

Caste, Community and Association: A Study of the Dynamics of Brahmin Identity in Contemporary Karnataka

A Thesis submitted to the University of Hyderabad
for the Award of the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology




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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the work presented in this thesis entitled '*Caste, Community and Association: A Study of the Dynamics of Branmin Identity in Contemporary Karnataka*' has been carried out by me and supervised by Dr. Sasheej Hegde in the Department of Sociology, University of Hyderabad. This work has not been submitted for a degree or diploma at any other University

Date: 03.10.2003.
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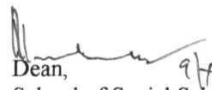
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This is to certify that the thesis entitled '*Caste, Community and Association: A Study of the Dynamics of Brahmin Identity in Contemporary Karnataka*', submitted by Mr. Ramesh Bairy T. S. for the award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology, is a record of bonafide work carried out by him under my supervision and guidance.

This dissertation has not been submitted either in part or in full to any other university or institution of learning for the award of any other degree.

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Acknowledgments

This is a study of 'caste' in contemporary contexts. **Contextualised** to the Brahmin community of Karnataka, it grew out of a concern to transform the terms of current debates on caste. Seeking to animate an 'upper' caste context, the study is an attempt to elide the present academic obsession with studying almost exclusively castes 'from below'. In embodying such a focus, the study attempts to demonstrate the analytical value of enlarging academic engagements with the problematic of the contemporaneity of caste

In presenting the dynamics of Brahmin identity in Karnataka across the (historically recuperated) registers of the non-Brahmin articulation, caste associations and the perceptual universe that Brahmins as individuals and families inhabit, the attempt is to foreground dimensions of contemporary caste that have received little attention in recent researches. In particular focus are the compulsions of secularisation, the attendant equivocation vis-a-vis one's caste identity, and the differential investment in the identity and identification of being and becoming Brahmin. These trajectories could be obtaining within all 'caste' communities, including even the subaltern ones, in the present moment. But the contemporary efforts at analysing 'caste' have remained too firmly wedded to recuperating caste almost exclusively as an identity of assertion. Of course, we recognise that this is an important aspect of the contemporaneity of caste; but it is important to point out that it is only one of them. Scholarly efforts will have to look for the larger picture, even if they appear to go against the grain.

To be sure, when Tharakeshwar, a **friend**, suggested that I must work on this topic, the script, as it were, was already written - one only had to adequately enact it: "How are the Brahmins successfully camouflaging their casteness even as they are firmly wedded to it?" Pithily, the idea of the Brahmin as a secular self - this was the script that needed some flesh and blood to be filled in. And indeed the 'filling in' task was earnestly taken up in the initial years of my work. When one has a script, 'reality' begins to 'act' accordingly, but the course has to be constantly re-charted. The attempt here has been, accordingly, to shift the focus to an 'upper' caste context, even while declining to subsume it within the already available scripts. Allowing the Brahmin to speak, thus, has

been an important decision. Of course, it should go without saying that the political project inspiring this work in the first place is too important to be repudiated. The study is an effort to push oneself to see more clearly what the political project can be all about. Needless to say, even as the present research forges an exploratory, and yet firmly sociological, agenda for caste studies, it does not probe the depths as it were. That precisely is the hope for a more long-term engagement with the question of the 'presents' of caste.

In engaging with this research question over all these years, I have accumulated many debts - intellectual and otherwise.

Dr. Sasheej Hegde, who has supervised this work - for being what he is. With the hope that some day, he will feel that the energies and passion, and of course the rigour, that he has invested in me and my work have been **worthwhile**

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All the usual disclaimers apply.

- **Ramesh Bairy T. S.**

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Chapter One

Introduction: Contextualising Caste Studies

This study is about 'caste' - about caste action and the very survival of caste as an institution - even as it takes on, in a specific socio-temporal context, the dynamics of Brahmin identity in contemporary Karnataka. Is caste what a people at any given historical moment make it out to be – that is to say, is it primarily a contextual construction, albeit whetted by its own structure and history? Or does caste demonstrate a stubbornly enduring structure that withstands the ever-renewing contexts that it finds itself in? What is one to make of the perceptual space of particular caste subjects and of caste action today? These binarily postulated formulations encapsulate the theoretical contours of this study, which also strings together a regional and contemporary historical matrix for its contextualisation. In a manner of speaking, the study may also be christened as the so-called 'continuity and change' thesis, albeit with its premises significantly changed or altered.

In many ways, this is not surprising because studies of caste abound in sociology. It has held a central axis for sociology in India. Caste studies have been a ground that sociology has claimed to be its own, and the other disciplines have not greatly contested the claim. This has led to the generation of various perspectives on caste, even as efforts to undermine the centrality of caste for a sociology of India have proceeded apace. Broadly this has meant a contradictory state of existence for Indian sociology, marked both by an essentialisation of caste (and caste-mediated realities) and its marginalisation, the attempt to efface caste from an assumed centrality and/or primacy. This contradictory state of existence can be - and has been - productive of a reorientation and recasting of caste studies. In this our introductory chapter, we reexamine the literature on caste, not with the intent of providing an exhaustive summary of the trends in the scholarship, but as a prelude to reorienting studies within the field. Our aim here is two-fold: on the one hand, to articulate a statement on perspectives in the sociology of caste that would be comprehensible by one and all without, for all that, lapsing into oversimplification, and, on the other hand, to lend some context to the historicising impulse undergirding this

study. The constitutive task here is to facilitate a kind of **agenda-setting** - at once, methodological and epistemological - for studying contemporary realities of caste, and not simply to achieve a substantive summation of the field of caste studies. In rendering the perspectives, therefore, we have sought to work off an extant secondary literature in the field.¹ It has to be kept in mind that the summation is only partial, often rendered at the cost of considerable violence to the rich and diverse nature of the works accomplished.

Even as we address the academic literature on caste in terms of the perspectives underwriting them, the claim is certainly not one of an argument for the conceptual determinacy of the categories posed in them - to oppose, say, the *anthropological* perspective on caste with the *sociological engagement* with the phenomenon. It has been repeatedly emphasised, in the Indian context at least, that the disciplinary orientations of anthropology and sociology converge; indeed that the distinction between these two disciplines is largely blurred, even vacuous. As Veena Das admits: "In my own usages ... there is a slippage between the terms 'ethnographic', 'anthropological', and 'sociological', and I think the reason is that none of the neat divisions often proposed to distinguish between these three kinds of texts could be applied to the disciplines of social anthropology and sociology in India" (Das 1995: 26, fn. 2). Likewise, Beteille (1993, also 1985) has remarked that one's professional identity - of being a sociologist or a social anthropologist - is determined by one's location, institutional and otherwise. Accordingly, many of the Indian sociologists (particularly those from the first two generations) have straddled the space of both these disciplinary orientations in their own personal intellectual trajectories. Beteille himself has been the figurehead of such a pathway. This blurring of boundaries has opened up important questions in the field, but they will only be cursorily dealt with here. Thus in setting **proto-typical** models, the imperative is only one of making methodological sense of the large literature on caste that confronts and consequently humbles any new student of the phenomenon.

The first section maps, synoptically, what is termed the anthropological perspectives on the question of caste - which, more often than not, are primarily a focus

¹ The works by Dumont (1980), Susan Bayly (1983 and 2000), Chris Bayly (1988), Quigley (1993), Gellner and Quigley (1999), Dirks (1989 and 2002), Gupta (2000) and Sharma (2002) have been most useful in formulating the terms of our summary. Other works that bear on specific questions taken up in this chapter will be duly acknowledged in course.

on the *caste system* or caste as a system. The second section then focuses on those perspectives that primarily seek to perceive caste as a phenomenon of *social stratification*. Broadly these can be termed as tending towards occupying the space of the sociological in their orientation. In the third and fourth sections, we engage with the works encapsulating the political sociology of caste and encounter the perspective of social movements. Our fifth section foregrounds the problem of *historicising* the phenomenon of caste - a demand that we believe must underwrite the very project of formulating a distinctly sociological understanding of the question of caste. Equally constitutively, such a demand also forms a necessary condition for making any headway on the problematic of the contemporaneity of caste, and this will be taken up in our sixth section revisiting debates on what has been called the 'substantialisation' of caste. The penultimate section yields more determinable protocols instituting our study of the dynamics of Brahmin identity in contemporary Karnataka, while the chapter ends with a note about the sequence of the dissertation.

Evidently, the categorisation of perspectives in these relatively fluid terms - and not as something *paradigmatically* incommensurable - betrays a definitive position *vis-à-vis* the 'object' in question, namely, caste. Even as individual scholars and traditions of scholarship have straddled various theoretical and ideological orientations, often rendering the spaces between and across disciplines indeterminate, the frames and peculiar predilections undergirding disciplinary orientations level will demand closer attention. It will also necessitate a more discriminating discourse, roughly corresponding with our section-wise treatment of the perspectives dominating the sociology of caste.

A final caveat, before embarking upon our review of caste studies. Each section clubs together a spectrum of scholars. In doing so, the presumption is not that there exists a perfect agreement on various issues among themselves. For instance, Louis Dumont and Declan Quigley will be discussed within the frame of the anthropological perspectives on caste, but they display rather foundational disagreements on many an important issue. Nonetheless, there is a common ground that a set of scholars bracketed under a frame share. It is this ground that we will be interested in, even as we recognise that fundamental differences on substantive matters often does obtain among a given group of scholars.

I

Anthropological perspectives on caste

Classical anthropological perspectives on caste have all shared the propensities - methodological and epistemological - of the discipline as a whole. They have tended towards conceptualising caste as a totality, as an immutable and essential system uninfluenced by its contexts or socio-political locations. The other anchoring feature is that of perceiving caste as a consensual system of social relations. Ethnography formed the defining research technique for the discipline in anchoring caste studies, informed many a time unconsciously by an idea of a Hindu India that issued off Sanskrit, Brahminical scriptures (Das 1995: 36). Such ideational recuperations of the social reality of India were heavily influenced by what has been termed 'orientalist' constructions of India (Inden 1986) which drew chiefly from indological sources of Sanskrit texts.

Encountering the anthropological perspective on caste will have to, almost inevitably, build around the figure of Dumont and his magnum opus *Homo Hierarchicus* (1980). His work remains the most articulate delineation of the workings of the caste system - a position that was also simultaneously projecting a vision for the discipline of a sociology of India. Most of the ethnographic work that constitutes the bulk of caste studies shares a great deal of common ground with Dumont's work. More importantly, even theoretical positions that diverge from Dumont too acknowledge the importance of his work. As Sharma (2002: 23) remarks: "*Homo Hierarchicus* may ... have been the 'last major work to make caste the central problematic of Indian society' ... yet thirty years after its first publication, general discussions of caste among anthropologists still tend to take Dumont's work as a major point of departure."

However, it is also important to recognise that Dumont himself was responding to the academic trends of his times, and their histories. Caste studies, when Dumont was systematising his sociology and anthropology of caste, were increasingly empiricist in nature. Primarily coupled with the genre of 'village studies', castes were viewed as substantive entities and as constituting localised structures of inequality. The 1950s and the 1960s that precede the publication of *Homo Hierarchicus* were animated by an impassioned plea made by Srinivas (1962a and 1962b) to foreground a "field view" of Indian society as against the "book view" which he thought had dominated works on Indian society. Srinivas called the indological constructions as constituting the "book view" of Indian social reality. For him, such book views are not adequate representations

of social reality, for people actually live very differently from the ways in which they might be **normatively** prescribed. He called for the generation of “**field views**” that need to supplement, if not displace altogether, the book view that had till then dominated the works of social scientists. Demonstrating the value of field views in the specific instance of the suitability or otherwise of the categories of ‘varna’ and ‘caste’, he reminded his fellow-practitioners that sociology should be devoted to understanding “**the way people actually live**” rather than “how they are supposed to live” (Beteille 1996b: 17).

The proliferation of studies from the field, primarily in the form of ethnographic monographs, indeed enriched and complicated the picture of an essentialised and thus coherent view of Indian society produced by the indologists. The field view, moreover, did not begin only with scholarly monographs of the 1950s and '60s. Even earlier, colonial administrator-scholars, census officials as indeed the pioneering travel writers had already produced a great deal of empirical work that laid bare the partial nature of the book view and which flew in the face of the uniformity and conformity that the classical texts presented before the indologists. For Dumont, nevertheless, this proliferation of field-based caste and village studies had some delimiting implications. According to him, they took “the [caste] system ... as a mere collection of blocks and their arrangement [was] neglected” (Dumont 1980: 32). Any plausible explanation of caste had to be, for Dumont, in terms of the *relations* between castes. This relationality, he further maintained, could be grasped only in terms of and in relation to an encompassing set of religious values, which are articulated in the classical Hindu sources. For Dumont, therefore, it is only this method - a confluence of anthropology and indology, as he christened it - that can yield a perspective on the ‘**structure**’ of what appear to be discrete castes and as such making up a meaningful and coherent system.

By hindsight however, both these scholars were perhaps overstating their cases. For, the bulk of apparently disparate and localised anthropological studies of caste were informed tacitly by indological constructions of caste. In fact, the criss-crossing of indology and anthropology has characterised anthropological perspectives on caste much before being formulated in these terms by Dumont; and even Srinivas may be situated at such a confluence. Broadly, this was the result of a unique history - spanning almost two hundred years before social sciences arrived in India - that the anthropologists inherited. It is a history that is both complex and **multivalent** in which both the colonial scholarship and the indigenous elites participated and mediated. It is important to note that any bland

characterisation of this history as 'orientalist' or 'colonialist' (as much of recent scholarship does) would seriously compromise our ability to grasp its varied texture. Besides, the pleas for concentrating on the 'field view' did not necessarily transform the anthropologist's perception of the 'book view' in itself - that is, as being an *adequate* source for understanding what Beteille (1996b: 15) calls "representations" of social facts. This is true in terms of constructing both an *essentia/ised* past of caste as well as an adequate representation of the ideology of caste in the present. We will return to this point later on this chapter.

One important distinction remained between the two positions of Dumont and Srinivas nevertheless - that of the temporal. While for Dumont, the indological construction of caste as a system that is animated by the principle of ritual hierarchy continued to be valid in the present, for Srinivas and a host of other 'native' scholars it held its validity only with reference to the past. While both the sides were unanimous in perceiving a continuous past for caste - of "nearly two thousand years" (Beteille, cited in Quigley 1994: 44, fn.7) - they diverged on evaluating the present of caste. Dumont believed that even in the present ~ one animated by modern, western values of individualism and egalitarianism - the principle of ritual hierarchy holds its ground, while admitting changes in the secondary realms of economy and politics. For Srinivas though, the change is far more transformative and foundational.

Dumont's substantive disagreements with the existing literature on caste had something more to do than with his methodological insistence on the confluence of the 'book view' and the 'field view'. He positioned himself against (i) treating the Indian caste system as merely an instance - if extreme at that - of social stratification, (ii) understanding particular castes as substantive entities at the expense of a defining focus on the *relations* that obtain among them, which for him is the only way to make sense of this system; (iii) empiricism at the expense of a focus on an encompassing set of values; (iv) adopting a perspective of individualism as against the *holism* that informs the logic of the caste system. It is important to recognise that Dumont was also attempting to set up a comparative axis from which one could understand his own - that is, modern Western - society that was foundationally animated by the logic of individualism. Thus Dumont is interested in locating a "unique structural principle" (Beteille 1992: 124) that both holds together and makes intelligible the Indian social system.

In spite of radical disagreements among scholars, it is the agenda that **Dumont** sets up (as articulated in the four objections listed above) which structures the anthropological perspective on caste. His frame not only unites the apparently disparate ethnographic studies of caste but also the divergent theoretical models proposed to explain caste. Quigley (1993), who has proposed one of the most rigorous theoretical critiques of Dumont's model, suggests as much in his recounting of the anthropological discourse of caste. There are two structuring principles that Dumont advises analysts of caste to be sensitive to - principles that structure the '**Hindu**' or Indian² society and its caste *system*. One is that it is tuned towards the 'whole', and the other is that the ideology or value of the caste system is defined by a principle of '**hierarchy**' that encompasses a domain of empirical facts. Consequently, for Dumont, if a satisfactory, all-encompassing understanding of caste is to be arrived at, then the analyst will have to tune **him/herself** to look at the 'ideology' (the system of ideas and values) undergirding the caste system, and do so not only in order to synthesise the bewildering diversity of caste and its workings but also to get a holistic hold on it.

Dumont arrives at that principle of ritual hierarchy, which for him explains the grounds on which the caste system obtains, namely, the encompassing oppositional unity between purity and impurity. This works itself out on two levels - the binary opposition between the Brahmin (as the very epitome and essence of purity) and the Untouchable (as the carrier of impurity); and between the Brahmin (as the figure of sacred/ritual status) and the King (as the figure of the temporal/secular **power**). Since the pure always necessarily encompasses the impure, at least at the level of the ideology (if not at the level of the fact), the Brahmin is placed at the top of the hierarchy. And this is so not only in relation to the progressively receding states of less purity (or more impurity) as embodied in the person of other castes, but also in relation to the King or the holder of the temporal authority.

The French scholar, Celestin Bougie had earlier insisted that the caste system "was a product of the unique configuration of three relational properties of the castes - separation, hierarchy and interdependence" (Appadurai 1988: 42). But Dumont implores that it is only the opposition of purity and pollution acting as the fulcrum of the Indian

² Dumont equates the two mostly, only tending to set them apart when drawing attention to caste among the non-Hindus.

caste system that can make sense of what are usually encountered by ethnographers as being distinct features of caste system - separation, interdependence and hierarchical ordering (Dumont 1980: 56; also Quigley 1999: 307). The several insistences that Dumont foregrounds - of finding the essence of caste primarily within the space of the sacred/religious, of looking at caste only in terms of comprising a systemic whole, a totality, and not as discrete independent entities, of preferring a reading of a consensual unity over dissent and **frames** of inequality - have all had important effects over the future trajectories of caste studies.

Dumont's formulations have been subjected to a thoroughgoing criticism and that too from within the space of the anthropological itself. Hocart had early on proposed a 'royalist' model (Quigley 1999) in which the central institution of caste is kingship, the occupiers of which should be kept in a state of purity, and in order to achieve that all the other castes serve priestly functions. This model has influenced the thinking of many analysts, but most notably of Quigley (1993) and Raheja (1988) who seek to be sensitive to both the structure of caste as well as its contexts. Besides, Das (1982) complicates the Dumontian binarisms - of Brahmin-King, Brahmin-Untouchable, and **Brahmin-Renouncer** - by suggesting a series of triads like the **Brahmin-King-Renouncer**.

There have also been many other critical engagements with Dumont, of course. Most importantly, they have been in the areas of his inability to explain contrary 'facts on the ground', his methodological decisions structuring the understanding of caste, ideological predilections as indeed his putative insensitivity to questions of context and history. While not going into the specific terms of this critical engagement - Sharma (2002: 21-28) has the details, but see also Tambaiah (1972) - and while keeping in mind that Dumont was only a sharp articulator of certain propensities in the study of caste, the signposts of what could be identified as further negotiations within the space of the anthropological can be detailed as under.

Caste as an encompassing totality

A primary characteristic of such an anthropological orientation has been its proclivity towards, to use Dumont's important term, **encompassment** - the urge to arrive at a singular structural principle to explain caste. It has been noted, with reference to Dumont, that there is a "commitment to the notion of totality, to a stable reality, and with it to a stable system of representation" (Das 1995: 34). This inclination prods such

theorists towards conceiving caste as a system, but equally crucially as a totality. The emphasis in these scholars is on understanding caste as a totalising ideological system; and consequently the attempt is to look for the 'unique structural principle' that undergirds this system. Gupta comments on this tendency, particularly as evidenced in Dumont, fairly accurately: "(F)or Dumont the ideology of caste system is all pervasive without exception in Hindu India. For the Hindus, Dumont avers, belief in God is secondary to belief in caste ... [Dumont] argues that there is only one elaborated ideology based on these principles, and for the elaboration of this ideology he depends primarily on the ancient Brahman lawgiver, Manu. From the highest caste to the lowest caste everybody subscribes to this elaborated ideology, duly accepting as their just position in the ranking" (2000: 69).

This insistence on a systemic understanding of caste directs them towards a theory of caste as a 'system' rather than that of distinct caste groupings. For Dumont, for instance, caste cannot but be understood as a system of relationships between these entities called castes; just as the Brahmin can be made sense of only in relation to the untouchable, and purity in relation to impurity. Dumont pointedly avers: "(T)he impurity of the Untouchable is conceptually inseparable from the purity of the Brahman. ... [W]e must get used to thinking of them together. In particular, untouchability will not truly disappear until the purity of the Brahman is itself radically devalued" (Dumont 1980: 54). There could be differences in terms of who occupies the 'top' or the 'centre' of the hierarchy or status rank. For Dumont, it is the Brahmin presented in a vertical linear scheme of hierarchy, whereas for Hocart and Quigley and Raheja the 'centre' obtains laterally and in the context of the king or dominant caste. Nevertheless, all the actors are taken to partake of a worldview, and a lifeworld is taken as given. Caste is a system and ought to be understood only as and in terms of making up a system of values, an encompassing totality.

Caste is accordingly understood, in the Dumontian framework, as a structure of meanings and practices that has no necessary linkages to its externalities of polity and economy, in that it is self-regulating and sufficient. Therefore, it is inalienably structured within and becomes meaningful only in relation to the Hindu religion and its values (or ideology). It also presumes that there is an *essential character* of caste that is unaffected by the larger structures of polity and economy, and which can be retrieved in its pristine

form either in terms of a 'past' or in the contemporary moment in some spatial location - say, in the ubiquitous Indian village, or in a locale like the **Kathmandu valley**.³

Insistence on a presumed holistic nature of Indian society and therefore the need to dep/o\ • non-western, unique/ • Indian native categories

Following from the above point, anthropological perspectives on caste, especially that springing from Dumont, understand the Indian society to be structurally holistic and thus inherently different from the Western society that recognises the individual as the basic unit. Since this distinction is posited as being so foundational as to enable a western scholar escape a "smug sociocentricity" (Dumont 1980: 214)⁴, the frames for understanding the ideology of caste will have to go beyond the simple application of western categories (religion, economics etc.) to Indian reality. Indeed, as Sharma avers in a description encoding aspects of this frame, "sociology is a product of an individualistic western society. Looking at India, the western sociologist seeks the individual agent and, failing to find it, fundamentally misunderstands the value system on which that society is based" (Sharma 2002: 23).

Thus the primary unit in Indian society for any sociological analysis is taken to be the community (primarily, the caste community) and not the individual [of whom the society "knows nothing of (Dumont 1980: 8) or who is encountered only "outside-the-world" (*ibid.*: 233)]. What is more, it is only by focussing on the encompassing set of values - primarily of ritual hierarchy and of socio-moral *dharma* - to which the Indians/Hindus adhere that the analyst of caste can say something meaningful. The *idea* of caste (as opposed to the *practice* of caste) accordingly encapsulates the sociological reality of caste, and the anthropological models have tended to approach the latter through the lens of the former. It is perhaps such an ideational orientation that facilitates building models or singular all-encompassing representations of caste. Access to these indigenous or native categories of thought is seen to be gained through the textual

³ See the introduction by Gellner in Gellner and Quigley (1999: 1-37, especially p. 2). Also see Quigley's conclusion (*ibid.*: 298-327) in the same volume (particularly p. 298) for an important, albeit mutely stated, correction.

⁴ See Berreman (1971: 17) for some biting remarks on this claim made by Dumont.

sources, which are taken to be representing - following from the above assumptions - the entire population, irrespective of its varied locations.⁵

Most often than not, this stated preoccupation with the indigenous ideology and values of the caste system has blocked the very opportunity to foreground the question of historicity or a historicisation of caste. As we shall see in a subsequent section on historicising caste, this preoccupation has resulted in a construction of a *traditional* India that is timeless and continually framed and governed by the caste system. It has always been this construction of a 'traditional' India that has been counterposed against the disjunctive and ruptured present of caste. Even if the scholars concerned would differ among themselves in deciding where to peg the 'past' of caste - "for over one thousand years" (Kolenda 1978: 3), "for nearly two thousand years" (Beteille, cited in Quigley 1994: 44), "for thousands of years" (Deliege, cited in Quigley 1994: 44) - they all seem to agree on not critically examining this past itself. Thus all evaluations vis-a-vis the 'present' of caste carry a sense of unprecedented novelty and surprise.

Caste as an integrative/consensual and coherent principle of thought and practice

For these perspectives, moreover, the systemic reality of caste is integrative, and not a system that is foisted from above or afar. In other words, they decline to perceive the caste system as a consciously deliberated system of coercion in which some people are kept 'low' and discriminated against by coercion and domination. Some theorists recognise the existence of competition between castes - Quigley (1993) for instance - but they are certain that there is an acceptance of the systemic principle that governs thought and practice within the caste system. However, that still leaves the question of consent open and anthropologists have taken sides on this question - in particular with reference to the loaded problem of the 'Untouchable'. Does the untouchable take values of purity and pollution as his own, even as the logic is evidently working to his detriment? While Moffat (1979), through an ethnographic study of an untouchable community (of the Paraiyars) in a village of Tamil Nadu, demonstrates that they share the same moral universe with the other upper/touchable castes, Deliege (1997) conducting fieldwork with

⁵ While this insistence has rightly invited criticisms in regard to its "elitism" (about which we will have more to say while discussing demands to historicise caste), Das has cautioned us against taking that point too far: "[I]t does seem to me that by characterizing ... (particular conceptions) ... as a purely Brahmanic conception, one loses the opportunity of treating it as an important conceptual resource" (1995: 37-8, fn. 9).

the same community, albeit in a different village setting, finds an articulated stress on egalitarian - that is, disjunctive - values even as they inhabit a larger hierarchical structure and moral **universe**.⁶

Vesting an a priori sociological reality on the Indian village 'asa bounded and coherent cultural unit and thus equating caste with village

"[M]ost anthropological work on caste", reminds Gellner, display a "rural bias" (1999: 2).⁷ Thus that ubiquitous 'Indian village' - making up both a sociological as well as methodological unit of reality - has remained the most favoured locale to study caste for anthropologists. 'Caste System', along with the 'Indian Village', was understood to be the two 'fundamental' aspects of the social reality of India. That is, if one were to study India, it was asserted, s/he had to take on the enterprise as an effort to analyse these two interpenetrating totalities, and that if one were successful in doing so they would have something 'authentic' to say about India.

More often than not, an anthropologist would choose a village - albeit after some careful considerations - and study it as though it constitutes a self-contained and self-reliant moral universe of meaning-making and practice. This choice to study rural settings rather than urban locales evidently has had important effects on the anthropological constructions of caste; but also in setting up agendas for the scholarly enterprise of studying caste, a point to which we will return in due course. Thus if at all some anthropologist were to take interest in caste in non-rural contexts, there was an unstated compulsion to explain such choices, even as the village as a natural locale for caste studies went without the pressure to explain themselves (as though it was self evident that caste had some structural link with the rural setting). Most of the ethnographies done on caste thus invariably have a rural bias.

⁶ Also see Racine and Racine 1998. But see Sharma (2002: 47-58) for an argument about the very vacuity of the question formulated in these terms.

⁷ Quigley's chapter that concludes this volume (Quigley 1999: 298-327) begins with the same observation, and is a thoroughgoing interrogation of the "rural bias" of anthropological studies on caste. The chapter comprehensively exhibits the value of actively moving away from such a bias.

II

A perspective from 'social stratification'

As mentioned before, since the boundaries between sociology and anthropology have always been left fuzzy, its effects on formulating a distinct sociological perspective on caste have been profound, even if usually not recognised in those terms. Sociologists generally have tended to **unquestioningly** take on anthropological assumptions as their own, and in the process rendered indeterminate the space of a distinctively sociological articulation. This indeterminacy notwithstanding, questions about the validity and adequacy of the anthropological perspectives on caste have been periodically **raised**.⁸ This has often entailed a standpoint from what could be crudely described as a perspective from 'social stratification'. Broadly, this has meant a normative interest in the distribution of benefits and burdens within a population, as well as an explanatory interest in social inequality (Beteille 1969b is a representative collection). The perspective deviates - at times decisively - from the traditional indological and anthropological approaches to the question of caste, both in terms of its methodology as well as substantive orientation. This has proved at once fruitful (in generating important debates about a sociology of India *beyond* Dumont, for instance) and restrictive (in **overdetermining** the future trajectories of the discipline's engagement with the question of the *present* of caste).

The understanding of caste as but another form of social stratification owes much to the founding ideas of the German historical and comparative sociologist, Max Weber. His influence is not restricted to merely the 'stratificationists', as it were; his sway over what could be reductively characterised as the *non-anthropological* approaches to caste (in that it includes perspectives from social stratification, political sociology, historical and comparative sociology) has been singular. Weber - unlike Celestin Bougie, the two figureheads that Sharma (2002: 10-15) recognises as offering the primary opposing frameworks of caste studies - was keen on the question of comparison. Interestingly, both Dumont (who draws largely from Bougie) and Weber insist that their enterprises are primarily meant to enable a comparative sociology. However the modalities instituted and the protocols set and practiced by them are significantly different. Even as it is easy to recognise that **Dumont's** comparative take on caste gets reduced to a mere contrastive

⁸ For a recent articulation, see Deshpande (2003).

frame, it is imperative to recognise that he is himself critically reflexive enough to remind us that comparison can be pursued only after according the phenomena being compared some internal coherence, substance and validity (Dumont 1980: 247-266, particularly 249). This is an advice, he notes however, that is held more in breach than in practice. Contrastingly, it is the same comparative keenness that allows Weber to understand castes as 'status groups', which is to say as "communities sharing some form of 'social estimation of honour'" (cited in Sharma 2002: 12). They are accordingly like substantialised entities or ethnic groups that have reached a climax of closure upon themselves.

To be sure, such an outlook recognises a history and an agency for these groups as well as the individuals acting within and in the context of these identifications. This recognition can, by itself, be conceptually liberating, in the sense that it enables the analyst to allow for dynamism in the workings of caste. Nevertheless, the problematic of caste as a *systemic* phenomenon remains here uncovered. Weber attempts to accommodate this question by deploying a conception of 'societalisation'. He implores that "the societalisation of ethnically distinct communities embraces them to the point of uniting them [into a systemic whole]" (cited in Dumont 1980: 250). Dumont, though, recognises the tensions and the ultimate inadequacy of this unsatisfactory marriage between ethnic-like groups (or substantialised entities) and a conception of hierarchy (*ibid.*: 249-51). Indeed, with some scholars operating from a 'social stratification' perspective - particularly Bailey (1957), Berreman (1971) and Mencher [1992 (1974)] but also, in more sophisticated and guarded ways, Beteille (1966) and Gupta (2000) - this problem exacerbates into constructing the systemic element of caste as an ideological obfuscation of its exploitative content by the beneficiaries of the system. In other words: caste here is nothing but a system of inequality and exploitation. The historian Susan Bayly has commented perspicuously on such tendencies (though not about these particular scholars). According to her: "[Caste is] much more than a 'structure of domination' ... [or] a kind of social conspiracy ... The caste system may offend present-day egalitarianism but even so there is more to caste than oppression or the use of ideology to maintain the authority of dominant castes" (Bayly 1983: 522).

Beteille has remained a consistent proponent of a perspective on caste from within a stratification frame - beginning in many ways right from his doctoral work (Beteille 1966) and sustained over four decades of consistent writing. His assiduous and still

continuing engagement with Dumont has brought forth some of the clearest expositions of this **approach**.⁹ Therefore, one could begin this summation with his words, which institutes with characteristic flourish and clarity some constitutive protocols in regard to a perspective on caste from within social stratification.

Critiquing Dumont's insistence on arriving at a 'structural' principle that animates and explains Indian society, Beteille foregrounds an important distinction - "It is easier for the anthropologist and the historian of ideas who views a system at a distance to discover unity in it rather than for the sociologist who views it at close quarters" (Beteille 1992: 242) - while going on to maintain "[however] I belong to the modern world, and I would be untrue to my vocation as a sociologist to disown the world to which I belong" (*ibid.*: 249). Being true to the modern world to which one belongs, for Beteille, is to be sensitive to the "material interests" of the society being studied, a standpoint that inevitably calls into question the 'unity' that the anthropologist or the historian of ideas have discovered. According to him, it is by no means true that students of Indian society have ignored altogether either economic and political life or material interests in general; what is lacking is a comprehensive framework for the study of interests of the kind which Dumont has developed in relation to the study of civilizational values. The construction of such a framework will be, according to Beteille, "a major step in the direction of a more balanced appraisal of social reality in India" (*ibid.*: 137).

These observations, as it were, structure the **primary** departures for what could be an inherently sociological perspective on caste. What is important to note is that Beteille is not dismissing the centrality of what can be called a systemic and thus 'ideological' (in the sense that Dumont uses, a civilizational framework of value or a system of ideas) approach to the question of caste. He is merely calling for a correction, a balancing act. Beteille thus has been a very nuanced and careful analyst of caste as a system of social stratification, when compared to many others who shared that space. He does not dismiss the 'systemic' understanding of caste that Dumont represented. However he prefers to concentrate on the 'material contexts' of caste and shares with much of the defining

⁹ The debate between Dumont and the 'stratification' theorists, but most importantly with Beteille, is not merely about contending ways of characterising caste. It is primarily about the larger question of representing societies and civilisations - here, the modern Western and the Indian/traditional/Hindu civilizations as standing for *homo equalis* and *homo hierarchicus* respectively. Beteille (1987: esp. pp. 33-53) bears testimony to the richness of this debate. Our mapping, however, restricts itself to the question of caste.

grounds of the stratification perspective. Beteille is not loathe to compare, for instance, caste and race within "the same framework of understanding" (Beteille 1992: 37). Indeed he even questions Dumont's insistence of understanding hierarchy as distinct from inequality, discrimination and thus stratification: "At any rate, the idea of hierarchy entails that of inequality, whether we speak of a hierarchy of castes or of a hierarchy of angels. And in the context of the study of Indian society, past as well as present, it has come to signify not just inequality, but inequality of the most rigid and uncompromising kind" (Beteille 1987: 34).

Understanding caste as a form of social stratification - even if unique and an extreme instance - is definitionally informed by a contextualising impulse. It also glosses over the prisms of ideology and values, with an intent to focus on the practices and "material interests" that caste simultaneously inhabits and also makes possible (Beteille 1992: 123). These two features of this perspective enable it to resist the problems that have been identified as the distinctive markers of anthropological theorising in general and of the Dumontian theorisation of caste in particular - of essentialisation, exoticisation and totalisation (Appadurai 1988: 41). The approach is also to a significant extent free from the problem of location. As we had observed earlier off Gellner, most of the anthropological works on caste suffer from a rural bias. Approaching caste from the perspective of social stratification does not necessarily have to suffer from this fixation. The promise is one of a necessarily sociological approach to caste, in that the perspective is more alert to (again invoking Beteille's evocative expressions) the "shreds and patches" of caste rather than constructing it as being "made of whole cloth" (Beteille 1992: 246).

The distinction that gets posited between the anthropological and the stratification perspectives on caste is also one of agency. While the former, through its insistence on holism, systemic nature of the phenomenon and the primacy of ideas over practice, glosses over the question of agency of the actors 'living-out' caste, the latter (that is, the stratification perspective) marks out a focus on that very agency - if not at the level of the individual, at least at the level of the communities of caste they belong to. Moreover, the understanding of castes as dynamic, historical and agential allows for contestations within and across these entities. This enables the stratification perspective to avoid the closure demanded by a consensual frame of understanding the caste system. This avoidance of closure is also made possible by asking the very important question of the

vantage point from which to look at caste. It serves up a way of looking at caste from a 'bottom up' perspective. Accordingly, as Gupta has suggested of the work of Berreman and Mencher, "both encourage a **non-Brahminical** view of caste, or to be more accurate, a view of caste that is not limited to the Brahmin's version. My [work] ... follows this line of thought and attempts to provide an alternative conspectus for understanding the caste system" (Gupta 1992c: 26-7).

In the words of Mencher: "It is quite clear that it was the superior economic and political power of the upper castes that kept the lower castes suppressed" (Mencher 1992: 94).¹⁰ Again, it is averred that "those at the bottom appear to have a more explicitly materialistic view of the system and of their role in it than those at the top" (*ibid.*: 104). Looking at caste from below leads her to underscore two primary impulses of caste - one, that it is a very effective system of economic exploitation; and two, that by its very existence it prevents the formation of social classes (*ibid.*: 93-109). This tells her why the East is "Not-so-Mysterious" (the original title of her essay cited here) for all that. Similarly, for Berreman, who is deployed with relish in most critiques of the Dumontian position on caste, the indological-anthropological obsession and romance with the distinctness of caste and thus the non-deployability of the same as a comparative category is simply untenable. For him, stratification is simply "the systematic ranking of categories of people" (Berreman 1981: 4) and consequently there are held to be "striking similarities in the structures, values, interactions and consequences of the rigid systems of birth-ascribed inequality in [the] two societies [the USA and the Indian], in both material and experiential terms" (*ibid.* 5). In fact, he is willing to take a step **further** and designate any birth-ascribed stratification as "caste stratification" (*ibid.* 5). Thus the relevant comparison for him is between caste-stratification systems (which are closed in that they are birth-ascribed) and more "open and permeable systems ... [that is systems of] 'class' **stratification**" (*ibid.* 5).

This is held to be all the more so because - and here he takes issues with Dumont - "power and status are two sides of the same coin" (Berreman 1971: 18). Accordingly, arriving at the central feature of his understanding of caste, he opines: "I believe that there are fewer exceptions to be dealt with - that explanation of caste is simpler and more

¹⁰ The work just mentioned was first published in 1974, and is reproduced in Gupta's anthology (1992c). The citations are from the latter, and the page numbers correspond to that publication.

in accord with the facts of social life in India –if the basis of caste is regarded as lying in differential power which is expressed in ritual status terms, than if the reverse is assumed [as **Dumont** does]" (*ibid.*: 19). This indeed is the central perception that perspectives from social stratification have yielded on caste. Not surprisingly, it has come under some trenchant criticisms from the exponents of the anthropological perspective. Dumont himself had only tangentially dealt with the question of caste as social stratification in his work. In the course of this treatment - which lasts a mere page or two (Dumont 1980: 214-5; also 36-7) - he maintains: "the word 'caste' is used to designate any permanent and closed status group. Then 'castes' can be found more or less everywhere, even in modern society. ... [This] tendency in question has simply failed to recognise the nature, **function** and universality of hierarchy, as is shown by the term 'stratification' taken from the natural sciences" (*ibid.* 214). For Dumont, hierarchy is neither by definition nor by necessity stratification and/or discrimination and inequality - an articulation which, as Appadurai suggests, enables him to make a "decisive break ... with the earlier western obsession with Indian stratification" (1988: 43).

Dumont comes back to the question, again tangentially, in an essay that polemically takes issue with a group of American scholars (but also Ghurye) on the comparative value of caste vis-a-vis race (1980: 247-66). He characterises any scholarly understanding of caste in terms of social stratification as being marked by a "sociocentric attitude" (*ibid.* 254), for they attempt to understand a **fundamentally** different cultural entity in terms of their own norms. Thus "[i]n general, caste here [in the stratification school] is conceived as a variety of class, differing from it in that it forbids mobility either up or down" (*ibid.* 253), even as "an extreme form of stratification" (*ibid.*: 256). This, Dumont suggests in his inimitable style, "reduces a society's consciousness of itself into an epiphenomenon" (*ibid.*: 249) - a position, incidentally, with which his most significant critic from within the space of the anthropological, namely, Quigley completely concurs (see the latter's 1994: esp. 25-8).

Indeed, Quigley foregrounds another point, not entirely unconnected with Dumont. As he pointedly remarks: "To characterize caste systems baldly as forms of stratification is also to leave out most of what is really intriguing about them ... the seemingly endless flow of ritual and ritual prohibitions [and also the] existence of untouchability" (*ibid.* 26-7). According to him, if they are merely systems of stratification "it is **doubtful** if we would notice anything distinctive about caste systems or

have any reason for using the word 'caste' in the first place" (*ibid.*: 32). It is important to note that the observation Quigley is making here is not strictly a Dumontian one. Where for the latter the understanding of caste as stratification is "sociocentric" by refusing to recognise the fundamental **non-reproducibility** of caste elsewhere outside **India/Hinduism**, Quigley is much more open to seeing caste outside India and/or Hinduism. His contention, nevertheless, is directed against an implication of the stratification perspective, namely, "that all castes are arranged, one above the other, in a relatively unambiguous way like a football league table" (*ibid.*: 27) with "Brahmans at the top and untouchables at the bottom" (*ibid.*: 40). More importantly, for Quigley, "many of the difficulties in constructing an adequate theory of caste seem to ... be the result of being imprisoned by this ladder-like representation which one is led to almost inescapably if one starts with the notion that every caste can be said to be 'higher' or 'lower' than every other caste" (*ibid.*) - a standpoint with which **Dumont** would completely agree, albeit to endorse a different representation. Quigley is clear that this tendency makes room for a number of misrepresentations (*ibid.* 27-8).

By far the most sympathetic and sensitive (but also nuanced) treatment of the question has been of Dipankar Gupta, who in a couple of works (1992a and b, and more elaborately in 2000) records a move towards a more systematic engagement with caste. His uniqueness lies, in no small measure, in being sensitive to the criticisms raised by the anthropologists against approaching caste through the exclusive prism of 'social stratification'. For Gupta, the concepts of 'hierarchy' and 'difference' are central to understanding any form of social stratification, including caste. Not all systems of stratification are necessarily based on hierarchy, for there could be such systems based also on a valorising of differences. The former (namely, 'hierarchy') becomes applicable only when the system is based on a criterion of differentiation that can be quantified or is quantitative. The latter (that is, 'difference') "is salient when social stratification is understood in a 'qualitative' [and thus an unquantifiable] sense" (Gupta 1992a: 8), and he goes on to actively foreground a notion of differentiation or discrete categorisation. **Thus** if such a system - and caste is primarily a system of the latter kind - has to be hierarchised, then "the criterion of hierarchy has to be imported from outside and can have no justifications from within" (Gupta 2000: 24).

According to Gupta, "[c]aste has resisted definition quite successfully precisely because its two dimensions, namely, hierarchy and difference, deflect any single unifying

definitional probe" (1992a: 10). It is held that **Dumont**, by over-emphasising hierarchy (and thus an **all-encompassing** unity) to the detriment of a focus on differences, arrived at the conception of a 'homo hierarchicus'. In an effort to restore the balance, therefore, Gupta forges an innovation that opens up tremendous possibilities for grasping caste in all its diverse expressions and practices. According to him, castes are discrete entities, for they can be differentiated only on grounds of difference. This 'discreteness' comes not merely from competing and discrete tales of origin that each caste possesses (consequently the improbability of a single, consensual ideology of hierarchy) but also from a '**hypersymbolism**' that works to keep each such entity separate and different. Thus the idea of "continuous hierarchies and discrete castes" that Gupta articulates, which accommodates both the notion of hierarchy and difference and accordingly is something that is necessarily contested and thus "muddled" (1992b: 124) unlike **Dumont's** unitary hierarchy. Gupta nevertheless concurs with Dumont - and thereby differentiates himself from those who work from a one-dimensional stratification perspective - holding that "caste cannot be seen as an extreme form of class, race or estate" (*ibid.*: 137). As he explicitly maintains: "The caste system is a form of differentiation. It cannot be subsumed under a system of *fundamentum divisionis*' (*ibid.*: 137).

Where he seems to be in agreement with his **fellow-stratificationists**, as it were, is when he makes a distinction between rules and ideologies: "Rules are most nakedly an instrument of power hierarchy. Ideology, on the other hand, tries to mask this nakedness. ... The caste rule in this sense, which holds that the subaltern castes must serve the privileged, is an expression of power and Brahman ideology attempts to cloak it" (*ibid.* 118). However since separation is an active feature of caste entities, ideologies can be as multiple as castes. In effect, therefore, "the rule of caste is only obeyed when it is accompanied by the rule of power. Therefore, contrary to what Dumont claims, it is the hierarchy of power and economics where we believe that hierarchy is naked. Ideology, on the other hand, introduces it 'shamefacedly' but only after effecting the separation between discrete categories of castes" (Gupta 2000: 67). The element of '**deliberateness**' and contrivance that he brings into the analysis seems to expose him to the Dumontian charge of reducing a society's consciousness of itself into an **epiphenomenon**. But Gupta would confront the very singularity of that charge, indeed the very presumption of describing 'a society's consciousness of **itself**'. All the same, one can doubt whether this

interjection would sufficiently and adequately cover the implications of the Dumontian query.

III

Perspectives from political sociology

By and large, perspectives on the political sociology of caste have derived more from political scientists than sociologists. It is possible to identify two kinds of studies that nearly exhaust the space of political sociology. One is what has been termed studies in 'caste and politics', investigations that predominantly tend to take caste to be a primordial or natural "hereditary status group" (Gould 1990: 9) harnessed by and into the political process of parties and elections. It is here that the influence and work of political scientists has been significant. The second relates to studies that see caste primarily as a mobilisational resource and encodes a 'social movement' perspective. Sociologists seem to be in greater numbers within this latter trend. Both the areas have been witness to a fairly productive range of studies in the last three decades. In a very real sense, they seem to be filling the void created by the receding number of ethnographic works that focussed on individual castes, particularly within the bounds of a village. This 'replacement' itself is significant. The predominance of works on caste and politics and on caste as social movements has been so complete that one is witness to a virtual shutting out of conceptual and empirical engagements with all the other realities of caste. This has had important consequences for some of the more recent attempts to reorient caste studies, particularly in negotiating the charge that 'caste' has performed a "gate keeping" function (Appadurai 1986a: 357) in relation to Indian society.

Approaching caste through a political sociology perspective entails many protocols and presumptions. Even as it is about the *present* of caste, it does not necessarily presume caste either as a historical entity or as something in need of historicisation. Therefore, even as it inevitably foregrounds a dynamic and processual understanding of caste, most of the studies that seem to bear the weight of a political sociology are blind to the question of the 'pasts' of caste. A great many of them, albeit unwittingly, take the excesses of the anthropological perspective as their own and look at, for instance, the past as an undifferentiated and timeless continuity. The dichotomies of tradition/modernity, East/West, and continuity/change get replicated in many a work.

Caste - particularly in the extant literature on 'caste and politics' - is approached as an already "substantialised" entity, indeed as "competitive, self-sufficient blocks"

(Dumont 1980: 222) without any necessary relationship with its systemic or structural underside. If for Dumont politics represents an interstitial, secondary level as far as the caste system is concerned, for the political sociologists the anthropological reality of caste is, at best, secondary or given. Their debt to Weber however is unmistakable. Interest in the problematic of caste and politics arose primarily with the perception that caste was becoming a salient and even primary player in determining the modern political system of representative democracy that India adopted. Despite the later preponderance of political scientists in articulating this problematic, Srinivas (among the sociologists) was the first to urge scholars to attend to this theme.¹¹ His essay 'Caste in modern India' (1962c) is the frame which structured the debate, and is still customarily visited by its adherents. What is most important about his formulation is a sense of break about the past of caste (understood primarily in anthropological terms) and its present (subsumed within a notion of "votebanks"). His posthumously published paper (Srinivas 2003) is a more striking enunciation of the break that he proposes. He expounds what could be termed as a 'near-alarmist' view of the intertwining of caste and politics, one that seems to have captured the imagination of the non-academic (particularly the English media) world.¹² This view concretises the consolidation of caste in the domain of politics as the revival of what is thought to be an outmoded primitive institution. Of course, such a perception is encountered in different hues and forms in various scholars. But, foundationally, caste is seen to represent an extremely damaging threat to the development of more 'modern' political identities - either of a liberal citizenship or of class consciousness and identity, depending upon the ideological persuasion of the scholars concerned (Sharma 2002: 65).

It is not surprising that such a perception often gathers itself under the rubric of 'the resurgence of caste'. The presumption here is that caste, which would have died a

¹¹ Srinivas was preceded by Ghurye [1969 (1932)] in proposing a similar evaluation of this particular modern dimension of caste. Indeed, it is primarily on the basis of Ghurye's observations in this regard, as also those of Srinivas, that Dumont was prompted to propose an important theoretical handle to comprehend the contemporaneity of caste. We will return to the axis of this engagement later. Nonetheless, see Dumont (1980: 217-38, but more significantly the footnotes therein) for crucial evaluative statements on the subject of caste and politics.

¹² Indeed, one is struck by the remarkable consistency that Srinivas has demonstrated vis-a-vis the contemporaneity of caste. See his introduction to 1996, as well as the posthumously published article being cited in the text. The near-alarmist evaluation of caste constitutes the contours of his engagement with the phenomenon throughout his long career. See also his newspaper articles during the Mandal Commission upheavals of 1990. Fuller (1996: 2, fn. 2) has the relevant bibliographical details.

natural death because of the society progressing from a traditional to a modern one (at once, a Weberian as well as a Marxist position), is being given a new lease of life by the machinations of the polity and is being kept alive for petty and sectarian votebank interests. Thus, it is maintained, the chances of India becoming a modern nation have been severely compromised by caste.

This presumptively closed perception notwithstanding, a host of political scientists between the 1950s and 1970s - beginning with the Rudolphs (1967), continuing with the greatly influential works of Kothari (especially 1970), and a plethora of empirical investigations - worked with a more open-ended and processual framework in understanding the problem of the intertwining of caste and politics. In their pioneering work, the Rudolphs (1967) presented an important statement. Arguing that caste has "contributed more to [the] realization [of political democracy] than to its inhibition" (Rudolph and Rudolph 1967: 24) they suggest:

The leading and most pervasive natural association of the old regime, caste, has responded to changes in its political and economic environment by transforming itself from below and within. Hierarchy, privilege, and moral parochialism no longer exhaust its secular significance. Caste has become a means to level the old order's inequalities by helping to destroy its moral basis and social structure. In doing so, caste has helped peasants to represent and rule themselves by attaching them to the ideas, processes and institutions of political democracy (*ibid.*: 19).

Thus what is, for them, a "natural association of the old regime" (in the sense of being primordial and given) is "adapting" to modern situations. This process of adaptation, it is **further** suggested, "can be understood in terms of three types of political mobilization, each suggestive of different phases of political development: vertical, horizontal and differential" (*ibid.*: 24).

