the prototype of this kind of movement (Jones 1976).

The hybrid nature constituting the singularity of the associations explains how they were able to be active on different levels and in numerous areas, even though it was always a matter of mobilising at any given time for an electoral campaign, for a confrontation with a rival caste in the framework of local politics, or for an objective likely to acquire a regional or national dimension. It was, after all, the only way to re-group, in the least formal manner, castes which were not always linked by marriage or residence, but which had either a common name or a comparable status on a larger scale. One can readily understand that the associations became particularly efficacious instruments in the hands of political leaders and that their influence would have been diffused in and by dominant political parties.

It is nonetheless a fact that a caste association with national scope is a sociological impossibility, given the linguistic fragmentation and the segmented organisation of Indian society. Associations were also fated to limit their ambitions in the face of the homogenisation of the economy and the institutional standardisation of a nation in the process of establishing itself. In fact, associations have been on the decline since the 1950s for a number of reasons. Once adapted to the institutional mechanisms established after Independence, castes had a tendency to abandon this type of organisation to either devote themselves solely to tasks involved with given social assistance to the most disadvantaged members, or, on the other hand, to evolve toward caste parties by segregating themselves. The democratic transition, that is to
say, both the alliances traversing castes and the expansion of political
machineries able to extend to the central government, rendered the associations
obsolete. Even in the most favourable case, in which the caste represented
between ten and twenty per cent of the regional population, it could not
assume a decisive political role in the age of universal suffrage. And, this does
not take into consideration the fact that the emergence of new forms of labour
organisations and sociability produced solidarities which weakened and divided
the associations.

Nevertheless, as shown by Kidder (1974) in the context of an inquiry
conducted in Bangalore in the 1970s, caste associations could on occasion play a
role in the entrepreneurial strategies of urban leaders in search of social
advancement. But, the latter deployed a much wider strategy than that founded
exclusively on caste membership by increasing productive activities of financial
resources and the intermediary agents which served industrial and bureaucratic
sectors. Similarly, although caste plays a secondary role in the industrial
sphere, it affects in a diffuse manner the entire world of labour (Holmström

Above all, to the extent that intermediate castes form federations on the
basis of associations against the Brahmans, these organisations support the
formation of the movement of the so-called "Backwards", one of the ground
swells of social life in contemporary North and South India. This movement is
a product of the reservation policy instituted by Indian democracy since the
attainment of Independence.

The Making of Democratic Inequality
DEMOCRATIC GOVERNMENT AND THE SYSTEM OF RESERVATIONS

Between 1947 and 1950, independent India endowed itself with a democratic constitution. This charter proposed to establish a formal egalitarian government in a societylegendarily recognised as hierarchic. Article 14 guaranteed the equality before the law of all minorities, while the following one prohibited discrimination based on religion, race, caste, gender or place of birth. Less abstract, article 17 declared as illegal the practice of "untouchability", that is to say, discrimination in social contracts. Article 46 stipulated that it fell to the state to advance disadvantaged citizens by means of education and economic aid, particularly as pertains to "scheduled" castes and tribes. This last article also imposed upon the state the duty to protect the thus defined social categories from social injustice and all forms of exploitation.

3.1. THE PRINCIPLES

To respond positively both to the principle of "social, economic and political justice" and to the requirement of "fraternity which ensures the dignity of the individual and the unity of the nation", to cite the Preamble of the Constitution, the sovereign Indian state mainly implemented the instrument of protective, also termed compensatory discrimination. This is a
question of constitutional reservations guaranteeing Scheduled Castes seats in the legislative assemblies of the states and in parliament, in proportion to their population percentage. Also included was the establishment of similar quotas for recruitment for educational institutions and the services of the Indian administration, from the lowest to the highest grade.

In fact, the policy of reservations was brought into being by the British, who had wanted to fix quotas for all Indians. However, the quotas were conceived on the basis of a separate electorate, the objective being to "divide and rule". For the independence leaders, on the other hand, this protection would have enabled the so-called "Backwards" or "Scheduled" groups to improve their economic condition and their status by integrating themselves into an India which was evolving towards modernity. In their minds, these measures, which were meant to repair an injustice, were temporary. A number of Indians thought that, as caste was in decline, ritual observances which had upheld the distance between castes in the past would gradually disappear. Retrospectively, it must be noted that it was precisely at this time that caste was acquiring a new dynamics as a consequence of its increasing utilisation in political life. Worse, whereas compensatory discrimination had been expressly conceived to weaken both caste and the awareness of it in society, its systematic employment on an ever-increasing scale would eventually produce the inverse effect.

India, after nearly fifty years, is today still engaged in the greatest effort ever undertaken to integrate oppressed or excluded populations into the mainstream of national life. Such a system of preferential treatment for the historically most disadvantaged sections of the population is, in effect, without precedence, both in terms of dimension and extent. Eighty million "Untouchables", thirty million "tribals" and one hundred and fifty million members of the "Scheduled Castes" are thus presently beneficiaries of a quite elaborate and periodically revised system which automatically assures them legislative representation as well as fixed percentages of places and employment in educational institutions and government services.

Of socialist inspiration, the enterprise was nevertheless paradoxical. For, at the same time as the Indian government proposed a plan to combat the social inequalities ensuing of prescribed membership, it prohibited the utilisation of the categories of caste, religion or race. Thus, it conceded a major exception by reserving for itself the right to make use of the same prohibited categories in order to remedy the social liabilities accumulated by castes situated at the
lower end of the hierarchy or on the margins of society. Forty years later, legal clauses explicitly concerning "scheduled" castes and tribes, which are at the centre of the policy of compensatory discrimination, give the Indian constitution its distinctiveness. The paradox is all the more evident as the majority of politicians who have, or claim to have, the ambition to combat discrimination based on birth continue today to regulate their behaviour according to caste, in particular as regards endogamy. A recent anecdote attests to this. When, during the course of a discussion in the Lok Sabha in 1990, Rajiv Gandhi held a long tirade against the prime minister, V.P. Singh, accusing him of supporting "casteism", Sharad Yadav, a minister from Maharashtra, addressed himself to the parliamentarians, asking who among them, other than Rajiv Gandhi, had taken a spouse outside his caste; no hand was raised.

Of democratic inspiration, the undertaking was also not exempt from ambiguity. There was, in fact, a tendency in India to confuse equality by law with a generalised policy of equality (Beteille 1992). If it was legitimate within the framework of a democratic system to reserve quotas for all positions relating to political representation, then the extension of reservation to all institutions in civil society, such as colleges and universities, hospitals and administrative services, at which qualifications based on merit and competence should prevail, made the development of patronage, nepotism and corruption foreseeable. What is more, because the system of reservations was put into effect on the basis of differentially classed group adherences, it was in principle contradictory to the extension of universal suffrage to several hundred million individuals. The citizenship of the latter could only be effective in the prolongation of a process of individual emancipation and in the at least formal recognition of equality of rank among all members of the nation.

In fact, the nearly fifty-year old democratic experience of the consecration of the [Indian] citizen took away the sacred aura from the "homo hierarchicus" of South Asia by secularising the criteria of caste membership. It worked towards transforming the latter into a means of political mobilisation so as to claim greater social justice. This is so much so that, in our time, a tacit consensus prevails on the subcontinent: all political bodies, from zilla parishad to state cabinets, by way of political parties and the army, indeed all educational and administrative services, including athletes and those receiving government awards, must be so composed as to represent the main castes and communities. Not only has the representative mandate progressively become

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synonymous with representation by castes and communities, but society itself is composed of only castes and communities. Whereas power for a long time consisted in providing the means to preserve a status which demonstrated ritual purity (of caste), it is today based on elections. The obtaining of an electoral majority, that is, the support of a coalition of heterogeneous groups, moreover eroded by division, has since replaced the relative consensus on which precedences were standardised and exchanges made. This indicates to what extent associations, federations, then coalitions of castes were transformed into "vote banks". And, unfortunately, for whomever defends the rights of an egalitarian citizenship, this major and revealing political change has already threatened considerable tension throughout the country.