The framework of this understanding however, as Kothari (1970: 7) observes, was only a more sophisticated version of the central problem that afflicted the earlier studies; the problem, that is, of being bound by dichotomous visions of tradition/modernity (even as they are seen to be interacting and negotiating with one another and not supplanting each other) and of an "ideal type 'contradiction'" (*ibid.*) between such dichotomous visions. More substantively, it is maintained that "(w)hat they fail to see is that there never was a complete polarisation between the caste system and the political system, and that what is involved in the contemporary processes of change is ... really a change in the context and level of political operation" (*ibid.*). For him, though, the problematic of caste and politics is primarily one of "the secularisation of the social system" (*ibid.* 22), even

that caste, which is the non-secular 'society', is getting secularised. In other words, the contention is that caste as a social system governing relationships between groups and individuals is negotiating with the "new procedures and values" (*ibid.* 23) of what is apparently vested with an inherent quality of the 'secular', namely, the political system.

Salutary as these prognostications might seem, it is not at all clear as to how Kothari himself escapes the binary frames that he criticises. His deployment of the category of "political modernisation" only reintroduces the **binarisms** that he argues against in another garb. This becomes most apparent when he talks about the three stages in the relationship that obtains between caste and politics - of 'polarisation', 'factionalism and fragmentation' and 'mobilisation' - stages testifying to a receding significance of caste. The third stage is held to represent the arrival of true modernisation, and thus of a stage when caste loyalties no longer determine political choices and **action**.¹³ Accordingly his thesis: "The alleged 'casteism in politics' is thus no more and no less than *politicisation of caste*" (1970: 4-5).

Kothari, besides, appears to work with some perception of a radical rupture between the past and the present - the simultaneous occurrence of the demise of caste as a system and the emergence and the increasing salience of caste in politics. Subsequent works have all shared this perception, and consequently remain insensitive to the issue of the negotiations between and across the two processes and their effects thereof. The premises of one or other versions of modernisation theory are accordingly presented in various hues. Thus Gould (1990), who otherwise successfully historicises the dynamic that is seen as being merely novel and unprecedented, too works with a similar framework. Again, as Hawthorn (1982: 210) has noted with reference to the first of Kothari's three stages: "Observers agree that where it once exercised social control at the **level of functionally integrated villages, caste now reinforced economic and political** conflict ... that it had become the unit in which men associate for competition against others." It is important to see that castes are here given, corporatised and yet primordial entities - with natural senses of identity and consciousness, and consequently of loyalty - readily available for political harnessing. There is also the presumption that caste groups are like any other ethnic groups and identities, and that, once fully incorporated into the

¹³ Beteille, it seems, also concurs. For this, see Kolenda (1978: 124).

political logic, they remain as no more than mere "names of groups and interests of other kinds" (Hawthorn 1982: 213)

For Hawthorn - as indeed for us - this is clearly a problematic presumption, but it is interesting to see how it is replicated in studies of caste associations especially. In fact, the study of caste associations, which too witnessed a plethora of studies during this period, inflects the ground of caste and politics **further**. The caste associations that emerged in the late colonial period across the country were initially seen as strivings for higher 'varna' rankings - as "idle strivings for social symbols" (Carroll 1978: 233) - in the proposed colonial census operations. However, Carroll (1975 and 1978) in important summations of works in this field has suggested that caste associations were primarily "responses to foreign definitions of Indian society" (1978: 233) which had "important economic and political repercussions" (*ibid.*) for the life-chances of these communities. Her essays prefigure in many ways the subsequent concern with caste and colonialism as in Inden (1986) and Dirks (1997) which will be discussed later.

A large body of empirical works conducted during the 1960s and 1970s covered contemporary caste **associations**.¹⁴ They seem to share many presuppositions and characteristics. Caste associations were seen as "an agent of recruiting caste members in politics", by "induc[ing] political ambitions on its members, and mobilis[ing] them for greater political participation" (Shah 1975: 161). Moreover, true to the evolutionary schemas within which they worked, the studies also sought out stages in this dynamic. It is thus asserted that "politics is not merely an end-product of social forces, but it is also an independent variable", adding that "in course of time, it weakens caste loyalty and develops its own 'autonomy' in determining political behaviour of the participants" (*ibid.*). Shah sees an enactment of these stages in the Gujarat Kshatriya Sabha that he empirically addresses. The Sabha was very effective in mobilising people for electoral gains during the 1950s and up until the **mid-1960s**. But thereafter it lost its influence, as reflected in the losses that it suffered in the 1967 elections. This model of the waxing and waning of a caste association does not get replicated across the country; and, what is

¹⁴ As already mentioned, Carroll (1975 and 1978) has a critical examination of the works on caste associations that were carried out during this period. For other instances of studies of particular caste associations, see Shah (1975), Mukherjee (1994), and Templeman (1996). Works that deal with the emergence of caste associations in Karnataka are cited in the course of our substantive chapters, esp. Chs. 3 and 4.

more, has been commented upon [see Rudolph and Rudolph (1967) and Kolenda (1978) for a summation].

Complicating this literature further are attempts to draw a longer historical trajectory for the peculiar relationship that caste and its mobilised forms seems to share with politics. Gould's final volume of his trilogy (1990) is an effort in this direction. Drawing on the works of C. A. Bayly and Fredrick Barth, he demonstrates the significance of the inherited structures and principles of governance dating back to the Mughal era and persisted with by the British (as indeed by the 'Congress System' of the post-independence period) in determining the course that the dynamic of caste and politics has taken to the present moment (Gould 1990: particularly pp. 5-20). More recently, however, the very *ration d'être* of these studies has been called into question. Most of these studies assumed - and many continue to assume - that there is a direct correlation between caste and the political choices of individuals and groups. More often than not, what is to be established comes to be assumed to exist. Brass and Mayer - both cited in Hawthorn (1982: 212) - were perhaps the first to raise questions about this premise (see also Hauser 1997). There have also been suggestions that the mutual intrusions of caste and politics can take different forms depending on the context and other contending mobilisational identities and forces. Sharma (2002: 66-7) discusses some of these studies.

A feature worth noting about these critical studies is that they are premised on the apparently contradictory nature of caste and politics. Even as caste within the system of ritual and sociality symbolised hierarchy and inequality, its introduction into a representative democratic political system had meant an equalisation and empowerment, most significantly for those castes that were discriminated against and denied opportunities. Indeed, in the last two decades - and in particular during the decade of the 1990s - the debate on caste and politics has overseen a decisive turn, which reflects not merely the pronounced shifts in the Indian polity and its relationship with caste but also the grids of theoretical perception and evaluation that the later scholars have brought forward. Generating extensive data on elections, voting patterns and the composition of the legislative bodies, this scholarship convincingly charts a picture of the Indian polity as a democracy from below, arguing that in the post-independence period lower castes have used their franchise as a tool of empowerment to rally against discrimination and denial and successfully wrested the state legislatures from the hands of the upper castes.

Yadav (1996), **Alam** (1999a), Varshney (2000), Shah (2002) and **Jaffrelot** (2003) have been the most significant articulators of this view. Varshney (2000) and Jaffrelot (2003) even foreground a thesis of replication - that North India (which had hitherto been a communal, Hindu-Muslim - centric polity) over the last two decades or so has begun to replicate South India (which for almost a century now has been caste-centric polity). Given the definitional significance that numbers have in representative democratic politics, this is taken to mean "democratic power is increasingly moving downward. Democracy is no longer a gift from above" (Varshney 2000: 22).

This largely celebratory scholarship, even as it offers a significant corrective to the largely uncritical versions of the alarmist school, appears to work within too many conceptual straitjackets and **binarisms** (South-North, Sanskritisation-ethnicisation, cooption-assertion of self, **democratisation-subversion** etc.). This has tended to block it from fuzzier areas of caste mobilisation and more nuanced questions about caste negotiation. Moreover this literature, although appearing to take on the contemporaneity of caste, is marked out by a tendency to overstate the shifts; and indeed is overeager to posit definitive breaks in the recent history.

These tendencies notwithstanding, the burgeoning academic works on caste and politics over the last four decades or so have changed not merely the ways in which we approach the question of caste, but more importantly have overdetermined our ways of looking at caste. Caste as a 'political' principle has almost decisively replaced earlier understandings of and negotiations with caste as a 'social' principle. This is bound to have some far-reaching regulatory effects on both our thinking about caste as well as the agenda of contemporary caste studies. More directly, it has overseen the near complete displacement of anthropological approaches to caste. Indeed, in the context of this latter development, 'caste' loses all analytical bite and comes to be replaced by a descriptive discourse of identities and identifications.

IV

A window into social movements

A coterminous but distinct pathway into caste has been the perspective of social movements. Looking at caste through the perspective of 'social movements' has witnessed a sharp momentum in the last two decades, primarily in the context of the study of the Dalit and OBC movements. Note the distinct shift that is already instituted here. The focus is no longer on individual caste groups, but on larger, internally

heterogeneous categories like Dalits and OBCs. These studies have pursued either of the following two directions. The first - and till recently the most prolific - version seeks to understand these movements as primarily being animated by the impulse of relative deprivation. These studies are greatly influenced by reference group theories. M. S. A. Rao's works (1982 and 1987) are important instances of this approach [see also Guru (1993) for a useful bibliography]. There are also some ethnographic studies, especially of Dalit "middle class" and "elites" - Ram (1988) for instance and the works cited therein - although, as Omvedt has noted, "(m)ost studies of dalit communities focus on their structures of exploitation; a few look at the histories of their movements for change" (1986: 1011). At any rate, most studies of Dalit exploitation too begin with or eventually take on the 'movements' framework and work off from the grounds thereon. Only Khare (1984) and Mendelsohn and Vicziany (1998) appear to consciously move away from this framework.

The second are studies - theoretically more rigorous and sensitive to questions of history and context - which are inclined to represent the issue of consciousness (and thus of an assertive or hard identity) as being central in such movements. These works attempt to concretise the disjunctive or contradictory consciousness that such movements from below supposedly are animated with. This consciousness emanates not merely from the lived injustice and inequalities of the constituencies they claim to speak on behalf of, but also involve a rereading of the history itself. Without doubt, it is a history both marked by the injustice and oppression unleashed by the upper castes, as well as testifying to a history of endemic resistance and a refusal to surrender self-respect and pride on the part of the exploited. Thus another set of binaries become prominent in such studies - Hinduism/Brahminism vs. Buddhism, literary vs. folk, elite vs. subaltern etc. Studies of non-Brahmin movements of the late colonial period (see Geeta and Rajadurai 1998 for an exhaustive bibliography) are a rich instance of this kind of works, but also Ilaiah (1996) and the agenda-statement of the Subaltern Studies school of Indian historiography (Guha 1982).

The differences as well as similarities with the anthropological traditions of caste studies are important to be noted. Even as most of these studies invoke a variation on the Dumontian way of perceiving caste - strictly, the ideational nucleus surrounding caste, while actively warding off its implications of consent - such an invocation acts merely as a point of departure. The very framework of social movements that they inhabit offers

them little space to dwell meaningfully on either the systemic or the processual dynamics of caste. Of course, these approaches attempt to straddle all the dimensions of the 'caste' reality - inflecting both aspects of its 'structure' and 'substance' - but given that **the** former axis functions only as a point of **take-off** and the latter is already overdetermined by **the** imageries of identity, they do not remain sufficiently sensitive to the internal **structuring** of caste consciousness and change. The result is that even as they reinforce and **over-visibility** the presence and the success of caste-based movements, they seem to add very little to our knowledge about the life-worlds and the worldviews of the communities themselves. It is as though the 'movements' narrative pervades and exhausts the lives of these communities.

This is not really surprising in that its categories are not castes in any available sense, but are blocks that oversee and/or seek a 'substantialisation'.¹⁵ Besides, these categorisations themselves are in a **Dumontian** sense alien to the logic of caste, deriving as they do from a very modern mode of self-assertion and which the 'movements' framework seeks to foreground and circumscribe. The category of 'OBC' is a case in point, in that even as it is proposed by the state, the subject-position announced by this labeling is taken on by discrete caste groups as their own. This is true as well of **the** category 'Dalit', albeit not always resonating state-defined imperatives. That is why categories like "upper castes" and "lower castes" assume here an *apriori* conceptual coherence and validity. In many ways, they need to be historicised, and our next two sections mark out the demands and effects of this maneuver. In the process, the specific contours of our study will stand disclosed.

V

Historicising caste

The drift of our foregoing summary, hopefully, will have become clear. **Our** purpose in collating and working through the various perspectives on caste has been to facilitate the space of its historicisation. It has also served to situate our study in a larger, multidisciplinary constituted academic field. To be sure, the tendency to reduce the logic of societies to a single theoretical and substantive lever as 'caste', even if **interdisciplinarily** constituted, is problematic. For one, as has been noted, "the discussion

¹⁵ This could also be the reason why the Dalit movement and its intellectuals differed so sharply from the other sociologists on the caste-race question that was debated during the UN's Durban Conference on Racism. See Visvanathan (2001) for details. We return to substantialisation in a subsequent section.

of the theoretical issues tends (surreptitiously) to take on a local cast, while on the other hand the study of other issues in the place in question is retarded, and thus the overall nature of the ... interpretation of the particular society runs the risk of serious distortion" (Appadurai 1986a: 358). In perspective is the "gate-keeping **function**" that the concept of caste has served vis-a-vis Indian society. Consistent with this **function**, it has been postulated that "the ghost of colonial sociology" still haunts Indian studies, even that "(a)nthropologists of India have themselves remained so firmly wedded to a Dumontian position (even in dissent) that India has become marginalized as the land of castes" (Dirks 1997: 123).

The demand clearly is to historicise the phenomenon of caste, and more crucially to make our understandings of caste contextually sensitive. Before looking at contemporary works that attempt to restore caste its historicity, we need to note that some of the pioneering anthropologists/sociologists themselves had attempted to look for possibilities that the caste system presented for social mobility. Srinivas (1968) is just an instance of that engagement, but there were many others too who recognised the possibility of mobility within the caste system.¹⁶ However, recognising mobility is not the same as historicising the phenomenon. For Srinivas [1987 (1975)], though, it was the colonial intervention that worked at the very roots of the 'hardened' caste system and contributed much to dissolving the **latter's** legitimacy and acceptance.

As indicated above, any forceful demonstration of the need to historicise caste would have to interrogate and argue against Dumont's understanding of caste which rendered it static and outside the purview of change and dynamism. There is a large volume of literature that has successfully demonstrated the value of such an endeavor. Approaching the question from within the space of specific caste-based ethnographies are the works of Conlon (1977) and Leonard (1994). The former charts the formation of a caste (the Chitrapur Saraswat Brahmins) over a period of more than two centuries and ably demonstrates that castes are not given and natural/primordial entities that remain static. He argues convincingly that "the classical definitions of caste do not necessarily accommodate the full range of possible fission and fusion processes which lie in the background of what at a given moment may be seen as a unified and clearly bounded group" (Conlon 1977: 8). Likewise, Leonard studying the Kayasthas of Hyderabad

¹⁶ Ram (1988) has the details.

shows the dynamism and agency that is so vital in the formation of a caste community, while going on to implicate its contexts and specific trajectories. These two works remain the most sensitive social histories of caste that draw attention towards the historicity of caste.

In a more **forceful** and deterministic tone, however, Inden (1986) and Dirks (1997) go **further** to suggest that the British invented what was perceived to be the 'traditional' caste system represented and explicated as such by **Dumont** in his *Homo Hierarchicus*.¹⁷ Dirks' important work (1989) sought to question the very basis of **Dumont's** thesis by looking at the **pre-colonial** political formations, and implores that the crown was not 'hollow' for all that in the pre-colonial times and that it was the colonial rule which rendered it hollow. Inden (1986), **definitionally** influenced by Said's thesis of Orientalism, argued that anthropological knowledge about Indian society saw caste as pathological and presented the 'natives' as being passive victims of caste. These scholars (see Fuller 1977 too) thematise a radical break in the moment of colonialism vis-a-vis both Indian society as a whole and caste in particular.

The contemporary scholarship has tended to recognise the value of such efforts. Fuller pithily formulates the most dramatic implication of such studies:

[T]he inescapable conclusion emerging from the historical literature is that the 'traditional' caste system encountered by village studies ethnographers - and generalised to all of India by Dumont - actually acquired its foundational position in the social structure, and much of its apparent stability as regulated by a distinctly Brahminical preoccupation with hierarchy, during the British rule. Latter-day caste society was not in fact 'traditional' - meaning very old - at all (1996: 6).

Many academics, nevertheless, see the suggestion of a radical break as being an overstatement, and take the attendant implication that anthropological studies need to be abandoned with a pinch of salt. Indeed, Gellner and Quigley (1999) begin their very important work with such an assertion (see **Gellner's** introduction therein). The historians Chris Bayly (1988) and Susan Bayly (2000) too reject the "rupture" thesis. They demonstrate that the hierarchical caste system precedes the colonial period. While Chris Bayly limits the role of the colonial state to one of consolidation of the 'traditional' Brahmin-centric caste order, Susan Bayly demonstrates that it was the interim period

¹⁷ Bernard Cohn prefigured this position as early as 1970 itself when he suggested that the British **rigidified** the previously flexible caste communities. See his 1987 *passim*. Appadurai (1986b) and Breckenridge and van der Veer (1994) share similar views.

between the fall of the Mughal Empire and the consolidation of the British rule that brought about a **firm** ensconcing of the traditional caste system. Furthermore, Quigley's *The Interpretation of Caste* (1993) is an important instance of a necessarily anthropological theoretical work that accommodates and remains alert to the question of history.

The 'historicising' literature, evidently, has been extremely useful in interrogating the holistic positions on caste, liberating in the process caste studies from the trap of such trajectories as 'essentialisation', 'exoticisation' and 'totalisation' (Appadurai 1988). By foregrounding a processual understanding of caste and historicising the dynamics of the latter, a very important advance has been made. However, an obsessive and fashionable preoccupation with the rupture thesis has had delimiting effects on these **attempts**.¹⁸ Indeed, as Quigley has remarked:

Dirks ... writes that 'colonialism in India produced new forms of civil society which have been represented as traditional forms; chief among these is caste itself ... Both Dirks and Inden are heavily influenced by Said ... Dirks's description of caste as a 'trope' inspired by the classificatory needs of colonialists ... greatly trivialises its sociological significance (1994: 45, fn. 25).

Needless to add, this peculiar trivialisation does not exhaust the value and need of the **historicisation** of caste. Susan Bayly's magisterial work is an adequate reminder of the compulsions of historicisation. Even as she is urging that -

[C]aste was and is, to a considerable extent, what people *think* of it, and how they act on these perceptions. Far from being a static reflection of received codes and values, caste has been a dynamic force in Indian **life** and thought: it has been embodied in what people do and say at any given moment about the conventions and values which they define as those of 'caste society' (Bayly 2000: 7)

- she is emphatic: "[C]aste has been for many centuries a real and active part of Indian life, and not just a self-serving orientalist fiction. (*ibid.*: 3). Further on, she states:

[The] attempts to downplay or even dismiss the significance of Brahmins and Brahmanical caste values go against the grain of much that is familiar both from the historical record and in contemporary Indian life. The social scientists who will probably have the most enduring impact on the field are therefore those who have taken Dumont's formulations seriously rather than dismissing them altogether (*ibid.* 23).

Mark the point, invoking at once the systemic properties of caste and highlighting its processual dimensions. Against this backdrop perhaps - and in the light of the

¹⁸ The famed Subaltern Studies scholarship abets this preoccupation in more ways than one.

summation offered in the foregoing pages - we can lay out the matrix of understanding undergirding this study. While its **specific** methodological and operative aspects will be encountered in the next chapter, we are here concerned to prise open the problematic of the contemporaneity of caste, and which, in the context of this study, is contextualised to the Brahmin community in Karnataka.

VI

The 'presents' of caste and the thesis of substantialisation

The foregoing leaves us with the problematic of how to make sense of the contemporaneity of caste: about what is happening to its hierarchical principle, the meanings and the kinds of legitimacy that actors inside the world of caste are according to their 'casteness' (as it were), the objective and subjective forms that caste takes in contemporary society, the 'modernity' of caste expressions, and so on. To be sure, the question of the 'presents' of caste has engaged various scholars. Evidently, the works we reviewed under the rubric of social movements and political sociology as indeed the integuments of a stratification perspective on caste are also engaging with this very problematic. However, our intent here in this section is to lend a more constructive profile to the dimensions that will inevitably come to be attached to our study. Fuller has remarked that "on the subject of caste ... anthropologists and sociologists have generally been more confident about structural continuity than contemporary change" (1996: 1). But if it is both 'continuity' *and* 'change' that is the focus vis-a-vis the world of caste, where does one go?

Again it is not surprising that the scholarship, in attempting to answer this question, should take **off** from Dumont's suggestion. His thesis on 'substantialisation' is by far the only conceptual lever that has sought to grasp the diverse and contradictory changes that caste has undergone over the last century. In fact, even those who are inclined to dismiss Dumont's larger theory of the caste system are willing to concede the usefulness of this thesis (see Hawthorn 1982; Fuller 1996; and Dirks 2002 *passim*). The thesis of substantialisation, in brief, is an attempt to encapsulate and theorise the contents of the various village and caste ethnographies as well as the macro trends that Ghurye and Srinivas in particular were noting about the caste system. While conceding that changes have occurred in the world of castes, and in the process of condensing the data and claims made by academics thereof, Dumont ventures to suggest that we look at it as a transition from 'structure' to 'substance':

[There is] a transition from a fluid, structural universe in which the emphasis is on interdependence and in which there is no privileged level, no **firm** units, to a universe of impenetrable blocks, self-sufficient, essentially identical and in competition with one another, a universe in which the caste appears as a collective *individual* ... as a substance" (1980: 222, emphasis in original).

Along the contours of this transition caste entities are no longer relational and therefore interdependent, but (as **Dumont** puts it) "each caste [has become] an individual confronting other individuals" seemingly accepting equality (*ibid.*: 227). The recognition of this possibility notwithstanding, Dumont however is not interested to **modify** his structuralist account of caste. As he avers:

But one must not lose sight of the fact that this alleged modification, however genuine it may be, remains incomplete. It bears on the politico-economic domain of social life ... [However] the politico-economic domain is encompassed in an overall religious setting ... Everything happens as if the system tolerated change only within one of its secondary spheres" (*ibid.* 228).

A large body of scholarship that either feeds off or into the 'presents' of caste seems to validate this thesis of the substantialisation of caste in the modern condition. This is so even if individual scholars have sought to distance themselves from **Dumont's** obsessions, whether it be his classification of "primary" (religious) and "secondary" (economics and politics) spheres or his rendering of the temporal dimension of caste (the latter as a matter of "structure" in the past and of "substance" in the present). Some - most notably Shah and Desai (1988) - have sought to avoid the terms of the **Dumontian** reference altogether. But summing this scholarship within the language of substantialisation demands that the loads of the larger Dumontian framework that we outlined above (cf. Section I) be addressed. Evidently the scholarship would struggle to bear such a load. Thus encoding the existing body of work on the contemporary avatars of caste *as postfacto* authorising the thesis of substantialisation remains problematic.

All the same, it can be suggested that in order to work with the idea of substantialisation, it is not a *logical* necessity that one shares the larger framework of Dumont. Interestingly, Dumont himself is rather reticent to announce a break in the world of caste; and while this might have to do with the urge to "protect the validity of [his] synchronic structural model from any ostensibly contradictory evidence emerging from modern change" (Fuller 1996: 12), the thesis of 'substantialisation' seems yet valuable in furthering engagement with the contemporaneity of caste.

Clearly, community and village studies (even by the 1950s itself) were testifying to a weakening of the hierarchical values of commensal restrictions and those of touchability (see Sharma 2002: 60-2 for a summation; and Mayer 1996 for a **specific** instance). In urban areas, the studies ventured to suggest, the maintenance of caste rules had been rendered pretty much impossible. Likewise, the dynamic that obtains between caste and politics, as well as the recrudescence of caste-based movements, have called attention to the decreasing visibility and legitimacy of caste as a hierarchical structure in such spaces. Beteille in more recent years (1991 and 1996a in particular) has sought to thematise a growing irrelevance of caste - both as a substantive and relational entity - among what is variously described as the "urban middle classes", the "intelligentsia", the "professionals", or the "service class".

Nevertheless one cannot carry this point any further. Indeed, Dumont's gesture of accommodating change through the notion of substantialisation is rather alien to and subversive of his agenda. It seems to arrive as an afterthought, as a forced confession. The gradualist, almost evolutionary schema he presents of a "transition from structure to substance" (Dumont 1980: 226) is rather one-sided and piecemeal. It could be attributed to the near-exclusive focus on what are perhaps the most substantialised elements of caste in contemporary India - the non-Brahmin movement and of caste in politics - and not, say, the anthropological constructions of caste. A more comprehensive and processual reading would perhaps have led him to address the relationship that obtains between the caste's structure and its substance.

Many scholars (see for instance Gould 1990, van der Burg 1991, Jain 1996, Beteille 1996a) understand ethnicisation as the contemporary form that caste is assuming. Many scholars (see for instances of such usage, Barnett 1977, van der Burg 1991, Fuller 1996, and Dirks 2002) even suggest that substantialisation is in fact ethnicisation of caste. Thus Barnett (1977) asserting that substantialisation can "also be understood as the transition from caste to ethniclike regional caste blocs" suggests:

"Ethniclike" because each such unit is potentially independent of other such units, defined and characterized by a heritable substance internal to the unit itself and not affected, in terms of membership in the unit, by transactions with others outside the unit. ... In an ethniclike situation, transactional ranking no longer orders the parts of the whole, and caste interdependence is replaced by regional caste bloc independence (*ibid*: 402).

It appears that conceptualising substantialisation as ethnicisation does not help much, primarily because it strips the former of any distinctness particularly in explaining the particular transformations caste as an ideological system is undergoing but also because the term ethnic/ethnicity has been rendered too vague and imprecise. However it appears that it is no coincidence or a mistake that many scholars have equated the two, for the very ways in which Dumont articulated the thesis enables this equation. Neither does the very move to frame caste in ethnic terms appear conceptually any more useful. Nonetheless, Barnett's effort to describe this process with specific reference to a caste in Tamil Nadu is useful not the least because he remains alert to the differential ways it unfolds at the individual, personal level as compared to the level of caste as a unit.

A more comprehensive introduction to the theme of the substantialisation of caste is the remarks by Fuller anchoring his edited volume *Caste Today* (1996). Towards the end of his introduction, Fuller cites the novel *A Suitable Boy* • (by Vikram Seth) in order to explicate the varied workings of caste today. In the context of a proposed wedding of the daughter, her mother and her brother express different positions about a proposal from a prospective groom. In evaluating these positions, Fuller of course dissolves into a gradualist stance by deliberately overstating some elements within the given positions over the others. Interestingly, he sees the mother's enunciation as being "a half-hierarchical and half-substantialist notion of caste" (Fuller 1996: 28) while the brother seems to show a preoccupation with class rather than caste. In the latter's instance, Fuller seems to believe, the trope of caste is no more meaningful than as an obfuscation of more secular concerns - of class, for instance. Fuller also accepts Beteille's thesis that among the so-called urban middle classes even the fructified form of the substantialisation of caste - as signifying cultural difference - has lost its significance. It is as though they inhabit a space 'outside' caste. This is an important claim as far our present study is concerned, but more needs to be said about the dynamics of this spacing. Indeed, Fuller himself renders the dynamic even more complex, viewing substantialisation as a "*self-contradictory process*, because as it develops castes actually become more *internally heterogeneous*" (1996: 13, emphasis added) and imploring that while relational hierarchical values might be expressed in the language of "cultural difference", their operative significance is restricted to the private realm (for, caste and its morality cannot be defended publicly). Thus the emphasis that "substantialisation is an ideological shift that simultaneously sharpens the divide between public and private behaviour and

expression" (*ibid.* 14). Further, caste actors' "understandings of caste - what it is and what it means - are above all a *denial*, most explicitly in the public domain, of the existence or continuing significance of caste in its 'traditional' form" (*ibid.*: 21; emphasis added); it is "*remembered* or *imagined* as their own past, a social and ideological reality that is now on the wane" (*ibid.*, emphasis added). Fuller sees caste identity as cohabiting a space in which there are other identities that are in competition with each other for the allegiance of individuals and groups.

To be sure, these are crucial points of evaluation for our own study of the dynamics of Brahmin identity in contemporary Karnataka. An associated formulation of discrete castes and continuous hierarchies, traceable to Gupta (1992b and 2000), likewise is open-ended and facilitative of an understanding of caste's contemporaneity as a dynamic given. (Incidentally, Gupta's prognosis is hardly alluded to in the Fuller volume.) Perhaps the greatest advantage that Gupta offers is that he steers clear of an aspect of the anthropological construction of caste - caste as a bounded ideational system articulating a clear structure of values - even as he is logically open to the question of the systemic properties of caste itself.

Some **reflexively** ordered questions however need to be foregrounded here, in the context of 'substantialisation'. Does the adoption of this frame commit one to the instituting protocols of **Dumont's** theory of caste - i.e., would mapping the presents of caste within the rubric of substantialisation require us to validate the Dumontian framework in its entirety? Particularly, what becomes of the language and the identity of caste as **Dumont** comes to inscribe, as indeed the meanings he associates it with? Fuller (1996) suggests that even if we accept Dumontian theorisation to be an accurate account of caste but at a mere instance of history, substantialisation still stands steady as a theoretical lever to make sense of its contemporaneity. Dirks too appears to share a similar ground in making the following statement:

[T]he process of what has been called the ethnicization, or **substantialization**, of caste, heralded by many social scientists as the necessary death of the old caste system (based as they thought it was on interdependency rather than conflict) has provided new mechanisms for the strengthening of caste identity (2002: 7).

Further, need substantialisation lose its validity if we, in a manner of **speaking**, historicise Dumont's caste reality itself as representing the phenomenon as it existed in the colonial and late colonial periods? As an approximation, it appears that one could

answer the first set of questions in the affirmative. However, the second complicates the terms of that positive answer by imposing new constraints on it. A **fuller** treatment would have to await the flow of our study, and ideally they need to be taken up in our concluding chapter. Be that as it may, let us here get down to systematising the contours of this study's focus.

VII

Representing the contemporary Brahmin

As the drift of the foregoing recapitulation should reveal, the transcription of caste as a crucial category of sociological analysis in the sociology of India is imperative. As Deshpande (2003) suggests, the first step is to acknowledge the very modernity of caste - of the fact that caste can and has reinvented itself throughout its history and especially in modernity. This is not to obscure its connections with structures of inequality in India and their reproduction - in that sense, perhaps, an emphasis on 'social stratification' is inevitable - only to suggest that trends in contemporary sociology that amount to marginalising caste by restricting it to certain spaces need to be interrogated. It is only by disclosing the more various and nebulous workings of caste that caste studies can be made more legitimate and responsive to the times.

More poignantly perhaps, we seek to disclose aspects of the world of caste by recourse to what may be putatively described as the study of caste in an 'upper caste' context, namely, the Brahmin community in contemporary Karnataka. To be sure, the categories 'upper caste' and 'lower castes', even as they are handy and ready-to-use, are ambiguous and slippery. They enter sociology (or rather the formal academic disciplines) from the 'field' - where, being objects of contextual usage, they present some intractable problems to academics before they can serve as useful conceptual categories. For instance, the category of 'upper caste' may be used to signify any caste which is above one's own caste, in which case the usage fixes on a certain systemic and relational notion of the 'upper'. But most of the times they constitute substantive definitions - some castes are 'upper' castes and some others are 'lower', and they are held to remain that way over time and across contexts. Even as these categorisations invoke the ritual orderings of purity and pollution, they are increasingly vested with connotations of the secular inequalities of power and economy. Besides, as they are substantive, they vary across 'regions' (in this instance, Indian states as units of region).

Of course, within a polity or a region, one encounters a relatively stable and unambiguous understanding of who constitutes the 'upper castes' as well as the 'lower castes'. In the specific context of Karnataka, only the Brahmin community is seen to constitute the space of upper castes, particularly when ritual hierarchy is the issue.¹⁹ But if one brings the economic and political factors into reckoning, then the category of upper caste would have to be expanded to include also the Lingayaths and the Vokkaligas. One **supposes** that this is what Srinivas was getting at in formulating his idea of 'dominant caste' (Srinivas 1959), but this can pass (for a critical reference to the concept, see Mukherjee 1979 *passim*). What is significant is that the Brahmin community is represented as 'upper' on either or both of these counts, although paradoxically enough its visibility commensurate with its status of being 'upper caste' has been diminishing in contemporary Karnataka. Indeed, in the wake of the latter, efforts at 'corporatising' the Brahmin identity has gathered pace, of course with varying degrees of success.

Our intention to focus on dynamics of Brahmin identity does not derive exclusively from such shifting contexts however. For one, the mode of contextualisation on offer seeks to rid the sociology of caste of an excessive (and even obsessive) concern with castes and communities from below. One need only traverse the methodological ground of the studies reviewed to consolidate this insight. It is almost as if lower castes come marked out as embodiments of an entrenched (and traditional) system, while the upper castes and the profiles attaching to them represent a changing present, one whose contours must await a delineation of the traditional system. Even more ironically perhaps, the choice of a focus on the Brahmin community need not - and indeed does not - entail the possibility of a perspective from above, for as we remarked above the Brahmin community is invisible in most spaces in contemporary Karnataka. What is more, given a now long history of **non-Brahminical** othering of Brahmins, the latter feels even more a community under siege. It would be interesting to capture aspects of this sense of siege - as indeed the Brahmin response to this condition - as a window into the

¹⁹ The case of the Lingayaths is a more contested one. They have been insistent that their community is treated on par if not better than the Brahmins. However, their own internal heterogeneity is held against them. Note also that to refer to caste groups as communities can be problematic. Nevertheless, we persist with its use for reasons that will become clear in course. Besides, as the title of our study discloses, it is the peculiar dynamic between conceptions of caste, community, and association (as derived from the discourse of Brahmins in Karnataka) that is the focus.

dynamics of Brahmin identity in contemporary Karnataka, something that our study sets out to do.

In a more constitutive sense, objectifying the subject of the Brahmin - as our study is wont to do - emanates also from the peculiar state of existence that the figure of the Brahmin has come to occupy in contemporary debates on caste. Although the figure of the Brahmin permeates all invocations and examinations of the structural and relational aspects of caste, the figure is conspicuous by its absence when the substantive aspects of caste are being either recalled or debated. The 'Brahmin' thus in most debates on caste is omnipresent, but the form of his presence is more as an idea or ideal than as an entity (an embodied person or even community). Indeed, Madan (1965) and Khare (1970) are arguably the only full-length studies that deal with the **contemporariness** of the Brahmin community, apart from the studies of Brahmin priests like Subramaniam (1974), Fuller (1984) and Parry (1994).²⁰ Even Beteille, as we have seen, avoids recognising the caste locations of the "urban middle classes" and the "intelligentsia" that he speaks of, although a fair guess, at least with reference to the context of Karnataka, would be that a determining number of individuals making up that category would come from the Brahmin fold. If this deduction is defensible, then the contours of **Beteille's** diagnosis would have us believe that it is merely a matter of time before Brahmins would have very little to do with caste or, more accurately, with caste as a system: it would have lost a great deal of legitimacy and influence and could obtain as a form of ethnic or ethnicised identity, one that these '**de-casted**' individuals share and probably significant in choosing life partners. That prognosis would have to await further investigations however. In focusing on the figure of the Brahmin, as the Brahmin encounters it and plays itself out, our study therefore problematises caste action and even queries the specific modalities of the survival of caste as an institution in the present.

Accordingly, then, in representing the world of the Brahmin, the study confronts what Quigley has noted in another context:

Some anthropologists have tried to sideline the theoretical problems by sticking to what they can actually observe on the ground during prolonged periods of fieldwork, as if ethnographic description and theoretical abstraction belong to mutually exclusive zones (1994: 28).

²⁰ A very recent treatment is Fuller (1999).

In bridging this divide, however, we remain committed to ‘**sociological**’ protocols - taking the term to designate a more contemporary register for fieldwork and theory. In fact, the historian Susan Bayly, way back in 1983, had noted that studies of single caste groups "are beginning to outlive their usefulness" and that "the future lies with studies which seek to portray the evolution of relations between a variety of castes in the context of the wider field of economic, religious and political organization" (Bayly 1983: 527). More recently, but pursuing a different demand, Deshpande has observed that even as the standard anthropological method of intensive fieldwork by a single scholar in a very small area has yielded valuable insights, "it has precluded any significant attempts at developing a macro-perspective based on a more broad-based coverage of the field" (2003: 104). Broadly, in keeping with these protocols for a renewed sociology of caste and working against their grain, we can maintain that our study attempts to combine a focus on both the synchronic and diachronic realities of the contemporary Brahmin community. By means of such a grafting of the historical onto the space of the present, we seek to resist the contemporary impulse both to ‘**substantialise** caste’ as well as to announce a radical break with its past. Clearly, the thesis of substantialisation is not the last word on the contemporaneity of caste, and indeed, as we indicated above with reference to Fuller, the process itself is a self-contradictory one. What this entails is a more empirical and perceptual engagement with the world of contemporary **caste(s)**, something that we seek to do in the course of investigating the dynamics of Brahmin identity in contemporary Karnataka. The specific methodological resonances attaching to our study will be recounted more fully in the next chapter.

To sum up the object of our research: the study issues from a concern to attend to “**caste**” in upper caste contexts, and translates into a focus on caste as an axis of identity and identification. The study is contextualised to the Brahmin community in contemporary Karnataka and seeks to map the perceptual field (individual and organised, historical and contemporary) occupied by the community as a whole. Along this course, the study will query the differential investment in the category of the "Brahmin".

VIII

A note on the chapterisation

The dissertation is sequenced as follows. The present chapter has been concerned to contextualise the study to the trends and perspectives that have dominated the sociology of caste. In the course of this summation, we also gave a glimpse of the object

and concerns configuring the study. Our second chapter incorporates concerns that are primarily methodological. The axis of a '**movement**' framework is actively repudiated, and a perspective on caste in/and/as identity is explored. The chapter also introduces the field of study by **summarizing** the historical and substantive contexts in which the work is taking shape. A note on the research materials used and the sampling strategies adopted is also included.

Following this methodological chapter, the next four go on to describe the dynamics of Brahmin identity across three prominent registers. Chapter three maps a contemporary history - that is, over the twentieth century - of the Brahmin community. This exercise, we seek to show, is not merely one of **contextualising** the study. The trajectories that the community undertook are constitutively enmeshed in the ways the modern Brahmin identity recuperates itself. The dominance of the Brahmins in the emerging spaces of the modern, the secularising experience that its individuals undergo, the consolidation of social and symbolic capital - all these are elaborated in this chapter. The Brahmin identity begins to posit itself increasingly in secularised terms - as a self whose identity is perceived to be outside or beyond the realms of caste. Such secularised imaginations of the self stand in sharp contrast to the non-Brahmin recuperation of the Brahmin persona, which insists on seeing the Brahmin as primarily a **caste-self**. It is this contestation that in many enduring ways structures the parameters of action within which the modern Brahmin identity begins play itself out (while also reinforcing the sense of siege that the community experiences).

Accordingly, the fourth chapter encounters aspects of the **non-Brahminical** othering of the Brahmin identity and community. It examines the responses of and negotiations with that othering on the part of Brahmins in the late colonial period (beginning from the 1900s) in the region that later came to be identified as the state of Karnataka, particularly the Princely Mysore State. This chapter also describes the many other intersecting voices - such as that of the Lingayaths as indeed of the contending imaginations of the self obtaining within the Brahmin fold - in order to map the shifting identifications that the Brahmin self foregrounds. The descriptions that get encoded in these two chapters - the third and the fourth - demonstrates that merely recounting these trajectories will not exhaust the space of the making of the modern Brahmin identity. The latter is also shaped by the self-interpretations and representations of the self that are

made possible by the modern conditions in which the community found itself overwhelmed.

Chapter five covers the ground of the ‘**associational**’. At once a conceptual and historical mapping of the efforts to bring Brahmins together under the umbrella of organisations and modern caste associations, the chapter encounters the scale of corporatisation achieved by the Brahmin community as a whole, while going on to detail the efforts to form associations at the level of individual Brahmin castes as well. We will see how the cases of Brahmin mobilisation raise some very crucial questions to the extant literature on the rise of caste associations in the colonial and postcolonial periods. The terms of this appraisal also encounters the ground of Brahmin associations in the present, and accordingly addresses the contemporary initiatives to form both corporate and individual caste associations and the differential recuperation of the Brahmin category that obtains in such enterprises.

Chapter six is based on the extensive interviews conducted among various Brahmin families in different locations. They seek to describe and complicate the parameters of the contemporary state of the Brahmin community and identity.

Finally, our concluding chapter revisits the critical premises and points of departure marking the study as a whole in an effort to arrive at a probable approach to understand caste especially in its contemporaneity and regional specificity.

Chapter Two

Middling through Method: Caste in/and/as Identity

One could venture to suggest that any methodological move which seeks to foreground ‘**caste**’ as a central axis in spaces that are not marked out as such will, of necessity, have to encounter questions about the casteness of caste (as indeed the bases of caste action) today. This is certainly not to be dismissive of either the past or the current trends in caste studies; only to be methodologically innovating from within them. In this chapter, we seek to do precisely this, bringing to the weight of our research those standards of reflexivity that would help lend some concreteness to the study of caste action. Indeed, one would want any reorientation of caste studies to be consistent with its own space. Besides, it is only too obvious that this issue will have to be foregrounded by a study such as our’s, which subsumes an ‘upper caste’ context - no less than the Brahmin community itself - as its object of appraisal; and, what is more, being undertaken by a researcher born into this community as **well**.¹ Engaging this issue leads us into outlining a framework of appraisal (and justification) that is at some remove from the perspective of a social movement’s vocabulary, and revolves around the contemporary fashion of theorising identities.

We then attend, in the next two sections, to the dimensions attaching to a conception of caste in/and/as identity, even as we incorporate some important corrections to the currently popular academic trend vis-a-vis the field of identity theorising and identification. In the last three sections, we lay out the specific operative contours of our study more substantively, note the research materials used and the strategies adopted in the field and present a general profile of the respondents.

We shall be taking up this latter self-referential axis for scrutiny in a subsequent section (#V). The register is important both from the perspective of data collection and theoretical articulation.

Recapitulating the ground of caste studies today

At the present moment, studies of caste within sociology find themselves in a fairly ambivalent and uncertain state of existence. As we characterised it at the start of our introductory chapter, it is marked by an oscillation between perspectives essentialising and totalising the space of caste and those seeking to efface the contours of its primacy and/or centrality. In the light of the subsequent commentary perhaps one could be even more conclusive about the contemporary status of caste studies. The overarching reality of caste, the predominant drift of studies in the sociology of caste seems to be suggesting, is in the realm of politics, both electorally in the case of lower caste mobilisations and in the context of state policies of protective discrimination. Of course, the anthropological construction of caste reality (albeit greatly **deromanticised** by an active sense of its inegalitarian character) is admitted, only to be sidelined as either belonging to the past or as being **confined** to the space of the rural (cf. also p. 12 above). Indeed, it would be no exaggeration to assert that there has been a great recession in the area of caste studies in sociology. It is now the political scientists who study caste and politics, just as it is historians who look at colonialism and caste, for instance. Even more glaringly, there hardly obtain studies of 'upper caste' (sic) contexts. The only significant area that has gathered and retained some momentum in the recent years within the discipline of sociology is the study of (lower) caste movements and the study of social mobility among the lower castes. But interestingly most of the sociologists who work in these areas and who offer a sympathetic treatment of the same appear to come from such communities themselves.

These features characterising caste studies emanate from principally two distinct - though related - factors. The first is a substantive factor, in that it calls attention to the 'externalities' (that is to say, the institutional and the discursive/ideological contexts) of the discipline of Indian sociology as it has developed over the last fifty years. Indian sociology in the post-independence period, defined and directed more by the Indian scholars than the non-Indian ones, has consciously sought to distance itself away from an immediate invocation or identification with caste. This had to do with the institutional as well as ideological mediations that found their way into sociology at the moment of independence. As Deshpande (1994) points out, any perceived preoccupation with matters of caste was seen as not belonging to and actually as working against the Indian

nation's wish to become modern. The test of the adequacy of its modernity seemed to rely on its unanimous wishing-away of caste.

However, this 'unanimity' on the question of caste appears to be more the result of a concerted blindness, for it was precisely during the time of independence that Ambedkar as well as the various non-Brahmin movements were tirelessly reminding the polity about the very vacuity of wishing-away caste. Besides, the composition of the discipline in India was such that most of its practitioners were until very recently from the same social locations that most of the mainstream nationalist leaders hailed from, and even expressed explicit sympathies with the nationalist dream of wishing-away caste. The point here, note, is not one about the deliberate and conspiratorial '**politics**' of these locations; rather, it is about the possibilities of recognition that these locations enabled.² This brings us to another observation. The externalities imposing themselves upon the structure of a discipline are not a sufficient condition to explain the silence of the discipline on the question of caste. Indeed, inspite of determined insistences on erasing caste out of the disciplinary frame, it has survived as an important marker of the discipline even to this day. In fact, the oscillation between the frames of essentialisation and marginalisation can be seen to constitute specific ways of dealing with the problem of caste. This would require some elaboration. Let us quickly return to the very trajectory of caste studies that we have contextualised in the previous chapter.

Recognising the anthropological perspectives on caste as primarily, if unintentionally, **furthering** a dominant agenda - as being so essentialising, totalising and exoticising as to vest caste with a "gate-keeping" function - and as being methodologically skewed have all been valuable. However these criticisms have also been overtly ideological and **overdetermining** in the influence wielded on the future trajectories of caste studies. Thus, not many pressed insistently upon what could be salvaged about the data and the theory issuing from the various anthropological perspectives on caste. It was plainly as though Dumont saw what he wished to see, and the critique seemed to render it on those very terms. For instance, what does one do with a figure like Ambedkar, who made no attempt to hide the fact of where he belonged and

² The instance of the pioneering Indian sociologist, G. S. Ghurye, is illuminating. See Dumont (1980: 220-23) for important remarks on Ghurye's sociological perspective. For a recent exposition, see Upadhyaya (2002). For a complementary perspective on the social conditioning of Indian sociology, albeit attesting to an earlier moment of the discipline, see Saberwal (1979).

on whose behalf he was arguing but who had a remarkably similar perception of the caste system as **Dumont** (for a formulation on this score, see Fitzgerald 1996). Indeed as more and more studies of communities from below unflinchingly point out, **Dumont's** construction of the caste system continues to be oppressively real.

The direction taken by caste studies after the anthropological moment has not only tended to obfuscate the contemporaneity of caste, it has also proved intellectually delimiting. Most post-Dumontian perspectives seem to share this burden (see the contributions anchoring Searle-Chatterjee and Sharma 1994, for instance). Indeed the demand to focus on the *substance* of caste has almost always been at the expense of a focus on the *structure* of caste - whether articulated within the frame of caste and politics or even, paradoxically, in the demand to historicise caste. The latter demand particularly has been most revealing. Apart from the illuminating instances of the **Baylys**, all too often the historicising impulse has terminated in an ideologically loaded and obsessed accusation about the moment of colonialism and its supposed fascination with the enumeration of populations. We are referring here to the works of Inden (1986), Kaviraj (1992), Dirks (2002) and the Subaltern Studies group. Without doubt, it has been rewarding to discover the transformations that caste underwent during the colonial period. But any extension of the space of this discovery - either by means of an "invention" theory or, derivatively, in terms of a celebration of the **pre-colonial** as "fuzzy" - will prove to be conceptually delimiting and even politically contentious.

What is more, this view is even less helpful in understanding the contemporary dimensions of caste, apart from embellishing the contentious standpoint that the British invented caste in India and accordingly that perhaps a sustained effort to ignore caste will end the colonial hangover on our minds. Indeed, it flies in the face of the mammoth data that works on non-Brahmin movements and Dalit assertions have brought to the fore. The colonial invention thesis, this latter data suggests, is merely inverting the picture.³ In

³ Much of the extant literature on the non-Brahmin movements of the late colonial period, post-independent backward classes movements and the contemporary Dalit movements begin with such assertions. This is in spite of the longer historical trajectory that they seek to draw for the resistance against and mobility in the caste system prior to the colonial moment. We shall be listing the works on the non-Brahmin movement later in the chapter, but it is important to note that works on Dalit communities such as Ram (1988), Pimpley (1990) and many others have testified to the positive effects of the legislative measures brought in by the colonial authority. Indeed, this latter admission has been almost rendered the status of a truism. In fact, even Srinivas [1987 (1975)] places the onus on the colonial rule for legitimising mobility in a system that was either greatly resistant to it or allowed it within certain limits and range. The policy of reservations, which owes its genesis to the colonial understanding of the caste system, has proved to be the

fact, Dirks' (1996) demonstration that the non-Brahmin movement of Tamil Nadu - and by extension, the entire spectrum of caste movements from below - shared the same theoretical and conceptual resource of Orientalism along with the upper castes does not really carry the point any **further**. By insisting on the colonial origin of the resource, this understanding trivialises the most crucial point of the varying negotiations that different communities have brought to bear on that resource.

Further paradoxes of course underwrite the contemporary dimensions of caste studies. All the different, and often opposed, frames converge on setting an agenda (or non-agenda) for caste exploration. Even as the validity of the anthropological reality of caste is accepted or denied, as the case may be, caste is often approached as being more constitutive and real in villages than in urban settings. Again, if one has to 'see' caste, then one is advised to look at politics or at caste movements from below, as also at enunciations of difference obtaining within the confines of the private and/or domestic spheres. It is this "fixity" of caste on some realms of behaviour that seems to blind contemporary caste studies to the modern and secular manifestations of caste. Srinivas (1996) and Fuller (1996) are the two most significant works that have come out over the last decade on the contemporary situation of caste. It is neither incidental nor insignificant that the cover pages of both these works have such fixed images of caste. Fuller's has an election campaign, while more tellingly Srinivas's has a photograph of the **anti-Mandal** agitation.

The implications of such a fixation are evident. One need not attend to caste in urban locales, in professional and non-state regulated settings (the state-defined sphere being seen as the key agency that keeps caste alive). Accordingly, caste studies as an agenda before Indian sociology is not only being summarily retrenched; it is also selectively fixated and being frozen. Only certain phenomena are perceived as being, shall we say, '**caste-d**' and others as 'non-caste-d'. The trajectories of two contemporary figureheads of Indian sociology are revealing on this score - the late Srinivas and the almost generationally removed Beteille. Srinivas (2003) offers an obituary on the demise of caste as a system. He does this by according an a priori validity to the traditional anthropological construction of caste, one that is **overdetermined** by its ritualisation and

founding cause for an emergence of a middle class among the Dalits which has been at the fore of articulating a Dalit consciousness. See Parry (1999) for just one instance of the positive effects of the policy of reservations on the Dalit communities.

the relational hierarchical ordering. This evaluation, as we noted in the earlier chapter, goes remarkably well with his early writings where (for Srinivas) the only space in which caste is staging a resurgence is in the domain of the political. This only reveals the “fixing” of caste and the determination of a certain frozen agenda for caste studies.

Beteille's works are incomparably more sensitive and theoretically alert but he too seeks to **further** this delimiting agenda. In fact, he goes a step **further** in decrying the significance of caste itself. The two essays we picked on earlier (1991 and 1996a; but see also 2002) are a definitive illustration of this tendency. It is ironical that **Beteille**, among the most articulate of those committed to describing the present of caste and working off the material contexts of caste (as opposed to its ideational components) should be the most consistent proponent of displacing the centrality of caste for the sociological analyses of Indian society. His diagnosis of the recent history of the Indian society and history accentuates this perception. Broadly, this seems to be issuing from two distinct but closely related quarters. One is Beteille's uncritical celebration of the mainstream nationalist elite like Bankimchandra **Chattopadhyay**, Gandhi and Tagore (as indeed his studied silence on Ambedkar). The second has to do with his appraisals of the present, as reflected in his positions on the backward classes' movement and the question of reservation, as well as his insistence on the receding influence and legitimacy of caste among the "urban middle classes". It is worth quoting him at some length:

Caste has ceased to play an active role in the reproduction of inequality, at least at the upper levels of social hierarchy where it is no longer an important agent of either social placement or social control. ... The recent attack on caste by egalitarians of both radical and liberal persuasions is misdirected even where it appears well-meaning. Caste should be attacked for its divisive role in electoral politics rather than its active role in the reproduction of inequality which is relatively small and clearly ~~declining~~. The role of caste in politics is neither small nor declining. Caste is no longer an institution of any great strength among the influential urban intelligentsia; but it is an instrument of great force in mobilising political support in the country as a whole. ... Equality, at least at the higher levels of society, can no longer be significantly advanced by attacking caste. (Beteille 1991: 25).

Clearly, therefore, the representational problem can be overbearing and overdetermining particularly in the 'modern' discussions on caste. The demand placed on scholars to be sensitive both to caste's conflictual and consensual aspects has gained increasing momentum in the recent decades, primarily in the wake of Hindutva and the rising tide of Hindu fundamentalism. We need maintain that this emphasis on the conflictual and consensual aspects of caste is an important and necessary one, even as the

specific determinates of and possible reconfigurations issuing out of this recognition have not always remained clear or **predictable**.⁴ All the same, we still have to clarify the methodological moves that could be made in recuperating the dynamics of the contemporary Brahmin identity.

II

Caste in/and/as identity

An excessive preoccupation with the substantive avatars of caste - as constituting a mobilisational resource, a collective identity, a movement of self-assertion - has contributed to a commitment to what can be grossly termed as a 'social movements' framework and to its methodological demands. This **framework** as extended to the reality of caste would entail the following characteristics. For one, the movements framework can only work if it presumes caste as a self-accepted, demonstrative identity - more accurately, caste as a 'hard' identity. Now, while the presumed hardness of caste as an identity is not by itself a problem, it is what follows in the wake of that presumption that freezes the operative dimensions of caste. In other words, it elides the question of identification altogether - as against the insistence of a hard identity - taking both the identities of the self and the other as *a priori*, in some logical sense fixed and owned unequivocally by the subjects of such **identities**.⁵ It is almost as if the *a priori* postulation of a caste identity is enough to characterise all the actions and perceptions of its subjects. 'Caste' (or anything in its place) here becomes primarily a mobilisational resource which effectively and successfully gets its subjects into collective and unequivocal action on its behalf. This brings us to another characteristic trait of the 'social movements' **framework** that needs repudiation.

Social movements are **definitionally** collective in nature, and represent deliberate and deliberated upon spheres of action in terms of clear and unequivocal (at least in intent) means and ends. The framework, consequently, takes on a normative axis of appraisal all too easily. Of course, this taking-on is neither a deliberate nor an externally mounted choice. The normative compulsion, as it were, is built into the very logic of the social movement's framework (whether articulated in terms of a 'relative deprivation' theme or organised around a mobilisational idiom and even rendered as an identity-

⁴ See Dirks (1996) for a reflection on this.

⁵ Our entire third section is devoted to a clarification of this space.

centered articulation).⁶ It is for this reason that, for instance, contesting claims about justice, equality, and, in more recent times, 'difference', seem to overpower this axis (see Fraser 1997: esp. the introduction and ch.1)

Such a condensation is too determinate and restrictive to measure up properly to the requirements of a processual and dynamic analysis of the malleable and contradictory nature of caste action. More frontally, following Fuller's suggestion that substantialisation of caste is a contradictory process, the 'movements' perspective is insensitive to this aspect of caste reality. To be sure, the paradigm of substantialisation would need to be altered so as to be operationalised, a point we shall come to in due course. But the fact is that the 'movements' framework, by exclusively focusing on castes as always-already substantivised entities (or blocs), cannot remain sensitive to the internal dynamics of caste legitimisation as indeed contestation. What is more, the 'movements' register does not allow castes, either as fluid identities or as normative communities, to exhibit an ambivalence about their 'casteness' - the givenness of caste-mediated identities being always collectively ordered and definitional to the 'movements' framework.

In an important contribution significantly titled "Beyond 'identity'", Brubaker and Cooper (2000) have forcefully suggested that we do away with the very concept of 'identity'. Their reasons are that it has assumed totalising proportions, even more that it has been put to contradictory usage and made to carry many loads that are hardly illuminating. More pointedly, Brubaker and Cooper maintain that no amount of 'constructivist' gloss on the notion of identity - that identities are never given; they are always constructed - will help redeem what is but a definitional requirement of identity, namely, primordality or a certain hardness and essentialism. According to them, if this property is sought to be taken away by prefixing any talk of identities with their so-called "multiplicity", "fluidity" and/or "constructed nature", then there is nothing left to talk about identities themselves. They suggest alternative terms that could take on "the theoretical work 'identity' is supposed to do" (*ibid.*: 14): of 'identification and categorisation', 'self understanding and social location, and 'commonality, connectedness, groupness'. These are necessary corrections to what can be termed as the

⁶ For the thesis of 'relative deprivation' as applied to social movements see Rao (1982). For the latter 'mobilisationar and identity-centered articulation see Touraine (1992).

fashionable postmodern celebration of identity politics and the logic of proliferating identities.

More significantly, however, while much of the contemporary engagement has been in the context of understanding assertions from below - identities as being decisively a question of empowerment - any reminder of their inherent instability works against the very justification of studying **them**.⁷ Consequently, we need to be drawing on an alternative repertoire of theoretical sources to formulate the question of identity and identification while also accommodating the concerns that Brubaker and Cooper foreground. Of course, subsuming caste to a logic of identity and identification runs the risk of according a reified status to the latter. But crucially the implication of stability and relative permanence that caste actors seem to recognise about the identities they express is important in making sense of their meaning-making activities and the action patterns they exhibit. The challenge really is not one of jettisoning the idea of identity, but binding it to more structurally ordained situations and notions.

A pioneering work in bringing the framework of identity to bear on caste is that of Barnett (1977). Building upon the thesis of substantialisation, he studies a non-Brahmin forward caste (the Kondaikkatti Vellalars) in Tamil Nadu and explicitly outlines "identity and identity choice as the central problem in situating caste today" (*ibid.*: 393). He charts the process of substantialisation encountered in that caste as it seeks to respond to **the** larger processes of urbanisation, industrialisation, the non-Brahmin movement, and caste consolidation within the realm of politics. In the course of this charting, Barnett reveals the extent of corporatisation of the different endogamous bilateral kindreds within the caste, often mediated through active demands of inter-marriage across such units and by contextually determined invocations of casteness. The accompanying processes of individuation of caste members and the resistance encountered are mapped.

⁷ Fuelled by the 'cultural turn' of social theory - on this see Alexander and Seidman (1990) - and the concomitant demand to focus on the fragment or the periphery, 'identity' has come to occupy a central position in social science theorisation. See Hall (1990) and Bendle (2002) for an account. The latter demonstrates the widespread and diverse concern with identity, even as it explores how problematic this concern has become in contemporary sociology. In the Indian context, particularly from the 1980s, the study of identities has come to occupy a preeminent position in social theory and research. Jodhka (2001: 14-28) points to the probable factors that account for this development. According to him, the failure of the so-called *meta-narratives* of development, nation, class, and modernity to accommodate the subaltern voices and concerns has given a fillip to identity-based articulations and movements. What is more, it is claimed that the prevalent theoretical frameworks sustained by notions of universal validity and rationality were ill equipped to explain these developments.

While Barnett's investigation seems to set the tone for our own, it is important to note that the former discerns sharp ruptures in the process of individuation proceeding from 'relationality' to ethnic-like caste blocs, and even pegs this transition to the early parts of the twentieth century. According to him, increasingly with the process of "ethnicisation" the very language of caste - of purity-pollution, hierarchy, and so on - is reduced to a mere ideological justification, serving its purpose by the sheer fact that individual caste members are familiar with it. Charting the dynamics of the Brahmin identity, we find however that the picture is much more muddled. This latter demarcation would have to await the unfolding of our substantive chapters. Nevertheless, Barnett's work brings us to attend to the process of substantialisation as a viable mode of understanding the contemporaneity of caste.

In many ways, the thesis of substantialisation can be seen to prefigure efforts to understand caste in/and/as identity. It also instructs the efforts to map the transformations in caste under the rubric of **ethnicity**.⁸ One can conceive of a fit between caste understood as a substantivised independent bloc and the idea of identity conceived as a form of self-identification and belonging. In either case, it is not a logical necessity that such entities/identities are seen to be relative to each other, ordered on a principle that governs all such entities/identities. But this fit also enables a re-theorisation of the changes within the space of identities and substantivised entities, by allowing for differentiation within individual groups and individuals within castes. Indeed some castes might become more substantialised than others, even as individuals and families within castes could become uncomfortable with substantialised notions of identity than others within their own caste. Substantialisation, on this register of identity-formation, is primarily a process of 'identity choice' in which caste is but one of the many such choices available for individuals to choose from and act upon depending upon the context. Equally, it designates a process by which individual or ethnic-like identities proliferate and compete with each other without any necessary binding logic that relativises them vis-a-vis each other

The foregoing constitute important reminders for a re-theorisation of caste in/and/as identity. At any rate, however, not much work has been done either in delineating the operative aspects of the process of substantialisation or in terms of

For a perspective on this, albeit straddling the contours of the Sikh identity, see Gupta (1996).

demonstrating at the empirical level its usefulness as a theoretical hypothesis. This is the case even if we were to retrospectively read much of the ethnographic village studies or those that sought to reflect on the larger processes of 'politicisation' of caste, caste-based mobility/movements from below etc. as hinting at precisely such a transformation of caste in recent history. Such a reading, besides, unauthorisedly burdens this body of work to take on the specific loads that the framework of substantialisation would demand. What is more, **Dumont** himself (even as he pioneers this thesis) does not engage with the task of illustrating the process any great deal.

The questions nonetheless about caste **in/and/as** identity remain - whether factored into the process and thesis of substantialisation or not. What is one to make of this space of re-theorisation, indeed its adequacy and validity? How does caste in/and/as identity unfold itself? Even if caste is privy to 'substantialisation', what of caste is getting substantialised - is it the ways in which individuals *represent* caste or the parameters of caste *behaviour and action* or is substantialisation obtaining at both these levels? Do the different aspects of casteness, and do the members of different castes, undergo substantialisation differentially? Can we speak of caste identity and identification outside of the rubric of substantialisation? What does the process of substantialisation make of the context, and in turn what does the context make of it? Does the thesis retain legitimacy outside the parameters of the Dumontian theory of caste? Even more crucially, why is it necessary that caste as *structure* and caste as *substance* remain mutually exclusive to one another - that is to say, to foreground a different axis, is substantialisation a process very unique to the modern moment? Have not caste actors made meanings of and worked on their caste identities and identifications in a substantialised sense before this moment? And conversely, is it the case that caste as a structure of relations, interdependently made sense of, is no longer available to the caste actors? Also, at another level, if caste is both continuous and changing, how does one then approach the problematic? Besides, 'continuous' and 'changing' in relation to what and compared to what?

Broadly, these are some of the questions that our study will attempt to tackle, but the modality of our answering is contextualised to the 'Brahmin' identity in contemporary Karnataka. The precise structure of our justifications for studying the dynamics of this identity - an 'upper caste' one at that - has already been laid out in our introductory chapter. In what follows, we shall set out the concrete ways in which we have gone about

operationalising our research focus and **problem** In perspective are the concepts used, tools deployed and the strategies of interpretation adopted, as well as a restatement of the coordinates anchoring the field of study.

III

On identity and identification and the question of othering

It is important to approach any judgment about identity as a judgment about oneself in particular, or about some particular person or group. Thus the question "Who am I?" points to certain values, certain allegiances, a certain community perhaps, outside of which one could not function as a **fully** human subject. Of course, one might be able to go on living as an organism outside any values, allegiance, or even community. But what is peculiar to a human subject is the ability to ask and answer questions about what really matters, what is of the highest value, what is truly significant, most beautiful and so on. The conception of identity, therefore, is broadly the view that outside the horizon provided from some master value or allegiance or community membership, one would be unable to function as a full human subject and would not be in a position to ask and answer these questions effectively.

Within this idea of identity and identification - the latter being taken to designate a process of having an identity - it is important to note that there is no claim that 'others' will be unable to function outside one's horizon. In fact, such a claim constitutes an inherent limit within extant formulations of identity, the expectation being that the horizon of the self implicates an 'other' (or others). Thus, for instance, Jenkins, for whom social identification is "knowing who we are and who others are" (2000: 8). Since identities derive from mutually implicated relations of similarity and difference - "(s)imilarity and difference are implicit in the other, one does not make sense without the other" (Jenkins 2000: 7) - they can only be understood with reference to one another and not in isolation. To speak of 'identifying' is also to simultaneously speak of othering. It is, as Jenkins avers, the "*internal and the external moments of the dialectic of identification*: how we identify ourselves, how others identify us, and the ongoing interplay of these in processes of social identification. This is also simultaneously, a matter of how we identify them, how they identify themselves, and so on" (*ibid.* 7, emphasis in original).

But the point that needs to be emphasised - contrary to most expansive theorisations of identity and identification (for the latter, see also Jenkins 1996) - is that

the horizon necessary for oneself is not essential for human beings as such. There are some things that we might judge universally necessary - for e.g., a minimal freedom from utter deprivation, or a minimum of caring for children - and one might argue that without these, no body could become a fully human subject. Consequently the claim about identity is particularised, and needs to be approached as so. One may come to realise that belonging to a given culture is part of one's identity, because outside of the reference points of this culture one could not even begin to put together those questions of meaning and significance that are peculiarly in the domain of the human subject (cf. Taylor 1985: Part I). In other words, it is this culture that helps to identify oneself, and in the context of which one gets to know who one is as a human subject.

It is important to recognise that the question about identity and identification is a modern one; as the philosopher-theorist Charles Taylor puts it, it belongs to modern, emancipated subjects (1989: 3-52 *passim*). According to him, for the medieval man, there could not have been a question about the conditions of human subjecthood for the individual; indeed that one can speak only anachronistically of the identity of medieval man. In a sense, for the medieval self, there were conditions for man as such (especially in the context of a relationship with God) which one could turn their back on with disastrous consequences. The idea that conditions could be different for human subjects, Taylor holds, is inseparable from 'modern emancipated humanism' (*ibid.* 3-24). Accordingly, being human is not just a matter of occupying the rank assigned to humans in a divinely ordained order, rather it is that our humanity is something we each discover in ourselves. To be human is not, therefore, to be discovered in the order of things in which people are set, but in the nature that people discover in themselves (see also Schneewind 1998).

Of course, it needs to be reiterated that emancipated humanism does not of itself lead to the notion of identity (as disclosed above). It is a necessary but not sufficient condition. It is not enough to imagine the human being as an active agent fulfilling his or her purposes in the world. Indeed, for the notion of identity to take shape, there is also the question of a horizon of meaning that will be essential for this or that person's being human. The need for a horizon of meaning, and therefore of a sense of individual and

national differences, is crucial for the question of identity and identification to take shape.⁹

On the terms of this account, then, coherence, vitality, depth, and maturity constitute the four dimensions of a fulfilled identity and/or identification (whether individual or collective). It seems to presuppose a theory of normative validity that is based on the authenticity and primacy of an identity or the process of having one. Not that this presupposition is inherently problematic, but the point is that it does not seem to be capable of accounting for the role of the 'other' (or others) in the constitution of identity. It is undeniably the case that a key dimension in the formation of identities is interaction with "others". It is precisely the strength of Jenkins' account (briefly recounted above) that due recognition is given to this fact, although of course the limitation of his analysis is that he tends to over-emphasise the role of the other in the constitution of an identity. Chiefly his categories of 'internal identification' and 'external categorisation' - as part of what he terms the "*internal and the external moments of the dialectic of identification*" (Jenkins 2000: 7) - while artful and disingenuous in disclosing the processes of othering in the constitution of an identity and/or identification, do not seem to be sufficiently attentive to the horizon of meaning (in the sense of Taylor recounted above) implicating identity and identification. Even as a sense of self (or identity, on our terms) is founded on a tendency to construct and even demonize 'others', these 'others' provide critique and destabilisation rightly focusing on the coercions and contradictions of identity-claims. This much is true, and it is the strength of Jenkins account (see also his 1996) that he forces attention on this dimension of the process of having an identity. But to this must be added the contrary contention that in our reflections about identity and identification, we must assign equal priority to how human agents (as encumbered selves) think about matters, of how they perceive and represent those matters to themselves.

In the most general sense, accordingly, an identity and identification can and ought to possess a degree of self-integrity or **self-congruency** - enough to allow for its self-realisation or 'flourishing'⁵. In order to be so, an identity must be autonomous, but

⁹ For Taylor, the importance of a horizon of meaning and of individual and national differences comes in the Romantic period, with what he characterises as the question of identity. For each individual to discover in himself or herself what his humanity consists in, s/he needs a horizon of meaning, which can only be provided by some allegiance, group membership, cultural tradition (Taylor 1989: 368-90).

autonomy is only one aspect of identity. In fact, for an identity to be autonomous, it must also be constituted intersubjectively in a struggle for recognition. But again, this intersubjective dimension of identity is just one further aspect of identity. Finally, in order to be authentic, an identity must posit itself as a project and articulate that project with its self-understanding. That is, an identity distinguishes itself by the relationship between its sense of purpose (who or what one wants to be) and its current self-evaluation (who or what one currently is). It is this aspect of identity that needs particular emphasis. Autonomy is crucial to pursuing projects of self-realisation, and it is undeniably the case that identities are formed through interaction with others.

It should be clear that the account of identity and identification presupposed by our study is interdisciplinary in spirit - which also explains partly the three simultaneous registers (explained below) at which we explicate the dynamics of Brahmin identity in contemporary Karnataka. Being so, it combines an **empirical/descriptive** understanding of identity and identification with a normative/explanatory interest in the same. It is the force of this combined recognition that our clarificatory comments above on the process of having an identity have sought to record. In what follows, we shall seek to further firm up the co-ordinates of our study of the Brahmin identity in contemporary Karnataka. But perhaps we could begin by introducing the field.

IV

Introducing the field

To be sure, much of the literature on the question –not limited to Karnataka of course, but focusing on other parts of southern and western India - has been concerned to deliver precisely into the framework that we are here seeking to avoid, namely, that of social movements.¹⁰ Broadly in keeping with our strictures above, the challenge is not (only) to study the 'origins' of an idea or movement - something that the literature just cited does pretty well, in terms of both the conditions which caused them and those which gave them their peculiar shape or means of expression. Rather, the specific imperative is

¹⁰ Works on the non-Brahmin movements are rich and diverse, if skewed in their excessive attention on Tamil Nadu. Some of the works focusing on the Tamil region are: Irschick (1969), Baker (1976), Arnold (1977), Washbrook (1989), Geeta and Rajadurai (1998). Gore (1989) and Omvedt (1994) are works on western India - particularly Maharashtra. Dushkin (1974), Manor (1977a) and (1977b), Chandrashekhar (1985) and (1995), Thimmaiah (1993) and Naidu 1996 are some of the works dealing with the non-Brahmin movement of the princely Mysore State. Most of these works adopt a 'movements' perspective in describing the non-Brahmin question.

to address [a] how these objective conditions were incorporated into a larger ideological scheme (if any) and why these conditions (and not others) should have assumed a new importance; and [b] the specific modalities of caste agency and response exhibited by and within this perceptual field. The present study shares much in common with the latter emphasis, although it is the dimensions of a contemporary caste register - and a singular one at that - that our investigation lays claim.

It is also important to point out that the focus on a singular caste identity - granting that we call the 'Brahmin' as constituting a bloc in the sense both of an endogamous community as well as a rank-ordered and ritually-legitimated varna - flies in the face of the historian Susan Bayly's (1983) suggestion that we move away from the study of single caste communities. Thus, even as the study seems to be innovating from within the anthropological understanding of caste (pp. 4-12 above has the details), it is not mere revisionism that is in perspective here. In focus is an effort to combine a pluralism of methods, attentive at once to the perceptual space of Brahmins, with theoretical abstractions issuing off a conception of caste in/and/as identity.

The modern imagination (whether scholarly or official, as indeed of lay actors themselves) accords the Brahmins of Karnataka with an always-already corporatised, internally homogeneous 'casteness'. More generally, the identity or identification is invested with a sacredness or religiosity which, although individual Brahmins might not emblematised, also translates into a normative definition of community. For the specific and limited tasks that this identification of being '**Brahmins**' - of making up a caste, even constituting a kind of normative community - is expected to perform, such a postulation of identity seems to be sufficient. For instance, as far as the modern state is concerned, with respect to its policies for the **upliftment** of the backward classes and the Dalit communities, categorising the Brahmin caste as 'forward' was (and is, until recently of course) relatively **unproblematic**.¹¹ Most of the Backward Classes Committees and Commissions appointed by the state from about 1918 (the year when the first such Committee was constituted) have all presumed an internal cohesion as obtaining within the Brahmin fold. In fact, given the remarkable similarities that exist in the contemporary trajectories of the different 'kinds' of Brahmins, with particular reference to their

¹¹ The qualification 'until recently of course' that we have parenthetically stated is a reference to the demand, at both the national and state levels, for reservations among economically deprived 'forward' caste individuals. This is however a problem that our study is not concerned to scrutinise.

unprecedented scales of urbanisation and appropriation of **modern** institutional spaces, the presumption seems to be valid. Even the copious scholarly literature on the backward classes and on their movements has not found it necessary to disaggregate the Brahmin category. These too have largely been content with looking at Brahmins as a homogenised whole, even when occasionally but fleetingly drawing attention to the internal distinctions, hierarchies and divisions that obtain within the fold.¹²

It is indeed essential that we recognise the validity and necessity - and not merely sufficiency - of such an assumption. The identity of being a Brahmin did and continues to perform certain essential symbolic and material functions in a **modern** and secularising environment. Quite emphatically, questions of marriage and kinship even to this day require a foregrounding of the identity of being Brahmin, even of a specific denominational kind at that. However, by the early decades of the twentieth century itself, in establishing and sustaining informal networks that enabled Brahmin men to come to the cities to pursue **modern** education and employment, the significance attached to the internal distinctions had undergone a transformation. As we shall see, the self-identity of being a Brahmin was the only necessary and sufficient condition to acquire an entry into these networks. Not that there was any complete and decisive erasure of the importance of other particularities, but being Brahmin was still sufficient. Thus the corporatised imagination of the Brahmins has performed and continues to perform crucial functions, and the Brahmins themselves participate in recuperating their selves as being so (of course, with significant oscillations and ambivalences).

During the public debates on the government's decision to implement the recommendations of the first backward classes committee (1918), the Brahmins, in their defense, did invoke the internal differentiations that obtain among the different 'kinds' of Brahmins. They had then suggested that the Havyaka Brahmins and the Sankethi Brahmins have remained backward as far as their share in the modern sources and resources was concerned. Thereafter too Brahmins have engaged themselves in bitter and acrimonious public and private contestations against each successive backward classes committee and commission. But all along, the question they foreground is one of class

Manor, for instance, recognises that "the Brahmins of Mysore State were in so sense a monolithic, integrated whole" (1977a: 33), but is concerned to sidetrack from the details about the same.

rather than caste - the trope of the 'miserable poor rural Brahmin' is often the register on which these scripts are written.

Nonetheless, our concerns in this work go beyond those of the state, the backward classes commissions, scholars working on the 'other' of Brahmins (be it the Dalits or the non-Brahmins), as indeed of the Brahmins themselves who in certain contexts and fields recuperate themselves as non-prefixed and corporate entities. Any mapping of the Brahmin category, identity and identification necessarily needs to be sensitive to the question of internal distinctions, heirarchisation and divisions that obtain within a corporately imagined Brahmin self. It is by way of making those demarcations clear that we go on to state the manner in which the different terms - Brahmin castes and the Brahmin community, in particular - are deployed.

In the course of our study, we shall consistently deploy the term 'the Brahmin community' to refer to an aggregated entity that incorporates all 'kinds' of Brahmins. That is to say, to all those who call themselves as Brahmins, subject to the condition that the other 'kinds' of Brahmins accept their claims, whether grudgingly or not, unwillingly or not. This is not an exclusively subjectively determined condition though. For instance, a federating association like the Akhila Karnataka Brahmana Maha Sabha (AKBMS) accepts the Saraswats as Brahmins even when many contending Brahmin castes might not, and even as there have been a negligible number of marriages between the Saraswats and other Brahmins. The AKBMS nevertheless does not accept the claims of the Vishwakarma Brahmins (the gold-making caste) as Brahmins, even if the Vishwakarmas themselves have for almost a century now staked claims to Brahminhood. To be sure, the AKBMS or any such association is in no way the deciding agency that exercises any terminal and successful moral authority over the Brahmins. For, even when it accepts a caste group as Brahmin, sometimes its own affiliates might not accept it, leave alone the community at large. Again, the case of Saraswats can be cited here. While some Saraswats have become executive committee members of the AKBMS, the Dakshina Kannada Brahmana Sabha that represents the AKBMS in Dakshina Kannada (a coastal region) does not accept them even as members.

All the same, it is important to recognise that there exists substantial agreement among the Brahmins as to who can be accorded that status and who are the 'pretenders'. Accordingly, the term 'Brahmin community' is used for this conglomeration of identities. To reiterate, corporatisation is a real and entrenched force within the Brahmin fold. Thus

even as we remain aware of internal distinctions, we can never lose sight of the fact of corporatisation. It might seem contradictory that tendencies exist simultaneously, but for the Brahmins themselves it is not so. Accordingly, we use the term 'Brahmin castes' to refer to particular caste groups that make up the Brahmin community.

An acceptance of this latter point would need at least a cursory description of the internal distinctions that obtain among the Brahmins.¹³ All the Brahmins owe allegiance to one of the three philosophical traditions - *Advaita* (whose adherents are called the Smarthas), *Dvaita* (the Madhvas) and *Vishishtadvaita* (the Srivaishnavas). These three traditions owe their significance to the three Brahmin philosophers - Shankaracharya (period not agreed upon and opinions range from placing him anywhere from 500 BC to 800 AD), Madhvacharya (13th century) and Ramanujacharya (eleventh century) respectively. The adherents are distinguished by popularly recognised and understood (particularly male) body insignia that they wear during the performance of elaborately defined daily rituals. The distinctions are also philosophical in nature, bordering on differences in formulating the origins and goals of (the Brahmin) life.¹⁴

However, these three traditions are further internally differentiated. The distinctions that obtain among the Smarthas in particular are great in number - like the Shivalli, Hoysala Karnataka, Badaganadu, Seeranadu, Mulkanadu, Sankethi, Iyer and so on. Most of these, except the Iyers, owe allegiance to the Sringeri Smartha *matha*, one of the monastic orders supposedly established by the Shankaracharya himself. The Iyers have their own *matha* in Kanchi, Tamil Nadu, with a Shankaracharya mediating its affairs. The Madhvas too display a range of distinctions, but these appear to be primarily based on the *mathas* they owe allegiance to. For instance, there are eight Madhva *mathas* in Udupi apart from those in the other parts of Karnataka, and families are distributed across these *mathas*. Even the Srivaishnavas are internally differentiated, particularly on the basis of regional distinctions. For instance, marriages are rare between the Karnataka Iyengars and the Iyengars of Tamil Nadu.

¹³ For a general and dated but detailed description of some of these internal distinctions, see Thurston and Rangachari (1909: 267-393).

¹⁴ See Rao (2002) for a description of the philosophical and ritualistic distinctions surrounding the Madhvas of Udupi in particular. The work even includes a pictorial representation of the body markers worn by the different categories of Madhvas of Udupi (*ibid.*: 54-55). The date attributed to the three Gurus is also taken from this work (*ibid.*: 5-6).

We shall be confining the term 'caste' to refer to such specific entities spread across the **Brahmanical** tradition. Many Brahmins themselves, for instance, often use the term 'caste' to refer to three distinct axes - of being Brahmin, even Smartha (say) while also constituting themselves as Shivalli (say) - although the pressures emanating from the sense of siege that many of them experience forces them increasingly to speak of being one distinct corporate community. This latter modality is the legitimised discourse within the space of the larger corporate associations, which consistently urge Brahmins to shed their 'particular' identities (they call them 'sects' or 'sub-caste') in the face of consistent attacks from 'the others'. This oscillation between particularised identifications and corporatised definitions is neither unmarked nor carelessly tossed about, and therefore needs to be addressed as such.

V

Operational parameters and details about research materials used

Equally critical for the evolving contours of this study has been a sense of and a capacity for self-criticism, or, on our terms, reflexivity. Clarifying the scope of and identifying the conditions for this activity can thus be a theoretically and empirically challenging task. In a recent contribution, Bourdieu has argued for incorporating the social experience of the researcher in his/her efforts to "understand and analyse other people's experiences" (2003: 287). He terms this practice - a 'device', as he puts it - 'participant objectivation'. The idea is distinct from both the post-modern narcissism (which, as Bourdieu repeatedly insists, has almost brought the enterprise of research to a grinding halt) and the egological reflexivity of phenomenology. Broadly, participant objectivation seeks to 'sociologise' the sociologist **him/herself** ~ not only as a private person with unique biographical particularities but, more importantly, by objectivising the "social conditions of possibility" (*ibid.* 282) of the researcher's lived experience. Participant objectivation is, accordingly, to subject "to constant critical vigilance" (*ibid.*: 286) how one is situated in one's professional universe as also how one arrives at a research problem, the ways that one chooses to operationalise it, the objectives of the research and so on. These practices of objectivation, Bourdieu avers, feed off and into each other, and brings to sociological knowledge greatly significant analytic resources.

Evidently, deploying this device in the context of our own research - one seeking to **objectify** the **identity-space** of the contemporary Brahmin community - is useful, even if difficult. The difficulty is one of constantly guarding against the lure of interpretive

indulgence, which given the fixations of contemporary identity politics can take on overpowering normative implications that are useless as a serious analytical **exercise**.¹⁵ Coming as this researcher does from a Brahmin family and into the intellectual space of academic sociology can be a strange experience. Even as they appear to inhabit two exclusive - even oppositional - universes, the trajectory of the discipline in India has ensured that the ambit of its articulation has been borne predominantly by Brahmins themselves. And yet, paradoxically enough, the mediating grounds of caste politics, its rhetoric as indeed the concrete institutional practices of the modern state structure have ensured that the *idea* of the Brahmin stood comprehensively subjected to interrogation, even repudiation. This researcher, having been an active participant in the 'progressive' caste politics, was often an agent in this process. At once, this researcher has had to bear the mantle of being "Brahmin, after all" as well as consciously strive to disown that caste self. The trends in caste studies apart, it is the simultaneous but deeply contradictory habitation of these worlds that has guided this researcher in **objectifying** his object, namely, the Brahmin.

In many ways, it is the disengagement of the *idea* of the Brahmin from **the person** (in the sense of a flesh and blood creature bound by spatio-temporal particularities) that appears to be at stake here. All too often, the Brahmin family from which this researcher came seemed to bear the burden of this disengagement, and would translate into a sense of crisis - more accurately, a state of burden, even of siege - vis-a-vis its casteness, the condition of being Brahmin. It was, to be sure, not a generalised feeling of existence, that is to say, it did not permeate all its registers of the lifeworld. Nonetheless, it was an overpowering sense that the family was privy to, in particular, by an articulate father, the head of the household, who was and continues to be a 'foot soldier' in many of the caste associational **efforts** in Bangalore. His compulsion to participate in the activities of various associations and to regularly contribute to the monthly journal of the AKBMS was in itself a statement of self-concern about the community in a context of general apathy. The sense of crisis, of being held in a state of siege, was attributed to various

¹⁵ For the excesses of identity theorizing and its associated politics see Appiah (1992). As the latter makes clear, much of the preoccupation with identities goes well beyond clearing a space for the same to make strong suggestions about how those identities should be used. In doing so, identity politics and theorisations in terms of identities may execute a displacement of their own, in the process reproducing the essentialisms they condemn.

sources: from a "wicked" state structure to the "deeply conspiratorial" non-Brahmin communities, from "apathetic" and/or "orthodox" Brahmins to those personages who actively and publicly participate in the act of repudiating the idea of the Brahmin, and so on

The articulation, as indeed the sentiment that underwrote it, was complete and relentless. But was it merely an instance of a 'private trouble' that was being voiced as a 'public issue' or was it a public issue after all?¹⁶ This question was crucial for this researcher - who, it is to be noted, was still seeking to prefigure his research question - especially since his family, when measured in terms of the community as a whole, had not been very successful in translating the cultural and economic capital of the previous generation into the present. The anxiety of a failure to be part of the 'distinctions' of the group to which one belonged was easy to recognise, and even feel as part of one's growing up. All the same, it was evident that the articulation was much more than a mere enactment of displacement - of seeking an external reason to alleviate what was really a failure of the self. One's own personal and private worlds, peopled by caste mates and kin, as indeed the public enunciations of personally unknown but **recognisably** Brahmin personages in the spaces of caste associations, newspapers etc. brought to fore the sharpness of this state of being. Many of these individuals and families did not share the personal predicaments and anxieties that the researcher's family was susceptible. But still most of these individuals frequently articulated similar senses of siege - even if most of them were not driven to 'soldiering' for the associations. In fact many remained ambiguous about the usefulness of these fora.

It was also evident, given the presence of three (almost four) generations simultaneously living together as one household, that the researcher's family was bearing the brunt of overloaded definitions of ritual purity and secular profanation. What however tended to complicate the picture was one of an extant practice in this social world, the practice of actively sourcing one's caste self in positive and productive ways. This was not merely limited to the deployment of kin and caste friend-networks for enhancing and consolidating life chances, which was evidently there, but more **significantly** of a recuperation of the very idea of being Brahmin in ways that were unmistakably enabling.

¹⁶ The terms 'private trouble' and 'public issue', note, are drawn from Wright-Mills (1959: 3-24).

What were the ontological resources that the other two worlds - of the **academia** and of politics - offered to make sense of this (contradictory and ambivalent) state of being Brahmin? The academic **commonsense** largely presented one with a set of choices. Firstly, the strain, which foregrounded its political commitments to the cause of the subaltern, that tended to be dismissive of the predicament of being 'upper caste' and 'Brahmin'. This position repudiates all protestations of such a caste self, expressing disbelief in the **latter's** ability to transcend caste frames of action and meaning. A second tendency is the exact opposite of the first, and entails taking the upper caste/Brahmin **self's** discourse as its own. This position urges one to accord an *a priori* sociological validity to the assertions of the (upper) caste self. Here it is often conceded, basing entirely on the assertions of the subject of research, that the caste self has indeed broken with itself. It is a self that is 'free' from its casteness. The point note, it is important perhaps to be reminded, is not one of the travails of being a Brahmin who displays all the genuine intentions to shed his casteness but is being denied every time from doing just that. **Indeed** the apprehensions of the Dalits about the 'sincerity' of the Brahmins-in-solidarity - articulated more often than not in terms of a model of appropriation - seem to require a model of historical authentication.

But still, one's own experience of being Brahmin (or, perhaps more accurately, of being a part of a social life that had to constantly negotiate with the simultaneously obtaining registers of repudiation and productive recuperation) suggested that neither of these frames was capable of framing the contemporary Brahmin. In a manner of speaking, this research marks an attempt to work out an alternative framework of appraisal issuing off the parameters of identity and identification borne by caste subjects. The initial trajectories that we begin with - of a sense of siege, a burden, of an oscillation in the self-identity of being Brahmin - have also been constitutive of our research concerns.

In operationalising this intent - of listening to contemporary Brahmins, retrieving their perceptual space, keying into the dynamics and paradoxes of 'upper caste' articulation - the methods we pursued as indeed the subjects we sampled chose themselves out. The need to carry out 'ethnography'⁵ - albeit not one delivering from standard anthropological protocols, and even incorporating elements of a survey framework - was clear from the outset. Listening to the contemporary Brahmins talk about their selves, castes, community, their life worlds, their Others, the larger processes

that they believe are shaping their everyday lives, the reflections on their 'pasts', and so on was crucial for our purposes. Likewise, the institutional and the discursive space of the many caste associations, each clamoring for the allegiance of the individual Brahmin, had to be accounted for from within the parameters underscoring the study.

Lest we be misunderstood, it is necessary to reiterate that our 'ethnography' departs from the classical modes of the same. Primarily, it does not claim as its object the 'whole', nor does it seek to present it in terms of a 'total narrative'¹⁷. Our intent here is less to provide a 'complete' picture of the lives of the contemporary Brahmin community as to animate a problem on hand about the patterns of dynamism that the Brahmin community has exhibited; and, in the process, to move towards interpreting what 'caste' means today. Therefore the depth, as indeed the range of detail, that one has come to expect out of what goes by the name of ethnography might not obtain here. Besides, the fieldwork was carried out using standard survey tools like questionnaire and interview schedules (more the latter) and involved both Brahmin households and caste association activists/office bearers. The fieldwork for this study was conducted during a period of fifteen months between January 2000 and March 2001. Given the theoretical and methodological focus, we had resolved to lay our hands on different kinds of data. The following is a description of how we went about gathering data and of the research materials that we have primarily relied upon in detailing our chapters. It also serves to amplify the research focus of this investigation.

Defined by our substantive focus, we attempted to get at three concurrently orchestrated types of data:

- the historical record on the late colonial period;
- the organisational efforts, over time, to mobilise the Brahmin community within the space of 'caste' associations (both as individual Brahmin castes and as a corporate Brahmin identity); and
- finally, the perceptual space of Brahmin households and of individual Brahmins largely within an urban setting.

In connection with the first of these, we have worked at collating material from the rich tradition of auto/biographies in Kannada. We also attempted to source insights and impressions from the Kannada literature of the period. A weekly journal named

¹⁷ See Marcus (2002) for a reflection on the ethnographic method and its future.

Mysore Star published from Mysore from 1881 to 1936 (it was apparently banned for a few years during the 1910s by the Mysore Maharaja for publishing ‘inciting’ writings) was sourced at a local library and its contents tracked. This journal, explicitly articulating the non-Brahmin articulation and concerns, has been a phenomenal source of information for the non-Brahmin othering of the Brahmin, while also providing clues to the Brahmin response to this process of othering. Our concerted efforts at getting at similar publications from within the Brahmin fold were on the whole unsuccessful, although wherever some disparate issues of such publications were available they have been perused. For instance, few issues of a newspaper edited and published from Dharwad by an iconic **Brahmin/nationalist/Kannada** leader (titled *Java Karnataka*) that were available in a local library have been scanned. More centrally nevertheless, allusions to the Brahmin response were also gathered together from memoirs and reminiscences penned by Brahmin men of letters as well as secondary works. The proceedings of the relevant representative institutions of the period - the Representative Assembly and the Legislative Council - were sourced. Apart from these, the successive Karnataka Backward Classes Committees'/Commissions' Reports have been scanned. Lastly, the secondary materials (scholarly works and journal articles) have been brought to bear on our recuperation of the Brahmin self and the community of this period.

Attempts to bring Brahmins together - either as individual castes or as a corporate entity making up 'the' Brahmin community - have been witnessed since the early decades of the twentieth century, and these efforts continue to the present. For data on the many pioneering attempts to form Brahmin associations, we have again gone back to the infrequent reportage of the same in *Mysore Star* as well as other journals and newspapers of the period like *Jaya Karnataka* (published from Dharwad, Bombay Presidency). *Mysore Star*, despite being most articulate in its attack on the perceived Brahmin dominance of modern spaces, surprisingly takes a rather sympathetic position on the question of the emergence of Brahmin caste associations. Apart from these references, the contemporary Brahmin associations – some of which have survived from that era - themselves have recounted the pioneering activities in the form of publications and brochures which have also been consulted.

As far as the contemporary situation is concerned, the data collected has been both extensive and comprehensive. Our initial effort to collate information through a detailed questionnaire that was sent to 100 Brahmin associations spread across the state of

Karnataka - the addresses of which were gathered from a directory maintained by the state-level federating organisation, the Akhila Karnataka Brahmana Maha Sabha [AKBMS] - had to be given up owing to a phenomenal rate of 'non-response'. Of the hundred questionnaires (which, as it turned out, demanded a fair amount of time and energy) that were sent along with a self-addressed stamped envelope, only **five** were returned duly filled in. Some more came back with either the address not being found or stating that the addressee had shifted residence or office. Characterising them as 'non-response' seems accurate, for many of the activists belonging to these associations, when individually contacted during occasions like the state conventions or other **functions** organised by the AKBMS, remembered having received the questionnaire. Most of them blamed lack of time as indeed the comprehensiveness demanded by the questionnaire for not filling them up.

Consequent upon this failure, we went across and personally visited the offices of the caste associations. Fifty such associations were directly contacted all over the state of Karnataka - specifically Mysore, Kolar, Hospet, Bidar, Shimoga and **Udupi** - apart from a more intensive coverage of the city of **Bangalore**.¹⁸ The federating association, the AKBMS, is situated in Bangalore, as are all the head offices of individual caste associations. There exist a range of Brahmin associations - distinguishable by the constituency they seek to represent. We have 'corporate' associations (like the AKBMS and its **district/taluq** level associations), individual caste associations addressing particular castes within the community (like the Mulkanadu Mahasabha or the Shivalli **Smartha** Brahmana Parishat), and associations that cater to particular localities in a city or town or the employees of an industry or organisation (like the Jayanagara Brahmana Sabha and the Indian Telephone Industries Vipra Vrinda). There are also associations that have specific and focused agendas like catering to the financial needs or marriage alliances etc. We took care to cover the entire spectrum of caste associations.

Over the last four years, almost each and every Brahmin congregation, meet, seminar, convention, and felicitation **function** that was organised by these associations (particularly those that took place in Bangalore, as most seemed to do) was attended. Apart from such conventions, permission was sought (and, more often than not, granted) to attend the annual and extra-ordinary General Body Meetings (which are definitionally

¹⁸ The list of Brahmin associations from which our data has been put together is given in Appendix 2.

meant for the members) and other routine meetings arranged by these associations. Apart from preparing notes of the proceedings, we also interacted with the members and activists in such settings. We have collected, wherever available, the journals that very many of these associations bring out on a fairly regular and long-standing basis apart from the souvenir issues that they publish on momentous occasions. Wherever spare copies of back issues were not available, notes were made from the library that many of these associations maintain. The files containing the pamphlets that these associations have brought out from time to time have also been sourced. More importantly, thirty five caste activists - primarily but not only the past and present office bearers of different kinds of Brahmin associations - were interviewed on the basis of an interview schedule.

The other 'ethnographic' component was embodied through extensive interviews with one or more members of one hundred households (in total 135 persons were interviewed, generally targeting that family member who was our first contact, but also including additional others for the sake of generational range and depth) - primarily in and around the city of Bangalore, but also in the cities/towns of Mysore, Hospet, Udupi, Kundapur, Bidar and Shimoga and the villages around Bangalore and Udupi. Of these 135 interviewed, 79 were male and 56 were female. The universe was largely 'purposively' sampled in accordance with the presuppositions encoding this investigation, and the numbers gathered together through the device of 'snowballing'. Many times, contacts established at public gatherings were followed up. Care was taken to make the sample as representative as possible - primarily in terms of the caste composition, class status, education, and occupational profiles of the family.

The interviews were, more often than not, conducted over two to three sittings. These interviews can be more appropriately called 'interview situations' - primarily because these would often turn from being 'one-on-one' to involving the rest of the household in animated conversations. Since most of the interviews were held in the homes of the respondents, many of the family members, even friends and visiting relatives, would in the course of the interview join the dialogue. These interjections however do not make up our list of the 135 respondents interviewed. A further clarificatory point - especially since caste association activists were interviewed separately - a small number of the latter (namely, six) also doubled up as our respondents within Brahmin households. The interviews of course were conducted separately.

Embellishing these discursively articulated interviews were the questionnaires that were handed out to these 100 **households**. The questionnaire was left to fill with that member of the family who was interviewed first in the family. The break-up was as follows: 63 men 'filled' in the questionnaire on behalf of the household and 37 women did ostensibly the same. The information sought related to details about family members, the recent history - migratory, marital and occupational - of the family, their affiliation to *mathas*, relationship with caste associations, observance of rituals (daily and otherwise), dependence on different networks at hand (kin, friends, neighbours *etc.*) and so on. A preliminary profile of the respondents and their families is given in the next section. Note also that the names of all the respondents cited in the following substantive chapters (Chapters Three to Six) have been changed to maintain anonymity and trust.

Broadly then, in keeping with these various data gathering techniques and sources of description, we map the contours of the differential investment that the contemporary Brahmin community endows on its casteness. These data sources also translate into three comprehensive registers of enquiry: one having to do with the very persona of the 'Brahmin' and embodied in the very agency of the individual Brahmin, the other having to do with organised complexes of action such as the caste association or even the public culture of print, and the last taking off from a longer (yet, modern and contemporary) history of **non-Brahminical othering**. To be sure, all these three registers evidently implicate each other, and as our chapters will disclose, we also strive actively to break this **homology** of data source and register of enquiry. Within the terms of rather **mixed-up** mode of mapping, we propose to foreground the dynamics of the contemporary Brahmin identity.

VI

A general profile of the respondents

As stated before, we interviewed one or more members of one hundred Brahmin households for the purposes of this study, while also administering these households a detailed questionnaire. The selection of these households followed the purposive sampling technique with a snowballing strategy. As is evident, this strategy is prone to many inadequacies. It introduces biases into the selection and renders the generalisability and the representability of the conclusions open to interrogation. Nevertheless, in keeping with Bourdieu's strategy of 'participant objectivation', we sought to render the field as determinate and purposive as possible. While the 'representativeness' of our

sampling technique is always open to scrutiny, adequate interpretative protocols have been introduced by way of sifting through diverse sources of data and capturing (indeed validly authenticating) a range of experience characteristic of Brahmin subjects today.

All the same, one needs to be sensitive to questions about the availability of caste specific data in the contemporary moment. The decennial census that the Indian government conducts stopped enumerating the population across the caste map since 1941, excepting that pertaining to SC and ST communities. Owing to this, but also owing to the almost negligible efforts on the part of social scientists themselves, we have hardly any information about, say, the share of a particular caste community in the state's population. In fact, various estimates of the Brahmins' share in the population of Karnataka remain at best informed projections made under by the successive Backward Classes Committees/Commissions based on the figures available in the Census of 1941. Given that such a basic information itself is not available, we have absolutely no way of determining other factors like their urban-rural population share, their residential spread, patterns concerning demography, migration etc.

Of course, the Brahmin associations have all promised, from time to time, carrying out a 'caste census'. But we have not come across a single instance of the same. All that such associations have is an inventory of the members. Taking that as the sampling frame would have distorted our selection irreparably, since membership of an association is already a statement borne by the individual concerned vis-a-vis the problematic of caste identity and identification choices. To be sure, these are restrictions that confront anybody studying caste today. Again, given such circumstances, snowballing was the only strategy that was open to us, although we were also mindful of factoring in various attributes such as caste composition, class status, educational, occupational and migration profiles of the families concerned, membership in caste associations etc. **Supplementing** these coordinates, of course, was the recourse to other research materials, especially the historical and literary sources and official reports and proceedings.

The following is a primary description of the respondents. The composition of the 135 respondents interviewed is the following. There were 83 **Smarthas**, 35 Madhvas, 10 Srivaishnavas, 05 Saraswats and 02 others who would not identify their affiliation. Among the Smarthas, the respondents came from a range of castes. There were six **Iyers** (a Tamil speaking caste); twenty Shivalli Smarthas, one Kota **Smartha**, five **Smartha**

Kandavara (all castes with origins in the coastal districts of Udupi and Mangalore), two each of Seeranadu and Sankethi, seven Badaganadu **Smarthas**, three **Babboorkamme**, ten Hoysala Karnatakas, twelve Mulkanadu Smarthas, four **Uluchukamme** Smarthas and one Sthanika **Smartha** (castes found primarily in the princely Mysore region). Apart from these there was two Namboodiris, two Havyakas and a Daivajna **Brahmana**. There were five Smarthas who would not identify their caste identity. The Madhvas were primarily divided into the Udupi *matha* followers and those otherwise. There were twenty-one Udupi Madhvas and fourteen non-Udupi Madhvas. The ten Srivaishnavas (or Iyengars) have been treated as a composite identification, so also the 05 Saraswats interviewed. There were two respondents who said they did not know to which Brahmin caste they belonged. One is an orphan who was receiving religious/ritual education at the Madhva institution called the **Poornaprajna** Vidyapeeta located in Bangalore. He however seemed completely naturalised as a Madhva owing to the norms of everyday living at such an institution. The other is a journalist who said that he did not know his caste identity. He said that he did not even know that further distinctions existed within the Brahmin fold, but anyway that did not matter to him as long as one can be identified as a Brahmin.