3.2. GENESIS

It has now been one hundred years since the provincial governments of colonial India established programmes to aid socially underprivileged sections of the population, those castes disadvantaged by their "untouchability". Their low status on the scale of Hindu purity sanctioned exploitation, although it did not legitimate violence exercised by those under whose ascendancy they stood. But, while the caste quotas have existed in the South for quite a long time and are very widely accepted, although grudgingly, the attempt to introduce them in the North provoked hostility and resentment. It is true that there was a difference in meaning of the terms and the apperception of the problem in the Gangetic Plain and the Deccan Plateau. While "communalism" in the North, until very recently, referred to the single conflict between Hindus and Muslims, in the South, it evoked opposition between castes, or caste groups, most particularly between Brahmins and non-Brahmins. Religious division in the North subsumed that among Hindu castes which were dominant in South India.

On the national level, the first systematic attempt to improve the lot of the "Depressed Classes" by means of caste quotas dates from the introduction of the Montagu-Chelmsford reform (1918). This instituted a separate representation of the group which was subdivided into "Scheduled Castes", "Scheduled Tribes" and "Other Backward Classes". However, as of 1885, the Madras Government had set forth, under the name of Grant-in-Aid Code, financial measures to favour the accession to education of members of the
"Depressed Classes", one of the older terms for "Untouchables" in a series of official euphemisms.

In the South, this policy was merged with the constant effort to reduce the predominance of Brahmans in public life, for it was true that they occupied a pre-eminent intellectual and cultural position, particularly in Tamil Nadu and Mysore. Demands for preferential recruitment in the name of all non-Brahmins came from the sat-sūdra leaders of the Loyalist Justice Party, formed in 1916 in Madras. On the authority of the "Communal Orders" promulgated in 1921 and 1922 by the state Legislative Council, the collectors were officially asked to give priority to non-Brahmins and "backward" communities in the according of government jobs. In the same year, the "enlightened" Maharaja of Mysore took similar measures, after having appointed a commission in 1918. In 1928, the committee appointed by the Government of Bombay, referred to by the name of its president, O.H.B. Startes, proposed in its turn a classification of disadvantaged groups into "Depressed Classes", "Aboriginal" and "Hill Tribes" and "Other Backward Classes". In 1931, the expression "Exterior Castes" was substituted for the category "Depressed Classes" so as to no longer designate only Untouchables, whereas the "Aboriginal" and "Hill Tribes" were subsumed under the name "Primitive Tribes". It can also be noted that a Criminal Tribe Act had made a few proposals, in 1871, to rehabilitate these groups which were yet more stigmatised than the lower castes.

While the non-Brahmin movement had its greatest impact in the Tamil region, the associations of "Depressed Classes", started by educated individuals from Untouchable communities, succeeded in obtaining reserved seats in the legislatures of the provinces and Central India. Dr. Ambedkar, who contested the pretension of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi to alone represent all the Untouchables, was invited by the British to serve as a delegate for the "Depressed Classes" to the (Round Table) Conference of 1930-32. And, only the fast unto death undertaken by the Mahatma was able to prevent the creation of a separate category of "Depressed Classes". Ultimately, however, this was to no avail. The Poona Pact (1932) recognised the Untouchables as a political category throughout India, procuring reserved seats in proportion to their population for the "Depressed Classes" in the so-called "Central" and "Provincial" Legislatures.

In the 1930s, the vocabulary of the varṇa-s, which qualified the Shudras and Untouchables as ritually impure, was no longer employed. In Bombay and
Madras, the category of "Shudra" was replaced with "Backwards" and the Brahmins became "Forwards". Far from being only nominal, the terminological substitution indicated a transformation of mentalities: the traditional opposition of statuses, of a religious nature, indicated only a discrepancy between educational levels liable to progressive reduction through voluntary measures. Although the census of 1931 was the last to correlate social groups with ancient "classes" (varṇa-s), these categories had acquired at that time a bureaucratic meaning and already represented an alteration of the varṇa ideology. The perseverance of such a classification is surprising, as much in view of the extremely low number of members of the three higher varṇa-s, Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas, as because of their very unequal distribution throughout the subcontinent. According to the 1931 census, the Brahmins comprised 6.4% of the Hindu population, and the Rajputs (identified as the Kshatriya "class") only 3.7%. The former were concentrated in North and Central India and were only weakly represented in the South, between 3% and 4%; there were 9% in the United Provinces - the present Uttar Pradesh - and thus comprised 40% of the varṇa category in India as a whole. The Vaishyas, the smallest group at an estimated 2.7%, were scattered in all regions.

It was in 1935 that the even more euphemistic appellation "Scheduled Caste" definitively replaced that of "Depressed Classes"; in 1936, the separate lists of the former were established. The "Scheduled Castes" then comprised approximately fifty million individuals, being 19% of the Hindu population and 12.6% of that of the Indian empire. The main benefit which the Scheduled Castes and Tribes derived from the Government of India Act, 1935, was political representation in federal legislatures and provincial assemblies. Regarding representation in the public services, the decision was taken in 1934, even though the order to reserve a contingent of 8.33% posts for "Scheduled Castes" was only given in 1943. This figure was subsequently raised to 12.5% in 1946, in accordance with demographic growth.

A few years later, the term "Backward Classes" was imposed throughout the country to refer to all or part of the population prior to their receiving particular treatment. The term, however, goes back to the 1880s, when it was employed to designate illiterate and indigent groups in the Madras region (Irschick 1969). In the Bombay region, in 1925, it included all castes with the exception of the Prabhu Brahmins, Marwaris, Parsis, Banias and Christians. Although vague, the term became synonymous with "Scheduled Castes". The
fact that the number and type of groups to enter this category varied gave rise to ardent controversies (Galanter 1984: 159ff). In proposing distinct protection for the "Other Backward Classes", the resolution of the Constituent Assembly, presided over by Jawaharlal Nehru on 13 December 1946, did little to clarify the situation. However, the delegates from the South managed to convince their colleagues from the North that the notion "Backward" referred to a specific category, as it included a succession of "non-Untouchable" Hindu castes which were, nonetheless, economically, socially and educationally backward. Thus, they were successful in registering the large group of "Backward Classes" as a section of society between the high castes and the scheduled castes, an indeterminate series of intermediary castes which were to be recorded by commissions. The task was delicate. The term "class" had acquired, in the nineteenth century, the vague sense of groups of persons having certain common characteristics, and was not understood in the economic sense or according to meanings specific to the social sciences. The ambiguity of the term "backward" was not less because, although classes were not necessarily castes, and illiteracy would have been a better criterion in reference to social "backwardness", one agreed to consider the so-called "Backward Classes" in the manner of "communities"! This was grist for the mill, as much for jurists and sociologists, as for bureaucrats engaged in the public politics of development, not to mention the latitude thus offered to the actors in specifying membership in such indeterminate entities.

"Backward Classes" is today still a generic term subsuming groups whose limits are both nebulous and elastic. The category is large, encompassing roughly one third of the country’s total population, more than three hundred million individuals, the main constituents of which are "Scheduled Tribes", "Scheduled Castes" and the "Other Backward Classes". The first two categories are well-defined, comprising approximately 7% to 15% of the population, the list of which is determined by the central government and is subject to revision only on presidential authority; a special commission is responsible for continually observing the affairs of these communities. The case is not the same regarding the "Other Backward Classes", a residual and unclear category, the position of which is ambiguous because there is no official list to provide exact figures as to their numbers.
3.3. COMMISSIONS

It was thus following Independence that the central government endeavoured to define the "Backward Classes" so as to take measures towards the amelioration of their condition.