Of these 135 respondents, 106 were located in the city of Bangalore, 16 were from other cities and towns (Mysore, **Shimoga**, Udupi, Hospet, and Bidar) and 13 were residents of villages (in the districts of Rural Bangalore, Udupi and Shimoga). Thirty-seven of these respondents were below the age of thirty years and 58 were between thirty-one to fifty years. The remaining (40) were above fifty years of age. Our questionnaire profiling the educational, occupational, marital trajectories of the respondent families, the individual respondents' everyday ritual practices, commensal habits, marital alliances etc. have been factored into the account provided in the next chapter, the first of our substantive ones, that seeks to present a schematic history of the modern world of Brahmins in Karnataka. Of the one hundred individuals (who, representing the hundred households, filled in the administered questionnaire), twenty-six were below thirty years of age and forty-one were in the age range of thirty-one and fifty years. The remaining thirty-three were above fifty year. It may be important, yet, to point out that only **thirty-two** households had at least one who was a formal member of some Brahmin association or the other.

Chapter Three

The Modern World of Brahmins: A Schematic History

As our title discloses, this chapter attempts to **profile** and forward some broad considerations on the trajectory of Brahmins in contemporary Karnataka - that is, broadly over the twentieth century. Evidently, any such recuperation within the space of a chapter can only remain schematic but it is still a useful and necessary exercise. The regrouping of a history of the contemporary Brahmin is necessary not merely as a gesture of contextualisation, but more importantly in establishing the parameters of action within which the modern Brahmin identity unfolds in contemporary Karnataka. Specific historical developments, as we seek to demonstrate, are a constitutive force in bringing to life the contemporary Brahmin identity. Accordingly, even as this history provides us with an anchoring ground to analyse the dynamics of the Brahmin identity, we will seek to show the ways in which the makings of (and the contestations to) the Brahmin identity themselves constitutively structure (in the sense of both enabling and constraining) the trajectories of the identification of being 'Brahmin'.

As was pointed out in the earlier chapters, the paucity of any appreciable macro-data with reference to caste - particularly since 1941 - makes our task daunting and consequently renders it schematic. We have therefore attempted to innovate. There are different sources of data that we have sought to get at. Anchored firmly within the scholarly literature that has been produced on Karnataka (in particular, on the Princely Mysore State), we have brought to bear on such a mapping different sources. They are primarily the journals that were being published in the late colonial period, the proceedings of the legislative houses, and the reports and compilations generated by the state particularly in the form of Backward Classes Commission/Committee Reports etc. We have also sourced the reflections and introspections of individual Brahmins themselves that are available in the form of *auto/biographies* in Kannada. Finally the 'testimonies' of the respondents of this study have also been deployed to embellish and embody the picture the sources listed above draw. This is done primarily in terms of a qualitative and consolidated retrieval of family trajectories (as yielded by our

questionnaire and interview schedules) across the registers of education, occupation, marriage and migration and over the last three generations in their families.

As can be seen, the disparately encoded sources of data are unevenly situated in responding to the demands that we place on them. We however hope that, at a future point of time, one could venture to be more determinate and systematic in mapping this history. Again, as will be evident, even as we seek to - with good reason - speak of *the* contemporary Brahmin - or even *the* Brahmin community - we remain sensitive to its internally differentiated profile. Subjective disparateness of the imaginings of the Brahmin identity apart, objectively too there were (and continue to be) many castes that obtain within the corporatised Brahmin fold (see for a description, pp. 61-3 above). However, it is in efforts to recuperate such specificities of individual Brahmin caste histories that we are left with almost no data - either macro or specific. All of them beg for intensive work, focusing exclusively on individual Brahmin castes in themselves - such as the work of Conlon (1977) which clearly demonstrated the value of such efforts. Therefore, here we have been only indicative, even definitively provisional, in our observations on such specific historical trajectories of the individual Brahmin castes. We will, nonetheless, be in a position to analyse far more confidently the question of specificities when we take up in the following chapters the problematic of the dynamics of Brahmin identity itself.

The chapter is divided into the following sections. The first section will summatively map the Brahmin predominance in the spaces of power that became available during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to the native population - primarily its transformation from being an agrarian caste economy into a thoroughly urbanised, modern caste economy, enabled in particular by great deals of investments in secular, modern education and employment in modern occupations. A comparison with other contesting caste and religious communities will bring home the point regarding the virtual unassailability and dominance of the modern by the Brahmin community. This is a well-documented history at least as far the context of Tamil Nadu is concerned. The trajectory of the Brahmin community in Karnataka too follows a similar path and in summing it we have relied primarily on the disparate data that is provided on the floor of the Representative Assembly of the Princely Mysore state, representative auto/biographies of Brahmins from other regions of Karnataka, but most importantly on the extant scholarly literature. In the second section, the consolidation of this

transformation through the deployment of formal and informal networks, using (even as recasting) the governmental policy and measures, **resignifying** and reconstituting the 'caste' rules and norms and practices will be described. The third section profiles the contemporary state of the Brahmins of Karnataka, their overwhelming middle class status, urbanity, constitutive reliance on the resources made available by the welfare state even in the face of increasing retrenchment from the landscape of electoral politics, the anxieties generated by the reservation policy and so on. This section is primarily based on the testimonies of the respondents in recounting their family histories, their life-chances etc. even as macro and secondary data, wherever available (primarily as encoded in official reports and scholarly surveys) are also included. The fourth section recreates the processes of individuation but also of corporatisation obtaining within the community through a narration of marital and commensal strategies, efforts to negotiate caste identifications and so on. A final section briefly invokes some peculiarities in the self-identification of being 'Brahmin'. It seeks to suggest the ways in which this unique position that the Brahmins find themselves in the contemporary moment structures the very possibilities of the 'Brahmin' identification.

I

Occupying the modern

Paradoxically enough, the scholarly literature focussing on the various non-Brahmin movements that emerged in different parts of South and West India during the early twentieth century have demonstrated the unmistakable preponderance of the Brahmin community in the newly made available spaces of the modern **institutions**.¹ Much of the literature describing these transformative processes that were underway among the Brahmins seem to make it as though they were 'natural', in the sense that a compulsion to urbanise or take to modern education was an inevitable course of action. While it seems quite presumptuous to assume so, it cannot be denied that the predominance of Brahmins was most acutely visible in the spaces of modern education and the state bureaucracy (even as it was also true of all other modern occupations like journalism and law). These spaces, constitutively vested with power, placed Brahmins in a key position - that of being the sole mediator between the state authority and the

¹ We have listed some of the important works dealing with the non-Brahmin movements across southern and western India in the previous chapter (fn. 10 therein). As far as the context of Kannada region is concerned, the data is relatively scantier - in particular for the regions other than the Princely Mysore State.

society. Not only did they mediate the negotiations and perceptions of the non-Brahmin **Population** with the state, they were able to decisively shape the policy of the administration towards its population. This arrogation of the role of the mediator or of the "spokesperson for society" (Geeta and Rajadurai 1998: xv) is rightly recognised as the fundamental element in rendering the Brahmin uniquely powerful. But it is not often that the scholarship has commented upon the transformations this unique trajectory and such a status bring about in the self of the Brahmin, which is seeking to formulate a legitimate identity for itself in the modern situation.

As in the neighbouring Tamil region, the trajectory of the Brahmin community from the middle decades of the nineteenth century has been remarkably similar in Karnataka². In the Tamil region though, there were some non-Brahmin corporatised castes which emerged as hugely **successful** mercantile communities during this period (Hardgrave 1969 and **Templeman** 1996). Their non-existence in Karnataka seems to have only rendered the Brahmin predominance more visible. The shift from an agrarian economy to one that was overwhelmingly dependent upon a modern service sector has been constitutively transformative of the Brahmin community as well. This is a process that scholars concur began in the middle decades of the nineteenth century. Manor notes the weak position of the Brahmins in the rural areas of the Mysore State by the 1930s:

As only 3.8% of the population spread rather evenly across the state, Brahmins were numerically very weak in most rural areas. This weakness was compounded by the tendency from the mid-nineteenth century onwards for Brahmins to migrate from the villages to the towns and cities in search of education and employment in the "westernized" idiom. To finance these migrations, Brahmins very often sold rural land holdings and the special tax privileges they had enjoyed in

² See Arnold (1977: Ch. 1) for details regarding the Tamil Brahmins migration from rural to urban areas. See Chandrashekhar (1995: 20-68) for a general statement on the Brahmin communities in South India as a whole, but more importantly on their emergence as the predominant part of a powerful educated class that eclipsed the hitherto dominant business communities, particularly in the Tamil region. Note also that when we talk of 'Karnataka', evidently, we are not presuming the existence of the present day state of Karnataka, neither is it an anticipation. It is merely used as a **ready-reckoner** in order to **unifiedly** talk about the present day state of Karnataka. Evidently, when the word *Karnataka* is used, one is aware that the Karnataka state, as is known today, emerged only in the year 1956 and thus the reference is merely to the geographical region that was to become 'Karnataka'. The region that makes up the Karnataka State of today was distributed into many administrative entities. South Canara (today's Mangalore and Udupi districts) and Bellary were part of Madras Presidency. Belgaum, Dharwad and North Canara (and parts of today's Gadag district) were part of Bombay presidency. Bidar, Gulbarga, Raichur and parts of today's Koppal were part of Hyderabad Nizam State. Coorg was a separate state (before which it was not part of Madras Presidency but directly under a British Resident, and for some time it was also part of Mysore when Mysore was ruled by a Resident). Apart from these there were as many as 22 little kingdoms including the large Princely Mysore State, which contained the present districts of Mysore, Bangalore, Mandya, Hassan, **Chickmagalur**, Shimoga, Chitradurga, Kolar and Tumkur.

10.9% of Mysore's villages since before 1881. This led to a marked decline between 1900 and 1935 in the economic power and numerical strength of Brahmins in rural political arenas [often replaced by that of Vokkaligas and Lingayaths who invariably bought land from the Brahmins]. The decline of the Brahmin influence in the rural context was paralleled by remarkable gains in wealth and influence in the towns and cities of Mysore (1977a: 31).

Thimmaiah augments this observation:

Rural Brahmins who owned agricultural lands received impressive incomes which enabled them to send their children to urban areas for English education. This helped their absorption in government service. Thus the transition of rural Brahmins was financed by rural surpluses generated from their lands (1993: 81).

The family histories that most of the respondents recounted during the course of interviews and in the course of filling in the questionnaire suggests that such reallocation of resources continued well into the twentieth century and, in many cases, even to this day. We shall point to many such instances later on in the chapter. Moreover in many parts of Karnataka, Brahmin families that owned agricultural property were not directly involved in agricultural operations and lent it out to predominantly non-Brahmin tenants:

The Brahmins held mostly the *Inam* lands - the lands granted by the erstwhile rulers in appreciation of their services. As both by tradition and also on account of the fact that they had taken up service in government and by reason of which moved out of rural areas into towns and cities, Brahmins were the absentee land-lords (Thimmaiah and Aziz 1985: 46-7).

The Havyakas (a Brahmin caste predominant in the coastal district of North Canara and in Shimoga) were perhaps the only Brahmin owner-cultivating caste. They continue to be so involved in great numbers (compared to the other Brahmin castes) in the agricultural economy, particularly in the cultivation of cash crops like areca nut.³ Further, in regard to the Mysore region, it has often been observed that the distribution of land holdings was not marked by disparities. Comparing Mysore with other states in south India of the 19th century, it has been observed that “(i)t was only in Mysore that except two - the Sringeri Math and jagir of Yelandur granted to Dewan Poornaiah's family - there were no big **zamindars**” (Chandrashekhar 1995: 11). This pattern continued into the next century too. In fact, Chandrashekhar suggests as much while analysing the data presented in the 1921 Census:

³ See Harper (1968) for a gross picture of the modern history of the Havyakas and of their interests in agriculture.

There were no marked disparities in the ownership of land ... Mysore had unusually high proportion of owner cultivators and Brahmins rarely held control over land. Though they held some lands they were not the real cultivators and more often their lands were rented out to powerful local magnates who could not be unduly (sic) exploited (1985: 4)

Thus the shift from an agriculture-dependent caste economy to what became a predominantly state-enabled service economy does not appear to have been much of a distress-shift. What is more, the shift was neither sudden nor complete. Even as most of the Brahmin families sent out each and every male member to the city to pursue modern careers - cornering a great share of even the lower grades of bureaucratic and other modern jobs - those who failed at getting any such job were retained to engage with agriculture, mostly as supervisors. This is a process that is still in currency - varying across regions primarily. For many of the respondent families from the Mysore region, for instance, the urbanity of their family life is so much taken for granted that they do not even remember and recount the familial history of migration from rural areas, if any. However the trajectory of most of the older male respondents who did migrate from their villages to urban areas is strikingly similar - more often than not, they ventured into the nearby town or city pursuing education or a career all by themselves. They have had to sustain themselves either on the money that was sent from home or, in the case of poorer families, from the institution-like practices of *Bhikshaanna* and *Vaaraanna*⁴. Wherever Brahmins continue to have landed interest and properties, like in the coastal and Malnad regions, the migration into urban areas is still an ongoing phenomenon, the contours of which we will come to at a later point.

It appears that it is only in the post-independence years, when the state instituted measures like the **Inams** Abolition Acts (1954-55) and the land reforms (initiated in the early 1970s) that the economic links and networks with the rural areas got severed to a near total **degree**.⁵ This is particularly true of the Brahmin families from the coastal districts of Karnataka in which the Brahmins continued to hold land but which were cultivated by the tenants. The land under tenancy in the two districts of Dakshina Kannada and Uttara Kannada were incomparably high vis-a-vis other districts. The Land

⁴ These two practices were prevalent in the urban areas of the princely Mysore State. We describe their workings and significance later in the second section.

⁵ There have been some studies on the impact of land reforms on agrarian relations and economy in Karnataka. See Manor (1980), Thimmaiah & Aziz (1985), Ksheerasagara (1985). However the impact of such measures on particular communities and among particular Brahmin castes is not very clear.

Reforms Act of 1974, it has been noted, has had its most profound impact in these two districts "which together account for over one-third of the applications [filed by tenants asking for the ownership of the land] in the entire state" (Manor 2002: 278).

The Brahmin quest for alternative spaces within modern institutions was realised primarily through their preponderance in the cities. Indeed their share of the urban population is truly astounding, as the following figures from the 1931 Census of the Mysore State demonstrate. A remarkable 21.7% of the total Brahmin population of the Mysore State was by the year 1931 already residing in just the two cities of Bangalore and Mysore. The other towns - particularly **Shimoga** and the industrialising town of Davanagere - too are supposed to have had equally significant Brahmin populations, as did the non-Mysore emerging cities of Dharwad and Belgaum, which further animates the urban nature of the community. While the Brahmins constituted a mere 3.74% of the Mysore State's [including the British administered Civil and Military Station located in Bangalore (the Bangalore Cantonment area)] population, they were the largest single community in both the cities of Bangalore and Mysore. In Bangalore, there were 32182 Brahmins and the next largest community, the Vokkaligas, numbered only 12994. Brahmins made up 18.68% of the population of the city of Bangalore - that is, almost every fifth person in Bangalore was a Brahmin. Brahmins likewise constituted 19.6% of the Mysore city's population - again a far cry from the presence of any other community in the city (*Census of India*, 1931, Volume XXV: Mysore - Part II - Tables; 1932: 230-2). Evidently these are remarkable figures for a community which constituted only 3.74% of the state's population. The value of staying in cities, which, as we shall see, were drawing disproportionately the resources of the state, is self-evident.

Over the last century or so, then, the community economy of the Brahmins of Karnataka has shifted from one that is largely based and dependent on agrarian economy to one that drew relentlessly (and even disproportionately) from the establishment of the institutions of the modern welfarist nation-state. Their entry into these spaces has remained largely unabated, though in the last three decades or so dented by the modest successes of the policies of reservation. They have been greatly successful in consolidating their presence in these spheres through single-minded investment in modern education in particular. This progression has placed many Brahmins in a position now to increasingly and resolutely look beyond their sustenance and reliance on the nation-state in the current post-liberalisation period. Even as the structures and institutions of

modernity were being established to a rather unprecedented degree in the Mysore Princely State in particular, it required and necessitated a quick re-allocation of resources of any community that intended to benefit from them. Brahmins began investing economic resources quite decisively on providing their children with modern, secular education. That this re-allocation has been decisive and single-minded is proved by the account that follows.

The Princely State of Mysore in particular had a fairly stabilised idea of being an administrative entity and for long, by the scales of other Indian states and territories, had modern institutions of administration - particularly the bureaucracy - in place. It had taken up the task of building and extending educational institutions rather earnestly and the state spending on education had increased rapidly (see Naidu 1996 for details regarding the spread of western education in Mysore State). Modern institutions of judiciary and press had also emerged as important spaces. The entry and spread of such systems/institutions were varied in the other parts of Karnataka, and this factor seems to have been crucial in the historical trajectories of these various regions even to this day.

Into such spaces, Brahmins entered in a big way, as they were apparently equipped with traditions of learning and literacy. This is a phenomenon that gets replicated almost all over India but more markedly in South India, and has in fact been a well-documented claim in the academic *literature*.⁶ By the time the British handed the Mysore state back to the Mysore Wodeyar royal family in 1881, after 50 years of direct rule, modern institutions and spaces had already taken root in the Mysore state. The British had opened up bureaucratic positions to the ‘natives’ and it was overwhelmingly the Brahmins who had taken up such positions. The predominance of the Brahmin in these spaces was such a naturalised ‘fact’ that beginning from the 1870s to till about the latter part of the first decade of the twentieth century, it was the conflict between the ‘Madrasi’ Brahmins and the Mysore Brahmins over their share in such spaces that dominated the public debates.⁷ It was only from the 1910s that non-Brahmins begin to articulate demands for a proportionate share in the government services and modern education.

⁶ For a recent affirmation in the context of Maharashtra, see Naregal (2001).

⁷ Dimensions of this conflict form a part of the next chapter.

The following account of the Brahmin dominance in the modern, urban spheres largely pertains to the context of the Princely Mysore State. However going by the accounts of the respondents hailing from other parts of Karnataka and selected Brahmin autobiographies from the period, some gross inferences can be made regarding the non-Mysore regions of Karnataka too.⁸ It appears that even as there were significant differences - in particular in relation to dependence on land - the larger trajectory of the non-Mysore Brahmins concurs with the picture that we are here presenting.

By the early decades of the twentieth century, the Brahmin community had already a dominant and entrenched presence in the structures of the state bureaucracy and in the sphere of modern, secular education in the princely Mysore. This presence, a concomitant of the fast pace of the processes of urbanisation and modernisation, however cannot be taken to mean that its accomplishment was at the expense of their hold over the villages and the rural economy. An overwhelming number of 'Shanubhagues' (village accountants, a hereditary position that was primarily a Brahmin preserve) as late as in 1924 were still Brahmins. Of the 5514 Shanubhagues at that time, 5390 were Brahmins with rest coming from other communities (Hanumanthappa, Vol. III n.d.: 263-4). This office exercised a great deal of power over the village affairs and economy, which greatly enabled the deployment and consolidation of informal networks between the various Brahmins, as we shall further see in the next section.⁹ Here, in demonstrating the preponderance of the Brahmin in the newly emerging spheres of modern institutions, we will present data regarding two spaces - of secular education and the composition of the bureaucracy. These two spaces were crucial and mutually sustaining of each other.

The caste composition of the students in the space of higher education was excessively skewed in favour of the Brahmin community. Sivakumar (1982: 15) presents the 'social composition' of the students receiving college education in the year 1916 (the year Mysore University was established). The Brahmins constituted a whopping 78.87% of the college-going population (571 out of the total 724 students). The overwhelming dominance of the community is rendered even starker when we look at the population

⁸ See for instance Venkatrao (1974) and Sriranga (1994) for a representation from North Karnataka (most parts of which were part of either the Bombay Presidency or the Hyderabad Nizam State). Also: Karanth (1984) and Adiga (1999) for a representation from the coastal district of South Canara, which was part of the Madras Presidency.

⁹ Chandrashekhara (1995: 21-2). This is a claim that is corroborated by many novels, reminiscences from that period. See Bhairappa's novel *Grihabhanga* (1970) and his autobiography *Bhithi* (1996) for instance.

share of the Brahmin community as calculated by the previous census of 1911. The Brahmin community, according to this census, constituted a mere 3.6% of the total population of the Mysore State. The next highest proportion of college-going students constituted by a single community was that of Lingayaths (whose share in the population was 13.7%), which had 29 college-going students in the community (4.01%). During the year 1924-5, 79.1% of the students taking university examinations in the state were Brahmins as against 6.8% of Lingayaths and 3.6% of Vokkaligas (*ibid.*:25).

The situation, evidently, was not very different in the case of professional courses like engineering and medicine. In 1924, of the 20 applicants selected for the MBBS course, 12 were Brahmins, and of the 23 selected in the year 1928, 17 were Brahmins (Hanumanthappa Vol. HI n.d.: 189). Of the 22 who passed out of the Medical College, 16 were Brahmins as against two Naidus and one Lingayath. During the year 1923-24, of the 113 scholarships that were distributed for the male medical students, 63 went to Brahmins (*ibid.*:267). During 1926-7, 553 Brahmin students applied for an admission in the Engineering College of which 216 were selected. The highly skewed nature of this number can be seen when compared to all other caste and religious communities. For instance, only seven Vokkaligas applied of whom five were selected (*ibid.* 270).

The non-Brahmin leaders often referred to the exclusive nature of the space of higher education, and thus to the unjustifiability of spending a large share of the educational budget on it. However the state continued to fund higher education rather generously. The discrepancy in the disproportionate nature of educational cess collected and the educational budget spending patterns was consistently pointed to by the non-Brahmin leaders in all available fora, including the Representative Assembly but to no avail (see Hanumanthappa, *ibid.* 176-181 for the debate during 1924-26). In 1924, while Rs. Eight lakhs were spent on the Mysore University, which had 2000 students, just Rs. Thirty five lakhs were spent on the entire primary education sector which had 56 lakh students. The Mysore government spent, apart from the money allocated to the Mysore University, Rs. Fifty thousand on the Indian Institute of Science located in Bangalore (*ibid.*).

The skewed distribution of Brahmin students in the university space continued, for in 1945, 60% of the university students were Brahmins (Manor 1977a: 51). Sivakumar (1982: 29) points out that during 1943-44, 67% of the students enrolled in the Mysore University were Brahmins as against 8.1% and 5.8% of Lingayaths and Vokkaligas

respectively. While the situation was not very different at the middle school level (see Hanumanthappa Vol. III n.d.: 188 for the relevant statistics), the case of Brahmin women is nevertheless equally informative. Even as the question of the Brahmin woman becomes a ground for varied contestations and/or collusions - between the Brahmins and the non-Brahmins, between the 'orthodox' and the 'progressive' Brahmins, and of course between the 'orthodox' Brahmin men and 'literate' Brahmin women - Brahmin women themselves have had a fairly impressive record in matters of education, particularly with reference to and in comparison with other women. During the years 1911-16, Brahmin women constituted 75.65% of the total number of women students in Mysore State (Sivakumar 1982: 24). Their predominance in professional education too was overwhelming. For instance, of the 13 women scholarships meant for medical students, Brahmin women received eight of them (Hanumanthappa Vol. III n.d.: 267). Even as the 'orthodoxy' among Brahmin men tried to block women's entry into modern spaces, the women in collaboration with the 'progressive' Brahmin male network had grown beyond the former's ability to regulate its directions.

Such an overwhelming preponderance was not merely reflective of the preoccupations of a few within the Brahmin fold; rather, it represented the larger trends obtaining in the community as a whole, as can be inferred from the following figures. According to the 1931 Census Report, the percentage of literacy among Brahmins was 57.3% compared to Lingayaths (16.4%), Vokkaligas (6.5%), Christians (43.2%) and Muslims (21.2%) [Madan and Halbar 1972: 135]. This was in tune with the trends obtaining in the entire southern India taken as a whole (Chandrashekhar 1995: 40). The following is a statement on the increasing levels of education/literacy in the community over a span of forty years, which strikingly demonstrates the gulf that existed between the Brahmins and the other two 'dominant' caste communities in the Princely State of Mysore. Even as the other two communities make a determined bid to improve their literacy levels, the gulf gets reproduced consistently.

Year	Brahmins		Lingayaths		Vokkaligas	
	Total Literacy	English Literacy	Total Literacy	English Literacy	Total Literacy	English Literacy
1901	68.0	10.2	14.1	0.13	4.0	0.07
1911	70.5	15.6	17.7	0.22	6.2	0.12
1921	70.7	24.0	20.3	0.63	7.4	0.24
1931	78.3	33.9	30.1	1.43	12.2	0.53
1941	87.1	36.2	32.6	2.43	15.2	1.09

Source: Manor (1977a: 32). Literacy rates are in percentages.

This predominance, of course, gets reflected in the government appointments in Mysore too as the following tabular representation illustrates. What is significant here is that the Brahmin predominance does not get significantly dented even after decades of formal governmental mechanisms in the form of affirmative action favouring the backward classes are initiated. This is particularly true of gazetted positions, even as their numbers dwindled more rapidly within the non-gazetted sector. This differential trend continues to the present times wherein the top echelons of the government bureaucracy are still dominated by the Brahmins, while the lower levels tend to have decreasing number of **Brahmins**.¹⁰

Year	Government Posts Gazetted (%)	Government Posts Non-Gazetted (%)
1918	64.86	69.64
1936	61.32	49.65
1947	46.89	37.5
1957	35.72	27.65

Source: Thimmaiah (1993: 75). This source also details the comparative figures concerning the Lingayaths and the Vokkaligas (*ibid*).

Again, no systematic and accurate data is available to validate this assertion. However see the cover story titled *The Resilient Brahmin* in the weekly magazine, *The Week*, dated November 10 2002 for a broad but indicative inventory of Brahmins occupying the top positions in diverse fields.

By 1918 itself - the year the Mysore government constituted the Miller Committee to recommend measures to increase the proportion of non-Brahmins in government employment - the gap between the Brahmins and the rest as far as government jobs were concerned was huge:

Community	Subordinate Appointments (%)	Gazetted Appointments (%)	% of Total Population
Brahmin	69.64	65.0	3.8
Lingayath	3.61	1.9	12.0
Vokkaliga	2.42	1.1	20.4
Vaisya	0.58	0.4	0.7
Kuruba	0.34	-	6.7
Adi-Karnataka	0.48	-	15.1
Muslim	7.72	4.3	5.8

Source: Manor (1977a: 32)

Between 1921-23, as many as 524 Brahmins were appointed through the Mysore Civil Services compared to 32 Vokkaligas, 46 Lingayaths and 70 Muslims (**Hanumanthappa** Vol. III n.d.: 263-4). This is during the years immediately following the Miller Committee's Report and the government's initiation of a reservation policy following the acceptance of the recommendations of the Committee. Further, in April 1921, of the 78 Amildars in existence, 63 were Brahmins as against four Lingayaths and Muslims each; and between 1922-25, of the 30 posts filled 20 were given to Brahmin candidates (*ibid.*: 269). Between 1924-5, of the 74 jobs with salaries ranging between Rs. 50 and Rs. 100, 47 went to Brahmins, five each to Muslims and Lingayaths and only one to a Vokkaliga (*ibid.*). Again, the picture at the top echelons of the bureaucracy was of course not different. During 1923-33, 36 Brahmins as compared to six Lingayaths and eight Muslims were appointed as Assistant Commissioners. 16 Brahmins as against one Mudaliar and one Urs were appointed as Deputy Commissioners. There was some sense of 'parity' in the Revenue Probationers appointments - five each from Brahmin and Muslim communities and four each from the Vokkaliga and Lingayath communities were taken (*ibid.* 272).

The patterns obtaining in recruitment into some other **significant** government departments can also be noted. Since the establishment of the Central Recruitment Board (instituted to stem the networks of nepotism) during 1927 to oversee appointments to all the government departments of bureaucracy, 2679 Brahmins as compared to 1378 Lingayaths, 1015 Muslims, 605 Vokkaligas and 383 individuals from the Depressed Classes were recruited. Even in the Police Department, at the level of Executive Officers, 367 Brahmins were employed in comparison to 40 Lingayaths, 55 Vokkaligas and 191 Muslims. In the year 1937, all the eight Government Advocates were Brahmins and out of the 22 Public Prosecutors, 18 were Brahmins. Sivakumar (1982: 18) gives the overall figures pertaining to government appointments during 1921-24 which embodies the general picture of Brahmin preponderance in the government services. Of the total number of appointments offered during this period, Brahmins took 570 jobs (54.2%) as against 42 for the Vokkaligas (4%), 63 for the Lingayaths (6%), 89 for the Muslims (8.5%) and 46 for the Christians (4.4%).

However, it is the space of the electoral politics that the Brahmins have never been able to dominate from its beginnings - indeed a striking contrast to their predominance in all the other spaces of modern institutions. By the 1930s, Vokkaligas and Lingayaths had already established entrenched positions of dominance in spaces which were determined by the logic of representative democracy, however limited the representativeness of such bodies might have been. This held good both at the larger bodies like the Mysore Representative Assembly as indeed the District Boards. It was only till about the 1920s that the Brahmins had tended to dominate these spaces, especially since neither was there a political consciousness of their numbers among the two dominant castes nor was such spaces themselves even presumptively representative (Manor 1977b: 178-183 *passim*). Nonetheless, it was not that in the post-1920s period, the number of Brahmins in the Representative Assembly began to become proportional to their share in the population. Brahmins continued to be in greater numbers than what a strict allocation based on their share in the population would have allowed for. This was primarily for the reason that some of the criteria for becoming members for the Assembly (as indeed for the eligibility to vote) were structured in such a way that only Brahmins could have satisfied them. Thus most of the members who went on the basis of being graduates were Brahmins. Further, a few Brahmins members of the Assembly were representing "Special Interests" such as those of 'Depressed Classes and Women' (*sic*).

Their numbers in representative bodies began to reflect their share in the population more decidedly only in the local level bodies such as the District Boards. Anyway, by the 1920s, it was also more or less clear that these spaces had outlived their usefulness as spaces articulating the democratic aspirations of the populace at large (Manor 1977a: 21-27).

Not surprisingly, the Brahmin members of the Representative Assembly did articulate a concern regarding the dwindling number of Brahmins in the Assembly, but stated it in different ways. They persistently demanded that the property clause be removed as a Representative Assembly membership criterion so that graduates and post-graduates can become members in greater numbers enhancing the level of erudition of the proceedings (Hanumanthappa Vol. II n.d.: 169-70). The records of the proceedings also continue to note the sustained indifference of the bureaucracy to the members and the ever-present displeasure expressed by the members against such apathy to their opinions on matters of state, economy, and society. Given the increasing propensity among the Brahmin families to convert agricultural capital into educational and modern occupational capitals, a conversion that had already reached constitutive proportions, most of the members coming on the criterion of landed property into the Representative Assembly were members from the dominant caste-clusters, like the Vokkaligas and the Lingayaths. The division and the acrimony between the members and the officials thus also had a caste dimension attached to it. We present an instance of that while discussing a Brahmin official's memoir in the next section.

All in all, the number of Brahmin members of the Representative Assembly does not appear to have been negligible. This was not merely because of the fact that most who were becoming members on the criterion of education were Brahmins. It was also because of the fact that, given their early entry into those new spaces that did not draw its primary identity from caste, they could become representatives in the Assembly of such interests. This ranged from representing the interests of Journalists to Depressed Classes (the Dalits) to Women. Even as they gained their membership on the grounds of representing interests that, by definition at least, had nothing to do with their being Brahmins, they did put to use their presence in such spaces to speak for their lot. We will present such an instance later - of a Brahmin, Gopalaswami Iyer, who was elected as a representative of the interests of Depressed Classes and who was referred to in the reports of the proceedings as "R. Gopalaswami Iyer (Member, Depressed Classes, Bangalore)".

Nonetheless, the process of circumscribing, if not retrenching altogether, **the** Brahmin from the spaces of the political has been an irreversible process, decidedly at local levels but also increasingly at state and national level politics. This has had important consequences for the perceptual space of the modern Brahmin self in Karnataka, in its relation to the modern nation-state, polity and society at large. We take up this theme in the subsequent chapters.

It is to be reiterated that the trajectory of the Brahmins in other parts of Karnataka - that is, outside of the Princely Mysore state - does not show a great deal of divergence from what has been mapped in the foregoing. The same investment in the twin processes of secular education and getting into the modern bureaucratic apparatus and other such occupations/professions also obtains here. The only significant divergence appears to be in terms of their relationship with land and agrarian economy in general. The Brahmin castes from the coastal region and those residents in the Malnad area continue to have stakes in agriculture, even as the primary choice of their youth has been one of education and employment in the cities. This is confirmed by the many auto/biographies available of Brahmins from these regions, as indeed from the recounting of our respondents. We will get back to these specificities in the third section. What the foregoing illustrates nonetheless is the virtually uncontested entry of the Brahmin community into the spaces of secular, modern education and government services. It is this unique positioning of the Brahmin vis-a-vis the *modern public sphere* that in very **fundamental** ways constitutes the Brahmin identity that takes shape in the contemporary times. Indeed, while the preponderance of Brahmins in such spaces has been a well-documented fact, what is perhaps more significant and yet less commented upon is the initiatives that the community has taken to consolidate this predominance. These initiatives too have been crucial in the formation of a corporatised and secularised Brahmin self in the contemporary context, especially since they necessitated the Brahmins to look beyond the individual Brahmin castes to which they belonged. In the next section we chart some of the formal and informal networks that the Brahmins used in order to consolidate their dominance over the institutions of the modern public sphere.

II

Networking to consolidate

The importance of modern formal institutions and the advantage the **Brahmins held** - in terms of education, traditions of learning, possession of agricultural surpluses

even while being detached from directly participating in agricultural production - in gaining a ready access to such institutional spaces have long been recognised in studies justifying the non-Brahmin movements of the late colonial period. However, it is not as often that the decisive role played by informal practices and networks, primarily based on community identities and locations, has been noted in these studies. Here, in this section, we shall venture to describe the same. We stress the ways in which the very fashioning of the policy of the government was, deliberately or otherwise, facilitative of the Brahmin quest to urbanise and inhabit the newly instituted spaces of modern institutions. The policies of 'Mysore for Mysoreans', eagerness to establish institutions of higher education (the case of the Mysore University being the most stark) often at the expense of primary and secondary education, the much touted 'modernisation' initiatives are the cases taken up here. We also allude to some of the more direct and deliberate instances of the ability on the part of Brahmins to deny access to such spaces for the non-Brahmins, besides directing attention to the existence of informal networks of kin/caste/community that bound urban areas of the Mysore State, as indeed the practices of *Vaaraanna* and *Bhikshaanna* and the well established institution of caste hostels. The focus throughout is on the distinctiveness of the space that the Brahmin has enjoyed, one that enables him to make, as his own, the positions and spaces that are, at least on the face of it 'non-casted'.

The Miller Committee, appointed by the Mysore Princely State in 1918 to look into and recommend measures to improve the representation of backward classes in the government bureaucracy and modern education, was rather candid when it observed:

[U]nder the present system of governance, the officers of the government in the higher grades of service have necessarily much influence in *shaping the policy of the administration* ... [T]he fact cannot be ignored that an officer in the exercise of his duty making appointments and promotions finds it easier to see the *virtues of his own community* than those of others (cited in Thimmaiah 1993: 60, emphasis added).

These statements offer a summary axis on which to look at the Brahmin community and its workings in the late colonial context, in that they accurately reflect on the trajectories of state policy and its proclivity towards the growth of powerful but informal networks. In fact, there was a legalised practice in the Mysore State that vacancies in the government bureaucracy could legally be filled by "nominating" candidates of "good birth" or hailing from "respectable families". This was an accepted practice till the Central Recruitment Board was established. Indeed, Dewan Seshadri Iyer, as far back as

1892 itself and in response to the concerns against the Brahmin predominance in the government services, had suggested what appear to be rather cleverly drafted broad guidelines:

No Brahmin, as a rule, be selected under nominations [for the Civil Services], because already this class is too well represented and competition, for many years to come will, most probably, only add to this number. Moreover the Brahmin is, more or less, a cosmopolitan and must not complain of the selection of non-Brahmin candidates of good birth, family connections etc. Their educational qualifications may not be as good as those of the Brahmin candidates also belonging to good local families. I do not advocate any hard and fast rule to which there ought to be no exception. All I say is:

1. Let the Brahmin, if he can by the competition door;
2. Let the local non-Brahmin come by the nomination door;
3. Let the local Brahmin also come by the nomination door when a sufficiently educated local non-Brahmin is not forthcoming (Hanumanthappa Vol. III n.d.: 295).

Quite emphatically, these guidelines were not heeded. Even if they were to be, the Brahmin was already too entrenched in different senses to have been ruffled. For, as Iyer himself recognised, the door of competition was already and uncontestably the Brahmin's own. Besides, there were, at that time, very few non-Brahmin families who would have passed the twin criteria that Iyer proposed - of having a "good birth" with "family connections" and being "sufficiently educated". The non-Brahmins had to wait for almost three decades before a more rational and justifiable policy of reservations could be formulated - as it was by the Miller Committee in 1918.

Likewise, the demand that only Mysoreans be considered for the government jobs in Mysore - encoded as the slogan 'Mysore for Mysoreans' - was a long-standing one. The fact that there were, as early as 1881 itself, nearly seventy thousand people in government service in Mysore (Naidu 1996: 182) indicates the massive strides that the Princely State had made in setting up a modern administrative set-up. As we have sought to indicate in the previous section, the government service was virtually a monopoly of the Brahmins even in the face of official measures of positive discrimination to contain the Brahmin predominance. But interestingly enough what was left unmarked in this enunciation of 'Mysore for Mysoreans' was the fact that it took shape primarily in the context of an intense struggle for bureaucratic positions between Brahmins who came from the Madras Presidency and those who were residents of the Mysore State. Mysore Brahmins had by the closing decades of the nineteenth century begun to encode their interests in 'non-caste' terms - in this instance, in the form of a 'sons of the soil' register.

Almost two decades of publicly-enacted contestations and machinations later, the Mysore Brahmins prevailed over the 'Madras' Brahmin lobby - a victory signalled by the appointment of Vishveshvaraiah, a native Brahmin, as Dewan in 1912.¹¹ He, in the very same year, brought in a change in the rules overseeing government recruitments that addressed the demand of 'Mysore for Mysoreans'. He announced in the Representative Assembly that "Only those born in or residing for a sufficiently long period of time in the Mysore state or those who have studied and taken degrees from the Mysore colleges will be eligible to take the Mysore Civil Service Examinations" (*Mysore Star*)¹² 4-4-1912). This initiative, by default, meant that the Mysore Brahmins could now exercise an virtual monopoly over the huge resources of the state bureaucracy - for, their main threat (the Madras Brahmins) were debarred from entering the Mysore government services and they had no competition whatsoever from any other native community. What however struck at this monopoly was the almost concurrent demand of the non-Brahmin associations that some ways of checking the Brahmin monopoly in government services are brought in. The Mysore Maharaja was more than willing to accede to this demand and the Miller Committee was appointed, even in the face of an expressed disagreement voiced by the Dewan to the non-Brahmin demand.

That the change in policy in favour of 'Mysore for Mysoreans' would primarily benefit Mysore Brahmins was no unintended consequence as far as the Dewan, Vishveshvaraiah, was concerned. He seems to have been keenly aware of the implications of this move; for he is supposed to have remarked on a file during the heights of the non-Brahmin contestation an evocative Kannada proverb - *anthoo inthu kunthi makkalige raajyavilla* - alluding to the epic Mahabharatha, which means 'Whichever Way, Kunthi's Children Never Got the Reigns of the Kingdom'. The Pandavas, children of Kunthi, were allegedly tricked by Kauravas into pawning their kingdom in a game of gambling and forfeiting it. When, after going through fourteen years of life in the forest (as was the condition), they ask the Kauravas to give back their kingdom, but are refused. Thus the Pandavas never get to rule their kingdom. Similarly,

We will detail this contestation in the next chapter while delineating the heterogeneity that marks the category of the Brahmin.

¹² *Mysore Star* was a weekly that was published from Mysore by a Lingayath, Yajaman Veerasangappa. This was one of the very few newspapers' which was taking pro-non-Brahmin positions, arguing rather passionately and articulatedly for the cause of the latter. It was also an important mouthpiece of the Lingayath concerns. We make extensive use of this source in the next chapter, as also Ch.4.

for the Dewan, the Mysore Brahmins had to first suffer the monopoly of the Madras Brahmins. Just when they thought, with the policy in favour of 'Mysore for Mysoreans' being implemented, they will be the masters, the non-Brahmins demanded that the Brahmin preponderance be checked. Thus, like the Pandavas, the Mysore Brahmins either way found themselves losing out.

The non-Brahmin leaders of Mysore, who had by then emerged as a vocal and effective pressure group, were quick in decoding this demand. They were very clear that the apparently progressive stance of the 'sons of the soil' argument was, in fact, serving the interests of the Brahmins. The policy shift in the form of "Mysore for Mysoreans" thus meant, as far as the non-Brahmins were concerned, that one set of Brahmins had replaced another set. Thus, when Vishveshvaraiah, announced the policy shift favouring the Mysoreans, the journal *Mysore Star* which consistently enunciated the non-Brahmin cause was emphatic in its position:

While the government has rightly become the subject of the indebtedness of the natives of Mysore for narrowing the door to block the entry of the outsiders, who can deny that it ought to pay special attention towards uplifting those among its own people who have remained backward for a rather long period of time? ... Isn't it as natural an expectation that the government should have a special interest in the cause of the backward communities, as it has for the natives, even if it were to be seen to be at the expense of the forward communities? (*Mysore Star* A-A-9\2).

Therefore the non-Brahmin leaders insisted through the Memorandum submitted to the Maharaja in 1918 that if qualified non-Brahmins were not available for government employment quota from within the Mysore region, then non-Brahmin candidates from outside be appointed over the Brahmin candidates from within (*Mysore Star* 30-6-1918; see also Naidu 1996: 195). It was indeed in responding to this Memorandum that the Mysore Government appointed the Miller Committee.

The establishment of the Mysore University in 1916 (as also the need to establish institutions providing higher education) was another such instance - clearly demonstrating the affinity that existed between the governmental policy and the concerns and aspirations of the Brahmin community. The establishment of a local university in the Mysore State was a long-standing demand of the educated Brahmins of Mysore. Vishveshvaraiah almost single handedly worked for the realisation of this demand often incurring the displeasure of the neighbouring Madras University (to which all the higher educational institutions existing in the Mysore state were affiliated) and the British

administrators of the Madras **Presidency**.¹³ The Mysore University began functioning in the year 1916 much to the excitement of the Brahmin community in the Mysore State. It increased the chances of the Brahmins coming from even poorer economic and village backgrounds to pursue higher education, which in turn facilitated their entry into the much sought after government services. This sense of jubilation, excitement and relief can be seen from the memoirs of many of the Brahmins who were part of the initial years of the Mysore **University**.¹⁴ Thus many young Brahmin men who would have been forced to discontinue their education for want of financial and other resources were presented with an opportunity to enhance their life-opportunities with the establishment of the university.

The establishment of the Mysore University proved to be a drain (and, at least in the initial years, a luxury that the State could ill-afford) on the resources that the Mysore State was willing to spend on **education**.¹⁵ It clearly affected the advances the State was making in the spheres of primary and secondary education. The non-Brahmin leaders were therefore none too happy with the establishment of the university. They feared that the university would demand a large share of the education allocation (as it did) while benefiting a few who would most often be Brahmins; and that, consequently, there will be lesser funding for primary and secondary education, a space into which the non-Brahmin communities were by then, even if hesitantly, making an entry.

Furthermore, the Mysore State veered towards highly subsidising higher education. In 1918, the Brahmin members of the Mysore University Senate unanimously proposed, in the Senate meeting, to abolish fees for all the Arts Education at the university level. The non-Brahmin and Lingayath leader M. Basavaiah (who was a leading advocate in Bangalore) opposed it on the grounds that almost all the students at the university level (who were Brahmins), as things stood then, were already receiving highly subsidised education. He argued that during the previous year (in 1917) 73 students were awarded degrees from the University whose budgetary expenditure for that academic year stood at around Rs. Seven lakhs, which meant that almost ten thousand

¹³ See the memoirs of Vishveshvaraiah titled *Memoirs of my Working Life*, excerpted in Iyengar (1990).

See, for a representation, Iyengar (1990) and the autobiographies and reminiscences of the Kannada litterateurs Murthy Rao (1990) and Sitharamaiah (1997) who both were students of the first few batches of the University.

¹⁵ See Manor (1977a: 50-1) for the skewed budgetary spending on education and spatial distribution of educational institutions in the State.

rupees was being spent on each student; and, what is more, this sum did not include their scholarships and fee exemptions (Deveerappa 1985: 50). These claims concur with the picture that we have presented of comparative spending on the higher and primary education in the first section.

Commenting on the virtual monopoly of the Brahmins in higher education, Basavaiah draws attention to the lopsided nature of revenue-accretion and budget-allocation in a speech before the Legislative Council:

[W]hen the collegiate education shows an extraordinary divergence of developments in the state between different communities *inter-se*, it regretfully happens that the university which has not *any* appreciable fund of its own but which liberally indents upon the revenues of the state, is thereby getting one-sided in indirectly asking those who receive little benefit from the university, to contribute largely to develop the intellectual capacity of those that least contribute to it (in Deveerappa 1985: 95).

Basavaiah's apprehensions are very clear here. While the overwhelmingly urbanised Brahmins contributed a very negligible sum to the state exchequer through taxes, it is the predominantly rural and landed backward communities that largely make up the revenues of the state. Thus, justly, the spending of the government should reflect the taxation patterns. However the Mysore University was increasing its budgetary demands annually in order to primarily cater to the needs of one single community, which in turn was contributing very little to the tax collected, while relying excessively on tax collected largely from the rural population which was excessively non-Brahmin.

More importantly, for the non-Brahmin leaders, Mysore University was but one instance of the incongruent nature of the state policy on budgetary spending - of accruing resources from the non-Brahmins in order to spend on the welfare on the Brahmins. Thus Basavaiah rhetoricises:

How have the large hospitals constructed in large cities, the University in Mysore, grants for public improvement and other kindred items of expenditure appreciably raised [the agriculturist's] position in life or his earning capacity?... There is a growing inequality and [the agriculturist] is invariably the butt for tapping revenue, both direct and indirect, which he certainly cannot afford to pay consistently [without any hopes for his own] progress (*ibid*: 100)

Similar was the debate on the Bill seeking to make primary education compulsory for girls introduced in the year 1917. While Brahmin members were in the forefront of arguing in favour of the Bill, the non-Brahmin members were more cautious in their approach. They suggested that the proposed Bill, if promulgated, should cover only the

urban areas to begin with, for in the rural areas not even non-Brahmin boys were in any appreciable numbers receiving education. The questions of women and of 'reform', which were also veiled ways of negotiating with questions of caste, are taken up for a more detailed discussion in the sixth chapter.

The Princely Mysore State was often touted as a 'progressive' and 'forward-looking' state - epithets chiefly arising out of its determined drive towards modernisation of its administration, measures such as the introduction of railways, electricity and so on. Scholars like Manor (1977a: 8-27) have drawn attention to the gross inadequacy of and misplaced enthusiasm demonstrated in such attempts. But the massive and unprecedented expansion of the bureaucracy, undertaking of newer governmental initiatives like electricity generation, irrigation projects, modern industry, mining, railways etc. were also feeding into the aspirations of the newly emerging Brahmin educated classes. The non-Brahmin leaders insistently drew attention to this felicitous convergence of interest and aspirations. Basavaiah's speech in the Legislative Council (Deveerappa 1985: 91-101) in response to the budget proposed contains many references to this affinity. It calls attention to the indiscriminate recruitment resorted to in the Engineering Department, in particular, which tended to make it "top-heavy" at great cost to the revenue-spending patterns of the government. Such recruitments - across the different departments - took place in spite of the apprehensions that the government entertained in regard to the capability of the recruited. The standard reply to any demand that more non-Brahmins be recruited to higher level positions was that there were no competent and eligible candidates available. This response is consistently offered on the floor of the Representative Assembly, in particular between the 1920s and the 1940s (Hanumanthappa Vol. III, n.d. has the details).

The Brahmin dominance and consolidation in these spaces was facilitated not only by such 'natural' convergence of the economy of their caste community and the policy of the modern state. The non-Brahmin newspapers and activists consistently referred to more direct and deliberate instances of the ability of the Brahmins to regulate access to such spaces vis-a-vis the others as indeed to facilitate entry of their own caste-men. Without doubt, the ability of the Brahmins to mediate, and if possible block, the entry of the non-Brahmins into the modern institutions was rather strong and appears to have been ubiquitous. This happened at different levels - from denying, or procrastinating in giving, admission in schools (leave alone spheres of higher education) to shaping the

policy of the administration, most importantly and decisively, deciding and defining what constitutes 'public good and welfare'. Many of the memoirs written by Brahmins of this period offer rich testimonies to the naturalised ways in which their being Brahmins seamlessly wove into their official/professional positions. They also provide candid instances of how bureaucratic positions were being filled up, the norms of which tended to 'naturally' favour Brahmins. Here we take a detailed look at the memoirs of a Brahmin official who richly details the period just before the non-Brahmin articulation becomes significant in the Mysore State. Navaratna Ramarao recounts his experience of working as a Revenue Probationary Officer with the Mysore administration in his memoirs titled *Kelavu Nenapugalu* ('Some Memories', 1990).

Pursuing a law degree in Madras (there was no law college in the Mysore state then) during 1900-01 and not in very financially comfortable situations, Ramarao gets a telegram from his father asking him to visit Mysore at the earliest, for the Dewan, Krishnamurthy,¹⁶ wanted to see him. Ramarao writes:

Then, in the Mysore State, Probationary Assistant Commissioner posts were given to some either on grounds of respect for their family/lineage or on recommendation from some noted person or on communal quota. ... When a friend had asked me to try for such a position, I had said, "I have too big a head to slip through such a back door"... But now when I received this unexpected telegram, I was a little excited wondering whether I could be in with an offer of an AC post (*ibid.* 20).