This objective was renewed and enlarged upon by the Kaka Kaleikar Commission, named after its president, which was appointed in 1953 in accordance with article 340 of the constitution. On the basis of an established list of 2399 so-called "backward" castes and of 837 classed as "most backward", comprising roughly 32% of the population, the report recommended an extension of reservations: 70% for students in all technical and professional institutions, and 25%, 33.5% and 40% respectively in government services, corresponding to employment categories I, II and III. In order to prevent the perpetuation of caste, the report suggested that one desist from referring solely to this indicator and proposed the application of "economic criteria" to define social and cultural backwardness. It stressed, however, that as no data were available pertaining to population, literacy, level of education and employment among the different castes and communities, the fulfilment of the objectives for which the commission had been appointed would be difficult.

Although the central government rejected the main recommendations of the report, made in 1955, it informed the regional state governments that they were free to determine certain points. They were to draw up their own lists of disadvantaged groups on the basis of criteria which they themselves would choose; and, furthermore, they were to decide which measures would be necessary for the rehabilitation of the disadvantaged. The majority of regional governments hastened to do so, appointing their own committees and commissions.

It was not until 1972, that is, until the Karnatak Backward Classes Commission, headed by L.G. Havanur, that a state instituted a veritable sociological survey, both comprehensive and purposeful. In its report, delivered in 1975, the commission concluded that it was necessary to determine "social backwardness" with reference to "economic backwardness based on occupational and residential backwardness". In spite of the vigour of the analyses of systematic empirical data, passions were inflamed when the government decided to apply the "Havanur" recommendations. But, to forestall protest, it added twenty groups to the 185 communities which the commission
had listed, notably the relatively prosperous and politically powerful Lingayats. The precedent set by the Venkataswamy Commission was still remembered. In 1960, the latter had removed the Vokkaligas from the list of "Backward Classes". When riots broke out, the government re-introduced them the following year. Moreover, whereas the Havanur Commission had suggested 32% reservations, the state raised the proportion to 50%.

The reactions provoked at that time were, however, insignificant compared to those which followed the presentation to parliament, on 11 August 1982, of the report on the "Backward Classes", referred to as the Mandal Report, after the patronymic of the president of the new commission. The event undoubtedly constitutes an important turning point in contemporary Indian social history. When V.P. Singh, concerned to strengthen the political support from certain factions of intermediary castes like Yadavs, Kurmis, Ahirs and Muslims, declared on 7th August 1990 that the government would immediately implement the "Mandal Report", the event sparked off furious controversy and sometimes violent demonstrations in Bihar and in Gujarat. These disturbances spread not only across Gujarat, Bihar, and elsewhere among North India high castes in North India, but in Andhra Pradesh as well. This report announced the extension of reservations (between 22.5% and 27%) to jobs and services for "scheduled" castes and tribes; which was in addition to the 27% already reserved for the "Other Backward Classes", making a total of roughly 60%.

The scandal resulted from the fact that these measures were determined exclusively by the criterion of caste. Deciding that the "Other Backward Castes" were those regarded as "backward" by the others, and considering that three-quarters of the responses to questionnaires identified the three upper varṇa-s with the dominant castes, the commission had chosen to employ at the same time the notion of jāti to measure "social backwardness" and the concept varṇa to evaluate caste status. Then the commission put forth the idea that quotas according to caste should be applied in each sector of employment, arguing that, far from being unconstitutional, official recognition of caste was, in fact, required by the constitution itself. The identification of the "Other Backward Classes" on the basis of caste re-actualised the old schema of the varṇa-s, abandoned a quarter of a century earlier. The choice appeared to some as a return to the (colonial) idea that caste was the elementary unit for any consideration of distributive justice. However, the process was neither specifically colonial, nor radically new. In Karnataka, from 1972 to 1978, the
chief minister, Devraj Urs, a descendant of the Wodeyar Maharajas of Mysore, divided the dominant Lingayat caste by coaxing its numerous sub-castes to ally with the rival Vokkaligas. Once the group had been constituted, it had the right to 50% of the reservations. Consequently, except for the Brahmans and the Vyasas, all castes could qualify as "backward", which brought the total figure for reservations in the state to 92%! In Tamil Nadu, the dravida movement divided the traditional Congress alliance between Brahmans and "Scheduled Classes" to form a new governing élit of Vellalars, Mudaliars, Chettiars and Naidus, for which 31% of the reservations were created.

The Mandal Report was also scandalous because the measures were extended to groups other than castes and tribes which until then had been "scheduled". This induced not only a continually increasing number of castes, but also groups such as the police and military, the blind and handicapped, women and refugees, etc. to claim reservations. And, it became increasingly difficult to refuse them. The perversion of the system appeared when the high castes, claiming job quotas, succeeded in having themselves registered on the list of "Other Backward Castes". This was the case for the Vokkaligas and the Lingayats of Karnataka in July 1994. It is, however, to be observed that the Meenas of Rajasthan had already succeeded in such a manœuvre as early as 1957. There was, in addition, the apprehension that some would be tempted to produce false caste certificates authorising them to obtain a particular type of post. This was effectively done by the Bedars, who in this way entered en masse government services in Karnataka.

The Mandal Report was furthermore scandalous because, by extending protective treatment to nearly all social groups, the measures rendered null and void the original concern of the Indian state towards those who, in fact disadvantaged, were initially the sole beneficiaries. The policy of reservations was no longer the exceptional instrument which allowed for the inclusion of disadvantaged sections of the population, but a system of subsidies accorded to the most active, or indeed most vindictive, sections. There was then the risk of an eventual "communalisation" of society in its entirety. Finally, more insidiously, to categorise one half the Indian population as "Other Backwards" - henceforth no longer defined by economic backwardness, but by extreme cultural privation - attested to a bureaucratic conception of social life which forebode the homogenisation of groups through the prism of the educational model and the state employee.
Thus, more than a mere political episode, the Mandal Commission touches the heart of India's self-image and reactions to it express the unresolved tensions of the constitution, notably the ability of the system of preferential compensation to modify Indian social structure. There is an apprehension, today commonly termed "Mandalisation", that, in making caste the criterion for availing of social benefits, the government itself perpetuates the caste system. Or, more precisely, that the government supports the creation of a caste system which, in effect, has very little to do with that system. For, a growing number of lobbies confront each other in the social arena, seeking the protection of the state, whose financing diminishes proportionately.

That amounts to saying that the policy of discriminatory compensations has had substantial redistributive effects. The reserved seats enabled a significant legislative presence of "Backwards" and tapped the flow of patronage to "scheduled" castes and tribes. The reservation of jobs procured a not inconsiderable percentage of the national revenue for beneficiary groups, by providing the security and prestige relevant to government employees. Although this occurred at the price of an extraordinary loss, both economic and intellectual, there was a large-scale redistribution of educational opportunities favourable to these groups, even if the beneficiaries of reservations were the same who already derived advantages disproportionate to their number. As is known, a few privileged networks channel to their profit subsidies and unfair promotions. Such networks are mainly those formed by groups whose elites were urbanised at an early period and rapidly became modernised.

Despite the controversy and violence which are regularly triggered off by reservation issues, it is nevertheless necessary to view the problem in its proper perspective. Public sector employment and the educational system which is the passport thereto - the only to be called "organised" in India - represent all in all not more than ten per cent of the jobs; and, of this the public sector amounts to roughly two-thirds. Also, when speaking of reservations, it is advisable not to overlook that it is a question of a maximum of seven per cent of the jobs available in the entire country, even though these seven per cent constitute, in effect, a highly privileged sector. Furthermore, the percentage of candidates from the "Other Backwards" likely to successfully pass the examinations is extremely low; it is, moreover, frequent that the quota of posts remains vacant, and the higher the required level of education, the more evident the rule.