When he goes to meet the Dewan, the latter is emphatic:

We are very close to your father and we are told that you write rather well in English. It has been on our mind for a long time that we should do some favour to your father. We thought we could take you into our office and help you come up in life (*ibid.*: 21).

Since Ramarao thought that it did not quite sound like an AC-ship offer, he takes courage to ask the details of what was exactly being offered. The Dewan proclaims:

We usually start with a Rs. 20/- per month job in the Secretariat for BA graduates. But we cannot give such jobs to all those who come seeking them. Since we know your father rather well, we thought of taking you to our Home Office on a Rs. 50/- per month scale (*ibid.*: 22).

Ramarao refuses that offer and goes on to complete his BL to begin a bright career as a Revenue Probationer. But that is not the point that is being pursued here. The first

¹⁶ The first Mysorean to become the Dewan, supposedly put in place in order to placate the Mysore Brahmin clique even when better qualified Madras Brahmins were available.

striking point about the above instance is that even as late as 1900-01, jobs were being distributed on grounds of *respectable family background, recommendations or communal representations*. This was way before any backward **class/non-Brahmin** articulations of communal reservations had made an entry. Notice the Dewan's 'compulsion' to promote Ramarao's career simply because he wants to do a favour to his father (even as the recipient thinks it is too small a favour). If one takes a look at the **auto/biographies** from this period, one is struck by the 'naturalness' with which such informal networks operated.

Second, the Dewan is rather unwilling to offer jobs at the secretariat to those who come looking for them. This clearly demonstrates the willingness, if not eagerness, of the officialdom, which was constitutively Brahmin in its composition, to shut out even such thinly available public spaces to 'others'. It was not that such job seekers at that point of time would have been anybody else but Brahmins themselves. Such instances of informal networks were not isolated. Indeed, Ramarao's memoirs are dotted with endless instances of that order. It was also helped by the fact that there was a huge chasm between the educational levels of the Brahmins and that of the others.

Thus the Brahmin appropriation of modern spaces was not merely enabled by what is variously described as their 'traditions of learning', 'writing skills' and so on, but also because of the above described informal networks and the naturalised tendency of capitalising on the emerging norms of institutionalisation. **Ramarao** himself gives us glimpses of the workings of caste and community networks. Talking about a Madhva Amaldar, Ramarao states:

Sect-patriotism was demonstrated at times. Once a Madhva officer was trying a Madhva Shanubhogue in a case of **embezzlement**. Then Govindaraya [the Amaldar], with tears in his eyes said, "This bastard [a very endearing word, a distinct part of the Brahmin lexicon, is employed here] has committed it, sir. But he has a family to look after. More importantly, one has to respect the *Angaara Akshathe* [body markers of a Madhva male]. If you can agree to let him off after collecting the misappropriated money from him, I will some how try getting it out of him." He [Govindaraya] himself is honest and thus had remained poor. But his devotion for the *Angaara Akshathe* made him accept not only spending his own money but also allowing a thief go scot-free. This might not be accepted as justice but I cannot say that such *compassion and devotion* are wrong (*ibid.*: 34-5).

While the invocation of particular caste loyalties (namely, Madhva and Smartha) is seen in the above illustration, the sense of both being and belonging to the larger category of 'Brahmin' is not entirely absent, as many more incidents that Ramarao

himself narrates exemplify. Indeed such a differential recuperation of the Brahmin self continues into the present and is largely determined by its contexts.

Besides, needless to say, such officials had other more condescending ways of negotiating with the larger non-Brahmin populace. Even if one might attribute this to bureaucratic indifference, the non-Brahmin activists preferred to see it as typical instances of subversion resorted to by **Brahmins**.¹⁷ Here is an instance narrated by Ramarao in which the recipient of such bureaucratic indifference and condescension is a **Vokkaliga** who was no less than a member of the Representative Assembly.

Ramarao is describing how he was taught to handle and conduct the ‘**Taluq Board Meetings**’¹⁸, presided by the Assistant Commissioner (AC), admittedly a democratic space wherein local people were supposed to negotiate with the government regarding their needs. When **Ramarao**, then a Probationer, goes to remind the AC, Krishna Rao, a Brahmin officer, of the impending Taluq Board Meeting, the latter says:

“It’s good that you reminded me of the meeting. I had forgotten all about it. I shall show you how to conduct the Meeting. You must know, I hope, Taluq Board means /oca/ autonomy, *full democracy*”. ...

The next day, at 12.00 was the meeting. Patels [usually belonging to the Vokkaliga community] of the surrounding four large villages, two Shanubhagues [usually from the Brahmin community], four five big farmers, local moneylenders, big traders had assembled. ... [T]he Local fund clerk [a lower rank official] read out the accounts. The President then ordered the assembled to bring to his notice anything that they thought was important. Nobody had enough courage to open his mouth. Then the President pointed at a rich, landed Patel, a Vokkaliga, and shouted, “OK Gowda. You are a RA [Representative Assembly of Mysore] Member, isn’t it? You say something.” Very hesitantly the Gowda got up. He was extremely nervous in front of the AC. He said [Ramarao uses the Kannada that is associated with Vokkaligas here], “Sir...please get us a rotu [road] to our village from Ilavaala [the neighbouring town].” The AC screamed at him: “Rotu, it seems... You are a goner. If you don’t have anything else to say, just keep shut.” The meeting went on like that (*ibid.*: 50-1; italicised words are the English words used in the original).

But Ramarao himself is clear that such an indifferent attitude towards “full democracy” and “local autonomy” is wrong and unjustified. He is also clear in making **fun** of such attitudes of his senior officers. However, the Brahmin-dominated bureaucracy’s ability to scuttle larger processes of democratisation can be seen by the way Ramarao himself

¹⁷ The non-Brahmin members of the Representative Assembly incessantly brought attention to **the** subversive strategies of the excessively Brahmin-dominated bureaucracy.

¹⁸ As we have noted above, such local level structures of polity were increasingly coming to be dominated by the landed communities like the Vokkaligas.

handles a 'tricky situation' during his probationary period. His superior, the Deputy Commissioner, instructs Ramarao to be in charge of a specified stretch of the route that the Mysore Maharaja is to take on his 'circuit'. His brief is to make such arrangements for the **specified** stretch that the journey is rendered comfortable and incident-free. He says:

Just the day before the king was supposed to reach the place to which I was made accountable, there was some news that created anxiety. The former Amaldar [a Brahmin] of Megalapura [the place for which Ramarao was now in charge] had given away some expensive land to some of his relatives - in fact to himself, and his relatives **were** only an alibi. Even as there were objections raised on the deal, he ignored them all and **made the** claims over the said land permanent. A complaint registered with the Deputy Commissioner (DC) met with no response, for the Amaldar was reportedly in the good books of the DC. Therefore, a person named Mysore Basavarajappa had decided to bring the case in detail before the king during his visit. I had known Basavarajappa to be a troublemaker. ... When the Amaldar enquired with the village elders, they reportedly said that they did not want any trouble during the king's visit but they also said that Basavarajappa is stubborn (*ibid.*: 65).

This was the anxiety before the Amaldar and Ramarao. Even when Ramarao claims that the villagers too did not want any trouble, it is apparent that the Brahmin bureaucrats are keen not to allow the king any knowledge of the appropriation. Note also the justness of the intent of Basavarajappa in taking a complaint before the highest authority, that too after trying out the other channels available. Nonetheless, Ramarao, apparently in consultation with the village elders, chalks out a plan.

Just behind the village, there was an old temple, which had strong doors to its sanctum sanctorum. I instructed the Patel thus: "Keep four strong men ready. As soon as I indicate, just carry him to the temple and lock him in it. If at all his shouts are heard when the king is here, we could always tell him that he is a mad fellow and has been locked so that he doesn't create nuisance during your visit". I then had a bugle man placed enroute, about a mile away with instructions that he play the bugle when the entourage of the king reaches that spot. ...

I tried convincing Basavarajappa assuring him of a hearing but in vain. We had to carry out our plan ensuring the smooth conduct of the **brief** stopover of the king (*ibid.*, 66).

These instances mark out the Brahmins' ability to at once naturalise the powerful spaces of bureaucracy and education as their own, while also complicating the terms of access to these spaces. However even as such mediations at the level of individuals were significant, there were also some institutionalised and yet informal practices that had gained large-scale acceptance within the community, and which were facilitative of the Brahmin quest to modernity. It is to a detailing of the more significant and wide spread of such practices that we turn in the following.

What appears to have been constitutive of the 'right to city' of many a Brahmin, particularly in the princely Mysore State, are the two practices of '*Vaaraanna*' and '*Bhikshaanna*'. These practices, although very significant, were not the only ones in operation in this period, there were others too. A Brahmin youth studying in a university or a pre-university course could also make some money by tutoring school-going kids of Brahmin families or gain 'freeships' largely by pleading to the generosity of Brahmin officials in the education department of the college bureaucracy. They could even take up part-time jobs in the bureaucracy. V. Sitaramaiah's reminiscences of his 'College Days' describes these arrangements (1997: 14-20), that seem to have been fairly entrenched practices.¹⁹ Nevertheless, almost every biography or autobiography that one comes across of Brahmins who were getting educated during this period calls attention to either or both of the practices of *Vaaraanna* and *Bhikshaanna*.

Vaaraanna, which could be translated as '*weekly food*', refers to the arrangement among the Brahmins residing in cities and towns of feeding one or more poor Brahmin boys, who have undergone *Upanayana* (the initiation ceremony), on a particular day of the week, till the completion of their education.²⁰ *Bhikshaanna*, apparently a more time-honoured practice, translates into '*food collected through begging*'. As the name suggests, students used to go around with a vessel in their hands to local Brahmins' houses begging for food. However it is the former which was more in usage than the latter. Even as such practices sound embarrassing (if not humiliating, as indeed many of the auto/biographies admit to) what is to be noted is the vitality and legitimacy that these practices commanded as well as the practical usefulness of their existence. Bhairappa (1996), an important contemporary Kannada litterateur, mentions about what a Brahmin told him regarding the legitimacy of such practices. When he, as a poor student, had to decide on going ahead with his practice of seeking *Bhikshaanna*, a Brahmin hotel owner who was known to him, tells him:

Any way, aren't you born as a Brahmin? Then what is the humiliation in seeking alms? I too have done that. In our side [he is an Udupi Brahmin], they call it *Madhukari* [collecting the honey]. Like the bee, which goes to scores of different flowers to collect the juice to prepare

¹⁹ On the other hand, Bhairappa, a much younger contemporary of Sitaramaiah, had to overcome, during the 1930s and the 1940s, many instances of over-eager non-Brahmin officials seeking to deny him some of these privileges — of freeship, of endowment grants etc. See his autobiography *Bhitti* (1996).

²⁰ Bhairappa (1996) mentions the severity of this restriction of having had *Upanayana* done on oneself to be eligible to seek *Bhikshaanna*, even while mentioning that he himself was not so '*Initiated*' when he was seeking *Bhikshaanna*.

honey. ... It is definitely more honourable to go to ten unknown Brahmins seeking alms (Bhairappa 1996: 152).

It is to be noted that the legitimacy of the practice is being premised on the scriptural sanction of the Brahmin, to whom begging is perhaps the only justified way of finding food. However, irrespective of such a justification, the seeker himself would feel rather humiliated imploring alms (as Bhairappa himself admits to have been). *Vaaraanna* was definitely more honourable compared to *Bhikshaanna*. However, such practices did indeed perform a crucial task for the Brahmin community vis-a-vis the unfolding structures of modern opportunity. This becomes very clear particularly when one evaluates them with reference to the constant efforts of the non-Brahmin leaders to draw attention to the non-availability of comparable avenues for students from their communities.

By the early decades of the twentieth century, the Brahmin community had already an entrenched presence in most of the cities and towns of Karnataka, which, by definition, had meant unprecedented access to the newly emerging modern spaces. **This** proved to be a defining advantage that the Brahmins held on to in exercising a head start over other communities. Thus most of the eager Brahmin youth who came to these cities or towns looking to further their education and careers would, more often than not, find a relative or a caste-fellow already stably located in these places and willing to provide shelter. They could thus invoke networks of varied kinds in finding an abode or coping with other exigencies. For instance, the household that V. Sitaramaiah (*op. cit.*) stays on in Mysore during his graduate and post-graduate education is one among the Brahmin households that his father had served as a priest. It is on the basis of the "respect" that the head of this household had for his father that Sitaramaiah gets to stay with the family. While shelter and food, in themselves, are evidently crucial components of being able to stay in alien locales, the advantages of residing with one's relative or a family friend (who would more often than not be an official in the government bureaucracy or a lawyer or a lecturer/teacher, each of which were crucial levers of advantage) went further. More often than not, as almost all the narratives available point to, it would also mean access to

an already entrenched network of social, economic and cultural relations that stood one in good stead in the search for a comfortable livelihood.²¹

It was, therefore, usually only when a person fails in **finding** a relative or a family friend that he had to look for alternative arrangements - and this invariably meant a Community Hostel. These hostels, opened mainly and initially by philanthropist Brahmin government officials or lawyers or landlords, too were crucial in stabilising the Brahmins' quest for modernity and the opportunities of the city. *fyi* the early decades of the twentieth century, many Brahmin castes which had formed associations established community hostels, which definitionally restricted admission to its own community students and denied the same to other Brahmin community students. Such restrictions in due course were gradually relaxed by the more secularised Brahmins in cities (primarily government employees, lawyers, and teachers). It was indeed this section that was becoming increasingly hegemonic in regulating the affairs of the 'corporatised' Brahmin community, and had learnt to articulate itself on behalf of a composite Brahmin identity. Many of the available auto/biographies do indicate towards the gradual loosening of the grip of the restrictions on inter-community dining norms among Brahmins, though not those of inter-marriages. In fact, Bhairappa, in his autobiography, even mentions the case of a Congress sympathiser, who was a landlord in a big village, in whose place even students belonging to Vokkaliga and Bestha (fishermen) castes were coming for *Faaraanna* (Bhairappa 1996: 100-1; note, this was in 1947).

Given the preponderance of Brahmins in the bureaucracy, much of the government efforts at establishing Government Hostels in cities and towns too served predominantly the interests of the Brahmin students. This was both in terms of the logistics of how it worked itself out in practice (through naturalised practices of informal networking) as well as a consequence of the inherent biases in the policy. Not surprisingly, this is another bone of contention obtaining in the non-Brahmin assertions of the day.

Accordingly, the arrangements of *Faaraanna* and *Bhikshaanna* largely came into picture only in the context of the non-availability of a relative or a family friend or a

²¹ Sitaramaiah's reminiscences of his college days (1997) offers a graphic picture about the 'givenness' of a Brahmin network that makes available for him a host of cultural and social capital - from obtaining a scholarship to getting access to a vibrant network of classical music to "getting to know" important people (definitionally Brahmin) in the bureaucracy, university, journalism, and so on.

community or government hostel. While the accounts available - of individual Brahmins who had to resort to such arrangements - use the instance of such practices to present a picture of heroic fight in the face of great adversity and challenge (as indeed they might well have been), the role that these arrangements fulfilled has been critical in enabling the unprecedented urbanisation of the Brahmin community.²²

Such practices seem to have become obsolete by the 1960s primarily because of founding of more hostels, both by caste associations and by the State, as also the presence of more extensive kin networks obtaining in towns and cities. It would be a mistake however to underestimate their centrality in forming the sensibilities and subjectivities of a mobile generation. The Brahmin youth often coming from rural, poor and orthodox backgrounds found the ethos of the urban Brahmin households quite different and liberating, even equipped to take on the mantle of a certain secularising of the Brahmin self. These transitions were fairly crucial in preparing the ground on which the Brahmins could experiment a transformation of the ethos and self-retrievals of the community commensurate with the demands of an urban, secularised life (see Murthy Rao 1999).

With this broad mapping of the trajectory of Brahmins in the late colonial period, in the next section we attempt a more contemporary characterisation of the Brahmins in Karnataka.

III

A contemporary profile

Reconstructing a picture of the contemporary state of Brahmins is by no means an easy task. As we mentioned at the very outset of this chapter, the decision to drop the category of 'caste' (except pertaining to the SC and ST population) in the decennial census from 1941 has prevented any effort to get at a macro-picture of particular caste communities. Though unsystematic, the data encoded in the census reports could have acted as a ready-reckoner for any serious attempt to understand the contemporary caste profiles. Thus from very primary data such as the population of a given caste community to more significant information such as its rural-urban distribution, migration and occupational patterns, representation in spaces such as the bureaucracy, judiciary *etc.*, scholars are forced to work with informed guesses or, more frequently, projections based

²² In fact, many of the respondents interviewed, that is, those in the age group of 50 years and above, recalled either themselves or somebody in their family being the beneficiaries of such practices.

on the 1941 census figures. On the other hand, strangely enough, there have been almost no attempts by the academic community to gather such macro-data either.

As already disclosed, the most significant efforts at a composite picture of the workings of caste have been the data generated by the various Backward Classes Committees and Commissions. Apart from the Miller Committee that was set up in the 1920s by the Mysore State, there have been successive committees and commissions instituted in the post-independence period. Paradoxically, these official reports are the only extensive documents which provide - even if **unsystematically**, and not often subject to the norms of social science research - some idea of the trajectory of the Brahmins in the recent years. It is paradoxical because, almost always, beginning from the Miller Committee Report to the present, Brahmins have expressed their displeasure over the various recommendations. The two Brahmin members of the Miller Committee, for instance, attached 'Notes of Dissent' to the final report. One of them even refused to sign the final report. Thereafter, however, Brahmins have either gone to the courts seeking stay on the government orders implementing the successive Commission Reports or have gone to the press stating their ire. It seems inevitable, nevertheless, to turn to these reports for further embellishing our contemporary sense of the Brahmin community (although of course our discussion also calls attention to a few of the limited studies of Brahmins in Karnataka). The resulting picture will be further embellished with the accounts of the respondents themselves as they speak of the trajectories of their individual families.

Several of the Backward Classes Committees and Commissions appointed by the Government of Mysore/Karnataka have sought to estimate the percentage share of each caste group in the state population. These reports peg the Brahmin population in the state at 4.28% in 1961 [the Mysore Backward Classes (Nagana Gowda) Committee Report, 1961]; 4.23 % in 1972 [the first Backward Classes (Havanur) Commission Report, 1975, Vol. II]; **3.81%** in 1984 [the second (**Venkataswamy**) Backward Classes Commission Report, 1986, Vol. I], 3.45% in 1988 [the third Backward Classes (Chinnappa Reddy) Commission Report, 1990, Vol. I]. Brahmins are spread all over the state of Karnataka - but are a significant population in the districts of Bangalore, Mysore, Shimoga, Dharwad and the coastal districts of South and North Canara. The first Commission headed by Havanur projected the 1941 figures of Brahmin distribution to 1971 in order to arrive at its estimate.

The picture that these successive post-independence reports offer is consistent with the larger map drawn of the Brahmin community in our two sections above.²³ **The** preponderance of Brahmins in almost all modern public contexts continue into the post-independence period, even as the overwhelming nature of their dominance has come to be increasingly circumscribed. According to the Nagana Gowda Committee, Brahmins who made up 4.28% of the total population constituted 38.8% of the students studying in high schools (cited in **Thimmaiah** 1993: 85). Further, as on 31 March 1959, 23.93% of **the** Brahmin population were state government employees, excluding those who were part of the Class IV cadre (*ibid.*: 88). The Havanur Commission too records the disproportionate nature of the Brahmins in different sectors of government services. Brahmins continue to corner a disproportionately larger share of these spaces as also the educational attainments compared to their share in the population. Likewise, the **Venkataswamy** Commission estimates the Brahmins as occupying spaces of modern education and employment to the extent of five to six times higher than what a strict distribution based on their share in the state's population would have allowed for. For instance, during 1984-85, Brahmins occupied 15.86% of the total number of medical college seats and 20.09% of the total number of engineering college seats compared to their estimated population of 3.81% of the state (1986, Vol. I: 167-8).

It is perhaps only in the space of the representative politics that there obtains a certain equation between the Brahmin share of the general population and their representation in the different elected bodies. In fact, there is more of parity as one proceeds downwards towards local levels of representative bodies such as the **Taluq** Development Boards, Town Municipal Councils, City Corporations and so on. (See *ibid.*: 162-66 for the figures). At the level of MLAs, MLCs and MPs though, 8.17% of the members of such bodies were Brahmins - more than twice of what their percentage in the

²³ It is to be noted that the data presented by these reports are not similar across each other. Every commission had to undertake, each time, the daunting task of arriving at some sense of a macro-picture of the differentially placed caste communities. Each succeeding commission would find that the judiciary had already invalidated the data and the methodology employed by the preceding one. Most of them, depending upon such factors as the time available, the extent of expertise at the disposal of the Commission and the cooperation of the bureaucracy, came up with different yardsticks to determine the backwardness or otherwise of a caste community. **Thimmaiah** (1993) critiques the extremely diverse and at times totally unscientific methods that these Reports employed in order to arrive at their conclusions. However, our allusions to the data from these reports vis-a-vis Brahmins are primarily those that had been compiled from official records and were usually **un con** tested.

state's population would have allowed for. In the year 1978, for instance, there were **16** Brahmin MLAs, 10 MLCs and four MPs.

The most recent Commission has been the one headed by a former Supreme Court judge, Chinnappa Reddy, which submitted its report in 1990. It too, like its predecessors, produced rather thinly spread out and disparate data in regard to the Brahmins. Being the most recent, one could take a more extensive look at its representation of the Brahmin community of Karnataka. In the spheres of professional and higher education the predominance of the Brahmins is most acute. Between 1977-78 and 1988-89, 20.58% of the medical seats were occupied by Brahmin students compared to their share of 3.45% in the state's population. Lingayaths and Vokkaligas, despite having had the benefits of reservations more or less through out the entire history of the policy, were still lagging far behind with 7.63% and 11.56% of the seats respectively. During the academic year of 1988-89, Brahmin students occupied 24.37% of the total number of engineering seats that were available as against 12.06% and 11.07% that the Lingayaths and Vokkaligas respectively occupied. During the same year, Brahmins took 19.42% of admissions into all the post-graduate institutions as against 21.47% and 12.03% taken by the Lingayaths and Vokkaligas respectively. As far as admissions to the agricultural university were concerned, there was greater parity - with 16.06%, 16.18% and 15.94% of Brahmins, Lingayaths and Vokkaligas respectively. Except for the Lingayaths, Vokkaligas and the Scheduled Castes, there was no other community which could even begin to compare with the Brahmin community in these numbers. And considering that the Brahmin community was incomparably smaller than any of these communities - 3.45% (Brahmins) as against 15.34% (Lingayaths), 10.81% (Vokkaligas) and 16.72% (Scheduled Castes) - its sway assumes greater significance.

Even in the recruitment to government services, the Chinnappa Reddy report adduces that Brahmins had managed to acquire about 14% of the positions as of 1986, and about 12% of the same post-1986. As on 02/11/1988, they held 18.12% of the Group-A posts in government services and 26.24% of all the posts in the Groups A and B in the public sector undertakings. Again, Brahmins, in the political sphere, continued to reproduce the pattern that we have noted. While their numbers in the higher levels of representative bodies such as the Parliament, State Assembly continued to be prominent, their numbers at local representative bodies was almost negligible. While there were nine MLAs, seven MLCs and two MPs from the community, there was not a single Brahmin

Zilla Parishad President. Besides, out of the total 863 Zilla Parishad members, only 27 were Brahmins.

The Report further makes the point that while the preceding two Backward Classes Commissions had included a reservation provision for economically backward families (constituting the 'E Group') irrespective of their caste background, during the academic year 1988-89, of the total 39 seats in all the professional colleges (medical, engineering and dental) and post-graduate institutions that were given away under this category Brahmin candidates garnered 22 of them.²⁴

Of course, the data presented in the Reports of the successive Backward Classes Commissions are uneven and incomparable in regard to each other. They however obtain as the only source of macro-data on the contemporary status of the different caste communities. A relatively safe and preliminary conclusion that can be drawn from them is that the Brahmins continue to be disproportionately represented in the bureaucracy, in the spaces of higher education, judiciary, and so on. Their predominance is nowhere near the astounding levels that were witnessed during the early decades of the twentieth century (as demonstrated, say, by the Report of the Miller Committee) but as commission after commission have averred:

So far as the Brahmin Community is concerned, there can be no question that they are socially and educationally the most advanced community in the State of Karnataka even if some of them are poor [*Report of the Karnataka Third Backward Classes Commission*, Vol. I, 1990: 50].

This can be corroborated with the aid of some scanty scholarly works that have looked at the question of caste in contemporary social life. For instance, the urban Brahmins of Karnataka seem to have fared exceedingly well, keeping intact their sway over even the other dominant caste communities of Lingayaths and Vokkaligas. This claim is substantiated in Sivaprasad (1987).²⁵ This study works with Bangalore-specific data, but it appears that one could extrapolate its findings to Brahmins in general and urban Brahmins in particular. Sivaprasad uses data collected during the years 1973-76 on the population of the city of Bangalore to study social mobility across different communities. It presents data regarding the families in the sample not only across caste communities but also across three generations in regard to each family, which gives us a

²⁴ All the above data is summated from the *Report of the Third Karnataka Backward Classes Commission*, Vol. I, 1990: 45-169.

²⁵ See also Gist (1954) for a comparative study of Bangalore and Mysore coming to similar conclusions.

fairly clear picture of not only the relative positioning of the different communities on a scale of social mobility but also of the differential ability of the communities to consolidate the mobility made. The central conclusion is that social mobility is in concordance with the traditional ritual hierarchy of castes. The congruence is real to such an extent that no caste group has been able to **defy** its status as ordained in the caste hierarchy to either garner dominance or lose its hold over society. Mobility is accordingly largely communitarian, and not individualistic. Thus Brahmins outscore other communities on almost each and every count of social mobility. They are even extremely successful in reproducing the mobility chain across generations. In other words, Brahmins have not only been the forerunners in utilising the modern educational and occupational spaces; they have also successfully, over generations, consolidated their pre-eminence in these spaces. The 'gap' between them and the other caste communities (including the so-called dominant castes like the Lingayaths) is at least that of one generation, and that between the Brahmins and the Dalits is at least two generations. Brahmin women (in spite of faring badly when compared with their own 'caste' men) have also been important recipients of modern education. Their pre-eminent position in this regard outruns that of women from any other caste, including the other 'upper' castes. Even as the shift from traditional occupations to modern occupations has been seen in all castes and religious communities, it is among Brahmins that this shift is most swift and **successful**. Brahmins, particularly those in the age range of 30 years and below, have begun diversifying into 'production and service' occupations (like electrician, mechanic, cook **etc.**) even as their preference for and preponderance in professional and administrative jobs is very clear.

Brahmins likewise, as Sivaprasad's study notes, are predominantly distributed in the High and the High-medium Socio-Economic Status zones,²⁶ where the investments that they have made on property tend to yield high returns. Their average monthly income was only next to the Jain community, which is primarily a business community. A majority of them are distributed within the categories of the High to Highest Income Groups. Further, in the sample there was not a single instance of the head of the household marrying outside the Brahmin fold. Equally **significantly**, Brahmins exhibit 'caste affinity' in selecting friends and interacting with them and their relatives. This

²⁶ The study divided the city of Bangalore into five such zones based on the land value.

tendency is noted for other caste and religious communities too, but the fact of a dominant upper caste community exhibiting a propensity for closed networks of social relations will evidently have different **effects** than those in the case of subaltern communities like the Muslims and the Dalits.

In sum, the upward mobility made by most of the Brahmin families on each count - of education, occupation, income and women's education - is not merely consolidated in the next generation but also successfully stretched further. This general state of well being of Brahmins is not limited to Bangalore, and seems to obtain across the contours of the state. Madan and Halbar (1972) conducted a study of the educational institutions in the districts of Mysore, Dharwad and Belgaum with particular reference to their caste composition and the differential access to education during 1965-66. It demonstrates the ability of the Brahmins, aided primarily by the sheer magnitude of their numbers as professionals and trained personnel, to circumvent the larger logic of the composition and access to educational institutions in those districts. Brahmins were the only community that defied a near perfect correspondence that was otherwise obtained between representation in the "local authority educational institutions" and the share in the general population. They were also able to overcome the neat correspondence that was otherwise obtained between the caste/community of those owning a private management educational institution and that of its teaching staff. That is, if a Lingayath owned a college, that fact was usually reflected in the make up of the teaching staff, with a majority of them being Lingayaths themselves. Brahmins were the only community which could break that pattern - they were in significant numbers in the ranks of teaching staff in most of the institutions, irrespective of the ownership. Finally, they were also the only community that defied the correspondence that obtained between the caste/community of the managements and that of the majority of the students. If an institution, thus, was owned by a Lingayath, while the general trend is for Lingayath students preponderating its student ranks, Brahmins were the only exception. The study's conclusion reiterates the general point that we have been making about the Brahmins in the modern situation. While the logic of proportional representation has caught up with them largely within the space of decentralized electoral politics, Brahmins have been rather successful in defying this logic in almost all other spheres of modern public life.

The larger transitions underway in the community - of a determined shift from rural to urban migration, becoming invisible (or inconsequential) in the rural areas, the

over-reliance on the state for its sustained social mobility, and, increasingly in recent times, the transmutation of the different forms of capital acquired under modern conditions into endowments that have prepared them to look beyond official (state-sponsored) institutions - receive an embodiment in the accounts provided by our respondents about their own personal and familial trajectories. For most of the respondents, access to modernity was essentially realised through and was translated into an access to the cities. In particular, modern structures of governance (especially the bureaucracy, judiciary and police) and the increasing importance placed on secular liberal education meant opportunities for shifting the locus of their economic and social power from land and traditional 'sacred' education. This seems to have resulted in largely making the Brahmin invisible as an entity in rural Karnataka - both literally and as an image for garnering political and cultural mileage.

Of course, Brahmins continue to reside in significant numbers only in the rural areas of coastal Karnataka and parts of Malnad - predominantly from the communities of the Havyakas and Shivalli (Smartha, Madhva) Brahmins - where they continue to be direct participants in the agricultural activity. Even in the case of these communities, it must be noted, the resource investment has not been uniformly agriculture based, for they have extensive familial and kinship ties with relatives residing in towns and cities. In fact, the aspirations of the youth of these Brahmin castes too are to seek secular, higher/technical education so as to be able to lead secure lives in urban settings.

This foregrounds itself in many garbs, as in the case of the changing matrimonial preferences of the Havyakas, a Brahmin caste concentrated in the districts of coastal Karnataka and Shimoga.²⁷ The prospective Havyaka bridegrooms engaged in agriculture find it increasingly difficult to get brides from the community, for the young Havyaka women are inclined increasingly towards marrying men settled with a modern job in an urban setting. Thus, even as a female respondent (one holding office as the President of the Sri Akhila Havyaka Maha Sabha) was rather proud that their community association was the first among Brahmins to set up a Working Women's Hostel - and which was getting overwhelming response from young unmarried women from the community - she seemed pretty concerned about the trend. As she states:

²⁷ See for a profile of the Havyakas and their continued sustenance on and investment in agriculture, Harper (1968).

It is a rather tricky situation that faces the community and its leaders. On the one hand, it is definitely heartening to see that young women from our community are stepping out of the four walls of the house, where their ability and creativity were hitherto contained, to explore possibilities of forging independent careers. This has become all the more necessary in the contemporary moment, given that doors are being closed on the Brahmin community from all sides. It is difficult, on the other, to see them refusing to go back to villages after marriage. I cannot, for a moment, suggest that they ought to return because their aspirations and talents will never be done justice to in a rural setting. But, again, it has reached alarming proportions to see young men involved in agriculture go without marriage till late in their thirties. There are also reports that such families are willing to seek alliances outside the community, among other Brahmin castes. I would not say that it is something reprehensible, but it is definitely unnecessary.²⁸

Many families from such communities which have settled down in urban areas have taken the mantle of nursing the children of relatives from rural areas who seek to pursue education and employment. As a respondent proudly stated:

Even though I do not have a family to call my own, many nephews and nieces have stayed here, got educated, employed and have set up their establishments. This gives me immense

A long process of urbanisation has also meant that for most of the urban Brahmin respondents there is no 'native' (in the colloquial) to either visit or even refer to. This is more so for the younger generations. The older generations have emotional attachments and memories of their 'native place' and the family deities situated there - usually referred to as the "*Moola Devaru*" ("The Original God" of the paternal family) or the "*Kula Devaru*" ("The Clan Deity") - which often provides a compulsive justification to visit the place. The younger generation though show no such bonding, and gradually over two to three generations the family loses intimate, if not complete, contact with that place (unless it has economic interests). Again, it is generally families from the coastal and the Malnad regions that sustain strong networks with their 'native place'. Many such families continue to have some direct interest, usually in the form of joint property - primarily agricultural but also by way of an ancestral house - looked after by a male

Interview with Ms. Shalmali Venkatesh, President of the Havyaka Maha Sabha, October 17, 2000. Note, names of all the respondents cited have been changed to retain anonymity and trust.

²⁹ Interview with Ms. Durga, 22/10/2000. She is a single, unmarried woman in her late fifties, who came to Bangalore from a village near Shimoga looking for an independent livelihood nearly thirty years ago. Many more respondents coming from these parts of Karnataka have also helped out their relatives and community members in similar ways. It has to be noted that Ms. Durga is an exceptional case - having remained unmarried and charting an independent and career of her own - and that too for her generation.

member of the family for whom it would have been a choice arrived by default. This person would invariably be one who is a failure in securing modern education. Again, if his children get jobs in a city, he too would move out of the village, sooner or later. For Brahmin families of these regions, the temple and '*matha*' institutions (which also serve up as the major pilgrimage centres of Karnataka, like Udupi and Sringeri) have provided reasons to maintain contacts. However, these contacts have become increasingly impersonal in the sense that they no longer double-up as occasions to meet familial and kin networks. The personal bonding with an extended kin network thins down as new generations take the reigns of the family.

As the narrations of our respondents affirm, not all instances of migration have been in pursuit of secular education or jobs in the modern sphere. For most of the women, till the last generation or so, the primary mode of realisation of the right to the city was through marriage. A respondent, a 37 year old woman who graduated from a college in Kundapur, Udupi District and whose father continues to be an agriculturist (albeit primarily as a supervisor) recounted:

Though I came to Bangalore about fifteen years back after marriage from a village near Kundapur, four of my sisters have since stayed at our place pursuing different things. While one did her engineering course and one a non-technical course, two others came here after their education looking out simultaneously for jobs and marriage proposals. As you know, middle class men prefer working women. The prospects of marriage and the prospects of finding better marriage alliances are incomparably greater than what would be out there in the village.³⁰

Accordingly, the Brahmin population that continues to exist in the rural parts of Karnataka are apparently either those families whose male heads have not been able to make it into the secular modes of upward mobility (through education and employment, primarily) or those families that have had direct landed interests.³¹ Another point that needs to be noted is the fact that Brahmins continue to have stakes in agriculture only in areas where the latter represents a stable form of economic activity, irrigated and with great emphasis on cash crops. Thus, even in villages, Brahmins have had a certain middle

Interview with Ms. Kala, 07/01/2001.

³¹ A very new trend among the neo-rich Brahmins - those young men who have brought in unprecedented amounts of money into the family from their jobs in the new economy, aided by work-stints in the USA in particular - is to buy '*farm* houses' in the villages on the outskirts of the major cities. However, these are used primarily for weekend recreational jaunts.

class existence, although their status within the fold is not equal to that of urban Brahmins.

An important instance of mobility that has not involved the educated men in pursuit of government jobs in the recent history of Brahmins has been the outflow of the South Canara Brahmins into not merely other parts of Karnataka but also other states (and even other countries). This is often held up as an exemplification of Brahmin grit, ingenuity and determination. The concerned individuals were not educated enough to take up modern occupations, but were semi-literate/illiterate workers in the vegetarian food business. The near-legendary Udupi Brahmin hotels that have come up all over the country - and now even abroad (particularly the West and the Gulf region) - are the most visible face of this development, even as many eke out livelihoods as professional cooks in the upper middle class and rich urban Brahmin households, as caterers and suppliers of cooks for special occasions like weddings, and so on.

For many Brahmin families from coastal Karnataka, the following testimony seems to hold good as a 'community biography'. The respondent, now in his mid eighties, reminisced:

I came to Bangalore in 1937 looking for a livelihood. Life was rather difficult in the village (near Udupi). We had very little land, and no assured irrigation. To top it all, we were too many brothers and by then itself, the ancestral property was divided many a time. I knew no one in Bangalore but still decided to take a chance. Then the idea of a hotel was still not a very acceptable thing. But I knew that I could work at somebody's house as a cook and survive. That was precisely what happened. I began working in a former Brahmin Dewan's house as a help to the main cook. For such jobs, they allowed nobody but Brahmins. I am a Smartha, and the Dewan was a Madhva. It did cause some minor hiccups and I could never have dreamt of becoming the chief cook there, for only a Madhva would have been allowed to take that position. But it gave me a foothold in the city nonetheless.

I came here alone and for almost twenty years my family was still in the village. After many such jobs, I started a canteen of my own and brought my family along. By then, my eldest son had finished his B. Com. and had joined the railways, which meant a source of secure income for the family. I then brought my family to Bangalore so that my other children could get better education and my daughter could get married to somebody who had a government job here in the city. I had my canteen running till all my sons were employed or educated and the daughter got married.³²

This respondent continued to own some agricultural land in his native village, which was looked after by a tenant but supervised by his brother's family that had stayed behind. He

³² Interview with Mr. Venkatesh 14/04/2000.

lost that property, however, due to the implementation of the Land Reforms Act of 1974. As we indicated before, it was only the relatively **successful** implementation of the **Inams** Acts in the 1960s and the Land Reforms Act in the 1970s that effectively ended the *indirect* landed interests of the Brahmins. Manor (2002: 279) has observed that **the** districts of South Canara and North Canara had a great amount of tenancy cultivation and accordingly most of the applications before the land tribunals set up to accord land to the tiller came from these two districts.

Now, in all such land reform initiatives, there was a gap of at least a couple of years between the proposal of a reform and its implementation. This, many observers have noted, always gave the landowners enough time to circumvent the reform initiatives. Thus Manor notes that an observed increase in the proportion of owner-cultivators should be attributed to "the hasty disposal of *inam* lands by their owners - often Brahmin absentee landlords - in anticipation of *inam* abolition laws. This occurred mainly in old Mysore and Bombay and Hyderabad Karnataka" (1989: 329-30). Ksheerasagara (1985) even points to the ability of the Brahmin-dominated bureaucracy to impede the effective implementation of the Inam Abolition Acts as well as the 1974 Land Reforms Act as these were inimical to Brahmin interests. He further mentions a study to the effect that the tenants cultivating the Inam lands refused to file for ownership either as deference to or fearing the fact that the land belonged to the gods or to Brahmins. Ksheerasagara further points out that most of the Brahmins who lost their land were those who had gone to urban areas taking up primarily jobs with the government (see also Nataraj 1980 and Nataraj and Nataraj 1982).

These assessments notwithstanding, there obtains a widely felt anger against these land reform policies that is expressed even now in conversations, caste journals and association meetings. There were two Inam Abolition Acts that were enacted in the 1950s. While **the** 1954 Act abolished all the Personal Inams, the one notified the following year abolished those Inams that were granted to the religious and charitable institutions. These two forms of the '*inams*' were largely held by the Brahmins - the former by individual families, and the latter, which were even more vast areas of land, by Brahmin *mathas* and temples. The Inam Commission set up by the British in 1864 had stated that "[t]here were 59,492 inams spread over 804,924 acres of agricultural land" (Thimmaiah 1993: 80), and much of this was at the disposal of the Brahmin community.

Therefore the families which had preferred not to sell these lands (even while becoming absentee landowners) were to lose them because of the **Inam** Abolition Acts.

Accordingly there was much at stake in these measures, and to this day they raise rancorous emotions. However, all the available works suggest that the Brahmins who owned such Inam lands had mostly become absentee landowners. Besides, the context of these legislations also enabled the Brahmins to spin a communal turn on the moves of the state with regard to the land reforms. In sharply articulating a position that many of the respondents voiced, a Brahmin resident of a village near Bangalore who claimed that he had lost "hundred and fifty acres of land" stated:

We tolerated when the government took away much of our land, even if through dubious means. But taking away lands that were given to temples and Mathas - this was a great attack on our religion and culture. This was the direct result of the government, in the name of secularism, targeting the Hindus. Give me one instance when the government enacted any similar law which took away the land or property of the Church or the Wakf Board.³³

Paradoxically enough, the large-scale migration into urban areas has also meant a sense of disempowerment too. As a respondent, who migrated from his village near Hassan in the late 1940s to pursue education in Bangalore, describes it:

When I was growing up, our village [near Hassan] had nearly 60 Brahmin families - all Iyengars - in the Agrahara. Almost all of them had lands. Now there is just one Brahmin family remaining there. And the Agrahara is completely taken over by the Gowdas, as are our lands which they bought. The only remaining Iyengar family runs a rice mill. The head of that family has completely transformed himself - he speaks the Gowda Kannada, wears those long half-pants, with a towel on his shoulder - the typical Gowda style that we all know of. But he has no choice - he cannot remain like an island there, speaking '*śuaccha*' [clean] Kannada like the Brahmins because he will be ridiculed. They often taunt him - "Where are the Brahmins now sir! Oh... what darpa, dhimaku [which grossly means airs and arrogance] they were showing off" and stuff like that. Now this man knows his place - he knows none of the earlier respect is shown, none can be expected. Earlier the Gowdas used to respectfully call us "ayya" or "amma" ['father' and 'mother' respectively], now they say, "Oh... What if they are Brahmins?" The most this Brahmin in the village can try to wield power is to tell some Gowda who comes to his mill in the morning

³³ Interview with Mr. Rama Rao, 15/01/2001. He is a Madhva Brahmin, aged 55 years. He has had his education only till the seventh standard (middle school). While he has been reduced to a lower middle class status - primarily owing to the land reforms - his parents' generation had been one of the richest families around. However, what is significant in his instance (which marks his family away from the general trajectories the community has gone through) is that his children - in particular the males - have not done well in education. While one of his sons owns a petty shop in the village, the other works as an assistant to a priest who performs at the village temple. His daughters are married to government employees (and thus into economically more secure families) but that does not usually translate into a betterment of Mr. Rama Rao's economic standing.

to get his *bhattha* [paddy] cleaned to come half an hour later. It **is with** these useless things he can delude himself that he still has some power.³⁴

This is largely true of Brahmin families which find themselves isolated in rural contexts. The following is a statement made by a respondent who makes a living through agriculture. This Madhva respondent, whose family was the solitary Brahmin family in the village (near Bangalore city) which was dominated by the Lingayaths in terms of land holdings and numerically by the Dalit castes, had the following to say:

When my father was alive, our family was accorded prestige and honour. Everybody in the village took advice from him on matters ranging from land dealings to auspicious days. He was a permanent member of the village Veerabhadra Swami Temple Trust. But now none of that obtains. The Lingayaths have taken over the management of the temple completely. Even the Holeyas and Madigas [the Dalit castes] dare to stand up to us and enter into our house without any hesitation. They now even have an Ambedkar Association in the village. I continue to survive here only because I am active in the local Congress party machinery as well as because of my socialist views. The villagers know that I do not take partial views on contentious matters. That is why they have unanimously voted me for the presidency of different local boards.³⁵

These paradoxes notwithstanding, the spectacular transition of Brahmins into a modern state-dependent community is also reflected in the educational and occupational profiles of the respondents and their family members. Almost every Brahmin family among those sampled has benefited from modern education, with most even going on to acquire higher educational qualifications. None of the women in any of these families, irrespective of their rural-urban differentials and age, was an illiterate. Almost every family, over the last two or three generations, has had at least one member - but often more than one - who held a government job. And the general trend among most families in the sample has been that each generation does better than its previous generation - whether in terms of educational attainment or securing better jobs - thus leading to a better quality of life.

The following is the educational profile of the 100 Brahmin households surveyed. As we indicated in our methods chapter, the questionnaire had been left to fill with that member of the family who was interviewed first; and, accordingly, we had 63 males 'filling' in the questionnaire schedule and 37 females doing the same. Of the 63 men,

Interview with Mr. Prakash, 22/07/2000. The respondent, a sixty-two year old Srivaishnava Brahmin, is a retired officer of the state-owned life insurance behemoth, the Life Insurance Corporation of India. We shall encounter this respondent again in this chapter and in Ch. 6.

³⁵ Interview with Mr. Sripathi, 17/09/2000.

eleven had education below graduation. None of them was an illiterate though; besides, all except two of these were more than sixty years old. Twenty-three of them had graduate degrees and most of these respondents were in the age group of 40 to 60 years. Nine had post-graduate qualifications and 14 possessed professional degrees. Six of them had pursued religious education and all of them, except one, had failed very early in their pursuit of secular education. The lonely exception was an orphan, who was sheltered by the institution where he was pursuing religious education. Of the 37 women respondents 'filling' in the questionnaire, five had pre-degree education; fifteen had graduate degrees; eight had post-graduate qualifications; and nine with professional degrees. Again: the age profile corresponding with the educational qualifications matched that of the men. Everyone, irrespective of age, spatial location, class status etc. have received education in the highly subsidised government run or aided educational institutions, and this factor is responsible chiefly for the remarkable literacy levels of the respondent families over generations. Interestingly, every household, without exception, has witnessed higher educational levels in each successive generation. While only seven of the respondent families were first generation literates, 54 of them were second generation literates and 39 of them were third generation literates.

The occupational profile of the respondents (in this case the 135 interviewed) is a further testimony to their reliance on the modern state structure. One hundred and ten of the respondents were employed, apart from sixteen "housewives" (nine others were students mostly staying in caste hostels). Fifty-two of the 110 respondents were employed with the government - either retired or current - largely at the middle levels of the bureaucracy. Thirty were self-employed in business and professions and 28 others were in formal sector employment either as bank and insurance officials, software executives, accountants, etc. What further embellishes this figure are the data on employment that takes into account the entire household. Thirty-four of them had their fathers working (or having worked) in the formal and governmental sectors. Likewise, fifty-one households had their spouses in such jobs. What is more, seventy-two of them had siblings similarly employed. As is evident, many of these Brahmin households accordingly had two or more individuals holding such jobs. This entire sector - primarily the public sector industries and organisations like nationalised banks apart from the government bureaucracy, educational institutions etc., but also private sector which

promised a secure livelihood - has meant a secure middle class existence over generations.

In more recent times, however, many Brahmin associations have been exhorting their youth to look beyond the government. Even as many of these associations voice their opposition to governmental (both central and state) efforts to extend reservations, they have simultaneously insisted that the Brahmin youth should become 'self-dependent'. Increasingly, the realisation seems to have dawned that, as a community, Brahmins are not in a position to determine (or even influence) the state and its policies in any significant manner. Indeed, the federating organisation, Akhila Karnataka **Brahmana** Maha Sabha (AKBMS), in most of its state-level conventions exhorts the youth to become self-employed and not wait eternally for a government job. It has even ventured into co-operative banks, so as make available credit for starting small business enterprises on their own, and even sought the guidance (through periodic workshops) of successful Brahmin industrialists for the purpose.

These efforts at mobilising Brahmins for self-employment and non-governmental jobs have not brought about a perceptible change in the occupational patterns displayed ³⁶ Most of the respondents who are in their middle age now, that is those who would have begun their careers during the decades of the 1970s and 1980s, hold jobs within the governmental machinery. It is perhaps only during the decade of the nineties that the plea to look beyond the state has been heeded in any significant degree. The shift is obviously neither complete nor unequivocal, nor is it consistent across different occupations and professions. Besides, at the lower echelons of the government bureaucracy, less and less Brahmins are found today - doubtless, an effect of the reservations policy as indeed a consequence of the **self-withdrawal** of the community from such positions.

These trends notwithstanding, it is necessary to reiterate that Brahmins have been the most extensive recipients of the welfarist measures in the post-independence period - from subsidised education, health etc. to securing 'modern' jobs. 'Modern' employment primarily meant a much coveted job with the government, including the burgeoning public sector industries and nationalised banks, all of which created unprecedented and secure employment opportunities for the Brahmin youth.³⁷ A job within any of these

³⁶ The space of Brahmin associations is explored more fully in Ch. 5.

³⁷ Many of the highly successful nationalised banks originating from Karnataka were originally Brahmin caste banks, like the Canara Bank. They were thus 'naturally' predisposed towards recruiting caste

sectors meant a secure middle class existence in a city that offered, at subsidised rates, residential sites, house loans, good schools, hospitals etc. Most of the Brahmin youth who have found employment in the 'new market economy' of the 1990s were all the beneficiaries of the 'capital' (social, symbolic and economic) that their parents had accumulated under the 'mixed economy' of the Nehru-Indira Gandhi era. Therefore, there are enough indications that many of them are ready for the next phase of transition - which will see a retrenchment of the welfare state from many fundamental spheres like education, health and employment and a compounding of private initiatives in these spheres.

There are absolutely no statistics available on the numbers of Brahmins in the spaces that were made possible by the 1990s policies of liberalisation of the economy and state. But all the anecdotal evidence point toward the already entrenched presence of Brahmins in such spaces. The Brahmins are becoming trans-national as never before, with their jobs as computer professionals, management experts etc. taking them beyond the boundaries of the Indian state. For many Brahmin families this has meant a virtual revolution in their financial and social status. In fact, many of the respondents interviewed had a kin or two already riding the wave of the new economy, with a consequent shift in family incomes and lifestyle. Lending voice to such a dramatic transformation of life patterns is the following statement of retired father:

My son brought home a salary after his first month of work as a software engineer which was at least twice the salary that I received in the final month of my working life. And mind you, I have worked for nearly 30 years for the LIC [Life Insurance Corporation] and retired as a middle-level manager. I had to work relentlessly all my life to buy a site (that too at the subsidised rates from the government), and to build this house. But my son went for some project-work from his company to the United States for just three years and came back to buy a site which is worth 55 lakhs in an upper class locality. I bought a car only with his help!

For my generation [now in their late fifties and early sixties] the model of a successful life has been one in which one had built a house in a city, if possible had a car, seen through the education and employment of the sons and marriages of the daughters - this would be then the dream come true. But within the space of say ten years, things have changed so dramatically that one cannot imagine. Many of my generation, including myself, have gone to the U.S., and for many of us the

members. However, even after nationalisation (in the late 1960s) and the introduction of competitive examinations, it was primarily Brahmins who entered these jobs. In fact, in large organisations like the Life Insurance Corporation of India, it was the conflict concerning which Brahmins are taking the lion's share of the jobs and postings that dominated the debate. There was, till the late 1980s, an acute dissatisfaction among the Kannada Brahmins that the Tamil Brahmins were recruiting only their counterparts into the organization (information from a respondent, Mr. Prakash, who is a former employee with the LIC).