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In any case, the lesson from reservations is less the efficacy of caste quotas for the sixty years which they have existed (in the South), as their irreversibility in the political life of the next decades, which emerges for the fixing of quotas, in 1994, of up to 80% in the different southern states. And, this makes even more paradoxical the fact that in a system of formal equality and open competition, there exists and is upheld a separate zone of discriminatory compensations, the beneficiaries of which, that is, those who accrue disadvantages, can hope for social promotion as a result of protective barriers. That such permanent protection, although largely ineffective, should be unanimously recognised today as necessary, reflects the vitality of hierarchic ideology in a society where, since 1991, the principle of economic liberalisation has become the new mantra of the caste leaders. The paradox is when one preserves the separate category of "Scheduled Class" in strengthening the relatively dominant positions of the (elite) "Backward and Other Backward Classes". However, one increasingly hears that a liberal and deregulatory economy cannot function and be competitive insofar as individuals hold their positions in public educational or management institutions on the basis of birth, rather than by way of merit.
CASTE AND POLITICS ON STATE(S) LEVEL

Although, after becoming independent, the public services of the Indian State evolved in continuity with the British colonial government, the political mechanisms of parliamentary democracy and of the separation of powers were only to be fully developed subsequent to the constitution in 1950. The latter defined the principle of popular sovereignty, upon which the division of powers between the central state and regional states were organised, as well as such institutions as individual civil rights, political parties, elections, the legislatures and judicial action. This historic gap and the difference in motivation are at the origin of a characteristic tension of Indian experience.

Since the 1950s, relations between the public sphere and political institutions have become increasingly strained. On one side, high castes and middle-class groups are very firmly determined to protect their socio-economic privileges; on the other, low castes and poor classes aspire to a more equitable distribution of wealth, and some groups among them demonstrate the will to upset the balance of forces. The latter have increased their representation in the administrative services in all of the states and in the central government, and also regularly strengthen their power in the political institutions. While this observation illustrates the link between caste and politics, it also shows that, above all, the fate of contemporary India cannot be understood without understanding the transformation of the caste system itself.
Figure 1: Dominant and dominated castes (1965)
A. CASTES AND THE CONGRESS PARTY

It fell to the Congress Party, founded in 1885, to have both managed and heightened the tension, while ensuring the transfer from colonial power to democratic government. Its unbroken electoral success until the 1960s in the northern part of the country was provided by the "vote bank" comprising, on the one hand, the varṇa-s of the "twice-born" (in particular the Brahmins) and, on the other hand, the "Scheduled Castes" and the Muslims. In Uttar Pradesh – a state which alone provides 16% of all the members of parliament –, the coalition between the Brahmins (9%), the "Scheduled Castes" (21%) and the Muslims (15%) enabled it to win the elections. And, with even greater success in the neighbouring state of Bihar – second in terms of population and representing another 10% of the members of parliament –, the same alignment of groups made it possible to obtain 30%, or even 40%, of the votes by mobilising factions of one or the other caste rivals of the "twice-born".

Outside the vast Hindi language zone, electoral strategies were also organised according to caste alignments. These, however, varied in relation to regional configurations. In the interior of states whose borders were re-drawn in 1956 on a linguistic basis, regional agrarian castes were dominant. They, together with the urban upper castes and the middle classes, were to provide the main social base of the Congress. The latter was thus able to consolidate its power in Andhra Pradesh as a result of the support of the Reddi(s), in Karnataka, with the support of the Lingayats and Vokkaligas, in Maharashtra, with that of the Marathas and in Gujarat, with the support of the Patidars. Nevertheless, the "vote bank" of the "Scheduled Castes" played a significant role everywhere, as did that of the "Scheduled Tribes" in some regions, while the allegiance of the Muslims assumed importance in zones where their percentage exceeded ten per cent.

In the states where there was no equivalent to dominant castes, even on the lower level of the region, the situation was less secure for the Congress. In Madras, it was the Brahmins and Vellalars in the urban zones and the nearby hinterland, then the network of clientele from the most important families of the agrarian castes which guaranteed Congress success. In West Bengal, where caste configurations varied according to locality and where the land-controlling groups came from diverse communities, Congress endeavoured to win over the village heads (jotedar) as intermediaries to mobilise voters. The party maintained its support in Orissa on the basis of the middle class of

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the Brahmin-Karans, to which was added a high percentage of "Scheduled Tribes", "Scheduled Castes", and the middle and wealthy peasantry of the Khandayat cultivators. Congress obtained the support of the urban educated middle class and a few leaders of the Jat peasantry in Rajasthan. However, it also had to attract a number of Rajputs in order to counter the former maharajas and other powerful landowners (jagirdars). In Punjab, the Congress Party, itself divided into two factions, had great difficulty in stabilising the coalition of the Akali Dal factions, one of which demanded a state with Sikh majority, and the other, a Punjabi state. Both were opposed to Hindu opposition parties.

Despite the diversity of configurations, solidarity between the most disadvantaged groups or castes was never formed. The dominant parties in the state accorded the minimum concessions required to avoid social polarisation. They integrated the militant leaders of potentially dangerous subaltern castes and, in so doing, cut them off from their social base. To this end, parties took recourse to the strategy of reservations, thereby following the lesson of the coloniser: "divide and rule". Whereas the system of reservations had been conceived to compensate for the handicaps of groups otherwise deprived of privileges, its implementation institutionalised divisions among them by encouraging competition among the groups. Availing of a power centre resultant of carefully dosed protection, the local dominant groups renewed the model of vertical relations among the diverse constituents of regional society, but, in this case, on the basis of a benefactor state.

What is worse, as Gokhale had very early remarked, the mechanism of reservations perpetuated the idea that the "Untouchables" formed a separate and specific category within the "Scheduled Castes". In effect, concerned with the preservation of their protected status, they neither were able nor wanted to transform the original identity as "Untouchables" which, in fact, stigmatised them. No doubt, by lending allegiance to the local leaders from high castes in the Congress Party, the "Untouchables" (and the tribals) who aspired to social advancement obtained access to educational institutions and administrative services for themselves and their families. But the members of this elite also thereby condemned themselves to support the status quo ante by becoming watchdogs of the state.

The policy of accommodation of the elites of the subaltern castes with which the "Congress culture" was identified only slowly disappeared. In the states where the level of politisation remained relatively low – such as in the
territories which corresponded to the former princely kingdoms of Rajasthan, or in certain undeveloped zones, like Orissa, or in Maharashtra with its unique model of social incorporation of the Kunbi peasantry by the Marathas – the model of integration of the pluralist élite prevailed until the 1980s.

**Figure 2 : Caste composition in Maharashtra (1995)**

But in a large number of other states, where the politisation of the lower castes and of the poor classes was more advanced, the struggle for political power was threatened by social groups united under the banner of the "Backward Classes" against the "Forward Castes", groups which had been initially adumbrated by the bureaucracy of the British Raj. A well-known reversal, however, was observed in the 1970s: caste identity was henceforth put forward by the disadvantaged sections of society, rather than by middle and upper castes. Whereas the "Scheduled Castes", the Dalits (and the tribals) sometimes displayed provocative caste awareness in the process of social advancement, the Brahmins showed this attitude less and less, particularly in the large metropolises. Part of them preferred to accentuate economic precariousness to obtain reservations, rather than posing the problem in terms of caste.

The second instrument which prevented the emergence of a solidarity movement among the mass of peasant cultivators was the implementation of the *Zamindari Abolition* subsequent to Independence, that is, the elimination of intermediaries between the peasantry and the state. This reform, the

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consequences of which varied according to region, triggered off waves of violence between classes which threatened the stability of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and of Bengal. It even provoked armed uprisings against the government in Telangana under the leadership of the Communist Party, beginning in the 1940s. It was thus that the Brahmin landowners of Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, the Rajputs of Gujarat, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh, as well as the Kayasthas and Brahmins in Bihar, saw their financial resources fall and their once undisputed authority decline. Though it should be noted a large part of Tamil Nadu was under the ryotwari system for a long time and only few Brahmins retained their zamindari-mittadari tenures. Throughout the Hindi region, the "twice-born" castes failed in subordinating economic standing to ritual status. Also, numerous absentee landowners from the upper castes emigrated to urban zones after having sold their lands to the most prosperous representatives of the peasantry. In reality, however, the transfer of power was less clear. For although the zamindars lost their land rents to the advantage of their tenants, they could nevertheless retain the farms on which they lived, without limitation of area, and received financial compensation for lands acquired by the government. Not only were the massive compensations a matter of very high cost for the state, but the former intermediaries, some of whom were still in the regional political machinery, represented an obstacle to the penetration of agrarian reform in the rural zone. Since the state made no effort (as in Bihar [Jannuzi 1974]) or too little (in Kerala, Bengal, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh [Bergmann 1984]) to redistribute land simultaneously to the poorest sections of society, the Zamindari Abolition did little to change the "pyramid of the agrarian system" (Herring 1983: 269). The "upper" tenants enriched themselves and raised their status by replacing the former landowners, while day labourers, poor peasants and agricultural workers were subjected to increased pressure. Briefly, they continued to bear on their shoulders the weight of the "agrarian pyramid".

While the reform did effectively put an end to the polarisation between landowners and tenants, it above all led to the formation of a class of wealthy and middle peasants who were present in large numbers in some states. Moreover, it was their leaders who initiated the rural development programmes after Independence in Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu; programmes which, as to be expected, served their interests. The political patronage offered by the Congress government to the rich and middle cultivators in states such as
Maharashtra and Karnataka where institutionalised decentralisation (the Panchayati Raj) was efficiently carried out, transformed the small administrative units represented by districts into so many foci of political competition. With the generalisation of credit and distribution and market structures at the same administrative level, the elite of the rural castes could easily make the link between the locality and the regional government.

In this context, it was not until the growth of economic differentiation that solidarity and its importance consolidated at the local level. In the village, for example, the most prosperous members obtained assistance for the most deprived jati-s in the form of low-interest loans, reduction in land rent, job reservation, or by acting as the intermediaries to their debtors vis-à-vis government agencies. A similar evolution is to be observed in the urban zones, although this took place more through caste associations, which varied greatly in size. The emphasis thus placed by the most wealthy members on unitary caste awareness authorised them to appeal to that collective sentiment of "we" which can to be mobilised against "them", the members of rival castes. When required, unanimity was fortified through financial or material support to the poorest members of the caste. The patronage extended by the Congress government to the wealthy and middle peasants is explained by the fact that the latter, federated in associations, were able to oblige the government to initiate agricultural price policies, subsidies and exports (cotton, vegetables, sugar cane) which were favourable to them. It should be observed that the transformation of caste into far-reaching lobbies encouraged the accentuation of an equivocal identity of "Backward Classes" which eventually widened the separation from the "Scheduled Castes". However, despite increasing economic disparities in and between regions, caste in the sense of a network, often remained the primary identity on the basis of which socio-economic demands could be articulated.

42. THE 'BACKWARD' MOVEMENT

The rise in strength of the "Backward" movement can be dated from the 1950s. It was in 1952 that Parliament promulgated the first amendment to the Constitution which authorised the state to make "a special reservation" for the betterment of all classes of socially and educationally backward citizens. Significantly, the majority of the members of the commission in which this decision originated were Shudras. Arguing from the fact that "our society was

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not built essentially on an economic structure but on the medieval idea of "varna", caste and social hierarchy", they eventually contested the person of the president of the commission, who was none other than a Brahmin. In fact, it was due to the two in no way medieval notions of universal suffrage and compensatory discrimination that the most educated of the "backward" communities could use "reservation" as an ideological rallying point for the political mobilisation of a large percentage of intermediate and average Shudra castes which form the main body of the peasantry of cultivators, or kisans, as well as the middle and low classes. This is particularly true for Tamil Nadu, where one observes the generalisation of a model of advancement of the "Backward Classes", which supplants that of the upper castes in all regions, since the Dravidra Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) came to power in 1967. This was the case, even though the political mobilisation of the "Backward Classes" (whether given impetus by regional or national parties) succeeded in appealing to caste sentiment across class differences and in segmenting the groups by means of distinct religions, ethnic and social categories.

The consequences of the political bipolarisation of "forward" and "backward" castes are less dramatic in the southern states, where the "fortwards" themselves issue from landed peasantry belonging to the Shudras. The latter demand a share of the privileges enjoyed by the dominant groups, without attempting to replace them. In fact, in Tamil Nadu, Tamil cultural identity is mixed with a Dravidian communitarian ideology which, in the 1980s, succeeded in raising the level of reservations to 68% of the posts (including 15% for the "Scheduled Castes"), introducing the additional category of "most backward", without negating the policy of accommodation. The DMK had ensured the social mobility of individuals from low castes, who gradually occupied "white collar" jobs in the main urban zones, and simply allowed the Brahmins and other high castes that were excluded from government posts to found private technical and medical colleges, the diplomas of which were equivalent to those awarded by state universities. The programmes for the well-being of the most deprived made it possible to secure the support to these groups, without threatening the economic interests of the land-owning upper castes or of the industrial class which ultimately supported the DMK (Washbrook 1989).

Although the approach was similar in the states of Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka, the means differed. Certainly, the respective Congress governments brought about a modest change in the social composition of the bureaucratic
and political elite. But, in so doing, they diluted the Telugu and Kannadiga cultural and nationalist sensibilities, and no dominant caste succeeded in securing the permanent support of the "Backward Classes". In Andhra Pradesh, the repeated intervention of the central government in 1983 resulted in the wealthy and middle peasantry, the business world and the educated middle class obtaining the support of the "Backward Castes" when they defended Telugu dignity against the attempts of the centre to substitute the Congress Party for the regional Telugu Desam Party (Reddy 1989).

![Figure 3: Caste composition in Andhra Pradesh (total population: 66.33 millions) in 1991](image)

In Karnataka, Devraj Urs, the first chief minister of the state, profited from the "campaign for the poor" led on a national level by Indira Gandhi, by progressively reducing the proportion of Lingayat and Vokkaliga candidates in the 1970s, through according privileges to the low and "scheduled" castes and the Muslims. The new government, comprised of a majority of disadvantaged groups, combined reservations for the "Backward Classes" (including Muslims and virtually all other castes except for the Lingayats) with a range of social development programmes so as to build the largest possible coalition of disadvantaged groups. Deliberately arousing the sentiment of prescriptive social adherence, the style of mobilisation set in motion by Devraj Urs favoured the development of caste associations which reinforced the resentment felt toward the dominant Vokkaligas and Lingayats. Aside from the Tamil country, however, these caste associations shared no common political ideology and had but little economic power. In Karnataka, as in Andhra, the

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mobilisation of the "Backward Classes" was mixed with both a competitive and populist politics, that led to widespread corruption. In the former, a series of affairs involving the misappropriation of public funds provoked rapid changes of government, from Congress (I), in power until 1983, to the Janata, between 1983 and 1988, and again to Congress (I), in power since 1989 (Manor 1989).

![Caste composition in Karnataka](image)

**Figure 4: Caste composition in Karnataka**
(total population: 44.8 millions) in 1991

Throughout South India, reservations for the "Backward Classes" combined with costly social rehabilitation programmes made possible a policy of accommodation which allowed a modest proportion of members of disadvantaged classes to join the urban middle class, finding jobs in political institutions and public bodies of the state. This was not the case, however, in regions more rigidly structured around the division of varna-s. In North India, such a policy produced violent confrontations between "Backward Classes" and "Forward Castes" reaching to the very centre of the state machinery, which has henceforth been powerless to forestall caste and class confrontations.