US has become a fairly regular place. If anybody had told me, even ten years ago, that all this would happen I would have treated it as a joke!³⁸

The above statement graphically represents the phenomenal changes that are underway in the economy of many of the Brahmin families. Indeed, the newer markers of status within the urban Brahmin families have invariably to do with the ability of each to realise the 'great American dream'. The benchmark for one's status and, through that, one's family status, particularly since the 'software boom' of the mid 1990s, is one's ability to become a 'transnational'. There are of course many families which have not been able to realise the dream, and the embarrassment and feelings of inferiority find expression all too often in everyday conversations. The sudden influx of the new forms of 'capital' - which ranges from one's ability to casually talk about the American tourist spots to the consumption patterns of emigre Brahmins - seems to entail that the hitherto 'equal' neighbour (or friend or relative) is pushed a notch or two down the status hierarchy. The changes even hierarchise individual efforts within the household:

My two elder sons are employed in the United States - one works for Infosys and the other General Electric. But my youngest son is a journalist here in Bangalore. He too has a research degree in sociology. Nonetheless, when I am talking about my family with friends or relatives, they all exclaim - "what -journalism, is it?" It is a way of saying, "Oh, a calamity has struck!" I somehow feel the pressure to explain this fact to them.

Clearly, the shifts exacerbate class differentiation between and among the Brahmins, with some riding the transition while others are left behind with neither the state nor the community to fall back on. While this dimension would require a different axis of appraisal than the one we are instituting here, it seems imperative nevertheless to take cognizance of the changes. Especially, such spatial and cognitive re-drawings of the community and its self have an important bearing on the contemporary Brahmin discourse.

IV

Towards secularising and individuating identities

The trajectory that the Brahmins have traversed over the last century has meant important transformations at individual, familial, kinship and caste/community levels. Caste practices regarding commensal relations, marital norms and everyday rituals come

³⁸ Interview with Mr. Prakash, 22/07/2000. Cf. our fn.34 above for personal details about this respondent. The quote that follows in our text is also from the same respondent.

to be marked out in distinct and different ways, even as tendencies towards the individuation and corporatisation of Brahmin identities gather apace. Auto/biographies detailing the life of Brahmins in the initial decades of the twentieth century contain important nuggets about the changing ways of life, the relative decline in the legitimacy and influence of ritual norms and the acceptance of the changes demanded by the quest to urbanise and modernise. In fact, by the early decades of the 20th century the restrictions on commensality among the different Brahmin castes seem to have receded in their authority. For instance, Sitaramaiah, while recollecting his brief stay in Bombay in 1922, sees the need to mention that he being a Smartha had to share the room with three Mysore Srivaishnavites, and points out:

But I didn't **find** any difference. This fact did not present itself as any obstacle or hindrance to me as a human being. The kindness with which they looked after me remains a highly cherished memory with me (1997: 3).

His memoir describes the sharing among them of the task of cooking and eating together, without as much as a mention about commensal restrictions. Even during his stay in Mysore pursuing graduate and post-graduate education, he never sees the need to separate himself from members of other Brahmin castes. Interestingly, yet, he always marks the latter out in terms of the denomination to which they belong. The imagination of belonging to the larger category of the Brahmin community seems to have always obtained, and has contributed much towards facilitating and consolidating their urbanness and modern state of being.

What is more, commensal restrictions (and the sanctions associated with them) vis-a-vis **non-Brahminical** castes have also more or less disappeared today - definitely in the urban **areas**.³⁹ Anybody who believes in the validity and legitimacy of such restrictions today will be laughed at for being "too narrow-minded" or "communal",

³⁹ Restrictions concerning commensality and touchability-untouchability do not appear to have been singular across regions or communities or even families. For instance, S. L. Bhairappa, in some of his novels focusing on the Brahmin families of the plains region in the princely Mysore region, draws a picture of a village community that was fairly 'open' on such matters. See, for instance, his novel *Grihabhanga* (1970). Focusing on the same period but located in the Malnad region, U. R. Ananthamurthy's novels (*Samskara* (1966), for one) represent Brahmins in the more familiar mould - as observing strict commensal and pollution norms. Even as one is aware of the so-called politics of representation, these enunciations do indicate towards differential investment in the validity of these practices across different regions. Nevertheless, even to this day, commensal restrictions are rather strictly enforced in the interactions between agrarian Brahmin and non-Brahmin families in the coastal districts of Udipi and Mangalore. However, in these locations eating with fellow-Brahmins from denominations other than one's own is a legitimate practice and does not raise any eye brows.

although eating at gatherings where meat is also being served did make many of our respondents "uncomfortable". Indeed, seventy-one of them explicitly stated that they will not eat where meat is served; and only nine households (of the 100 administered the questionnaire) maintained that they had broken the vegetarian food habits.

Even the conduct of life cycle events - marriage being the most important instance - has undergone a process of secularisation. Marriages are held in '*Kalyanamantapas*' (literally, wedding halls), which are hired for a duration of two days. The rituals are truncated to a matter of few hours, from what used to last over five days. Food is served in a common hall wherein invitees - irrespective of the caste they belong to - sit together and eat. Some, in particular elders, still feel a sense of discomfort with the "uncultured" ways of eating of the non-Brahmin invitees; while a few refuse to eat in marriage halls. A popular way of tiding through such situations is by ensuring a rather subtle homogeneity in the invitees called to partake of the wedding lunch - where food is served in the 'traditional' manner by Brahmins cooks to guests sitting at tables - whereas a much more heterogeneous profile of guests is retained for the evening's 'reception' with food being served in the form of a buffet.⁴⁰ While caste and kin-people are generally present for both the wedding ceremony/lunch and the evening's reception, 'colleagues' and 'friends' (whose caste remains unstated but not indeterminable) are invited for the reception. It must be acknowledged, however, that these subtleties are neither strict nor consistent.

Many of the 'traditional' distinctions continue to obtain yet in families, albeit in a muted form, even if they do not designate a way of life and are never overtly stated. For instance, an elderly respondent (84 years), who made a living running a small canteen, described how a non-Brahmin would be served lunch or dinner at his house:

The guest will be served food along with the other family members in the same hall. However he will not be served on a steel plate to eat on, but on a plantain leaf. We don't make it look as though we are making a difference, for the same food will be served to all. It serves two purposes - one, after food the leaf will be thrown so that we don't have to wash it; two, we always serve food to the guests on plantain leaves, whether he is a Brahmin or otherwise.

But anyway things are changing and quickly at that. Once my grand children take over the reins of the family these 'distinctions' wouldn't exist, not only because they don't care but also because they don't know the modalities.⁴¹

⁴⁰ It is unclear from where the word 'reception' emanates, but connotes a largely secularised space without the intervention of priests and where the bride and the groom sport 'western' wear.

⁴¹ Interview with Mr. Venkatesh, 14/04/2000.

Another respondent, a professional cook, rued the fact that he is being forced to make many "adjustments" vis-a-vis his Brahminness because of the peculiar circumstances. In his words:

I had to move into this place because the house I was staying in, in the heart of the city, became prohibitively expensive and I couldn't afford it. This is on the outskirts and I have to travel a lot more to reach my clients' places but can't help it. The owner of the house I am staying in is not a Brahmin. They are nice people but have no regard for *mad/- mai/ige* [clean-unclean]. They are very dirty also. They eat 'non-veg' on Sundays and the stench is excruciating. But I am so helpless I cannot do anything.⁴²

Note, it is not that all 'distinctions' are no longer marked vis-a-vis the 'traditional' notions of commensality. For instance, a young, college-going respondent described how her non-Brahmin friends still show a great deal of "deference" and "respectful fear" towards her and her family whenever they visit her:

When I get to meet new people in the college, I never ever ask their castes. It is never a determinant in my interaction with my friends. But they themselves say, "One look at your face, and anyone can know you are a Brahmin". They also say, "We are afraid to come into your house. They have too much of *madi*. They give us food only on plantain leaves and not in plates". I won't do it, but my parents follow it as a matter of custom. Customs are the foundation given by the elders and all castes have them.⁴³

Thus all statements describing change need to be qualified - not only because particular members within households continue to accord legitimacy to customary practices, but also because the household as a whole seems to retain them by hindsight.

Interview with Mr. Bheema Rao, 01/03/2001. Forty eight years old, Mr. Bheema Rao is a Madhva Brahmin. With very little resources to depend on and having studied only till the eighth standard (first year of high school), he struggles to make a decent living in Bangalore. He is part of two 'cook groups'. These groups are hired by families (both Brahmin and non-Brahmin) on occasions of marriages, initiation ceremonies, etc. but also increasingly for 'secular' occasions like birthday parties (which are held in increasing numbers in a 'western' manner complete with candles, cake, balloons and the "happy Birthday to you" song) to prepare food in a large scale. Given that these are uncertain and irregular work opportunities (for instance, marriages are seasonal), many of these groups remain on the brink. It is not the case with all such groups because a lot depends on the 'reputation' of the group, and thus some such groups do extremely well. This is true of another respondent, Mr. Mohan (a Smartha Brahmin, aged 35 years). After finishing his B. Com. degree, he began a small such catering enterprise and within years has seen remarkable career growth (Interview on 05/03/2000). All the same, Mr. Bheema Rao remains financially stable (particularly in that he succeeds in sending his son to a relatively good school) because of a Madhva *matha*. Every *matha* has to prepare food for a great number of people everyday (it varies from thousands, like in the Udupi temple run by one of the eight Madhva *mathas* of Udupi, to some scores). Mr. Bheema Rao, whenever he has no other contract, works in the *matha* kitchen. He has great hopes for his only son, who is in his middle school and supposedly doing very well in studies.

⁴³ Interview with Ms. Sarita, 25/01/2000. She, a 21 year old Smartha Brahmin, has just finished her degree in management studies from a college in Bangalore. She is keen on pursuing a master's degree in management. Her father is a senior steno with the government.

More often than not these practices are seen to be 'functional' for earlier times, but the fact of their survival into the present is seen to bestow them a validity of sorts. Moreover, the sacred persona of the Brahmin has today **refurbished** itself. A crucial aspect of this persona is the rather individuated confidence that it offers to a young Brahmin of today. Indeed, as another young woman respondent remarked:

I don't believe in these notions of *madi-mailige* [pure-polluted; clean-unclean], *enjalalu - musure* [norms regarding what food can be kept with what and what food requires washing hands after touching] etc. They might have been important at one point of time. But definitely they don't serve any purpose now.

But one thing is clear. Whether I believe in these things or not, whether I follow any rituals or not (in fact, I believe only in meditation rather than in the performance of any of the rituals), I am very certain that I am given the status of being pure. I walk into any non-Brahmin family's kitchen or even their pooja room being very certain that they would not mind it. But those very friends when they come to my home are very hesitant and defensively enquire whether it is fine for them to come in, to do this or that etc. Not that I mind it any way.⁴⁴

Indeed, the 'sacredness' that gets discarded by a Brahmin family on primarily the grounds of rationality - "It just does not make sense" - often comes back in those very terms, albeit shorn of all the ritualism that had marked it earlier. As a young man (29 years) stated:

I believe in the immense capabilities of *Sandh yavandane* [the daily ritual that is prescribed for a Brahmin male post-initiation ceremony, whose significance has begun to centralise around a hymn that is uttered while performing the ritual, the *Gayathri Mantra*]. In fact the *Gayathri Mantra*, the cornerstone of our Brahminness, is the single most powerful Mantra in the world. When I was initiated some years ago, I obviously had no idea about the significance of the Gayathri. But the greater tragedy was that none around me (including the priest who conducted the ceremony on me) had a clue about it. It was done because it had to be done. So for some years, it was just drudgery for me. My mother used to insist that I do it and I used to comply, albeit reluctantly. In fact, my father himself has quit doing *Sandhyavandane* for quite sometime now!

But some three years back, I came across a pamphlet published by, I think, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, which in clear and simple terms told me the significance and powers of the Mantra. It is the only *Mantra* (religious chant) that can represent the real pursuit of the Brahmin. Gayathri is not about pleading the God for the worldly riches - it doesn't beg the God for money, power, status or anything like that. Instead it is a plea to the almighty to kindle that '*Dhee Shakthi*' [the

Interview with Ms. Pooja, 17/07/2000. She, a 21 year old Smartha Brahmin, is pursuing her undergraduate course in Bangalore. Her family migrated to Bangalore from a village near Shimoga recently. Pursuing a women studies course and keen to articulate those ideas in evaluating her caste self as indeed of being a woman, she was vehement in stating how Brahmin women are more liberated than the other caste women. This, she felt was primarily due to the high educational levels among the Brahmin men but also due to the *Samskara* that is ingrained in them from childhood to treat women with respect, for she represents the greatest force of *shakti*, the feminine force of divinity which, according to Brahminical mythology, surpasses the power that the male gods possess.

strength of mind and character] that is there in everybody, which, once ignited, will take that man unhindered in the path of self-realisation - towards becoming one with the Brahma. Isn't this the real pursuit of a Brahmin? They have never gone after material needs - though they remained poor, they reaped the riches of indefinitely more basic needs of humanness. Now, anybody, irrespective of caste, class, religion can pursue this - but only Brahmins are inclined towards this because of their *samskara* (character/conduct).

I don't need to perform all the other ritualistic acts that go with the recitation of the *Gayathri Mantra*. Indeed I have given up on them for sometime now. I recite the *Mantra* whenever I feel depressed, powerless, challenged etc. whether I am in my office or on the road or anywhere. It then gives me immense strength.

Now I am in the organising committee of a forum that will popularise the significance of the *Mantraby* conducting a *yajna* (ritual ceremony) for world peace and harmony.⁴⁵

As far as the striking of matrimonial alliances is concerned, the choice structures were firmly circumscribed within particular Brahmin castes till as recent as the 1960s and 1970s. One comes across - in the memoirs, biographies etc. - absolutely no instances of marriages across castes. This is corroborated in the respondent narratives of the self too. But alliances between and across Brahmin castes have become increasingly legitimate over the last thirty years or so. Almost all our respondents above the age of sixty years have married within their own Brahmin caste. However, from the next generation - including their younger brothers and sisters - marriages across not merely castes within the same traditions (among the different castes of Smarthas, for instance) but between castes belonging to different traditions (that is, a Madhva marrying a Smartha) have been accepted as legitimate. They are even seen as being necessary, particularly in abetting the widely felt need for Brahmins to "unite". Such marital alliances happen fairly regularly and are fixed by the families themselves - that is, in the so-called 'arranged marriages'. This has evidently been a crucial ingredient in the efforts towards imagining a 'Brahmin' community that seeks to work as a corporate identity.

One needs to be wary however about reaching any determinate conclusions concerning the irrelevance of particularised Brahmin identity markers. This is especially so because even to this day when a family begins to look for a marital alliance, the first and unmistakable preference is for partners from within the tradition to which one belongs - indeed within the particular caste to which one is attached. A Hoysala

⁴⁵ Interview with Mr. Sandeep, 07/02/2000. He is a Smartha Brahmin. After his B.Sc., he is working for a private concern. One who strongly believes that the reservation policy has denied him his rightful opportunities, he is nonetheless confident that his merit and hard work will bring him a better future.

Karnataka family thus ideally will want a match from within the Hoysala Karnataka caste itself. If that search fails, then it extends to any Smarthas, and only then to other Brahmin denominations, with the proviso that these others are non-Saraswat. Marriage alliances with Saraswats are a rarity - an avoidance that is mutual. Thus, among the 100 households surveyed, fifty-six (including one divorcee) have married within 'traditions' - that is, Madhvas have married Madhvas, and Smarthas have married Smarthas etc. In fact, most of these marriages have also been within the boundaries of particular castes to which they belong - Shivalli Smarthas have married Shivalli Smarthas and Hoysala Karnatakas have married other Hoysala Karnatakas. Twenty households have spouses whose parental family was of a different 'tradition'. While there was just one respondent who had married a non-Hindu (a young woman journalist, 32 years old, who has married a Syrian Catholic Christian, the latter having been her classmate during her post-graduation at Mangalore University), there was no other instance of an inter-religious union.

Marriage patterns, as deduced from our questionnaire schedule, also reflect a similar trend. The following is a description of the marital patterns that obtain within each generation. One's generation is grossly defined as comprising of siblings and cousins. Out of the 26 respondents below 30 years of age who filled in our questionnaire, twenty reported marriages across Brahmin castes and traditions in their own generation. But there were only three instances of marriages outside the Brahmin community in this group (all of which involved some cousin or such once-removed relative rather than one's own sibling). Of the families of 41 respondents in the age range of 31-50 years, there were 21 instances of marriages (in their own generation) across Brahmin castes/traditions and just one instance of a marriage outside the Brahmin community. Alternatively, the 33 who were aged above 50 years did not report of marriages either across Brahmin castes or outside the Brahmin community in unions that involved individuals of their own generation.

Marital histories across generations but pertaining to each respondent family too suggest the same trend - of opening out to alliances across Brahmin castes (even as the first choice continues **resiliently** to be for alliances from within) whereas marriages involving non-Brahmin individuals' remains proscribed. Strikingly among the

respondents there was, as far as their immediate family⁴⁶ is concerned, just three instances of marriages outside the Brahmin fold (two in which the daughter of the household had married a Shudra boy, and the other was an instance of the son marrying a Shudra woman) apart from the above cited instance of a respondent herself being married to a Christian.

Marriage alliances beyond the boundaries of the Brahmin community are clearly perceived with disapproval, and are often a source of embarrassment. 'Endogamy' (albeit of an enlarged kind to include most Brahmin castes) still commands legitimacy, even as it draws its justificatory grounds from different sources. A rule of 'community endogamy' seems to be gathering shape. The justifications offered in favour of 'intra-community' marriages have also become largely secularised. Not many are predisposed to foreground the terms that could have carried legitimacy earlier (such as those of intra-denominational superiority and purity and the ordained need to not commit '*varna sankara*' - the mixing of the mutually repulsive elements comprising the varnas through marriage). In its place are offered protestations about 'cultural compatibility' and family harmony. Thus a respondent opined:

Don't think that the principle of endogamy derived its legitimacy from any notions of caste purity. Those are all later inventions. It was brought into place primarily to ensure that the marital relationship be harmonious. Imagine if a Brahmin girl married a *holeya* [a Dalit caste] boy and goes to live with his family. Right from eating habits to cleanliness - everything will be so different for her that immediately there are conflicts. See how many inter-caste marriages have been successful. Most of them end up as failures.

Earlier, even marriages across Brahmin communities themselves posed a great deal of problems. But now the Brahmin community is sinking its internal differences. So marriages across Brahmin communities are an accepted practice today and they do not lead to a conflictual environment. So, maybe as time passes inter-caste marriages could also become acceptable and compatible. But as far as present circumstances are concerned, it is still an impossibility.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ That is involving either themselves or their children or their siblings.

⁴⁷ Interview with Mr. Subramanya, 30/01/2000. The respondent is a - inactive - member of the AKBMS. He came to Bangalore in the early 1970s seeking to further his career in music and has been a Bangalorean ever since. Even as he actively repudiated the significance of caste - in his personal life, as indeed in the affairs of the public - he was very keen on knowing the researcher's caste background - not only whether he is a Brahmin but also to which caste among Brahmins he belonged. He showed a rather deliberate knowledge about the particular castes of the Brahmins he spoke of, and was keen to make it a point to mention it each time. Of course, he insisted that he gathers such information for curiosity. Himself a Smartha Brahmin, he was a veritable fund of stories, anecdotes, origin stories etc. concerning the different Brahmin castes.

This is a perception shared by a large number of the respondents, in the process reproducing the legitimacy of intra-community marital alliances and ensuring the retention of the various forms of capital within the community.

As already noted, most of the marriages continue to be 'arranged' by the respective families, even as the choice-structure available to the participating individuals and families have enlarged appreciably. However even the so-called 'love marriages' do not seem to violate the enlarged norms of endogamy. To be sure, such situations involve greater play of individual choices and preferences and heighten the chances for inter-caste unions, but invariably, given the 'caste' basis of social interactions generally, the partners in love are from one's own caste or community. Thus even as there were as many as ten 'love marriages' in the respondent population interviewed, only one of them had married a Syrian Catholic Christian.⁴⁸ Besides, as mentioned before, within the immediate families of the respondents surveyed, there were only three instances of the respondents' children marrying non-Brahmins. Thus higher levels of sustained interaction with 'outsiders' in one's public life need not ensure greater incidence of inter-caste marriages.

Nonetheless, as long as 'community endogamy' is ensured, the family indeed enables and ensures a great deal of independence in choosing the partner. Considerations of the individual's education and employment are as important as the status of the family to which s/he belongs. Women, especially those with higher education and career-oriented, demand that their husbands be receptive to their aspirations and that they share the burden of household chores. Such expectations are accepted as legitimate too, even as the translation of such recognition into actual practices is not always realised. Women are still expected to be the 'natural' caregivers, and accordingly many of our women respondents have had to give up promising careers to look after the family.

Considerations having to do with the 'safe' and 'secular' occupational attribute of the individuals are overwhelmingly important in match-making. A respondent noted with adequate amazement:

⁴⁸ Interestingly enough, the respondent who had married a Syrian Catholic man made this observation: "My mother-in-law always tells me and my parents that Syrian Christians were all Brahmins before they converted to Christianity." Interview with Ms. Anuradha, 03/08/2000. The 32 year old Anuradha is a Namboodiri Brahmin. She is a journalist working with a newspaper in Bangalore married to another journalist who, as mentioned above, is a Syrian Catholic Christian. A recent migrant to Bangalore, she was a resident of a village near Mangalore.

Things have changed in the last ten-fifteen years. I will give you two instances. There is a Brahmin family in our neighbourhood. The father is a retired army Colonel. The son is a serving Major - a good rank, if you do not know. The family has been looking out for a girl for the last five years. They are **well-to-do**; and the son has a good job by any means. But everybody refrains on the ground that he works in the army. In any other community, people would have run after that boy. The other is that of young men who run hotels. Girls these days are so averse to the idea that a relative of mine is finding it almost impossible to get a match for his son, who runs a hotel which has good business. What's more, the boy has even a B. Com. degree to boot. Both these cases concern boys. You can no longer take it for granted that boys can be easily

Even in terms of regulating the everyday lives of Brahmin men, the authority and legitimacy of caste norms were already weakened in the early decades of the twentieth century. The first 'social' novel written in Kannada, *Indira Bai* (1899) by Gulvadi Venkata Rao, a Saraswat, is woven around the theme of reform. Among the issues that are narrated at length, one is the injunction against Brahmins taking voyages across the seas in pursuit of education. However, it was hardly a contentious matter by the initial decades of the last century. Many of the memoirs recounting life in these times do not think it important to state such stints across the seas as anything extraordinary. Many among these writers themselves had studied abroad - Sriranga, a playwright from Dharwad, and Kailasam, another celebrated playwright from Mysore, for instance - apart from the many other individuals they interacted with who have had similar sojourns.

Such loosening of the authority of caste norms is also reflected in many of these individuals completely renouncing the everyday ritual practices that they were supposed to perform as Brahmin men, such as the '*sandhyavandane*', wearing the appropriate caste markers on their body and sporting a tuft, and so on. Caste defined norms seem to have largely become by this time a matter of individual preferences and propensities. Thus, personages like D. V. Gundappa (a key intellectual litterateur wielding enormous clout among the powers-that-be in the Mysore State) and V. Sitaramaiah steadfastly stick to performing *sandhyavandane*, for instance, whereas others like Sriranga and Kailasam had willfully given up these practices. Sriranga has even remarked on the individuated character of such practices:

⁴⁹ Interview with Mr. Kumaraswamy, a 62 year old Smartha Brahmin (14/04/2000). He retired as an Accounts Officer with a multinational company in Bangalore. He has been an active participant in the caste associations for the last two decades.

I was born in the family of the 'Aadyas' [The First Ones]. My tradition-bound Madhva family had received the honorific title of 'Aadya' from the matha pontiff for its erudition. [But] when I was a small boy, I used to accompany the [non-Brahmin] farmers to the lands. Many times I just stayed behind with them, eating their food. I still remember my grand father, in a friendly manner, chiding me: "You are really a Shudra; you are born in our family by accident". During my school and college days though, I remained loyal to my brahminical tradition. The photograph on my passport, taken on the occasion of my trip to England, prominently features the *akshata* [a Madhva caste marker] that had covered my forehead. Even while playing cricket and tennis I had refused to wear trousers. I reached England - my tuft vanished, I had tea for the first time. Sick of eating cooked rice and potatoes, within two days of reaching England I ate meat; shaved of my moustache; paid money to learn *dance*; then followed cigarettes, and finally consuming alcohol beverages! Leave that - now also I neither have a tuft nor a sacred thread, but I haven't smelt liquor for the last 25 years! Even as my house has no scent of any rituals etc., it is no less to the pure atmosphere one begets in a traditional Madhva household. As my grand father had said, I am a Shudra in the exterior, but from the inside I am a loyal pure Brahmin! (1994: 5)

Elsewhere he recounts another instance:

Once (around 1944) I had gone visiting Belur and Halebidu with two friends. From Belur we had cycled to Halebidu. While returning, feeling thirsty and tired we asked for drinking water at a place. They simply stared at us... Finally one of them said, "We are Adi Karnatakas [a Dalit caste], sir". Then I immediately said, "It is OK then - we are also Adi Dravidas". Finally we were given buttermilk (*ibid*: 14)

Of course, one cannot presume that Sriranga represented general trends that obtained among the Brahmins as a whole. Even during these decades, Brahmin *mathas* were holding public debates on different issues of 'reform', and there still obtained a powerful current in favour of the 'orthodoxy'. What is more, in spite of the fact that traditional practices have lost their ability to be binding on individuals, a surprisingly significant number (that is, 33) out of the 79 male respondents (more elders than the youth) interviewed for the study admitted to observing practices like the *sandhyavandane*, albeit in a more truncated form.

While the contestation between the 'progressive' Brahmin and the 'orthodox' Brahmin is a question that we shall take up in due course (especially in Ch. 6) what is to be noted here is that the processes of individuation and secularisation impinging on the community are also enacted on a site juxtaposing the 'sacred' against the 'secular' of the modern Brahmin. Consistent with this logic, the sacredness that is always already attached to the Brahmin persona has undergone a transformation. Brahmin men who take to priestly occupations are very few and far between. It is never the primary choice across class positions and spatial locations; and only those who are considered 'failures'

take to performing the priestly task. This is a phenomenon that one encounters even from the early parts of the last century. None of the memoirs from that period even as much mention it as a probable occupational choice existing before kinsmen.

The life cycle rituals are more generally practiced, even as their schedules have seen great modifications. *Upanayana* (initiation ceremony) is still performed for Brahmin males, often at a greatly advanced age and many a time conducted just before the marriage ceremony (since it is a prerequisite for the marriage ritual to go on). As already noted, marriages are performed in a 'traditional' manner, though it has been truncated to a day's affair in tune with the demands of urban life, as against the five day weddings of the earlier times. *Shraddha* (death rituals) is performed too, but many go to temples or *mathas* for the performance. Many even have given up the entire ritualistic nature of such occasions, preferring instead to provide for a day's lunch or dinner in their caste association hostel.

Very few Brahmin men wear their caste markers outside their homes. Few even discard their sacred thread during daily life, and wear it only on given ritual occasions. Even as it has been made more difficult for the public confirmation of their caste status, a respondent pointed towards some other markers of recognising a Brahmin:

As soon as one sees me, it is affirmed that I have *Brahmana Kale* written all over my face! '*Kale*' refers to what is seen as being represented in the face of an individual. Thus when one says, "You have Brahmin *kale*", it means that one can make you out to be a Brahmin without getting any verbal feelers to that effect from you. It is rather intricately coded, and even the ones who make such judgments, which often are fairly accurate, feel difficult to explain the ingredients of the *to/e*. I don't know what makes them say that. But even I have thought likewise many a time. As soon as I see a face, I feel that person has *samskara*, has culture and thus he must be a Brahmin.⁵⁰

The invocations of the self as 'Brahmin' and as belonging to a particular Brahminical denomination go together, and are often determined by the contexts in which the identifications are made. This was witnessed even in Ramarao's memoirs mentioned above: against a context that was exclusively peopled in by Brahmins, being a fellow-Madhva played itself out in the case of the corrupt official (Sect. II, p. 98 above). Further, as we shall seek to demonstrate in the course of the next chapter, even after the non-Brahmin constitution of the image of a corporatised Brahmin, the significance of such caste identities do not cease to matter. This is also largely true of our respondents.

⁵⁰ Interview with Ms. Pooja, 17/07/2000. Refer to fn. 44 above for some details about this respondent.

Marriages continue to authenticate and reproduce the validity of caste identities, even as enunciations such as the above recuperate the self in terms of its **Brahminness**. The corporate imagination of the self as 'Brahmin' does not necessarily obliterate the internal distinctions, for on various occasions the identities of being **Smartha** as against being Madhva or even a Badaganadu Smartha as against a Shivalli Smartha surface. The 'internal other' is thus still an important Other. A Shivalli Smartha respondent, even as he waxed passionate about the imminent need for all the Brahmins to come together in order to face up to the contemporary state of hostility they encounter, was rather forthright in stating the following:

These Madhvas continue to think hierarchically. While a Brahmin on the street is willing to believe that humanity is one and the hierarchies are to be consigned to the dustbin, Madhvas still stick to their notions of superiority. In fact when a relative [from his own caste] narrated some Madhva friend's abuse of the Smarthas, I told him to go right back and ask that Madhva as to who his ancestors were. Anybody should tell him that each and every Madhva is a convert from Advaita. So any abuse of the Smarthas is like abusing his own forefathers!

Theirs has been a philosophy of proselytisation. It is common knowledge how they have taken over Udupi which was a Smartha place. The Shiva temples of Udupi precede the establishment of the Madhva Ashta Mathas.⁵¹

Evidently negotiating with one's selfhood as Brahmin is richly variegated and differentiated, perhaps largely reflecting on the individual experiences, influences etc. Such entrenched processes of individuation, apart from allowing for the emergence of different Brahmin selves, has also brought differentiation in terms of economic and social standing of the Brahmin families. Class is an important factor in determining the modes of interaction possible among Brahmins themselves. Many poor Brahmin families increasingly find it difficult to translate their Brahminness into extant forms of capital. On the other hand, the trope of the 'poor Brahmin' often accords enough ideational ammunition to the self-imagination of the Brahmins today, including that of their caste/community associations. We shall be returning to this theme in Ch. 5.

V

Prefiguring the Brahmin identity

The question needs to be posed: how does one make sense of all these developments that have been schematically represented in the foregoing sections? Indeed, do these transformations (and the relatively unique position in which they place

⁵¹ Interview with Mr. Kumaraswamy, 14/04/2000. Refer to fn. 49 above for a summary profile.

the Brahmin) prefigure and structure some of the ways in which the Brahmin identity enacts itself out? We shall attempt a brief formulation in the pages that follow.

As we have indicated in the course of this chapter, the inadequacy of the available data on the Brahmins - especially of the order that would yield a sharp macro perspective - stops us from making any determinate statements on their contemporary state of existence. Compounding this difficulty is the rather queer status of the efforts that are encoded in the various reports of the Backward Classes Committee/Commissions. Even as these documents point towards the changing and enduring profiles of caste groups, they tend to presume a corporatised interest as animating the logic of groups. Invariably, these documents prefigure the Brahmin as the 'Other', an entity that is internally **undifferentiated**, corporatised and working as a collective interest. While such a prefiguration is necessitated by the demands of politics and administrative compulsions, it would be a serious delimitation for more extant studies of the dynamics of caste action. The corporatised profiles attaching to caste groups and communities is often a concomitant of the processes (internal and external) to which they are subjected. **Indeed**, the many **auto/biographies** and the respondents' own recounting of their situations are a testimony to the contradictory nature of the modern state of caste - one which internally differentiates and individuates its members even as it seeks to consolidate itself into a substantialised entity. This point needs to be borne in mind in our attempts to capture the modern essence of caste, as indeed must be factored into our macro picture of caste communities and their associated identities.

Of course, Brahmins as a group were the first and foremost to enter the spaces of the modern before any other community. Obviously, for the Brahmins themselves, such an entry was made possible not by their structural location - the sheer fact of being (and recognisable as) 'Brahmin' - but because of other apparently non-caste factors like their keenness to invest in education, to readily migrate to the cities, take up modern occupations, and so on. This fact enabled a certain sense of naturalisation of the Brahmin in such spaces. Thus by the early decades of the last century itself, as we saw, self-retrievals that apparently had nothing to do with one's own casteness had begun to dominate the imagination of the Brahmin. This was most articulately expressed in the case of the Mysore Dewan Vishveshvariah. He rather single-mindedly refused to allow for any networks of nepotism to develop in the bureaucracy. He is said to have not taken a single of his kinsman into any government job during the entire tenure. What is more,

he was responsible for abolishing the caste-specific kitchens and dining halls that existed for the members of the Representative Assembly. He was certain that merit alone should determine an individual's chances, and it was on those grounds that he resigned **from** the Dewanship in 1918 protesting against the formation of the Miller Committee. However, it is easy to see that even such a position was basically an argument for and on behalf of the scrupulous Brahmin. It was as though the modern Brahmin self had to take on a certain impersonal secular garb in order to complete itself.

Thus, in most of these spaces Brahmins were not speaking either as or on behalf of Brahmins. They seem to have taken on secular identities and identifications - of being a graduate, a lawyer, a journalist, a Hindu, a nationalist, a Kannada activist, and so on. The uniqueness of this positioning comes across strikingly in the proceedings of the Mysore Representative Assembly, for instance. While definitionally Brahmins became members only by meeting the 'secular' performative criteria, other groups represented in the assembly had to carry their 'casteness' as their primary justification for being there. Further, it was only the Brahmins who were in a position to **fulfill** the 'modern' demands that were being placed on the public sphere. As already pointed out, there were Brahmin members in the Assembly as the official representatives of the 'Depressed Classes' (Dalits). Again, when there was a demand that women be made part of this emerging public sphere, it was inevitably the Brahmin women who came to fulfil such a secularised criterion. This unique positioning seems to have also been a factor in facilitating their entry into the upper echelons of politics and the bureaucracy.

The instance of Gopalaswami Iyer is instructive in this regard. He was a member of the Representative Assembly during the 1920s, representing the interests of the 'Depressed Classes' (the Dalits) of **Bangalore**. A perusal of the proceedings of the assembly clearly presents him as a vocal member. He does indeed make **frequent** appeals on behalf of the Depressed Classes. He frequently proposes that separate residential schools and hostels in different cities be built for them, that their womenfolk be trained in midwifery (for midwives from other communities refuse to attend on them), and that land and building materials be provided for these classes. But, interestingly enough, on various occasions he is seen arguing fervently for the cause of Brahmins. His participation in the overall Brahmin resentment against "communal representation" is very conspicuous. He is the spokesperson for the Brahmin members of the assembly on this issue. For instance, he resents 'communal' considerations being applied in matters of

recruitment to the civil services. Criticising the policy on grounds of individual merit and competence, he wonders whether the government is under the impression that "a Hospital Assistant can [carry out a surgical operation] better if he belongs to the backward community, than a Brahmin officer doing the same being a MBBS?" He adds, "God will give positions to men, but not brains to all" (cited in Hanumanthappa Vol. III n.d.: 265). He opposes the resolution seeking to increase reservation to the Backward Classes stating "It would practically close the doors of education to Brahmins" (*ibid.*: 267).

More conclusively, it is this entrenched secularised self that **successfully** dominates over the other contesting Brahmin selves in the modern condition - including not only the 'orthodox' Brahmin self but also the authority structures of the Brahmin monastic order, as well as the equally modern institution of caste associations. While this is a point we shall elaborate upon in the subsequent chapters, it is important to be **mindful** of the fact that negotiations from within and across Brahmin castes have also been facilitative of a modern identity for Brahmins. Indeed, the secularising **function** of the Brahmin situation is the structuring grid that animates the dynamics of the contemporary Brahmin identity. The Brahmins who radically flouted many caste prescriptions and proscriptions (say, in terms of **commensality** and touchability), even questioning the caste authorities such as the *mathas* particularly in matters of 'social reform', sincerely believed that their interactions with themselves and others were truly taking place in a space beyond caste norms and influence. The sphere of 'caste' was thought to be a concern of the private realm. Not surprisingly, therefore, the expressions of incredulity with which they receive facets of the **non-Brahminical** othering (a theme we take up in some detail in the next chapter) have their source in such secularised notions of the Brahmin self.

Such a secularised Brahmin identity (or identification) is not without its paradoxes, however. Even as Brahmins began to inhabit spaces that they believed had very little to do with their own specific casteness, the structuring of those very spaces meant that they frequently encountered other Brahmins like themselves. As we have noted throughout, in all the new spaces that they opened out to - be it in the cities, in the colleges, in the bureaucracy, in law, in journalism, in nationalist/linguistic activism and so on - Brahmins tended to be present in disproportionate numbers. Thus, even as their spaces of interaction began to take on a more public cast, this 'publicness' seemed to be prefigured by interactions with fellow-Brahmins like themselves. This continues to be

the case, with Brahmins, either as a matter of choice or sheer expectation, tending to have circles of interaction that are so circumscribed. Almost all the respondents indicated that their primary groups - those representing their primary units of interaction - were the family and the peer group, with the latter (be it in the neighbourhood or workplace) hardly taking on **non-Brahminical** others.

Of course, it is not as though these constrictions of the space of experience are not contested from within. Many Brahmins have had to negotiate with a modern consciousness made available through liberal education and inhabiting secular institutional sites and discourses such as nationalism, the office, college etc. A mixed sense of being beleaguered and ambivalent about its own Brahminness seems to configure the contemporary Brahmin identity. It is towards a description of this state of existence that we devote the chapters that follow.

Chapter Four

Intersecting Voices, Shifting Identifications: Complicating the Contours of the Non-Brahminical Othering of the Brahmin

By the beginning decades of the twentieth century, Brahmins had established an overwhelming dominance on the space of the modern world and its institutions. They attempted to negotiate directly with modernity on their own terms, even as they mediated it to the other castes and communities. However, the larger processes of what we called the secularising experience proved to be in excess of the Brahmin's ability to so mediate and contain. Since the experience of secularisation was primarily an experience of modernisation, of becoming modern, it required that those inhabiting the space of the modern become reflexive about themselves, their selfhood and identity. Brahmins, by virtue of their occupying such spaces before anybody else, have had to confront this demand much more than the others. Now, while this situation by itself is similar to how any caste entity is forced to negotiate with the modern condition, Brahmins have had an additional and very unique command to bear. The discourse of the 'modern' prefigures caste as a system of hierarchy and inequality that is the very antithesis of modern ways of ordering social life. As a constitutive part of this imagery, the Brahmin gets to be seen as not merely the carrier of this unequal system but also as the very embodiment of its legitimacy and normative value.

While this rendering of the Brahmin is an accomplishment of the processes of othering initiated by the non-Brahmin articulation (with of course the compulsions of everyday politics also undergirding it), interestingly enough the more secularised among the Brahmins have tended likewise to look at themselves in this 'othered' manner. This othering of the Brahmin, as indeed the latter's own negotiation with its self-identity, can be adequately represented as a contending dynamic of 'community' and 'association' - with the identity of the Brahmin consistently and constitutively oscillating between these two poles of identification. It is towards an unraveling of these shifting poles of identification that we devote ourselves in this and the chapters that follow. The modern world of Brahmins has had its share of intersecting voices and shifting identifications.

More frontally, the non-Brahmin articulation was directed primarily at challenging what it viewed as the Brahmin 'reinventing' his dominance in the modern condition. In the process, the 'Brahmin' they recuperated was a corporatised identity that was always-already **hegemonising**. Further, as many non-Brahmin communities expressed it, the secularising function of the Brahmin had in no sense rendered his ritual status and identity incapable or insignificant, either in terms of generating symbolic-material value or reconfiguring itself in modern, secular spaces. Therefore many contending communities, like the Lingayaths, continued to challenge the figure of the 'sacred' Brahmin, even as they resolutely sought to work within modern institutional spaces, such as the courts of law, census operations, newspapers, and so on. Besides, partly in response and partly of their own will, Brahmins had also begun in many ways to query themselves, hardly content at taking on their 'Brahminness' unproblematically. It is in the context of such varied contestations and challenges that a modern Brahmin identity began to take shape. What is more, this emergent Brahmin identity has had to stave off challenges from alternative ways of imagining the self from within in order to position itself as *the* legitimate Brahmin self.

Given the largely descriptive ground that we traverse, the sequencing of this chapter needs to be borne in mind. The triumphant entry of Brahmins into the modern world, which often was rendered as a 'natural' outcome of events and circumstances, came to be successfully interrogated by the 'non-Brahmin' articulation that had gained momentum by the early 1910s. The modern state too - for its own reasons of legitimacy and expediency - patronised the non-Brahmin othering of the Brahmin, by bringing in different forms of legislation to check what was seen as the **latter's** predominance. This **non-Brahminical** othering of the Brahmin has had an enduring impact on the ways in which the modern Brahmin identity has come to be constituted. This forms the first section of this chapter.

The non-Brahmin challenge, which brought together many disparate and even mutually contesting caste and religious communities, by no means exhausted the nature of contestations over the status of the Brahmin. The case of the Lingayath challenge to the Brahmin's status of ritual supremacy, even as they participated actively in the secular non-Brahmin articulation, is interesting. The challenge, perforce, had to inhabit a rather contradictory space: of simultaneously inhabiting a secularised non-Brahmin space as well as asserting the right of being 'Veerashaivas', a community that had for long served

as a critical counterpoint to the Brahmin supremacy in matters of ritual status. Even as this 'contradictory' status of the Lingayath challenge is taken cognizance of, one needs to also place in perspective the different senses that the Brahmin himself was making of his ritual status in a secularising context. Such instances of ritual reordering and contestations are taken up in the second section primarily in order to demonstrate how the emerging Brahmin identity has had to contend with a complex terrain of mediation and negotiation.

Equally significant are the processes that were underway within the Brahmin community itself. A secularised and corporatised Brahmin - *the Brahmin*, in a somewhat retrospective sense - was increasingly coming to demand that the internal distinctions and hierarchies existing among Brahmin castes be set aside. Interestingly, this demand is being made even as the Brahmin's own relationship with and investment in the category of his selfhood was set to become **definitionally** ambiguous. Of course, neither the demand nor the ambiguity heralded the decay and death of the internal hierarchies and differentiations. The contestation over the relative status of the different Brahmin castes, the determined bid on the part of some castes to claim **Brahminhood**, the contests among the Brahmin castes over share in the modern space - all these form the content of our third section.

I

Categorising the Brahmin: feeding off and into the non-Brahmin articulation

The non-Brahmin articulation of the early decades of the twentieth century emerged, in many ways, as the principal 'other' of the modern Brahmin identity. The articulation, often positing the Brahmin as the very embodiment of the oppressive regime and ethos of caste and as endowed with an uncanny ability to reinvent itself in changing conditions, has proved to be an enduring one. This is demonstrated by the fact that the modern Brahmin himself incorporates many of its elements in constructing his own self. Inasmuch as the **non-Brahminical** rendering of the Brahmin owes its articulation to the normative ethos of a modernity built around principles of individuality and emancipation, and considering that the Brahmin himself is privy to an inexorable experience of becoming modern, it is easy to see how the latter comes to participate in his own othering.

Here in this section we outline the history of the non-Brahmin articulation, its constructions of the Brahmin, and the modern state's complicity in these exercises. We primarily use the journal *Mysore Star* to reconstruct the fragments of the non-Brahmin

discourse. This journal provided the non-Brahmin leaders and intellectuals a space not only to bring to the attention of the state the need for taking measures to ameliorate the condition of the non-Brahmin communities, but also to conjure into existence a 'Brahmin' with whom a polemical and oppositional engagement could be forged. *Mysore Star* was owned by a Lingayath leader, and accordingly served also to articulate the concerns of this caste order. The journal thus adequately represents the mutual - and often contending - self-identifications that go with the fact of being non-Brahmin and Lingayath. In doing so, it also reflects on the very limits of the non-Brahmin self (as indeed on particular facets of the latter's own recuperation of the Brahmin self). The Brahmin primarily responds to such categorisation in a complex manner.

The word 'response', note, is being used here advisedly. The 'challenge' and the 'response' are not available in any mechanistic sense to either the Brahmin self or the non-Brahmin other. One needs to guard against imposing any notion of pragmatism or of deliberateness on either of these categories. The non-Brahmin recuperation of the Brahmin, to be sure, does not exhaust the Brahmin's own sense of what it is to be a Brahmin or at least to inhabit the space of a Brahmin. Consequently, the Brahmin's 'response' will necessarily be in excess of the non-Brahmin's retrieval of his self, both in its formulation and in its effects. This reminder, impinging on both our conceptual and methodological frameworks recounted in Ch. 2, is necessary in that it lends a sense of dynamism to the perceptual field we are going to encounter. Even as the Brahmin self subjects itself to many of the definitions that the non-Brahmin imposes, it also contests aspects of the othering that the process entails. But both in 'subjecting' its self to the other's categorisation as well as in resisting it, there is always an 'excess' that needs to be accounted for - primarily, in this instance, the Brahmin's very own processes of secularisation and modernisation. We will also detail such strategies of the modern Brahmin self particularly in the context of the non-Brahmin construction.

Lingayaths, Vokkaligas and Muslims were the main participants in the non-Brahmin alliance that gets to be formed in Karnataka. Lingayaths and Vokkaligas were landed communities and were numerically dominant.¹ But, as we saw in the previous

Manor (1977b) delineates the problems in assuming the Vokkaligas and Lingayaths as internally homogenised castes/communities; but for our specific purposes here we will not work with these complications. Our object, to reiterate, remains the specific contours of the Brahmin response to its othering.

chapter, they had abysmal literacy rates and an appallingly low representation in the modern spaces of bureaucracy, educational institutions and the judiciary. Muslims were no different. It is primarily an invocation of this under-representation in modern spaces that informed the establishment of such alliances, although in the case of Lingayaths the counterclaim to '**Brahminness**' also acted as an equally formative influence to begin with. Thimmaiah (1993) has noted that even the Kannada speaking regions of the Bombay Presidency witnessed the emergence of the non-Brahmin cause (see also Omvedt 1994 and Gore 1989). In these areas, the Lingayaths were numerically and economically (both in terms of land-holding and trading) the dominant community and were the leading articulators of the non-Brahmin cause. As early as in 1883, the Dharwad Lingayath Education Development Fund was instituted and many Lingayath hostels had begun functioning in that region by then (Javali 1999: 31). While data regarding the Hyderabad Karnataka region is hard to come by, Lingayaths from Bellary (a part of the Madras Presidency) seem to have been active participants in the activities of their Bombay Presidency counterparts. However, since Mysore took to modernising of its ways of governance in an unprecedented scale (from the last decades of the nineteenth century onwards, but particularly from the beginnings of the twentieth) there was a huge expansion of the administrative machinery. This offered unprecedented opportunities to castes and communities for upward mobility. Consequently, it is also here that the non-Brahmin cause finds determinate voice and leadership.

The contours of a non-Brahmin opposition to the 'Brahmin dominance' of government services and educational institutions begin to take shape in the closing decades of the nineteenth century. They nevertheless remain disparate and sporadic. In 1874 itself, the Mysore Government, then under the administration of the British, had passed an order reserving eight out of every ten positions in the Police Department to non-Brahmins, including non-Hindus. However the order was hardly complied with - despite being reissued in 1895 - and finds specific mention in the observations of the Miller Committee that was appointed in 1918.² Tamboochetty, a non-Brahmin who was

² The Committee noted: "In spite of this long standing order ... we find in the Police Department that in 1918, out of 361 officers, 191 were Brahmins" (cited in Thimmaiah 1993: 73). Indeed, the instance of the Police Department is an interesting one. Occupations like this and those of the Sanitation Department and the armed forces required a great deal of transgression of caste rules concerning purity. Secularisation of these 'functions' in the modern situation thus allows the Brahmin to encroach upon such spaces too, without of course seriously compromising with his Brahminness.

the Dewan for a brief while, had in 1895 itself sounded a note of concern regarding the overwhelming dominance of the Brahmins in the Mysore bureaucracy. The Maharani of the Mysore Princely State too had expressed her resentment against the Brahmin element being too strong in the public services, especially the Madras Brahmin element (Chandrashekhar 1985). In 1896, the Lingayath members of the Representative Assembly submitted a memorandum to the Maharajah seeking "by the grant of scholarships and in other ways, to encourage the spread of education in our [Lingayaths] section of the community" (Hanumanthappa Vol. III n.d.: 278-9).

The space of the Representative Assembly appears to have played a crucial role in enabling articulations of the non-Brahmin cause. The Representative Assembly, as we noted in the previous chapter, was elitist by virtue of allowing only the propertied and the university-educated to become members and voters. The criteria for membership included holding a certain specified volume of landed property, involving in trade, and so on, and, at a later point, even recognised caste associations as legitimate entities that could send members to the Assembly. Thus the Vokkaligas and the Lingayaths but also Muslims and many minority castes could make an institutionally recognised entry into the space of modern structures of governance. That these communities took this space in earnest in furthering their community interests can be seen even through a cursory reading of the proceedings of the Assembly.