In Gujarat, for example, the Patidars left the Congress Party during the 1975 elections to join the United Front, a coalition in alliance with the Janata. The responding Congress strategy consisted in building an alliance of disadvantaged social groups, called KHAM (Koli-Kshatriyas, Harijans, Adivasis and Muslims), which enabled it to return to power in 1980. But the attempt to cut off the social base of the political power of the Vaniyas, Brahmins and Patidars and to transfer that base to the Koli-Kshatriyas, miscarried in the face of resistance from the economically powerful higher
castes. Since the 1980s, Vanias as well as Brahmans had become anxious regarding growing unemployment in their ranks, which they explained by the 21% reservations intended for "scheduled" castes and tribes. Similarly, the Patidars, who claimed for themselves the Kshatriya status, saw possibilities to enter colleges dwindle because of the over-representation of "scheduled" and artisan castes. In 1981, the resentment of the upper castes towards reservations took the form of sporadic clashes with the "Scheduled Castes". And, it was at that very time that the government, contrary to all expectations, took the decision to raise to 28% the quotas reserved for "Socially and Educationally Backward Classes" (SEBC). Subsequent agitation quickly became uncontrollable strikes alternated with riots. These were led by students from the middle and upper classes and soon won over government employees, the medical corps, and the police. Only the intervention of the Indian army succeeded in returning calm after the decision to increase the quota had been withdrawn. Not only did these events result in the dangerous polarisation of the state entire social life, they were also a preview of subsequent violent clashes between Hindus and Muslims (Shah 1990).

![Caste composition in Gujarat (1994)](image)

**Figure 5 : Caste composition in Gujarat (1994)**

### 4.3. The Rise of the Peasant Castes

In the Hindi-speaking states, one observes since the 1960s a rise in strength of peasant castes, commonly called *kulaks*, because they are associated with the development of capitalism in agriculture (Prasad 1991). It was a

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question of the formation of a front of castes comprising Yadavs, Jats, Gujars and Rajputs organised by an elite of small landowners with common interests, sometimes described as "bullock-cart capitalists" (Rudolph & Rudolph 1987: 49). Not being of sufficient number to win a majority in the assemblies of the federal states, they attempted to gain the support of the "backward" classes by clashing with the powerful Kurmis. Profiting in 1977 from the state of emergency, the representatives of these peasant castes succeeded in being appointed as heads of government in Haryana, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. This rapid political expansion sanctioned economic enrichment resulting from the transformation of their agrarian world. For not only had agrarian reforms enabled them to accede to landownership, but the "Green Revolution", that is, the development of irrigation and the introduction of high-yield seeds, had favoured the landowners who, though small, nevertheless had the means to invest. In 1983, 23.3 % of the member of parliament came from this milieu.

In Bihar and in Uttar Pradesh, the "Backward Castes" emerged as an important force by opposing the Congress Party. In theses states the confrontation was led by a fluctuating number of groups, extending from the Shudras to the "twice-born", with a view to replacing the upper-caste leaders in the state legislature by cutting into their monopoly of government posts through reservations. The rivalry also assumed a class dimension as the leaders of the "Backwards" attempted to enlarge their social base by amalgamating wealthy and middle peasants. To achieve this, they appealed to common resentment felt by the peasants, this time including the poor, towards the high castes who scorned agricultural work which historically fell to the lower orders. The industrial under-development of these states exacerbated social competition since the towns offered little opportunity for the educated members of the upper castes, other than to those engaged in government jobs. Moreover, obtaining this type of employment is perceived by the "Backward Classes" as the only possibility to surmount the stigma of caste, as well as their irremediable poverty. The decision by the Janata government in Bihar to institute a policy of twenty-five per cent reservations for the "Other Backward Classes" for the first time in 1978 intensified the confrontation. The subsequent clashes polarised the "Backwards" and "Forwards" in nearly all the villages and towns of the state. And even though the impression would have dominated that the "Forwards" had gained the upper hand with the return to power of the Congress Party in 1980, the conflict persisted and the state machinery was unable to bring it to an end. All the more so, since besides the
insurmountable identities which belong to caste, the "Backwards" began to form alliances with the poor peasants among the Rajputs, the "Scheduled Castes" and the Muslims. By thus lending its support to the Janata Dal, this coalition prevented a Congress victory on the national level in 1989 and indeed supplanted it as the first party in the state in 1990 (Frankel 1989).

![Caste Composition and "vote bank" in Bihar (1995)](image)

**Figure 6:** Caste Composition and "vote bank" in Bihar (1995)
The political developments in Uttar Pradesh between 1977 and 1989 reveal similar characteristics. Although the reservations initiated by the Janata government in that state were modest - fifteen per cent for the "Other Backward Classes" -, they provoked violent clashes in the eastern districts. Subsequently, during the long interregnum of the Congress (I) Party, the "Backward Classes" were outflanked by the Brahmns and Thakurs, who aligned themselves with the "Scheduled Castes". Nevertheless, the MAJGAR alliance (composed of Muslims, Ahirs, Jats, Gujars, Rajputs and other "backward" castes), organised by the Janata Dal in 1989, succeeded in breaking up the traditional Congress vote bank and secured control of regional and central governments. It should be noted that the victory of the Janata Dal was achieved with the electoral cooperation of the Bahujan Samaj, the first party to be led by a member of the "Scheduled Castes" able to mobilise a large part of these communities, including the lowest castes, on a platform which was both anti-Brahmin and anti-caste in the middle of the Hindi-speaking belt (Hasan 1989).

![Graph of political partiesVotes according to castes in Uttar Pradesh (1994)](image)

**Figure 7(A): Votes according to castes in Uttar Pradesh (1994)**

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Figure 7(B) : Composition of castes in Uttar Pradesh (1994)

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The victory of the Janata Dal in 1989 and 1990 under V.P. Singh, both at the level of central government and in several states, was a sign of the disintegration in North India of the model of vertical mobilisation which had been long established. A new type of cooperation, this time horizontal, emerged between heretofore socially disadvantaged groups which attempted to group together politicians on the basis of a national class of cultivators. This grouping included the Rajputs (Thakurs) and the most prosperous sections of the "Backward Classes", notably the Yadavs, Jats, Kurmis and other middle castes. The cooperation between Thakurs and "Backward Classes" is in itself an unprecedented social phenomenon in a region where the memory of the oppression exercised by the Thakur landowners, zamindars and jagirdars, over the Yadavs, Jats and other castes of cultivators is still vivid. All the more so, since the conflicts which continue to oppose the members of the most influential peasant-cultivators against the landless peasants, on a basis which is both discriminatory and economic, reflect the persistence of divisions of castes and classes between "Backward Classes" and "Scheduled Castes".

Even though the "Backward Classes" savour, as they should, this (first) accession to central political power, their ability to establish a social combination which could neutralise the upper castes in a lasting manner is still in question. This has, moreover, caused tensions to rise within the coalition. Stability is all the more difficult to ensure as the increase in the strength of the "Backwards" is occurring at the same time as the resurgence of religious sentiment. This was manifested first in the Punjab, when the Congress clandestinely manipulated the divisions between moderate and fundamentalist Sikhs with a view to defeating the Akali Dal. The same tactic was employed by the Congress during the national elections in 1984, when it appealed to anti-Sikh sentiment so as to capture the Hindu vote in Central and North India. This strategy fostered a climate favourable to the development of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

It was, in effect, this salient renewal of religion in politics which brought the BJP to power in Madhya Pradesh and in Himachal Pradesh. It also favoured the expansion of that same party in Rajasthan and Gujarat, together with the Janata Dal in 1989 and 1990, and then secured a majority of the seats for it in the election of 1993 in Uttar Pradesh. The political optimism of the leaders of the BJP regarding the years to come is based on a twofold prognosis: that the decline of the Congress [1] will continue, and that the BJP will be the main beneficiary thereof. In the twelve major states of the country, which

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represent 470 of the 542 seats in the Lok Sabha, the Congress [1] has lost power in eight of them since 1990, and has experienced serious crises in Gujarat, Maharashtra, Kerala and in Madhya Pradesh. However, although the Congress Party in effect lost a considerable part of its traditional electoral base – in particular among the minorities and the "Backward Classes"–, the transfer of votes was not always to the advantage of the BJP, as the latter would have hoped. Certainly, its representation is significant in Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan and, to a lesser extent, in Bihar and Karnataka. It is but one of the political components however in Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal and Orissa. But, despite the persistent influence of the BJP in Madhya Pradesh, and notwithstanding its victory in Gujarat and its excellent results in Maharashtra (due to an alliance with the Shiv Sena in 1995) the leaders of this party cannot deny that the voters have never in the past preferred the BJP in these states parliamentary elections. It would also be venturesome to anticipate a radical change in the electorate.

This growth does not, however, mean that caste division does not affect the most intransigent nationalist parties. Thus, when the charismatic leader of the Maharashtra party, the "army of Shivaji" (Shiv Sena), Bal Thackeray, publicly opposed the recommendations of the Mandal commission, he was opposed by Chhagan Bhujbal and a few other leaders who, on the contrary, supported the recommendations. This difference of opinion regarding the question of caste sheds light on the contradiction within the hindutva movement, torn between an ideology calling for a revitalisation of a re-examined Brahminism, and a thirst to conquer which obliges it to recruit among the Shudras so as to enlarge its political base.

But as this religious resurgence shows when linked with the expansion of the nationalist parties there are nearly inexhaustible potentialities for exploiting social identities by politicians. Indeed, the majority of the Indian political parties continue to mobilise the poor on the basis of caste or community, rather than on a class basis. This is so even though the expansion of urban middle class which comprises the dominant economic stratum, derived mainly from the English educated "Forward Castes" who have benefitted from reservations.

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CASTES AND CLASS

The discrepancy between institutional procedures of a democratic nature and the reality of a segmented civil society which remains bound to prescriptive identities no doubt explains how caste tends to become similar to ethnic groups, consisting of lobbies of modern multi-cultural societies in which great social inequalities prevail. Both economic development and polarisation, with their secularising effects, have led to a paradoxical situation. Although caste, as a group defined by a ritual status, has weakened, it has become stronger in both communitarian and ethnic senses. The congruence of ritual status and politico-economic power has lessened, even though castes have not yet been transformed into classes, while local hierarchic patronage loyalties give way to solidarities dictated by the awareness of a common interest between people of near status or comparable conditions.

This, no doubt, always pertains to a group of very distinct castes. However, they are aligned according to the play of parties in the electoral arena and are transformed into interest groups whose identities are, with increasing willingness, ethically expressed in order to have particular rights recognised in a social universe where they feel discriminated against. And the awareness of being subordinate favours the coalescence of identities of caste, class, lobby and ethnic group. This model of social organisation in units which combine traditional and modern characteristics, however apparently

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competitive or indeed conflicting as in the case of social classes in Western society, seems poised to prevail as the dominant model of society in the subcontinent. But the question remains open, whether this type of alignment is new in the history of India, given that the supposed opposition between a "traditional India", synonymous with the hierarchic order of caste, and a "modern India", favourable to horizontal solidarity between castes and cross-cut by economic and political conflicts, is today contested (Fuller 1977).

In fact, endogamous prescription always provides the caste with the means to reproduce, but for objectives which are not entirely in conformity with that what is conjectured to be tradition. This is illustrated by a slogan employed by candidates of the Meena caste at the time of elections in Rajasthan: "Don't give your daughter or your vote to just anyone, but to a Meena" (Beteille 1992: 83). Hereditary, mainly service and artisanal occupations, linked less with a particular region than with patronage, were abandoned and replaced by jobs which scatter those related by blood ties and by marriage over a vastly extended network. However, despite the sometimes considerable geographical distance, links of reciprocity and of multiple dependence, which must be compared with caste, subsist in the form of ritual obligations (birth, marriage and obsequies) or, for example, in the sharing of common goods. The very socio-economic opportunities generally offered by the progress of education reinforce former solidarities, when they do not create new ones.

However, caste and class today are not always distinct categories, nor do they exactly overlap. And should the former no longer play a hegemonic role in the distribution of power and of wealth, it is because the economic differentiation within each caste has increased considerably. A number of studies conducted in villages in different parts of India indicate that there are a few families from high castes who are poor - small cultivators or marginal peasants, landless labourers, factory workers, etc. Inversely, a few lower-caste households are relatively prosperous and belong to the category of wealthy or intermediate cultivators. Data on the regional level lead to similar conclusions. For example, in Gujarat, 2% of the Brahmin households and 33% of the Patidar (intermediate caste) households are wealthy peasants who cultivate more than sixteen acres of land, as against 11% of the Koli ("backward") households, 5% of the "Scheduled Castes" and 2% of the "Scheduled Tribes" in the same category. On the other hand, scarcely 1% of the Brahmins and 5% of the Patidars are cultivators or labourers, as compared with
10% of the Kolis, 17% of the "Scheduled Castes" and 8% of the "Scheduled Tribes" (above 18 years) (Shah 1985).

Among the industrialists of the same state, one counts a not insignificant proportion of members from the Bania and Patidar castes. But, neither Banias nor Patidars form the industrial bourgeoisie in Gujarat. The great majority of them are small or intermediate cultivators, shopkeepers or employees and managers of modest rank. In spite of the impression that workers from high castes belong *grosso modo* to the highest economic strata, there is no strict correlation between caste and occupation. With the exception of a few castes which are economically homogeneous, like the lowest, their members do not necessarily have the same economic interests; different strata of one and the same caste pursue different, or indeed sometimes contradictory, objectives.

Nevertheless, social links continue to perpetuate caste, an awareness of one's standing and, consequently, divisions between castes. This is more the case among the lower castes, because the union of high castes/classes disregards caste links or limitations, should these represent obstacles for their own economic and political activities. Thus, the situation has turned to the advantage of entrepreneurs who can mobilise the poor members of their caste in factions so as to settle eventual conflicts. Such support legitimises the domination of the haves over the have-nots (Shah 1990).

To determine caste boundaries is in many cases no easy task. Kalelkar noted in the first report on the "Backwards" that the commission successively re-employed the old lists of castes, without ever having verified them. Using the census of 1971 as reference, commissions contented themselves with updating the lists on the basis of a small number of petitions from associations and instructions prepared by a few official committees. In any given case, Kalelkar added, two investigators covering the very same regional zone might come to entirely different results. If it is usual to retain the distinctions between different sub-castes among the Brahmans and artisans, there will be a tendency to conflate similar distinctions among agriculturists as well as nomads and professional bards. In Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Karnataka, the dominant castes were classed as "Backwards". In the case of Orissa, twenty-one castes were accepted as "Other Backward Castes", even though they had already been recognised as "Scheduled Castes". Furthermore, the commission registered caste entities which, in truth, were but names or surnames used by upper castes in their place, appellations which were obviously not to be found on any of the other available lists of castes in Orissa!

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The government of Bengal, for its part, asserted that it was unable to find any trace of some castes mentioned in the list established by the commission for that state. In addition to which, one should not forget that those surveyed have their own conception of caste.

Finally, the scant reliability of the lists in circulation confirms that caste is a segmentary organisation which implies not one, but several identities. The group with which one eats "pure" food is not necessarily the same as that with which one marries. The horizontal solidarity of caste, regional in scope, is not the same, nor has it the same meaning, as the vertical solidarity which still regulates a good part of the relations in the countryside. Although caste still often remains the expression of the brutal violence which the wealthy dominant strata exercise on the poorest, caste practices and awareness differ in villages or small towns and in cities. In fact, it is usually forgotten that any fixed definition of caste depends on the scale of observation. Planners of social development conceive of it in another way than do politicians and ethnologists; social workers view castes without the preoccupations particular to professional sociologists; and, militants of a given group consider it differently from jurists or indologists.
ECONOMY, CASTE AND POLITICS

The correlative decline of the caste, as a system legitimizing an inegalitarian social order of status hierarchies founded on notions of purity and pollution, has led to the emergence of increased competition. Social groups contend through class struggles and interest conflicts for access to the immense resources of a "managerial" and providential state; at least this is the case for those who know the machinery and motive forces. Competition is all the more exacerbated as it is not only a matter of sharing the wealth of the nation, but also of using it as a basis of rank and potential for privileges in the actual society.