By 1908 itself, the Mysore Representative Assembly was rather markedly polarised on Brahmin and non-Brahmin grounds. This is evidenced by the fact that during that year the Newspaper Regulation Bill was passed because the non-Brahmins voted for it while most of the Brahmin members opposed it. While the **latter's** opposition was founded on grounds of protecting the liberty of the press, the non-Brahmin members took what at first approximation appears to be a regressive position by way of favouring the Bill.³ The state of Mysore had by then a vibrant culture of the print media which was largely free from interventions of the state. This can be deduced from the fact that "(d)uring [1874-1908] not only as many as fifty papers started from Mysore, what is more

³ Joseph (1981:21) has noted that "most of the members from rural Mysore, representing the rural gentry, vehemently supported the Bill", and that it was primarily due to their "myopic view" in not grasping the "liberal ideas of the century" that the Bill was passed. This, he suggests, was in contrast to the opposition of the "members from the urban centres of Bangalore, Mysore and Shimoga, chiefly of the legal profession [who] pointed out the inherent dangers involved" (*ibid*).

important, these papers led and participated in several social and political movements" (Ramakrishnan 1985: 108). But as far as the non-Brahmins were concerned, this was a Brahmin dominated press, one that actively and publicly took sides on behalf of the Brahmins in the 'Brahmin versus non-Brahmin' confrontation. Except for the *Mysore Star* and the *Vokkaligara Patrike* (the Vokkaliga's Newspaper), almost every other newspaper published from Mysore and outside took active positions against the non-Brahmin demand. For instance, D. V. Gundappa (hereafter DVG) considered as the doyen of Kannada journalism, explicitly states his displeasure on the formation of the *Praja Mitra Mandal* and the appointment of the first non-Brahmin Dewan, Kantharaj Urs. While closing down, in 1921, the publication of his bi-weekly English journal *Karnataka*, he is explicit in stating:

Only efficient and able officials/authorities have the ability to take criticism that is both unforgiving and acidic. Journalism becomes dreary and un-enjoyable when the inefficient and the narrow minded take over offices. Once the Party called the *Mysore Praja Paksha* was founded in Mysore state, it appeared to me that the *Karnataka* ought to be stopped (cited in Venkataramanan 1988: 56).

The "inefficient and the narrow-minded" that he is referring to is the first non-Brahmin Dewan, whose narrowness comes because he made it explicitly known that he is a sympathiser of the non-Brahmin cause. In his memoirs, DVG writes:

Vishveshvariah was an exceedingly able administrator. He had nurtured radically novel ideas. It is only possible to such able persons to take unforgiving criticism on the new ideas. When ordinary folk take over the administration, such acidic criticism, even if logical, will only lead to bitterness. Therefore, from here on, our criticism will have to be tempered (1997: 151).

All in all, the overwhelmingly Brahmin dominated press in Mysore was actively using the rather modern arguments of the "freedom of press", "creation of an unbiased public space" (DVG, cited in Venkataramanan 1988: 48) etc. to create public consensus against a dispensation which was explicitly supporting the non-Brahmin demand.

The decade of the 1900s proved to be momentous in the history of the non-Brahmin articulation in Mysore. The founding of the *Akhila Bharatha Veerashaiva Mahasabha* in 1904 in Dharwad, the *Vokkaligara Sangha* in 1906, the Mysore Lingayath Education Fund in 1907 and the Central Mohammedan Association in 1909 (all in Bangalore) signalled the readiness of at least a visible elite in these communities to engage in contestations over modern resources. The founding statements of all these initiatives underlined the importance of getting their communities educated and finding

adequate representation in the government services. This was equally true of other communities such as the Jains and the Urs which joined the non-Brahmin articulation (Naidu 1996: 102-5).

The joint memorandum submitted to the Maharajah in 1912, through the Representative Assembly, is apparently the first clear articulation of a willingness on the part of these communities to come together on the platform of 'non-Brahminness'. It was signed by the Central Mohammedan Association, the Lingayath Education Fund, and the associations of Aryavaishyas (a trading community), Devangas (weavers) and Jains. The Memorandum had three demands. One, that more government jobs should be given to them; two, their community members are to be accorded places in representative bodies such as the municipality and the Representative Assembly; and, three, scholarships are to be given to the students of these communities to pursue studies both in the state and abroad (*Mysore Star* 16 December 1912). While the response of the royal authority to the demands of these communities was overwhelmingly positive, the aggregate figures of non-Brahmins in government employment and enrolment in educational institutions (particularly higher education) do not reveal any encouraging increase. The articulation nevertheless is important. A common focus - resentment against a perceived dominance of Brahmins in the spaces of the modern - draws them together into an alliance, voicing a language of non-Brahminness that by the 1910s-1920s had been popularised by the Justice Party of Madras. The articulation takes precipitate form with the founding of the *Praja Mitra Mandal* in 1917.

Scholars who have worked on the non-Brahmin movement in Karnataka have been unanimous in concluding that it was elitist, urban-based, and myopic. It never spread beyond Bangalore, Mysore and Kolar. It did not attempt to fashion a mass base for itself and though it spoke apparently 'on behalf of the entire non-Brahmin population, it did, in fact, serve the needs of the elite of these communities. Besides, it was excessively focused on garnering a share in the government services (see Manor 1977a: 33; Chandrashekhara 1985: 82-3; Thimmaiah 1993: 51-2; and Naidu 1996: 197-8). Now, it is true that representation in state bureaucracy was a very important concern for these communities, simply for the reason that it was a space that they could ignore at great costs to their overall development. As we saw in the previous chapter and will further testify in this one, preponderance of Brahmins in the structures of administration had almost debilitating consequences for the development of these communities. Often, as

already posited, this meant a naturalisation of these spaces vis-a-vis Brahmins and a deliberate even if discrete attempt at restricting the entry of other's into these spaces. But equally significantly it was also about the Brahmin's ability to mediate in a number of ways the taking-on of all such identities that were definitionally available to everybody irrespective of caste status.

The non-Brahmin leaders display a keen awareness of the crucial role that a presence in the ranks of the government services plays in the advancement of a community. C. R. Reddy, a visionary and the chief ideologue of the Mysore non-Brahmins, was very clear about the importance of the space of government and bureaucracy when he asserted that “(p)ublic life in India at the present means a scramble for places and **offices**.” Accordingly, for him, it was

necessary that these are distributed fairly as between different classes. ... Place means not only power to oneself, but opportunity to educate and find places for one's children, relations and people. Office is a clear lever of the highest importance and as such we must see that we get our share (cited in Chandrashekhar 1985: 50).

Evidently, then, the increasingly felt need to contest the growing ability and propensity of the Brahmins to appropriate and mediate the institutions and discourses of modernity went beyond a mere scramble for government jobs. There worked a clear vision of what these spaces meant in the emerging social order and the implications of any community monopolising them. Thus provision for secular, modern education, representation in government bureaucracy, judiciary etc. and accessibility to governmental fora such as Municipal Corporations, the Representative Assembly, and the Legislative Council become central in the articulation of the non-Brahmin leaders. It was also these three issues that were foregrounded in the first Memorandum that the *Praja Mitra Mandal* submitted to the Maharajah in June 1918 (*Mysore Star* 30 June, 7 and 14 July 1918).

Concerning access to modern education, the Memorandum very clearly identifies the vicious circle that was in operation. It identifies the mismatch between the source of tax generation and the recipient of government spending, emphasising thereby the point that while much of the revenue that is spent on education is accrued from the rural areas, very little is being actually spent on establishing educational and allied institutions (like hostels, in particular) in rural areas. Since most of the rural schools teach in the vernacular medium, it often stifles the progression of most of these non-Brahmin students

into the sphere of higher education, forcing them to occupy the lowest levels of **the** government services. This latter possibility was however scarce, for most of them went back to taking up '**traditional**' occupations like agriculture and allied services. Even if some did come to the cities seeking after higher education, many would drop out since there were very few community or government hostels.

The non-Brahmin Memorandum hints at Brahmins reinventing their 'traditional' dominance in the modern situation. It also suggests the ways in which that dominance gets to be consolidated:

Even as the age-old tradition and practices were furthering the hierarchical emotions affecting the growth of different communities ... [t]he modern educational practice and the unequal representation given to different communities in modern bureaucracy have equally adversely affected the welfare of the backward communities. ...

We would like to point out the shortcomings in our present educational system that has actively contributed to the paradox of the inverse relationship that exists between the amount of tax paid and the educational facilities given access to:

- 1) Students who pass the Lower Secondary examination in Kannada or Hindusthani medium in rural schools do not have the qualification to join High Schools to further their education, to gain which they are forced to study just the English language for two or more years. To do this, they have to come to a city or a town wherein, invariably, either due to casteism or for some such social reason, they can never arrange for food and shelter for themselves;
- 2) There is no uniformity in syllabi nor are the educational facilities available equal. Not all the towns have hostels belonging to all the castes.
- 3) Even though the primary education has been made free, it is actually the rural people who are paying for much of the expenses incurred on higher education to which either their children do not have access to or they have been rendered incapable of pursuing it (*Mysore Star* 30 June 1918).

Linking up the issues of education and employment, the Memorandum goes on to state:

It is neither new nor novel that everybody seeks to get educated primarily to get a placement in the government bureaucracy. ... [Therefore] it is only natural that all communities ought to get adequate representation in the government services that match their share in the population. This will ensure that all the communities in the state will possess adequate motivation to get educated. In order to ensure such representation, the government should appoint, though temporarily, non-Brahmin candidates from outside Mysore till such time when education has been made available to all castes and adequate number of non-Brahmins attain qualifications to compete for government jobs available (*ibid*).

As far their third demand was concerned, the Memorandum **beseeched**:

All autonomous bodies, including the Legislative Council, have to be re-formed to ensure representation to all communities according to the share in the population (*ibid*).

The royal authority was quick to respond to these claims. Within two months (in August 1918), a committee headed by the Chief Justice, Leslie Miller, was appointed to look into the unequal representation of communities in both education and government employment. The terms of reference were explicit:

1. Changes needed, if any, in the existing rules of recruitment in the public service;
2. Special facilities to encourage higher and professional education among members of the backward communities, and
3. Any other special measures which may be taken to increase the representation of the backward communities in public services, without materially affecting efficiency, due regard being paid also to general accruing to the state by a wider diffusion of education and feeling of increased status which, it is expected, will thereby be produced in the backward communities (cited in Thimmaiah 1993: 58).

The clause of "efficiency" in the above mandate was in response to the widespread antipathy that the Brahmins exhibited against the appointment of the Committee. The primary ground on which they opposed the terms of reference was that 'reservation' would adversely affect the efficiency of the government machinery. On its part, the Miller Committee tended to pose the issue of efficiency differently:

Efficiency, however, is not to be measured solely or even mainly by academic qualifications and it will not be denied that there are many important branches of administration in which other qualities, such as sympathy, honesty of purpose, energy and common sense go as far to make an efficient officer (*ibid.* 59-60).

While recommending the categorisation of most communities, save Brahmins, as 'backward'⁴, it maintained:

Within a period of not more than seven years, not less than one half of the higher and two-thirds of the lower appointments in each grade of the service and so far as possible in each office are to be filled by members of communities other than the Brahmin community, preference being given to duly qualified candidates of the depressed classes [Scheduled Castes] when such are available (*ibid.*: 64).

It further recommended the abolition of competitive examinations for recruiting persons into government jobs and relaxation of requisite educational qualifications for different services. The Committee stressed the need for spread of primary and secondary education, opening more English schools, opening schools for the *Panchamas* (Dalits),

⁴ The Committee, note, worked with two criteria to determine the backwardness of a community: a) any community with less than five percent of English literacy rate; and b) any community which had inadequate representation in middle and higher rungs of the government services.

starting community hostels in towns and cities, and increasing the scholarships, particularly at the level of higher education.

More directly, however, the non-Brahmin construction of the Brahmin (as indeed of the question of caste) can be gleaned from the following editorial of the *Mysore Star*. It is commenting on the response of the Brahmins to the activities of the non-Brahmin movement of the neighbouring Madras Presidency:

It surprises us that barely a whimper is made by the non-Brahmins [against the appropriation of Brahmins of modern spaces] and the Brahmins and their newspapers have begun crying hoarse and alleging that *Brahmadvesha* [Brahmin Hatred] has become too strong. There is no country in the entire world wherein there exist people who do have some form of internal systems of distinction [*bhinna*]. States of distinction/discrimination are natural. ... It is a law of nature that there exist so many religions, varnas, castes, kulas, and languages. This is the natural quality of the world. However these distinctions have the destiny of unity, which is what is the goal of great philosophers. Till that state of unity is reached, each and every distinction needs to work for its own betterment. Many distinctions, of religion, caste and kula, have existed from time immemorial in our country. ... These are based on legitimate foundation and have a great deal of thinking and good will behind them. Therefore they cannot be rooted out by anybody. However, since people of recent times have made changes in the Great Reason that lay behind such systems at their moment of origin, some have begun to think that such principles of distinction themselves are the reason for all the problems. Religion, caste, kula (lineage) distinctions should not die. They will not, in fact. What should meet its end is the practice of unequal hierarchy that many indulge in, claiming basis in the natural principles of distinction. ...

If merely by taking the name of the Brahmins one becomes a hater of Brahmin, it becomes difficult for others to even survive. ... When Brahmins, all so educated, themselves are rushing after government jobs as though they are the heaven in this world, it is only natural that others follow the leader. ... Some argue that if there are caste-based restrictions regulating dining habits and matrimonial networks, let there be, but they should not regulate national activities. To this, we too agree (*Mysore Star* 14 January 1917).

This statement bears testimony to a curious and even contradictory space, one that invalidates the hierarchical principle of the caste order even while celebrating the distinctions [*bhinna*] that obtains among the caste entities. Caste as constituting the differential essence of its members, and therefore the larger purity-pollution principle regulating inter-caste patterns of relations, are all seen to possess an inexorable legitimacy. Certain spaces are being defined as alien to and outside the normative purview of the caste order - the practice of inequality based on one's caste identity, occupational choices (particularly the "government jobs"), and the space of nationalism.

The Brahmins though express a sense of disbelief at the very thought of protective discrimination, as evidenced in the Notes of Dissent that the two Brahmin members attach

to the Miller Report and in the proceedings of the Representative Assembly. Significantly, their opposition to the proposed measures is not articulated in ritual-hierarchical terms. The dissent per se is not about the demand that Shudras or the Panchamas want to get educated or that they want to become officers of equal rank with the Brahmins; all this is recognised and accorded legitimacy. In fact, the statements of dissent of the two Brahmin members of the Committee begin with voicing an agreement with the stated cause of the **upliftment** of the backward classes. 'Merit' is the register within which the opposition is mostly configured. Thus K. T. Seshaiya, a Brahmin member of the Representative Assembly, argued:

Whether a candidate for office is a Jew, Christian, Protestant or Jacobite, his qualifications alone count. In no country and at no time in the annals of the world, was government service held to be representative institution to be recruited on a communal basis (cited in Naidu 1996: 205, fn. 59).

However, such statements of "qualifications alone" are also coded in order to camouflage sentiments reflective of caste norms linking occupation and ritual status. *Sampadabhyudaya* (a daily that represented the interests of such secular Brahmins, according to the *Mysore Star*) states:

The arrangement of appointing representatives on communal basis is not beneficial. And this arrangement is nowhere, in no country, practiced. He, who has the merit to do a job, alone has to be appointed to do the job. Will the job be performed to the satisfaction of all if an able *Agasa* [Washerman; the reference here, in fact, is to a 'lower' caste and not merely to the 'function' of washing clothes] is appointed as a minister? Or even, if a top ranking officer is appointed as a scavenger [again referring to a Dalit caste and not merely to the 'function' of scavenging]? (Cited in *Mysore Star*, 11 November 1917).

This position ties together, at once, the modern discursive register of 'merit' and the norms of the caste system that seek to regulate occupational entry. Such a fusion of distinctive codes, it needs to be reiterated, was not an isolated instance. The *Mysore Star*, commenting on the position endorsed by *Sampadabhyudaya*, frequently observes that it was the Brahmins who were the first to relinquish their 'caste occupation', and that if Brahmins wish other communities should go back to their traditional occupations, they should lead by example.

The dissent of the Brahmins is also about denying one community - in this instance, the Brahmins themselves- their right to inhabit these spaces. It is pointed out that they are not occupying these spaces by resorting to any illegal or even unjustifiable means, and that it is therefore unfair to punish them for their merit. Attention is also

directed at categorising a whole group as '**Brahmins**'. They point to the differences that obtain within this category, referring in particular to the Havyaka and Sankethi Brahmins who had remained largely agriculture-dependent castes. As a Brahmin member from Shimoga, S. R. Balakrishna Rao, deliberated:

[T]he principle on which groups of people were classified as backward is wrong. The Brahmin community is made up of a number of subjects and is not a homogeneous body. There were subjects among them who were really backward in education and were also poor. Should not such people be helped? (Hanumanthappa Vol. II n.d.: 377-8).

The public voicing of such a dissent notwithstanding, the non-Brahmin articulation was acutely successful in its quest to 'other' the Brahmin. 'Brahmin' as an invocation came to represent everything that was abhorrent to a modern mind. The non-Brahmin articulation renders the category of the Brahmin as 'illegitimate'. But - and by no means independent of this non-Brahmin construction - the Brahmin himself was undergoing a secularising experience primarily owing to the effects of urbanisation and the fact of inhabiting spaces such as liberal education and modern occupations. He was growing to be circumspect and reflective about his own self as 'Brahmin', an identification that was now being invested with all that the modern ethos stood against. Therefore, any active invocation and owning up of one's Brahminness was increasingly becoming a non-option. It had to be reconfigured and reinscribed. In what follows, we present two locutions of the Brahmin self, paradoxically from the pages of the *Mysore Star*, in order to show the possibilities that were present especially in the wake of the non-Brahmin articulation and the ongoing process of the secularisation of 'function' of the Brahmin self. It is to be noted that while the first of the two locutions was becoming increasingly difficult to defend and argue for, the second comes to dominate the retrievals of the self that the Brahmin engages with. The non-Brahmin articulation itself seems to rest content with the latter retrieval, but the former term is unacceptable and is denounced.

The following are the excerpts of a letter, titled *Working of the Reforms: The Brahmins' Lot*, which a 'South Indian Brahmin official' wrote to the Manchester Guardian (a journal published from England) and re-published in the *Mysore Star* (20 February 1920):

My poor sons are able to get on smoothly through grace in the midst of non-Brahmin administration. The British Government was encouraging Brahmins in the last century in consideration of their intelligence and education and their loyalty. They are now in a depressed

condition thinking as to what to do for their future, as in their thirst for British education and encouragement they have lost all their properties and deserted their homes. Non-Brahmins with below average education are now encouraged and the Brahmin minority is put down in all ways, socially and officially. The Brahmin villages abound in passed candidates who do not know what to do. I assure you that, excepting a few Brahmins here and there who have lost their senses, the majority are always loyal to the British Government, and appreciate the benefit of its administration. If you are pleased to pursue the 11th Skandam of the Sri Bhagavatham you will observe that the Government will pass into the hands of Shudras towards the end of Kaliyuga. The lowest castes are now forcibly and even against their will allowed to go through Brahmin quarters and to join all social functions. I beg to add and venture to assert that in a few years hence the word 'Brahmin' will have to be expunged from the Census Report

Compare this locution with another letter titled *Nija Brahmananaru.? Avana Dharmavenu?* (Who is the Real Brahmin? What is his Dhanna?), written by Head Master T. Nanjundaiah, a Brahmin, which appeared in the *Mysore Star* issue, dated 9 November 1929:

The word *Vedamurthy* denotes the actualisation of the Vedas in a man. I, the unscholarly [*paamara*] Head Master of the Hircuntanooru Boys High School, T Nanjundaiah, who, even if one takes a thorough search from head to bottom, has not a trace of such Brahmathva [the knowledge of the Brahma, the ultimate knowledge], bow before you.

What is Brahmana? What are the Brahmana *karmas*? How will the Brahma *Tejas* be? How does one recognise a Brahmin who possesses that *Tejas*? - I know not. But when I asked a Mahatma, he said that one who has control over his senses, external and internal, who meditates, is clean, patient, contented, has Brahma *jnana*, is invested with the qualities of scientific temper, devotion, theism, *egalitarianism* because of his ability to practice the teachings of his Guru is called the Brahmin. He even provided the necessary evidence from the Shastras. ...

Neither do I have those qualities nor have I seen anybody endowed with them. ... since I, myself, don't have Brahminness, how will I have the capacity to recognise a true Brahmin? My conscience does not allow me to act like a Brahmin, as if in a drama, when I am not following the Brahmana *karma* and cannot even imagine of matching up to the greatness of the Brahminhood. I have no symptoms of Brahminness. I am performing 'This Worldly' activities, I am interested in 'This Worldly' things and, to top it all, I eke out a living through offering services. That I offer services for returns in itself points to my Shudraness, since it represents *Tamoguna*. Brahmins, for whom *Sathvaguna* is the dominant quality, will know my caste [of being a Shudraj, just by the fact that I offer services. I am a straight man who says what he does and does what he says. I eat and drink where I feel like. ... Given that I don't even know myself, how will I know Brahma *jnana* or Brahminness? I do not like getting called Brahmin by un-true conduct. ...

Taking all this into consideration, the great Brahmins should find answers to the following questions - what is a Brahmin? What is his *Dharma*? Does everybody follow this *Dharma*? Do they believe that, at least, they themselves follow this *Dharma*? After finding answers to the above, if they find that they all follow Brahminness and that it is only myself who does not, then they should, I request, dismiss me from the 'Brahmin' list itself.

It is significant that both the locutions occupy modern spaces - one is a government bureaucrat and the other a school teacher. Their divergent recuperation of one's 'Brahminness' is thus a testimony to the fact that the processes of secularisation and the non-Brahmin challenge do not necessarily homogenise the Brahmin's understanding of his self. Individual trajectories and contexts were also significant in formulating the response of an individual.

The first writer unhesitatingly owns up and speaks on behalf of his Brahmin self and identity. For him, the traditional authority and the normative grounds of caste are the basis on which social life ought to be still organised. Shudras, for instance, cannot enter Brahmin colonies; nor are they supposed to take up occupations that are not prescribed for them. His own sense of self-identity is captive to a feeling of being under siege, and, given that the scriptural authority had ordained to the capacity of being Brahmin, it is beyond human control too. He is accordingly speaking from what can be seen as a self-propelled Brahmin identity. The Head Master, though, can take a step outside his own Brahmin self and evaluate it. He employs three prototypical images - the Ideal Brahmin, the Contemporary/Degraded Brahmin, and his own Brahmin Self (one that is at a remove from the former two images).

Interestingly, these distinctions endure to this day in Brahmin constructions of the self. For Head Master Nanjundaiah, his ascribed identity of being a Brahmin has no significance. It is there merely because he is born in a Brahmin family. Thus being 'Brahmin', for him, is no more than constituting part of a "list". He invests no significance to it unlike the other Brahmins around him. But again, it is not that the category of Brahmin has no meaning for him. He is re-inscribing it with a different code, and refilling it with a different content. He is investing in the category of the Brahmin an 'achievable' value - of one who has acquired an identifiable inventory of attributes, and who could be born of any caste or community. The attributes identified are interesting, ranging from egalitarianism and scientific temper (decidedly modern values) to devotion to the Guru, being pure and so on. Given this axis of identification, there are no Brahmins, including himself, who are worthy of that identity. Consequently the poser, why call oneself a Brahmin at all? Such a strategy, what could be termed universalisation of the category of the Brahmin, is an enduring frame in the context of which the secularising Brahmin begins to negotiate with his caste self.

Interestingly, what is common between the two locutions is that both are alluding to the traditional scriptural authority for authentication, even as they are putting it to divergent uses. Nanjundaiah's lampooning of the contemporary Brahmins does not come to him from any validation of modern notions of equality and fraternity; rather, from the fact that they do not live up to the scriptural imagination. While not demanding any radical break with the past that it constructs for itself, it still asks for an **effort** to live up to a certain inherited image.

Complementing this reconfiguration of the Brahmin self is the fact that the non-Brahmin articulation seems to content itself with the language of caste. Indeed, there are enough indications that the non-Brahmin articulation was not vested with any stated position against the caste system as such. For instance, in 1915, when the state government schools were thrown open to the Panchamas (who were untouchable castes), it has been pointed out that "not only Brahmin parents but even non-Brahmin parents (including Muslim parents) withdrew their children from such schools" (Thimmaiah 1993: 51). This is further testified to by the *Mysore Star*, particularly with reference to the Lingayaths. There is acute heartburn among the Lingayaths that students from their community are denied a "separate bathroom" in the hostel attached to the Maharajah's College in Mysore, while the Brahmin students were provided the facility. (*Mysore Star*, 6 and 27 May 1923; and 3 June 1923). It is important to note the grouse here was not that the Brahmins were following a 'caste rule' in a secular space, but that the Lingayaths were not being extended the same facility. The *Mysore Star*, which as we already noted was also a crucial articulator of Lingayath concerns, seemed to offer the latter a forum for contesting the Brahmin claim to Brahminness. This point, when combined with another about the Lingayaths constituting the most important constituency of the non-Brahmin alliance, only provides grist for the contention that the non-Brahmin discourse hardly entailed a questioning of caste as a system.

One could of course view such moves as instances of '**sanskritisation**' in the idiom of M. N. Srinivas. But it could be profitable as well to approach it as 'modernisation' (or, more accurately, as a contestation over modernity **itself**) As we shall see, in the case of Lingayaths, disputations over being categorised as 'Shudra' was more than merely a question of their place in the 'Varna' order; it permeated their contemporary struggles over the meaning of being a modern caste community. The resolution of this question was essential for certain subaltern caste sections of the Lingayaths who were engaged in

an acrimonious battle with the elite castes within the fold over the legitimate ways of constituting the Lingayath community and the norms that ought to govern this constitution. Whether the Lingayath community be divided as Brahmana Veerashaiva/Lingayath, Kshatriya Veerashaiva etc. or whether it should be seen as a composite, non-hierarchised community raged on for decades in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. (See for a description of some aspects of this contestation, Boratti 2003). Secular Brahmins like the Census Superintendent of 1931, Masti Venkatesha Iyengar, were prone to dismiss anxieties on the part of such communities over their ritual status as being of little significance, whereas for the communities themselves, these were legitimate questions about ways of imagining and re-imagining their place in the emerging scheme of things.

The non-Brahmin discourse often constructs an 'ideal Brahmin' or a 'Brahmin-in-essence' and ventures a positive evaluation of this figure. Such an essentialisation is encountered very frequently in the *Mysore Star*, ironically the converse of the strategies of othering germane to the non-Brahmin articulation. This Brahmin is not only tolerated; he is, in fact, celebrated. A write-up, in the form of questions and answers, titled *Brahmadveshigalaaru?* (Who are the Haters of Brahma/Brahmins?), has a structure of argument imploring the following:

Q: What is the loss in believing that birth determines one's Varna?

A: That is plainly unfair. Then, even if a Brahmin turns corrupt/unclean and joins Islam or Christianity, he will still be called a Brahmin. ... The Shastras have defined distinct characters for different Varnas. But now, since they have the arrogance to think that they have become Brahmins by birth itself, all the goodness inherent in the Brahmin character has been rooted out. Can there be a greater loss? Isn't the one who is destroying such a great Brahmin character the *Brahmadveshi*? ... Instead of realising that they themselves have turned the primary threat to Brahminness, they have begun calling others *Brahmadveshis*.

Q: But in today's world, who cares for the quality/character? Isn't it merely the 'practice' that everybody observes? Doesn't the government too take into consideration merely the birth as the marker of one's Brahminness?

A: The nitty-gritty of such questions does not entangle the government. They merely follow the practice accepted by the outside world. Moreover, in religious matters, the decision of the king cannot be taken as final.

Q: Then, who are the *Brahmadveshis*?

A: Those who are destroying the Brahmin character and arguing that the Varna comes with birth and that the character is not important for determining one's Varna - they are the real *Brahmadveshis* and *Varnadveshis* (*Mysore Star* 17 February 1918).

Likewise, an editorial (27 May 1917) rather appreciatively refers to a speech made by a Brahmin, which argued that:

According to the Vedas, the Brahmin and other such Varnas were born to facilitate the human quest for the development of *Adhyathma* [spiritual thinking]. These Varnas, as time progressed, turned into the present occupation-based Varnas. The Varna divisions were, in fact, facilitating caste unity and had no principle of hierarchy. The Varna contamination began happening when such *Adhyathma* oriented schema began to be used for determining 'This Worldly' occupations. Therefore, we ought to grasp the essence of the Vedas and seek to uplift, and not oppress, women and the backwards.

Thus the *Mysore Star* consistently makes a distinction between, what it calls, the *Jaatibrahmana* (Brahmin through Caste/Birth) and the *Karmabrahmana* (Brahmin through Action for whom the "ultimate goal of life is to think for/of the good of the world") and fervidly argues for the latter. For instance, the editorial dated 19 November 1916 is a lament about the non-availability of the *Karmabrahmanas*, since most of those who are Brahmins by birth have taken to Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra occupations. This editorial even goes on to celebrate the activities of the *Aanandavana Vaidika Samskruta Paatashaale*, located in Bombay Karnataka and run by a Brahmin, which sought to inculcate the old Brahminical values

More pointedly, the fact that such a lamentation about the 'demise' of the 'Brahmin-in-essence' was rather shared is demonstrated by the following letter. Written by a *Vaishyakulaabhimaani* (A Fan of Vaishya Community)⁵, the letter challenges the Thyamagondlu *Vaidika* (priestly) Brahmins to answer a few questions:

I hear that the local Vaidika Brahmins are conducting meetings regarding their Brahminness. Let them answer the following questions that are based on their present status. These questions are based on proof ... Can one be called a Brahmin even after he has committed one of the *Panchamahaapaathaka* (Five Great Sins) like drinking? Can a Brahmin, who has committed 'lesser sins' like *Brithakaadhyaapana* (receiving remuneration in order to teach) be still called a Brahmin? Can a Brahmin who has not engaged himself in learning be still called a Brahmin? Can a Brahmin, who being a hotel owner cleans the *enjalu* [the left-behinds, and thus polluted] of all, irrespective of their caste, be still called a Brahmin? Can a Brahmin, who is employed in Medical Department or the Excise Department, be still called a Brahmin? (*Mysore Star*, 28 August 1926).

Many of the above queries would implicate the secularising Brahmin, especially those who took up employment as a doctor, hotel owner etc., rendering their self-perception of being Brahmin as both inadequate and unworthy.

⁵ Vaishyas were part of the alliance that formed the *Praja Mitra Manda/i*.

In 1919, *Mysore Star* reproduced the text of the letter that the Pontiff of Kolhapur Shankaracharya *Peeta* wrote to the Baroda king, who was the President of the Bombay Depressed Classes Conference:

I cannot overstate the regard I have for your efforts. But I also warn you that we can neither ignore nor misread our Shastras. Regarding these aspects, our Shastras have necessary and great spiritual norms. But it is also true that over time many meaningless but harsh practices have also crept into our unions. The former are non-negotiable. The loyal, who are seeking after the realisation of **Atma**, have to necessarily follow the proscriptions imposed. They ought not to eat those things that are proscribed to a *Nijavaidika* (real Vaidika) and cannot mix with those who are prohibited. ... This is necessary not merely for their individual quest of realisation but also for the greater common good. ... Till he reaches the stage of Greatness endowed with powers of purifying anybody who comes near, he should follow all the proscriptions to stay pure. All the norms regulating Pollution and Untouchability have this very philosophy as their basis. ...

But, of course, it is indeed hard to come by the Real Vaidiks. No matter what, we cannot at all forget the changes that have happened in the affairs of our country. The practices and discourses do change according to the demands of the present. ... I strongly believe that a Hindu Loukika, who is not following the path of Self Realisation, treats the converted Muslims and Christians fairly but ill-treats the Panchamas who are very much Hindus, is committing a phenomenal sin. ... However I have a note of sermon for the Panchamas too. ... All the Panchamas, in the past, and a majority even now were/are slaves to the most polluting acts. ... We all know how, from their own communities, many a Yogi and Bhakta emerged to earn all our respect. ... I am a pontiff and I strongly state that the primary aspects regarding our practices and Dhanna ought not to be changed. But it is inevitable that many things change according to the changes in country. ... Firstly, since many from the formerly untouchable castes are taking to 'Good Ways' but, more importantly, also since many from 'Good' castes are finding it difficult to ignore this world like their Vaidik predecessors did, such formerly untouchable people have to be treated with respect. ... [However] if the demand for change in practice becomes more widespread, I assure you that I am willing to sit with other pontiffs to prepare a charter of the changes to be brought about (*Mysore Star* 30 March 1919).

Apart from re-imagining the contents of being a Brahmin, what is significant here is the category of the 'Hindu' (with all castes, from the untouchables to the Brahmins, constituting *the* Hindu community) that the pontiff foregrounds. However, re-inscribing these populations into a single category of being 'Hindu' does not seem sufficient to obliterate the caste distinctions and specificities. These have to be necessarily carried over into the new self-identification of being Hindu. Such enunciations by the Brahmins, nevertheless, were enthusiastically received by the *Mysore Star*, and provided a common ground on which the greatly contesting imaginations of the Brahmin and the non-Brahmin could meet. The reconfigured Brahmin self, one that denied to its own ascribed status a moral and normative grounding but which nonetheless positively evaluated the ideal

Brahmin self, seemed successful in convincing it's Other - the non-Brahmin - of its legitimacy.

These complexities notwithstanding, what is perhaps more disconcerting for the Brahmin was the position of the modern state itself in regard to the non-Brahmin demand for representation. This is signified in the status of Vishveshvaraiah who was the Dewan when the Miller Committee was constituted. Vishveshvaraiah was perhaps the most proactive of the Dewans that Mysore had seen, and was held in great esteem by the King for his efforts to modernise the state and its economy (Naidu 1996: 187). The Dewan however was vehemently opposed to the idea of reservation and believed that merit and efficiency alone ought to be the principles guiding recruitments into government services. The King though was willing to let Vishveshvaraiah resign on the issue. This ready compliance of the stately authority, even in the face of spirited opposition from a highly respected Dewan, many members of the Representative Assembly, the Brahmin-dominated press and the bureaucracy in general, was disconcerting to the Brahmins. Many factors - such as a policy of placating local landed interests (Manor 1977a), palace intrigue and politicking (Chandrashekhar 1985) and the sheer fact of managing a population increasingly dependent on governmental attention - could have contributed to this readiness to heed the non-Brahmin demands for representation. For the Brahmins, though, it was perhaps the first clear signal that in spite of their preponderance in the executive or even the civil social institutions (in the form of the press, for instance), they cannot mediate the trajectory of the state itself. Once heeded to, this meant that the modern state begins to get articulated (both by caste associations and by individuals) as the most significant Other of the Brahmins in the modern condition. The increasing volatility of electoral politics at all levels, as indeed the persistent willingness on the part of the state to appoint successive Backward Classes Commissions and measures like land reforms, have only served to authenticate a certain narrative of state abdication vis-a-vis Brahmin subjects for every succeeding generation.

To be sure, the non-Brahmin contestation of the Brahmin and the state's legitimisation of the terms of such a contestation do not exhaust the range of external-categorisation and othering that the Brahmin has had to deal with. The case of the Lingayaths maps another array of concerns that the Brahmin has had to contend. Note it is not that the non-Brahmin 'othering' of the Brahmin inhabits a space that is entirely independent of the Lingayaths. As we have noted, Lingayaths present an instance

wherein they inhabit the self-identification of being non-Brahmin simultaneously with that of a community that is seeking to contest the exclusivising Brahmin claim to the status of ritual sacredness. Consequently, unlike in the non-Brahmin instance, it is the ability of the Brahmin (albeit undergoing a secularising experience) to mediate and control the space of the 'sacred' that the Lingayath seeks to contest. Our next section presents some further instances of such contestation so as to point towards the complexities that were involved in the making of the Brahmin identity. It also allows us to speculate on the internal coherence of the figure of the Brahmin that the non-Brahmin often presumed as being in existence, which then leads us to the final section where we discuss the internal contestations that the Brahmin self-identification entail.

II

Contesting the 'sacred' Brahmin: the Lingayath instance

The cases represented here concern primarily the Lingayath interest in establishing a position in the caste ritual hierarchy that equals (if not supplants) the Brahmins. But, not surprisingly enough, the discussion will further testify to the eclectically positioned power of the secularising Brahmins to mediate even those affairs that ostensibly they had departed from. Indeed, the Brahmin's growing ambivalence with regard to his 'Brahminness' did not necessarily mean his withdrawal from the field of ritual status contestation.

One could begin with the struggle over the space of the two Government Sanskrit Colleges that existed in the Mysore State. This is a good instance primarily because it points towards the mutual interpenetration of the non-Brahmin identification with that of the Lingayath identity as well as the tasks that these intersections were made to perform on behalf of each other. The space of the Sanskrit colleges provided an unusual context of confluence between rival contestations. The debate over allowing non-Brahmins to study in the Government Sanskrit Colleges of Bangalore and Mysore raged for over a decade during the 1910s and 1920s. The dating of the controversy notwithstanding, non-Brahmins had to wait till Independence to get effective entry into these colleges.

There were two Sanskrit colleges in the princely Mysore State, one in Mysore, called the Maharajah's Sanskrit College and the other in Bangalore, the Chaamaraajendra Sanskrit College - with the Mysore College the older and conferred with more prestige and sacredness. These colleges received patronage from the Sringeri *Matha* (a *Smartha* institution) and the Parakaala *Matha* (a Sreevaishnavite one, the official *Gurupeta* of the

Mysore king). Nevertheless, they were **primarily** funded and managed by the government. The establishment of these colleges was to impart training, in Vedas and other scriptures as well as in the performance of rituals, to the Brahmin male students.

Before narrating the struggles over the Sanskrit colleges, it has to be noted that by then (if ever) the priority before the Brahmin youth was not to take to Sanskrit education or religious training. None of the **auto/biographies** available from this period even mention such a choice as a distinct **possibility**. In fact, by then (as it continues to be, almost like a rule without exception), 'sacred' education had already become a least attractive option for Brahmin young men. Most of the Brahmin boys who found themselves in such institutions of learning (as is the case today) were 'failures' in pursuing secular education, except of course for those very few students who just could not afford secular education. But interestingly enough, even in such institutions of traditional learning, the need to enable the students to work within the increasingly secularising Brahmin spaces was acutely felt. Thus C. Subba Rao, a retired Deputy Commissioner, made an endowment of Rs. 10,000/- (which was a large sum then) with the Maharajah's Sanskrit College, Mysore as early as in 1894-95 with the expressed intent of

induc[ing] Sanskrit scholars fall of whom were Brahmins] to receive a high English education so that the narrowing influence of their purely Sanskrit education might, to a certain extent, be remedied and they might receive the benefit of liberal education without which the stores of traditional learning were not likely to be productive of useful results (cited in Naidu 1996: 73).

Complicating this scenario is the fact of *Jangamas*, wandering ascetics or priests within the Lingayath fold, who have apparently had a traditional access to Sanskrit education and authored many Sanskrit texts of ritual and **philosophy**.⁶ While no other caste or community was anywhere in a position to contest the Brahmin monopoly in this regard, the curious status of *Jangamas* among Lingayaths seemed to buck this trend. Consequently, even as the demand to democratise the space of Sanskrit/religious education was definitely a demand made by the *Praja Mitra Mandali* on behalf of all the non-Brahmins, it is equally certain that it was also a fundamental issue for the Lingayaths themselves.

⁶ See Murthy (2000: 206-7) for a list of such texts.

It had been a long-standing demand to permit non-Brahmin students to gain admission into these two government colleges. The Brahmins resisted it for a little more than two decades. In 1920 the government appointed a committee to offer its recommendations on the issue. The Committee had nine members and all of them were Brahmins. **Significantly**, their appointment as members of the Committee was not because they were Brahmins but on the basis of them holding the relevant government positions. The Committee recommended that only the Bangalore College be rendered accessible, that too for non-Brahmins of a “high or good caste” (*Uthama Kula*). However such students would be taught only Sanskrit literature and not Vedas. The Committee held that the Mysore College ought to remain restricted to Brahmin students. It also suggested that teachers in the Bangalore College should be allowed to take transfer if they feel uncomfortable teaching non-Brahmin students. The *Mysore Star*, characteristically, responded with a scathing editorial (18 June 1922) targeting the recommendations for being undemocratic and unjust, and pointing out that the institutions in question were government colleges meant to cater to one and all. Nonetheless, a Government Order dated 10 June 1924 brought into effect the recommendations of the Committee.

In the year 1925, another committee was constituted to look into the question of the continuance of teaching Veda and *Prayoga* (the practical aspects, relating primarily to the performance of rituals) in the Bangalore Sanskrit College. This question came up because the teachers in the college (all of whom were Brahmins) were feeling uncomfortable teaching the non-Brahmin students. This Committee had four Brahmins, a Jain and a Lingayath as members. The four Brahmin members were for abolishing the teaching of Veda and Prayoga in these two Colleges, on the ground that

none of the teachers in the college was willing to teach these subjects to those other than Brahmins. The Lingayath member argued that since the *Vedaghosha* (chanting of the Vedas) is quintessential for the Lingayaths, the teaching of the Vedas ought to continue. He further opined that even though the study of Sanskrit literature is thrown open to non-Brahmins, without access to learning of the Vedas, it was like a body without life. But his proposal lost out for want of majority (Murthy 2000: 213).

The point to be noted is that the Lingayath challenge was primarily articulated in terms of a spirited claim to Brahminhood, one resting on the authority of the Vedas and other sacred Sanskrit texts. Needless to say, such contests between the Brahmins and the Lingayaths were **frequent** and bitter. What is of significance here is that the Lingayath

challenge to the supremacy of the Brahmin and the accompanying claim to **Brahminhood** never ceases to obtain; nor is it rendered ideologically problematic and unsustainable once subsumed under the non-Brahmin critique of the Brahmin. They coexist, even if uncomfortably, with each other. Such a peculiarly simultaneous existence of seemingly contradictory positions appears to have directed the inner trajectory of the non-Brahmin articulation in the princely Mysore State, given that the Lingayaths were the chief sustaining force behind its articulation.

In what follows, we shall narrate four instances that point towards the range of concerns that animated the Brahmin-Lingayath field, each instance testifying to the willingness of these entities to deploy and consolidate their versions of reality. The first pertains to the issue of categorising Lingayaths as Shudras in the Mysore Census of 1871 and the subsequent protest from the community, one that gave rise to an acidic debate with Brahmins which lasted till the first decade of the last century. The second is what came to be known as the *Shubhodaya Prakarana* - a controversy over the 'acceptable' modes of retrieving the twelfth century 'Sharana' movement' that came to increasingly act as the grid around which the Lingayaths sought to imagine themselves as a community. The third is the controversy over the right of the Lingayaths to perform *abhisheka* to the *Linga* (obeisance to the Shiva icon) in the pilgrimage centre of Parali, then part of the Nizam administered Hyderabad State, during 1924-29. The fourth is an incidence of 'riot' between Lingayaths and Brahmins in Bagalkot (then part of the Bombay Presidency) in 1911 over the propriety of the Lingayaths in carrying the replica of sage Vyasa's shoulder (*Vyasana tholu*) in caste/religious processions. This latter incident also entails a further breaching of boundaries, and the forging of tacit alliances between the **Smartha** Brahmins and the Jangama Lingayaths against the Madhva Brahmins.

1. Census contestations

The Lingayaths were enumerated as Shudras in the 1871 Census. Not only is this categorisation continued in the next census (of 1881) despite widely articulated sense of displeasure among the Lingayath leaders, they were placed below some of the 'untouchable' communities in the ritual Varna hierarchy. This led to a great deal of dissent - tracts were written, books were published and community newspapers such as the *Mysore Star* were copiously distributed to assuage feelings of disbelief and hurt. The *Mysore Star* even served as a context wherein a (Madhva?) Brahmin working for the

Railway Department, Ranganna, came to engage himself in an extended argument over the Lingayath claims to a higher caste status.⁷ Ranganna, in his letter, primarily called into question the claims of the Lingayaths that they be treated as a Brahmin caste. The ground on which he does so is by pointing to the eclectic composition of the Lingayath community, as containing castes ranging from washermen, barbers, oil pressers to trading and agricultural castes, to Satanis (the non-Brahmins who work as low level assistants in Vishnu temples). According to him, these people merely by wearing the Lingayath markers cannot claim an exalted position of having become Shaiva Brahmins or the Srivaishnava Brahmins; such status is accorded only for Brahmins and not to any "pretender" who decides to wear the caste markers (Veerasangappa 1882: 20-22). The terms of this derision even went further:

Veerashaivas [Lingayaths] call themselves Brahmins now. Many Veerashaiva women who are staying in the palace of the Mysore King as his concubines have begotten children in such relationships. Then we could even call them Kshatriyas! Isn't it? (Cited in Murthy 2000: 201).

The editor of the *Mysore Star*, in the pages of his journal, carries on a rather caustic debate with Ranganna and some other Brahmins who joined it. His own defense is constructed on the basis of a plethora of Sanskrit texts, all of which are copiously cited in order to confer the status of Brahmins to the Lingayaths (Veerasangappa 1882: 24-42). This acerbic public debate went on for decades and in different fora. In the year 1884, some Brahmins of Mysore put up a public notice ridiculing the claim of Lingayaths to Brahminhood:

There is no sacred thread on the body of the Banajigas [a trading caste among the Lingayaths] and they do not have the initiation ritual. Their women, when they have their periods, do not seclude themselves but merely take bath and attend to the kitchen. When this is the case how will the Veerashaivas become Shaiva Brahmins? In places around Bellary and Hubli they have tied the Linga [the bodily worn sign of Shiva signifying a Lingayath] to Vokkaligas, Barbers [Shudra communities] and even to Harijans - how can they be called Brahmins? All of them are Shudras and that's the truth. ... If bronze can be made into gold then even you can get Brahminhood (cited in Murthy 2000: 202).

Of course, there were many other communities too that were claiming Brahmin status for themselves - like the Vishwakarmas [goldsmiths], barbers and so on. Indeed the Vishwakarma demand was rather sustained and appears to have enjoyed wide

⁷ The editor of the journal later published the debates that took place as a tract titled *Mysore Star Correspondence* (Veerasangappa 1882). The details stated here are from this volume.

currency. Bhairappa, a celebrated novelist, in his autobiography, narrates the story that a Vishwakarma widow in his village used to detail.

When Shankaracharya was in Sringeri, he had many Vishwakarma disciples as he had Brahmins. Shankaracharya belonged to the Vishwakarma jati; that is why he is called Acharya [goldsmiths have *Achari*, a derivative of the Sanskrit word Acharya, as their surname]. Once he wanted to test his students. He kept his footwear at the riverbed and came back to the Math. He told his Vishwakarma students that he has forgotten his footwear at the riverbed and asked them to fetch it. Each of those boys wore the slippers for some distance each and brought them. The next day he asked the Brahmin students to fetch them from the riverbed. They reverentially kept the slippers on their head and brought them to their teacher. Then the Acharya shouted at the Vishwakarma students: "You have all become very arrogant. You don't have the reverence that the Brahmin students have. I will give them the *Matha* and go away." Then the Vishwakarma students fell at his feet and begged forgiveness and asked that the *Matha* be given back to them at least at a later date because they belong to his caste. The Acharya said, "After a thousand years, the *Matha* will be yours. Let them have it till then". According to calculations that period is over. But the Brahmins are refusing to give it back to them. Our people will not keep quiet; one day all of them will go together and take control (Bhairappa 1996: 23-4).

However, none of such claims seem to have ruffled the Brahmins as the claim of the Lingayaths did. This could have been due to the sustained nature of the claim,⁸ as well as due to their growing clout in the administration, increasing rates of literacy among them and an increasing presence in crucial spaces such as the press and the judiciary. The controversies were frequent and passionate and played themselves out in all available spaces, as the rest of our instances demonstrate.

2. *The 'Sharana' controversy*

Shubhodaya was a weekly from Dharwad, edited and published by a Brahmin. It carried an article titled *Allama, Basavana Vrittaantavenu?* (What is the Chronicle of Allama and Basava?) in its issue dated 18 April 1919, which was penned by Srinivasacharya, a (Madhva ?) Brahmin. Basava and Allama are the two figures who came to be constructed as the founding figureheads of the '*Sharana* movement' of the twelfth century. The latter half of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries saw a determined effort on the part of some sections of Lingayaths to

⁸ For instance, in a case debating about the ritual status of the Lingayaths the Bombay High Court in 1926 ruled that "the Veerashaivas are not Shudras; they are Lingi Brahmins [Brahmins who wear the *Linga*] of the highest order" (Nanjundaradhya 1969: 75). Even the enumerators of the 1931 Census were instructed to list them as Lingi Brahmins, but reportedly not one of the Lingayaths took on that appellation. By then, apparently, the need to acquire state recognition of ritual contestations had outlasted its value.

reconstruct this 'movement' as the grid around which a corporate Lingayath community could be imagined. The piece by Srinivasacharya attempted to subvert this imagination by calling into question the caste status of Allama and the motive of Basava. The Lingayath sections that were keen on 'resurrecting' these figures, expectedly, took great offence. This controversy, which came to be known as the *Shubhodaya Prakarana*, generated a lot of community interest and efforts. Meetings were organised in different parts of the Kannada speaking regions; *Matha* pontiffs were sought out for monetary and moral assistance; and the respective community newspapers actively took part in articulating their positions.⁹

Some excerpts of the contentious article by Srinivasacharya were reproduced in the *Mysore Star* (14 September 1919):

Allama, according to the available historical records, was a Shudra. The name 'Allama' is symbolic of the Muslim god. Chitradurga's Murugha *Matha* collects donations from the Muslims because Allama was a Muslim. ... Allama went to Kalyana to assist Basava, a minister under Bijjala, who was involved in a mission of conversions. Allama entered Basava's house, where the food was being served to the followers of the faith, with a liquor pot on his back, true to his previous caste. ... We can confidently say that Basava spoilt the sacred Virashaiva faith and did not further it. With the desire to become the king, he harboured *Minda-Punda Jangamas* [ascetics who still partake of the worldly pleasures and create trouble] and built an army. He fed one lakh and ninety thousand Jangamas not out of *Bhakthi* but out of this desire. He had a keen sense of conspiracy, and not of true devotion. Moreover he was a meat-eater too.

This expectedly triggered off an animated controversy. A Lingayath leader went to the district court in Dharwad seeking an injunction against the article. It is not very certain as to how the court went about ascertaining the validity or otherwise of the claims made before it. However, the *Mysore Star* (*ibid.*) claimed that the court found the petition of the Lingayaths valid and held that the publication of the article had indeed hurt the sensibilities of the Lingayaths. The court censured the editor and the writer, and the matter rested with the editor apologising for publishing the said article. The Lingayaths though were not satisfied with this. The court had suggested that the Bombay

⁹ It is problematic to speak of the Lingayath community, at least with reference to this issue. The *Panchacharya* tradition, the *Mathas* which belonged to it and the (upper) castes which owed their allegiance to them were accused by those espousing the *Viraktha* tradition of actively collaborating with the Brahmins in order to defame the 'progressive' twelfth century movement, which apparently spoke against caste distinctions and often incurred the displeasure of the upper castes within the Lingayath fold. Some aspects of this internal contestation and turmoil - that witnessed remarkable upheavals in the late colonial period - can be found in Murthy (2000).