From 1984 to 1989, Rajiv Gandhi (and his "computer boys") organised an internal economic liberalisation. The flow of money tapped was such that the urban middle class, comprising roughly forty million persons and comparable to middle classes in economies of the advanced industrial countries, in addition to sixty million individuals on the point of obtaining bourgeois comfort, completely detached itself from its rural roots. This new class exerted a direct influence on those occupying the highest positions, outside the traditional channels of political elections. The possession of money and of the highest official posts ceased to depend on ritual rank and the criterion of "untouchability" no longer appeared to define a social status. At the same time, transnational agencies, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB) became established with the watchwords of liberalisation,
export-orientated economy and of technological transfer, in collaboration with multi-nationals. This served to integrate India definitively into the "global market", thereby transforming the state into an agent and collaborator of world capitalism. These liberalisation and globalisation contributed to the erosion of state autonomy, which had already set in at least as early as the period known as the "Emergency", when it had begun to be more than an agent for social promotion and the regulation of dominant interests. It was thus at odds with the model of the nation state which evolved its own rhythm of social change, relatively independent of class, caste and of "communalist" pressure groups, as 
tatit Nehru had envisaged. For a long time the nation-building exercise was conceived to be one that simultaneously led to a greater unity of the nation and greater involvement and participation for the citizen in the institution of the state. Hence the conception of an "open society" and the belief that democratic participation was the best way of achieving national integration. But regarding today the endorsement of the charter of demands set forth in the report of Mandal Commission by the National Front government, and accepted by an large by all politics parties, there is a growing crisis of governability: how will the Indian state survive if it is to concede to all kinds of demands coming from such a wide variety of groupes and regions? (Kohli 1991).

It became clear in the 1980s that India was set on a course in which a distinct separation was to be discerned between economic and political power. For, in the majority of states, despite the lack of a developed organisation, the low and middle classes of the "Backward Castes" and the kisans gained ground in elected political institutions, including in state legislatures and the Lok Sabha. So the nation that had come into being has entered a process of acute fragmentation, multiple polarisations and likely desintegration. Both the erosion of the nation, facing challenges from the large number of castes, ethnic groups or "nationalities", and the reducing role of the state in the affairs in the country, hijacked by the "whole market mechanisms" and the "global order", are going hand to hand. Alongside such retreat of the state and economic globalisation there has emerged the rise of regional chauvinism and nationalism based on religious fundamentalism which seeks to suppress various pluralities. But, as far as the people are concerned, far from allowing the state to retreat from its social obligations, they are in fact subjecting it to increasing challenges from both ethnic and regional movements and class and caste arenas in the struggles for their democratic rights (Kothari 1995).
Today, such polarisations have entirely transformed the way in which the caste system functions. Its hierarchies and ritual dimensions have been replaced by strife over social advancement and the struggle for greater equality through claims to power. Politics has become the main arena for the expression of demands relating to the distribution of wealth and claims of distributive justice; consequently, debates and controversies concerning the "castification of society" abound. Nevertheless, as an Indian political analyst has remarked, to lament the rise of "casteism" in politics is to seek a type of politics devoid of social base (Kothari 1994). The designation "casteism" is in this sense misleading. It gives one to understand that there would be an ever-increasing withdrawal into caste. The epidemiological metaphor inherent in the idea of "casteism", like that of "communalism", lacks the essential dimension of caste, namely its ability to perpetually renew itself under the influence of political networks, of ethnic diversification, social mobility, processes of fusion and fragmentation through federations, parties or coalitions. What is called "casteism" is nothing more than a polarisation of caste which was begun in the colonial period. Since then, castes have been politicised and politics is each day increasingly haunted by caste identities. It was not long ago that this politicisation was effected through associations and federations, each negotiating with the political parties at local or at global levels. Today, it is rather a question of the formation of classes and of categories: "Dalits", "Kshatriyas", "Backward Classes", "Other Backward Classes", or indeed "Hindus", all of which attempt to enlarge the social base by means of claims, the legitimacy of which must have an ideological basis: neo-Buddhism, communitarianism, populism, ethnicity, communalism or nationalism.

But, the category "Backwards", for example, does not include only Hindu castes; it also comprises Muslims, Sikhs and Christians. To the extent that new caste formations are both aggregative and dissociative, and in the measure in which they can form secular federations, they affirm and accentuate the secular dimension of a society which has become plural and multi-cultural. The Dalits are an example of such a secular caste. To say that today caste has a secular influence, is to observe that it operates among both traditionalists and modernists, among Christians as much as among Muslims. For, notwithstanding the anti-caste rhetoric of politicians or intellectuals, caste, in the modern sense, merges with the pressures of deep-seated social forces and the most active movements. Faced with the development towards trans-caste mobilisation and based on a numerical majority of the population, the
indigenous institution of caste is likely to assume today a democratic role. This, at least, is the controversial function which the earlier-mentioned Indian political analyst ascribes to caste: that of forestalling the unifying force of religion and fundamentalism in their fascist connotations. More than an origin (or a source) caste has become a resource in contemporary India.
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ABSTRACT

From the second quarter of the nineteenth century until today, the successive transformations of the notion of caste and of its socio-economic and political reality testify to the flexibility, both functional and structural, of this type of social form. Across its successive embodiments—associations and federations, movements in alignment with or opposed to the dominant strata, coalitions or aggregations of social groups comparable to "vote banks", parties mobilised for or against patronage, pressure groups and more recently, communities in the process of ethnicisation for electoral motives or with separatist objectives—, one observes the multiplicity of its use and its significance according to context and regions. One also observes its progressive politicisation: caste is less and less a certain mode of social access to the sacred, and more and more an electoral factory in the framework of a democracy comprising five hundred million voters. An evolution accompanied by paradoxical consequences, formerly as regards the census work begun by the British and, since 1947, regarding the system of discriminatory compensations developed in independent India. Because it places in question the sacro-saint system of equations: hierarchy = tradition / reification of caste = modernity, such an itinerary through time and space shows that caste is henceforth less a source than a resource, also against the unifying forces of religion and fundamentalism in their fascist connotations.
RÉSUMÉ

La fabrique de l'inégalité démocratique
Caste, classe, groupe d'intérêt et politique
dans l'Inde moderne (1880-1995)

Depuis la seconde moitié du XIXe siècle jusqu'à aujourd'hui, les transformations successives de la notion de caste et de sa "réalité" socio-économique et politique attestent de la flexibilité, à la fois fonctionnelle et structurelle, de ce type de morphologie sociale. A travers ses avatars politico-économiques que sont les associations et les fédérations, les mouvements d'alignement sur ou contre les dominants, les coalitions ou les agrégations de groupes sociaux assimilés à des "banques de voix", les partis mobilisés pour ou contre les protections, voire transformés en groupes de pression et, plus récemment, les communautés en voie d'ethnicisation pour des motifs électoraux ou des visées séparatistes, on observe la multiplicité de ses usages et de ses significations en fonction des contextes et des régions. Une telle analyse des multiples re-configurations locales du système des castes dans la durée remet en question le sacro-saint système d'équation : hiérarchie = tradition / réification des castes = modernité. On constate également une politisation continue : la caste est de moins en moins un mode d'accès social au sacré et de plus en plus une fabrique électorale dans le cadre d'un système démocratique comprenant un demi-milliard d'électeurs. Cette évolution s'est accompagnée de conséquences paradoxales, en particulier depuis la mise en place des recensements par les Britanniques vers 1880 et de l'application des discriminations compensatoires à des groupes de plus plus larges dans l'Inde indépendante (1947). Mais, face à la tendance de la mobilisation trans-castes basée sur la majorité numérique de la population, l'institution indigène de la caste est susceptible de jouer un rôle démocratique : celui de désamorcer les forces unificatrices de la religion et du fondamentalisme dans leur acception fasciste. Plus qu'une source, la caste est devenue une ressource dans l'Inde contemporaine.
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