Government could, if deemed necessary, proceed against the defendants; and although many Lingayaths attempted to convince the government of the need for pursuing that option, it was never exercised.

It is significant to note that Srinivasacharya, in the course of the essay, is claiming to write a history that has nothing to do with his own **Brahminness**. The Lingayaths though see this as yet another attempt by the Brahmins to subvert their history and memory. **By** this period, the modern contestations between the Brahmins and the Lingayaths (both as non-Brahmin figureheads and as a community claiming parity in the ritual hierarchical order) had become routinised. What was more difficult to contend, as far as the Lingayaths were concerned, was the role played by **Alur Venkatrao**, a Madhva Brahmin who spearheaded the Karnataka Unification Movement in the Bombay Presidency Kannada-speaking areas and is today known as a pioneer Kannada **activist**.¹⁰ An extremely versatile person, Venkatrao was then the president of the Karnataka History Congress. It was in that capacity that he was asked to depose before the court in the *Shubhodaya* case and offer a perspective on the *Varnashrama* system.¹¹ He says that his deposition had gone against the contention of the Lingayath side, on the basis of which the court decided the case against them. This version, of course, contradicts the *Mysore Star* contention that they won a censure and an apology. We have no way of checking the veracity of these claims. But Venkatrao's status as the president of the History Congress is accepted not only by the court but also by the Lingayaths. He does not describe what his arguments were though. His position nonetheless on the question can be gleaned from the other instances that he describes.

He mentions that many Lingayaths took objections to him mentioning Basava as the founder of Veerashaivism in his writings. Finding that very strange and unfathomable, he asks a Lingayath **friend** about the reasons for this. The friend tells him how that very question - of whether Basava is the founder of Veerashaivism (accepting which would not only mean that it is dated to as recent as the twelfth century but also

¹⁰ For an analysis of his disparate concerns, see Raghavendra Rao (2000). This work also details the preoccupations of DVG, and forwards some conceptual considerations on these and some other Kannada/Karnataka intellectuals of the period. See also Venkatrao's autobiography (1974).

¹¹ This information is from Venkatrao's brief essay (1989) on his good friend, Hardekar **Manjappa**, a Lingayath leader and one of the very few Lingayaths who had defied the general non-Brahmin (unwritten) diktat of not joining the Indian nationalist movement as it was perceived to be dominated by and furthering the interests of the Brahmins.

subverts the *Panchacharya* tradition which claimed a more antiquarian past) or just a reformer - was a major bone of contention between the two sections of Lingayaths. The resolution of the question was thus foundational for the nature of the corporatisation of the Lingayath community. Given the crucial nature of the question, and indeed given that it was being publicly debated, it is rather strange that Venkatrao, a public activist, editor of a newspaper, and the president of the History Congress, should feign ignorance of the significance of taking positions on the question. Further, he narrates the discussion that he had with Manjappa on the twelfth century 'movement'. For the non-*Panchacharya* sections among the Lingayaths, the founding importance of the movement rested on what was seen to be its rejection of the *Varnashrama Dhanna* and accordingly in its openness to recruit anybody irrespective of caste into its fold. Indeed, for these sections (which were also the 'lower castes' among Lingayaths), the success of this assertion would allow them to stake an equal status within a corporatised Lingayath community. Venkatrao is unconvinced, even as the explanations he offers are not very clear:

I told Manjappa that my views on the Veerashaiva *Dharma* are very different from the common perception. I agree neither with the perception that Basaveshwara [Basava] was against the *Brahmana Dharma* nor that he destroyed the *Varnashrama* system (1989: 139).

Thus Brahmins such as Venkatrao and Srinivasacharya, whether deliberately or otherwise, and merely by the fact that they occupied spaces that were ostensibly outside caste, were indeed playing crucial roles of mediation in the processes of formation of other caste communities. It is not as though such communities did not recognise this mediatory role, and they even attempted to contain it. What was more difficult to contain though was an alternative imagination of these identities of being 'Brahmin' or 'Shudra' as achievable qualities rather than as purely ascriptive statuses. The following instance from DVG's memoirs illustrates this.

DVG is here narrating a Vaidika Brahmin's "Political Thinking/Philosophy". On the way to a temple, the young DVG, in a mood to exhibit his readings on political philosophy before a Vaidika Brahmin (who is not English educated and therefore totally alien to the world of western political philosophy), explicates the ideas of democracy, socialism and so on. After listening to him in rapt attention, the Vaidika responds:

So, it means, from now on everything is going to be *Shudra Prabhuthva* [the rule of the Shudras]. Isn't it? (DVG 1997: 271).

A little perplexed by such a crisp response, DVG plods him on. The Brahmin's response is summarised by DVG:

Shudra means a person who is narrow-minded; and not, one among the four varnas. Let the *Jaathi* [caste] be anything; what is crucial is to have broadmindedness. Look at, for instance, our own village. Who does not respect the words of ... Muniyappa, ... Maarashetti, ... Sonnagowda or even those of Hyder Saheb, Haaji Madaar Saheb, Syed Pasha Mia [all are from non-Brahmin castes, including Muslims]? Doesn't everybody honour them? Who will and can say 'no' if respectable people and intelligent people rule the state? But what you are explaining to me doesn't sound like that. You talk of "majority"; you even talk of "larger numbers". Is it the case in any country in this world that a "majority" is intelligent and justice-bound? If the majority is indeed like that then why do we need the state? It seems in *Krita Yuga*, it was indeed like that. ... So, are you by any chance saying that *Krita Yuga* is back upon us?! The meaning of "Shudra" is somebody who is always in distress - I don't have this, I don't have that; this good happened to him but why didn't it happen to me and so on. Thus Shudra is one who heightens his desires and consequently his jealousy. ... Therefore, if such people take over the responsibility of looking after the state, they might just care for themselves and their own needs. Will they take care of the state? It could only result in riots and anomic and never in a state that cares for justice. All that we need is justness, isn't it? (*ibid.* 271-2)

Mark the different ways in which the term 'shudra' is being used in the two instances - that is, in the *Shubhodaya* article mentioned earlier and in DVG's recuperation of the Vaidika Brahmin's take on contemporary democracy. While in the former instance it calls attention to an empirically identifiable group of people, in the latter it is invoked as a value, a disposition of mind. Indeed, the simultaneous availability of these two senses of the term 'shudra' did make for a crucial admixture of shifting identifications, even as a certain will to mediate and overpower ought also to be recognised.

J. The Parali case

The case of Parali though is a more straightforward instance of Brahmin will to mediate and dominate over the affairs of other communities, at least as far as the *Mysore Star* was concerned. It again offers an instance of the above-mentioned oscillation between the two invocations of the term 'shudra'. Parali Kshethra, a famous Shaiva pilgrimage centre located in Warangal, Andhra Pradesh, was part of the Nizam administered Hyderabad State. In 1924, the local Brahmins filed a petition with the Nizam seeking to disallow the Lingayaths from officiating the offering of *abhisheka* to the sacred Linga of the temple. Their claim was that the Veerashaivas, being Shudras, do

not possess the authority to learn the Vedas; and that, consequently, any recognition of the right to offer *Vedoktha Rudraabhisheka* [a ritual that involves bathing the god with ghee, milk etc., the performance of which is authenticated by the chanting of Vedic hymns] would be against the *Dharma*. The claim was accepted by the local government authorities, who ordered that the Lingayaths should not perform the ritual. Vexed by such a (what was termed) "gross violation of tradition-honoured rights", Veerashaivas approached higher authorities seeking intervention.¹²

The government decided on a *shasthrartha* to settle the issue, wherein experts and scholars from both the sides would argue their respective cases on the basis of the *Shastras*. Even prior to this mode of resolution, a three-member Commission appointed to look into the matter had upheld the Lingayath right to offer *Abhisheka*. It ruled:

Veerashaivas are Lingi Brahmins [meaning that they are Brahmins who wear a Linga on their person, referring to the practice of the Veerashaivas of wearing a Linga on their person], and thus have a right to learn Vedas. They are eligible to perform the *Abhisheka* to Rudra (*Mysore Star* 20 June 1925).

But the Brahmins contention was that while it is true that Veerashaivas do have a tradition of performing *Abhisheka*, they do not use the Veda hymns during the performance; and that therefore they automatically become unsuitable to perform the abhisheka (*ibid.*). Since it became evident that such claims and counter-claims were irresolvable through the pronouncements of modern mechanisms like Commissions, it was decided that a *shasthrartha* be held to decide on the issue.

While the Veerashaiva side had a ready scholar in Swamy Viroopaksha Pandita, a *Jangama* who was the Vedabhashya Professor in the Indore Province's Sanskrit College, to lead its case, the Brahmins apparently found it difficult to find a scholar to champion their cause. Finally, after much deliberation, a lawyer from Pune, Vishnutheertha Bhatpat was hired to argue the Brahmin contention. Both the parties began a major campaign soliciting help in finding material proving their case as well as requesting monetary help. The *Mysore Star* even alleged that two Brahmins from Parali went to Indore and told the

¹² In fact, a feeling of incredulity that apparently struck Veerashaivas was given vent to in the pages of *Mysore Star*. A letter titled *Brahmanara Vichaara Vaichithryavu* (Bewildering Thinking of the Brahmins) asked with great disbelief and contempt: "Leave alone the question of untouchables for a moment. If Veerashaivas - who are the followers of the Vaidic path, who are above the Shaivas, are the practitioners of *Shaktha Vishishtaadvaita*, have borne the Shivalinga that they hold equal to their life - enter the temples of our Karnataka Brahmins, it appears that their God gets defiled!" (*Mysore Star* 7 February 1925).

Brahmin Education Department officials that it is their moral duty to stop Viroopaksha Pandita from taking part in the debate; otherwise they would be indirectly contributing to an activity, which would belittle the *Brahmanya* (Brahminness) of the Brahmin community (*Mysore Star* 8 August 1925). But Viroopaksha Pandita had decided to come even if it were to be at the cost of his job. The government also suggested three names, including those of Mahatma Gandhi and Sarojini Naidu, to act as the arbitrator. But apparently the Brahmins did not approve of any of the names (*Mysore Star* 8 August 1925), forcing the Nizam to appoint a former Chief Justice of the Hyderabad High Court as the Chief Arbitrator.

The central issue here was one of proving (or disproving) the rights of the Lingayaths over Vedas and consequently their claims over Brahminhood. For about six days the Veerashaiva scholars presented their case. On the seventh day, when the gathering was in place for the counter-argument, it was found that the chief pleader of the Brahmin side had left for Pune leaving a note behind stating his inability to argue the case (or so claims the *Mysore Star*). Brahmins tried hard to get a *Pandita* to plead their cause but in vain. The *Mysore Star* (8 August 1925) even alleges that this inability in finding a Brahmin Vedic scholar surprised the Government Commissioner. To be sure, these are confounding claims. Here is a controversy that seems to have become a major public event and the Brahmins supposedly cannot find a single Vedic scholar who can argue on their behalf.¹³ The *Mysore Star* (*ibid*) even goes to the extent of claiming that the Brahmins finally employ an *Aradhya* (a high caste Lingayath) to argue their case. What is clear nevertheless is that the Veerashaivas are keen on establishing that their side had competent Vedic scholars and were the rightful owners of the task of *Rudrabhisheka*.

The evidence from the Brahmins then went on for fifteen days, but finally they were found wanting in their claim. The Nizam government, in July 1929, dismissed the case and restored the Veerashaivas the right to perform *abhisheka* in the temple. The 'Brahmin' that the Veerashaivas constructed, in the conduct of their defense and as part of their claim to a position above that of the Brahmin, can be culled out from the statement that Viroopaksha Pandita made during the *Shasthrartha*, a summary of which is reproduced below:

¹³ References to this debate and controversy are found in many of the journals of that period. See for instance, *Svadharm* (quoted in *Mysore Star* 2 December 1925) and *Jaya Karnataka* (8 February 1925).

It was proved with enough evidence in the Shastras that Veerashaivas, who are **the** Lingibrahmanas, are Devabrahmanas and thus it is they who have a greater right to perform the *abhishheka* and not the ordinary Brahmins who are *alingi* [without the Linga]. Moreover such ordinary Brahmins, for they are the products of *sankara* [illegitimate inter-caste unions], can never attain *shuddha* [pure] Brahminhood.

That they are not *shuddha* Brahmins is borne out not only by many an authority, but also from their ritual practices, the evidence regarding the origin of their founder Gurus and by the fact that their women are, even to this day, prohibited from worshipping the god, reciting the Vedas, and receiving initiation. Most of the Brahmin castes like the Chitpavana, Karhade, ... Shenave, Konkani [all referring to the Saraswat Brahmins], Ramanuja [Sri vaishnavas], Maadhyandina, Madhva, Saraswat, etc. were, not many years ago, part of Shudra communities such as Vyaadha, Billa, Beda etc. and only recently been elevated to Brahminness, and this, their own scriptures point to. Most of these groups, even now, eat meat and consume liquor and do not have *Vedoktha samskaras*. Even their own sacred books admit that their founders, like Madhvacharya, were born out of wedlock, to a widow. All these make it clear that they are not pure Brahmins ... (Cited in Nanjundaradhya 1969: 32-41).

Further on, it is stated:

Thus, they have as their Gurus who, in turn, had lower caste people as Gurus. They are made up of communities like the Chitpavans, Karhadas, Hameekas, Ladas who, not many days ago, were part of such low castes as Bhillas and Chandalas. Even now they do not eat together and fight incessantly amongst themselves over each other's position in the internal hierarchy. Therefore such Alingi Brahmins who are corrupted by the mixing of many a *neeche Jati* [low caste] can only be given the status of Adulterated Brahminhood and definitely not that of Pure Brahmins like the Lingi Brahmins/Veerashaivas (*ibid.*).

The point that Viroopaksha Pandita is drawing constant attention to in his argument is the illegitimacy of the contemporary composition of the Brahmin category itself. That apart, he is also pointing to the alleged fluidity of who can be called a 'Brahmin', with the constant re-drawing of boundaries as making possible the availability of alternative (or counter) claims to Brahminhood. Saraswats and Halekarnatakas were some of the communities that were engaged in bitter disputations with avowedly 'better legitimised' Brahmins like the Smarthas and Madhvas over their Brahminhood. An associated point is the many feuds that were taking place even among the more 'legitimised' Brahmins over each other's ranking in the hierarchy of Brahminhood (as for instance between the Smarthas and the Madhvas) but more about it later.

One last point, even more apparent in an associated case, is the ability of these disparate communities to close ranks when an 'illegitimate' community claims Brahminness for itself. The Banavasi instance involved invoking a concept of *Dashavidha Brahmanaru* [Ten Types of Brahmins] as a founding plank for the Brahmin

argument. A controversy erupted over the entry of a Veerashaiva Deputy Commissioner into the sanctum sanctorum of the famous Madhukeshvara temple on the ground that only *Dashavidha Brahmanaru* were allowed to enter that space. Even as they sought to prove their Brahminness, the Veerashaivas, in this case, also raised uncomfortable questions regarding the composition of the *dashavidha* (which included the Saraswats and the Gowd Saraswats). The composition question was crucial in the context of **Karwar**, because Saraswats and Gowd Saraswats were in great numbers in this district. They were engaged in an attrition of their own with the other 'more legitimised' Brahmin communities over claims to Brahminness (Conlon 1977 has the details), which continues even to this day. The Saraswats' claim to Brahminhood was (and still is) looked at with contempt on grounds that they ate **fish**. Their case, however, could not be ignored, in that the community had not only become economically rather **powerful** but, even more crucially, had entered the legal profession in large numbers. Appropriation and recognition of those communities was therefore crucial for the Brahmin fold as a whole. Finally, when the case went up to the Bombay High Court, it was a Saraswat lawyer who argued the Brahmin case but lost it.

The contests between the Brahmins and the Lingayaths, then, were strikingly frequent, most of which centred on the Lingayaths' claim to the learning of the Vedas and performing Vedic functions. The *Mysore Star*, in its 27 March 1926 issue, carried a letter that challenged the Brahmins for a debate before the Mysore Maharajah on whether only Brahmins have the right to learn Vedas. The letter writer takes it upon himself to argue the case on behalf of the Lingayaths to establish their Shashtra-ordained right to learn the Vedas. The pages of the *Mysore Star* are literally inundated with such challenges and contestations. As we have seen the claims to Brahminhood were many and not merely restricted to the Lingayaths. However, 'successes' in claiming Brahminhood did not automatically mean homogenisation or equalisation. For instance, even to this day, Saraswats are not accepted as partners in the marriage networks of other Brahmins, for the 'memories' of the community are still fresh regarding the 'entry' of the Saraswats into the Brahmin fold. As far as the Lingayaths are concerned, the claim for the status of Brahmin seems to have lost its attraction by the 1930s. Although the reasons for the same could be debated, the fact of the increasing willingness of the state to accord greater legitimacy to 'Backwardness' - rather than or even at the cost of claims to Brahminness - as well as the moral and material ascendancy of those Lingayath sections that were

seeking to establish the twelfth century event as the primary source of community imagination were pretty determining.

4. The 'Vyasanatholu' controversy •

The final instance involving controversy over *Fyasana Tho/u* also tells something about the rivalry between Brahmins and Lingayaths, but more importantly it enables one to raise questions on the efficacy of the corporateness of the Brahmin identity. *Fyasana Tholu* refers to the shoulder of Vyasa, to whom the authorship of the epic, **Mahabharatha**, is ascribed. The story behind the symbol of *Fyasana tho/u* is briefly this:

After finishing writing the Mahabharatha, Vyasa went around the world propagating the supremacy of Vishnu over every other god [the concept of *Vishnu Sarvotthama*]. In a place called the Naimisharanya, the Shiva devotees challenge him to propagate the same in Kashi. Taking the challenge, Vyasa comes to Kashi and with his shoulders held high declares the supremacy of Vishnu. Nandeeshavara [the principal follower of Shiva] gets angry and paralyses his arms held high. When Vishnu himself chides Vyasa for his incorrectness, Vyasa praises Shiva, accepts his supremacy and gets back his arms (Murthy 2000: 220).

Besides, it needs to be noted:

This story is very popular in pro-Shiva puranas. This symbol, which publicly proclaimed the supremacy of Shiva over Vishnu, and consequently the supremacy of the (Veera)shaiva over the Brahmin, was conspicuously tied to the Nandihvaja [a flagpost representing the Nandi, the principal follower of Shiva] on the occasions of processions of deities and the pontiffs. ... If the Brahmins ridiculed the Veeerashaivas as Shudras, Veeerashaivas used *Fyasana Tho/u* to ridicule them. By about 1900, *Fyasana Tholu* had turned itself into more than something that proclaimed the supremacy of Shiva - as a symbol shaming Brahmins. At that time, apart from the picture of Basaveshvara, a picture titled 'Sri Vishnu *Sudarshana Laabha*' had also become immensely popular [among Lingayaths in north Karnataka]. The latter depicted the story of Vishnu worshipping Shiva and giving away his eyes to Shiva as a mark of his devotion. This picture appears to have been very popular, as popular as that of Basavanna himself, given that *Mysore Star* (9 December 1917) even printed an advertisement for the picture (*ibid.*: 220-1).

In such a context, a *Fyasana Tho/u* procession was organised by the Lingayaths of Bagalkot (Bombay Presidency) on 11 September 1911, occasioning a spirited protest from the local **Brahmins**.¹⁴ On their petition, the police declined permission to the

¹⁴ The issue of the legitimacy and propriety of Lingayath pontiffs carrying themselves in a palanquin was also a bitterly contested one, with Brahmin pontiffs taking recourse to judicial authorities in order to get injunctions against their Lingayath counterparts from holding palanquin processions. The Sringeri Smartha Swamy had unsuccessfully approached the court (during 1833-43) to disallow Lingayath pontiffs from holding such ceremonials (Murthy 2000: 219). We are not sure about the details of this case, nor of the

Lingayaths, but the District Collector gave the go-ahead. Brahmins approached the court and got an injunction against the procession; but, by then, the procession had already begun. When the Brahmins went up to the head of the procession to announce the court verdict, they were beaten up. According to the **Dharwad** based newspaper *Karnataka Vrittapathrike*, "the processionists went into the Brahmin *agrahara* and plundered the Vitoba Temple and threw away the statue of Hanumantha" (cited in *Mysore Star* 30 October 1911).

The incident was a rather contentious one, and it is difficult to ascertain what 'really' took place. The *Mysore Star* claimed that given the "pronounced ability of the Brahmin's pen" everything was indeed exaggerated, while the *Karnataka Vrittapathrike* accused Lingayaths of "pretending as though nothing has happened" (*Mysore Star* 30 November 1911). Such street fights appear to have been rather common particularly in the northern parts of Karnataka. Apart from the rather striking fact of actual physical confrontations in which the Brahmins were involved, what is of interest here is the alleged targets of the Veerashaiva processionists. Both Vitoba and Hanumantha are principally the gods of Madhva Brahmins. Moreover, Madhva Brahmins have had an acknowledged pre-occupation in establishing the principle of '*Hari/Vishnu Sarvotthama*' [a belief that Vishnu is the paramount among the gods], with the **Smartha** Brahmins being their principal 'other' in such contentions. This makes one to question the efficacy of the corporate identity of something called a 'Brahmin community' and to explore the possibility of this identity to tear at the seams.

Interestingly enough, in the specific context of the *Vyasana Tholu* controversy, all the symbols invoked, ostensibly to provoke and insult the 'Brahmin' community, are in fact those that would be hurting the sensibilities of Madhvas rather than that of an **undifferentiated** 'Brahmin community'. In fact, one may even presume that **Smarthas** would not have experienced any heartburn on such degradation of the essentially Madhva symbols. In the *Mysore Star Correspondence* called attention to earlier (*vide* fn. 7 above), all the Brahmin participants appear to belong to the Madhva Brahmin community, if their names are any **indication**¹⁵. What's more, both Ranganna and Bhujangacharya

nature of its deliberations. In the immediate context of the *Vyasana tho/u* controversy, however, this was also an issue in question.

¹⁵ Names till very recent times offered fairly accurate indications of the Brahmin caste to which a person belonged. Apart from the surnames, which are a give-away, even the first names usually remained distinct.

(the two Brahmin participants in the debate) denigrate Shiva in order to praise Vishnu [Veerasangappa 1882: 21 (Ranganna's statement) and 166 (Bhujangacharya's statement)]. They even unambiguously state that Brahminhood is only for the Vishnubhaktas, and the **Rudra/Shivabhaktas** are not eligible for it.¹⁶ Similarly, there have been instances of the Sringeri pontiff, the supreme Guru of **Smartha** Brahmins, being invited to mediate quarrels and contentions between Jangama *mathas*. There are also references to the accepted practices of inter-marriages among the Smartha Brahmins and the Aradhya Lingayaths (see Shastri 1963).

Thus even as the *Vyasana Tholu* incident showcases a controversy between the Madhvas and the Lingayaths in particular, it bears testimony to the lingering tensions within the Brahmin fold as well. This leads us to our third section, one designed to probe further the complications that obtained within the 'object' of the non-Brahmin articulation, namely, *the* Brahmin caste/community as a corporatised entity. While extant modes of internal demarcations and contests within the Brahmin fold are rendered unviable by the non-Brahmin challenge, these continue to obtain and represent a sort of mediating device structuring aspects of the Brahmin identity.

III

Some tensions within: negotiating differentiation within the fold

As we have seen, Brahmins have laid claim to a naturalised monopoly over modern institutions, and it needed a concerted policy on the part of the state to contain aspects of this monopoly. These efforts, especially aimed at 'other backward castes', have yielded mixed results - for a treatment see Galanter (1984) - with the integuments of a broad Brahmin hold over jobs and education remaining in place. The situation entails new questions - about what one makes of it (the dynamics of internal 'resilience' or hegemony) and about whether Brahmins across the spectrum of caste divisions come to appropriate such new spaces of power equally or whether only certain castes and denominations within the Brahmin fold were successful in mediating the circumstances. Answers to these questions are important for the purpose of lending sharper sociological

This has changed quite drastically as of today. Not all families prefer to keep surnames as part of the official names of their children. Obviously, this makes it difficult to guess the particular caste affiliation of a Brahmin.

¹⁶ **Smarthas** are not Shaivas in the sense that they are not marked by an exclusive devotion to Shiva. They worship five deities, and thus are distinct from the Shaivas.

determinacy to the data about the agency undergirding the **modern** world of institutions, rules and resources, as well as pointing towards the formation of the **modern** Brahmin self itself. As we stated in the previous chapter, there hardly exists data that answers these questions; and quite paradoxically it was the non-Brahmin demand about the 'Brahmin' that sensitised the state to collect data on the 'caste' composition of the government services, institutions of education, and so on.

Finding an answer to the question "which Brahmins?" was neither a logical necessity nor a political need for the non-Brahmin articulation in convincing the state to heed to its demands. As far as the state was concerned, it appears that since the demand came already packaged in the form of the non-Brahmin recuperation of the question of the Brahmin it too did not see the need to answer the above question. Indeed, alongside the non-Brahmin othering of the Brahmin, which as our foregoing account has disclosed was not without its paradoxes, there is also the dynamics of contestation among the Brahmins themselves that would require independent consideration.

Glimpses of this dynamic can be got as one considers aspects of differentiation within the Brahmin fold. In what follows, we allude to three specific 'identifications' (which also constitute axes of differentiation) that have complicated the grounds of identity available for Brahmins in the wake of the non-Brahmin articulation. One relates to the 'Mysore' Brahmin versus the 'Madras' Brahmin conflict over the sharing of government jobs in the Mysore State that dominated the happenings in the public sphere till the 1910s (that is, till the non-Brahmin articulation gained ground). Of course, with the advent of the latter articulation, the posturing of the two combatants is not erased; rather, they get shifted to other arenas or more privatised zones. Another has to do with the disagreements over the relative ritual status of and the accompanying animosity between the **Smarthas** and the Madhvas. The last bears on the effort of such caste groupings as the Hale Kamatakas to legitimate their status as Brahmins. While the range of these negotiations indicates the difficulties in speaking of an undifferentiated Brahmin identity, paradoxically enough they constitute the very grounds on which a certain corporate re-staging of that very identity is attempted.

The contestation between the 'Mysoreans' and the 'Madrasis' that dominated the public debates for about two decades in the Mysore State immediately prior to the articulation of non-Brahmin demands offer important clues to finding a determinate answer to the above questions. The significance of this contestation is in pointing to the

fact that internal divisions need not only be **restricted** to the space of the ritual, as they are generally thought to be; they could equally be factors to contend with even in the spaces of the secular. We have already alluded (in the previous chapter) to the acrimonious public debate that took place between the 'Mysoreans' and the 'Madrasis' - '**the natives**' versus 'the foreigners' respectively, as the articulation went - while referring to Dewan Vishveshvaraiah's policy of 'Mysore for Mysoreans'. The policy marked a culmination of this Mysorean versus Madrasi contestation that seemed to structure the contours of administration. The following is a summation of the issue.

From 1831 to 1881, when the Mysore State was under the direct control of the British authority, it had witnessed a great expansion of the modern bureaucracy and other such institutions of governance. Thus in 1881, there were nearly seventy thousand people working for the government services (Naidu 1996: 182). Since no other community was in a position to lay claim to a predominant share of this resource, it was virtually a Brahmin space. However, significantly, most of these positions were held by the Brahmin men - particularly Iyers - who had come from the neighbouring Madras Presidency. This, as has been observed in different accounts on the princely Mysore State, had to do with many reasons. The Madras Presidency in general, and the city of Madras in particular, was way ahead in the spread of modern secular education compared to the Mysore State, and consequently the Madras Brahmins had better qualifications and were in greater number. Particularly from 1891, when Dewan Seshadri Iyer introduced the Mysore Civil Service Examinations, the better-equipped Madrasi Brahmins virtually inundated the top echelons of the Mysore bureaucracy, who in turn brought in many of their own clan to work at the lower levels. What further contributed to the preponderance of Madrasi Iyers in the Mysore administration at all levels was the reported mistrust that the British harboured for the local, 'native' Mysore Brahmins. Naidu (1996:183) cites a letter that the then British Chief Commissioner of Mysore and Coorg wrote in which he calls the Hebbar Iyengars (who represented the cause of the Mysore Brahmins in this struggle) "unscrupulous" men. The British officials also apparently perceived the local Brahmins to be inefficient and intellectually poor. This impression was reportedly rather wide spread among the British **officialdom**.¹⁷

¹⁷ The details can be had in Naidu (1996: 183-5) and Thimmaiah (1993: 40-43).

The Mysore Brahmins, who self-styled themselves as the 'natives' were predominantly the Srivaishnava Hebbar Iyengars whose language at home was Tamil. They were primarily the descendants of those Iyengar families which had either come to Mysore region along with their founding Guru, Ramanujacharya in the eleventh century (fearing persecution from the Chola Shaiva king) or had been converted into Srivaishnavism by him thereafter. Hebbar Iyengars had grown close to the Mysore king, who was even persuaded to accept Srivaishnavism and accord the status of *Rajapeeta* (the status of the 'official' *matha*) to the Srivaishnava institution, the Parakaala *matha*. Thus the Hebbar Iyengars had become rather powerful in the palace lobby. Since the local Brahmins were not a major land-holding caste, their dependence on government jobs was especially acute. However, the British officials perceived them to be not only inefficient but also corrupt and thus favoured the 'foreign' Brahmins. Thus from the 1870s onwards the Mysore bureaucracy saw a significant influx of the Madras Brahmins. The introduction of the Mysore Civil Services Examination in 1891 merely formalised the British preference for the Madras Brahmins.

Apart from such formalised entry into the Mysore bureaucracy, the Madras Brahmins, once part of the administrative structure, reportedly recruited their kith and kin for the lower echelons. As the Miller Committee later remarked, "[A]n officer in the exercise of his duty making appointments and promotions finds it easier to see the virtues of his own community than those of others" (cited in Thimmaiah 1993: 60). Though the Committee was making this observation in regard to the corporatised Brahmin 'community' as a whole, one can draw the same parallel with the Madras Brahmins too.

Hebbar Iyengars perceived a real threat to their life opportunities. They however could not have used the language of ritual hierarchy in legitimising their claims. For instance, they could not have probably said "we are the purer Brahmins; so we should be given all the jobs". They had to invent a modern, secular language to argue their case. They accordingly brought forth a 'sons of the soil' argument, encoded as 'Mysore for Mysoreans', and maintained that first preference in government recruitments should be given to the Mysoreans. Not only did this argument underplay their casteness - in that the 'Mysorean' for them was a trope that meant a Mysore Brahmin, a Hebbar Iyengar in particular - they also glossed it with a modern ground of justification. Interestingly, the plea 'Mysore for Mysoreans' shared remarkable similarities with what was to later become the non-Brahmin argument, by way of asking for some frame of protective

discrimination, the abolition of public examinations, etc.; indeed the very same grounds that they, as a corporatised Brahmin self, were **refusing** to grant legitimacy to when proposed by the non-Brahmins immediately thereafter. Throughout the Dewanship of Seshadri Iyer, the Mysore Brahmins argued for restricting the Mysore Civil Services to **Mysoreans**, imploring that jobs be automatically given to "first class graduates and post-graduates from Mysore" on such grounds as language familiarity and the fact of discrimination of Mysore candidates by the bureaucracies of the Madras and Bombay Presidencies and by the Indian Civil Service (**Hanumanthappa** Vol. I n.d.: 250-265).

The emerging 'public' - particularly as represented by the newspapers - was divided along similar lines. The *Bangalore Spectator* took the side of the Madras Brahmins, while the *Karnataka Prakasika* argued the case on behalf of the Mysore Brahmins. This bitter and public debate went on till about 1912, when the appointment of the 'Mysorean' Vishveshvariah signalled the Mysore Brahmins' triumph. What is particularly interesting about the contours of this contestation and its 'resolution' is the naturalisation of the secular-modern as being Brahmin. Prior to the emergence of the figure of the *non-Brahmin*, the emergent spaces of the secular-modern were often tacitly recognised as legitimately made up of Brahmins. The press, the State (both colonial and native-princely) and the bureaucracy were all partisan entities, taking sides on behalf of one Brahmin group or the other. Such a naturalisation and consolidation of the secular sphere as a Brahmin preserve was so complete that it perplexed the latter no end that the non-Brahmins could even ask for a share in the resources and opportunities.

An equally interesting observation served up by this specific order of internal contestation has to do with the nature of the secularising experience that a caste itself undergoes: that the trajectory of its secularisation need not imply an inevitable corporatisation of caste identity. Thus the Brahmins in question here are increasingly seeking to keep their casteness under erasure, while foregrounding the secular identities that they inhabit (such as being Mysoreans, or even manning the apparatus of governance). Indeed, in the absence of an 'external' other, this strategy could be deployed to confound the identity of being Brahmin itself; but such a field of internal hierarchisation is suspended once the non-Brahmin articulation takes shape, with the othering instituted by the latter necessitating a response on the part of Brahmins as a corporatised whole.

Of course, Brahmins continued to recruit caste distinctions as resources to negotiate with secular issues, even as these never retained their legitimacy as publicly defensible actions. The dominance of the 'Madras' Brahmins, and, more importantly, the animosity between them and the native 'Mysore' Brahmins, therefore continued to be played out on the sidelines in a circumstance that was increasingly being overwhelmed by the **Brahmin-non-Brahmin confrontation**. Some of the memoirs recollecting the contours of the period vouch for this. A. N. Murthy Rao, a celebrated Kannada writer, recounts an instance in his autobiography (1990) which demonstrates that the non-Brahmin challenge did not necessarily put an end to the largely secular confrontations within the Brahmin fold. Noting the undercurrent of animosity that existed between the "Tamil" and "Kannada" Brahmins, Rao narrates an event of altercation between them in a school where he was teaching for a brief while.¹⁸ The immediate occasion for the flare-up among the Mysore and Madras Brahmin teachers was the introduction of a 'higher grade' for the high school teachers, which benefited about 30-40 of them. Of these, it was alleged that almost all except three were **Iyers**, leading all the Kannadigas to call it the "Iyer Grade". He recalls:

One day in the Common Room [where all the teachers sat] a **Kannadiga** teacher **said** something to the effect "These people come from outside, eat our food [meaning that they are surviving because we have allowed them to] but boss over us" ... The response from the Tamil group was swift. "Mysoreans lack brains. Therefore you had to import from Madras. We might be surviving owing to your graciousness but remember that you are surviving because of our brains" (Murthy Rao 1990: 228).

Even as Rao tries to recuperate this animosity solely in terms of 'Kannadiga versus Tamilian' - or even 'Mysorean versus Madrasi' - thereby erasing the casteness of the event, by the sheer fact of the names that he mentions it is apparent that it was primarily an exchange between the Mysore Brahmins and the Madras Brahmins. Accordingly, even as the secularising Brahmins were unitedly contesting the non-Brahmin assertion, in contexts such as the above which were bereft of the non-Brahmin presence, they were willing to foreground their other identities.

The non-Brahmins frequently alleged that Brahmins worked as networks of nepotism in recruiting and promoting caste and kinsmen into the bureaucracy. However,

¹⁸ This incident takes place during 1925-26, that is long after not only the public row over the Madras Brahmin domination had died down but also fairly long since the non-Brahmin articulation had legitimised its attack on the Brahmin.

evidently such networks were further inflected in terms of the 'kind' of Brahmin one was, where one came from and so on. Thus from the days of Dewan Poornaiah (that is, after the fall of Tipu Sultan in 1799) there have been complaints of nepotism in terms of favours (particularly in cases of recruitment into government service) to not just any or unmarked Brahmins, but to those who belonged to the same denomination as that of the powers that be. Poornaiah was supposed to have appointed many Madhva Brahmins into the bureaucracy (Chandrashekhara 1985: 17). With the exception of Rangacharlu and M. Vishveshvariah, all the Brahmin Dewans (till the appointment in 1918 of the first significant non-Brahmin Dewan, Kantharaj Urs)¹⁹ have had to face charges of favouring Brahmins of their own caste.

Contestations over ritual status and hierarchy too mark the space of the Brahmin. These too precede (but also co-exist with) the non-Brahmin imagination of the Brahmin, and mediate the dynamics of the Brahmin identity in crucial ways. While it is possible that the different Brahmin castes that come within the ambit of a single philosophical tradition (say, like the **Smarthas**, followers of the Advaita philosophy) too entertain notions of hierarchy among themselves, what appears to have marked the religious history of Karnataka is the mutual animosity between the Smarthas and the Madhvas. A longer religious history of the 'Karnataka' region might yield a firmer perspective on this question but the axis we are trying to recuperate here is a more contemporary one.

What makes this space of contestation unique is that it is different from a caste claiming the status of Brahminhood. Unlike the latter, the self-perception of being Brahmins held by the constituents of this field of contestation is a confident one. Thus we do not come across Smarthas saying that Madhvas are no Brahmins at all, even as they keep reminding the Madhvas that since their tradition was founded after that of the Smarthas, most of the Madhvas are converts to this denomination. While the 'Brahminness' of these groups is not the object of scrutiny - unlike that of say the Saraswats - it is their relative 'purity' and relational position in the ritual status hierarchy that is being called into question. As part of this contestation, there have also been attempts at enlisting the support of the local chieftains or other such powers of authority in order to physically take over each other's places of worship, *Mathas*, and landed property.

¹⁹ **Tambuchetty**, a Tamil Christian, was Dewan for a very short period.

The records available at the *Sringeri Smartha Matha* are replete with such instances as the following. The matter relates to an attempt on the part of a Madhva *Matha* in Udupi to take over the same of a relatively small Smartha Brahmin caste called the Haigas (the Havyakas of today) that owed its allegiance to the Sringeri pontiff but had its own *Matha* in Theerthahalli of the Shimoga District. Following a complaint in this regard, the then Mysore Dewan, Poornaiah, in a letter dated 27 July 1810 directed the local official, Shankariah to initiate appropriate action:

In the Haiga *Matha* of Theerthahalli, ever since the death of the elder pontiff, the minor pontiff is in charge. Some people from there reportedly went to the Puthige *Matha* [one of the eight Madhva *Mathas* located in Udupi] and slandered against the *Shanubhogue* [the official responsible for accounts] of the Haiga *Matha*. Based on this, the Puthige pontiff allegedly called the Haiga pontiff and the *Shanubhogue* to his presence, along with the account records. The Puthige pontiff not only has taken possession of the said records but also has got the *Shanubhogue* murdered. We have received a complaint to that effect based on the one registered with the Sringeri pontiff by the wife and children of the *Shanubhogue* ... If you find the allegation to be true, this is what you are supposed to bring to the notice of the pontiff of the Puthige *Matha*. That the Theerthahalli Haiga *Matha* belongs to the Smarthas and, consequently, comes under the jurisdiction of the Sringeri *Matha* which alone is responsible and has the right to regulate its affairs. Lumpens will always be there complaining with you against the *Matha*. But it is evidently not your job to regulate the functioning of that *Matha*, isn't it? Therefore, you are hereby directed to give back all the records pertaining to the Haiga *A/atha* to the concerned and, hereafter, not to get into the affairs of the Haiga *Matha* (cited in Sharma 1969: 53-4).

There continue to be recuperations to this day of this supposedly centuries old feud between the Smarthas and the Madhvas. Sharma's Kannada book entitled *Sri Udupi Kshethrada Naija Chitra matthu Chaarithrika Hinnele* (The Authentic Picture of the Udupi Pilgrim Centre and its Historical Background) published in 1969 is one such.²⁰ It provides a decidedly Smartha version of the alleged forceful acquisition of Udupi from the control of the Sthanika Brahmins (a Smartha caste) by the Madhvas in the 15th century. Madhvas reportedly enlisted the help of the local Bunt and Jain chieftains and landlords to violently take over the Smartha controlled rich temples of Udupi and the vast

²⁰ We however have not been able to check the veracity of either the claims made or the details presented in this extremely fascinating book. Given that it cites many court records verbatim complete with citations and presents documents from the Sringeri *Matha*, one could grant it a primary validity. What augments our position is the fact that many of the respondents interviewed did recount the bitter animosity that prevailed between the Smarthas and the Madhvas. One of them even referred to the alleged invasion of Udupi, supposedly then a Smartha stronghold by the Madhvas, a story that Sharma narrates with great passion. Even if one decides not to stand by the contents and claims of Sharma's book, we could take its publication as testifying to the internal contestations that mark the Brahmin fold.

areas of agricultural land that these temples possessed. It details how Vadiraja **Swamy**, a proactive Madhva pontiff, took the lead in this effort, even displaying a willingness to convert the Bunt and Jain powers-that-be into the Madhva fold. It further cites a series of civil and criminal court proceedings that involved the two sides.

In more recent times though, the contestation appears to have been much more muted and privatised, even if the sting remains. DVG, who as we mentioned early on was an important intellectual and writer in the Mysore State and whose life almost spans the century (1887-1975), notes the articulation of the **Smartha-Madhva** divide in his pen portrait of the Madhva Dewan P. N. Krishnamurthy:

Many did say that during Krishnamurthy's dewanship, Madhvas became rather powerful. But I know that he was not responsible for that ... But **still**, if one were to take a look at the coterie around him, one could legitimately entertain a doubt. In the eastern side of the [Dewan's bungalow], there was a small temple of the *Praanadevaru* a god exclusively of the Madhvas] ... Every evening, *Mangalaarath* and bhajans used to signal the culmination of the puja held in the temple. Krishnamurthy, along with his family, would be present then. After the *Mangalaarathi*, devotional songs used to be sung. One that some of the overly devoted [*Atibhaktharu*] used to sing on that occasion was:

Eddheddhu odheethaane Madhvaraaya
Namma *Madhvaraaya* Namma *Madhvaraaya*
AdvaituBhandanna Smartha Randeegandanna
Eddheddhu odheethaane Madhvaraaya
Namma *Madhvaraaya* Namma *Madhvaraaya* ...

And it went on like this (DVG 1997: 51).

The following is a gross translation of the above lines.²¹ It remains gross owing to the sheer untranslatability of the spirit of the expletives used in the song.

How he kicks their butt, our Madhwaraya [Madhvacharya].
Our Madhwaraya, our Madhwaraya.
He kicks the shameless Advaitis,
The sons of bitches/widow-marrying Smarthas,
How he kicks their butt, our Madhwaraya,
Our Madhwaraya, our Madhwaraya...

Indeed, one of the Madhva respondents, during the interview, recalled that this very song was being sung just before the food was to be served in the Madhva *Matha*

Translation is by Ms. Bageshree S., a friend from Bangalore of the researcher. The complete works of DVG, in eleven volumes, are published by the Directorate of Kannada and Culture, Government of Karnataka, of which his memoirs form a big part (three volumes of pen portraits and another one of biographies).

located in Theerthahalli which he used to frequent during his childhood. This was during the early years of the 1960s.²²

There were such fights concerning the other important Brahmin category - that of the Srivaishnavas - too. One of the respondents, a **Smartha**, recalled during the interview a popular saying that was fairly widespread among the Iyengar Brahmins, which depicted their scorn for Shiva. His Iyengar friends apparently used to cite this saying to their Smartha friends, apparently making fun of the spirited and resolute antipathy against the **Smarthas** that supposedly lay behind it.²³ The saying went on these lines: a true and spirited Iyengar, or Srivaishnava, will never enter a Shiva temple, even if it is dilapidated and is not-in-use; not even when an elephant, on rampage, is relentlessly pursuing him on a night of fearsome storm and lightning.

We shall now turn to another axis of contestation. If the foregoing concerned those castes whose 'Brahminness' was more or less accepted by the other Brahmin communities and the outsiders, there have been insistent demands from other 'brahminical' (*sic.*) castes that they be accorded the status of and be recognised as Brahmins. The Hale Karnatakas (literally, Old Karnatakas), a Smartha caste that was placed under boycott by the Sringeri *Matha*, attempted vigorously in the early decades of the twentieth century to get back the status of Brahminhood. The following is a letter titled *Brahmana Bandhugalalli Vijnapane* (A Request to the Brahmin Brethren) that appeared in the 27 July 1927 issue of the *Mysore Star*, written by V. Ranganna. Ranganna (who, it can be deduced from the tenor of the letter, could have been a Hale Karnataka himself) calls himself "An obedient servant of Shankaracharya". The tone of the letter is evidently one brimming with sarcasm and seeks to challenge the Brahmins.

The **Halenaadu** Karnatakas had requested the Sringeri pontiff that the disgrace and infamy that is heaped on them be removed and that they be allowed to regain rights of commensality and other such rights vis-a-vis other Brahmins. The Sringeri **Swamy** had rejected this request on 10-01-1867 . . . [However] on 15-12-1923 the Swamy himself went to their houses and gave his blessings [a symbol of acceptance into the fold]

²² Interview with Dr. Ananth, 13/08/2000. A Madhva Brahmin, aged 48 years, Dr. Ananth is a medical practitioner in the city of Shimoga. He is a member of the Shimoga Jilla Brahmana Sabha (the Shimoga district representative of the AKBMS) and of a recently floated local association - the Vipra Trust, which is actively pursuing formation of Brahmin residential colonies in the outskirts of Shimoga, plots that are to be sold at subsidised rates to Brahmins, irrespective of the particular castes to which they belong.

²³ Interview with Mr. Subramanya, 30/01/2000. As previously mentioned (Ch.3, fn. 47) the respondent is a - inactive - member of the AKBMS. He came to Bangalore in the early 1970s seeking to further his career in music and has been a Bangalorean ever since.

Soon after this, the Brahmins of Nanjanagoodu (a pilgrimage centre near Mysore) got together in a meeting and decided that the Hale Karnatakas are not Brahmins. Consequent to the decision, they have got appropriate *Praayashchitha* [expiation] done on those Brahmins who, consequent to the Swamy's gesture of acceptance, had mistakenly eaten with the Halenaadu Karnatakas.

If these Brahmins truly believe that because of this 'act of atrocity' committed by the *Matha* [of accepting the Halenaadu Karnatakas into the Brahmin fold], the Brahmana *dharma* and the Swamy's pride and *Tejas* have been affected adversely, they could decide to boycott the Sringeri *Matha* itself and become autonomous so that they can save the Brahmana *dharma*.

The *Mysore Star* reported (in 1929, that is, six full years after the Sringeri Swamy's gesture of reconciliation vis-a-vis the Hale Karnatakas) the continuing refusal of the Brahmins to allow Hale Karnatakas into the 'Brahmin space'.²⁴ The Srikanteshvara Temple of Nanjanagoodu (a pilgrim centre near Mysore) contained a space called *Sukhavaasini* into which only Brahmins were allowed. The report says that the Hale Karnatakas, in spite of getting permission from both Sringeri Swamy and the Mysore Maharaja, were still not being allowed access to that space in the temple. Not only that, the report alleges, the Brahmins were putting pressure on the Swamy and the Maharaja to take back the permission.

We have not been able to follow the events thereafter, and Ranganna's letter itself did not attract any responses - either from the Hale Karnataka Brahmins or other Brahmins or from the *Matha*. There is however a mention of the Hale Karnatakas in the Census Report of Mysore, 1931. The Superintendent of Census Operations, Mysore State, M. Venkatesa Iyengar (incidentally he is one of the most celebrated Kannada writers), notes:

The community known as Halekarnataka claims to be a Brahmin community and is refused that status by the three main groups [meaning the Smarthas, the Madhvas and the Srivaishnavas]; but it is treated as Brahmin for Census purposes as the people return themselves as Brahmins and cannot be said to belong to any other group (*Census of India 1931*/Vol. XXV Mysore Part I Report 1932: 318).

It is not possible to conclusively determine whether the state recognition in the form of the census enumeration had any better impact on the social acceptability of the Hale Karnatakas within the Brahmin fold. There appears to be no caste association too of

²⁴ It is significant that the journal *Mysore Star* (a decidedly anti- and non-Brahmin space) should make its space available for the Hale Karnatakas time and again. What is more, the Hale Karnatakas are not the only 'Brahmin' caste receiving such a sympathetic treatment at the hands of the journal; even the Gowd Saraswats, another caste bidding to be recognised as Brahmins, received similar kindnesses of positive reporting.

the Hale Karnatakas today, unlike almost all the Smartha castes which have associations that survive even today.

The aforementioned Census Report details many other castes that were staking a claim to be considered and enumerated as Brahmins. The Report is also a good study of the grounds of justification - many evidently **perfunctory** - that the census officers adopted in evaluating such claims. Here are some claims to **Brahminhood** and their "disposal":

Some persons of a community calling themselves Venkatapur Brahmins and ordinarily included in the Satani community desired to be enumerated separately

The Shattada Sri Vaishnava Samaja of Kunigal requested that the people hitherto known as Satani should be shown under the name "Shattada Sri Vaishnavas"

A representative of the Brahmin community dwelling in or around Devarayasamudra desired that his community should be described as Vadama Dravida.

The Aradhya Brahmanas of the Akhila Bharatha Aradhya Brahmana Maha Sabha [All India Aradhya Brahmin Federation] requested that the Lingayath community should be re-classified under castes as shown in a statement [The statement is not reproduced in the Report] (*ibid.*: 316-17).

The following observations, made in a section rather characteristically titled "Their [the claims'] Disposal", offers a window into the seamless ways in which the officials' secular positions and their casteness were entwined with each other. The section begins with these remarks:

Requests of this kind come up at the time of each Census. It does not seem to be realised by the persons who make such requests that *the Census is a record of existing conditions and that it makes no attempt to grade people by their class. For the purpose of a Census no caste is either higher or lower than another.* The difficulty in accepting a new name for the Census Tables arise from the fact that too many and too frequent changes from Census to Census would make the statistics collected of no use. Also when a community not generally considered a Brahmin or Kshatriya community, wants to adopt a name that makes it appear as a sub-caste among Brahmins or Kshatriyas the proposal is rejected (*ibid.*. 317, emphasis added).

The Census then takes up each claim, and either accepts or rejects the same on the basis of the guidelines it set for itself as above.

The people of the Viswakarma community have long desired to be shown "Viswakarma Brahmins". For reasons already stated [that the three main "sections" of Brahmins do not accept their claim] the proposal could not be accepted.

The request that the name "Satani" may be changed to Sattada Sri Vaishnava could not be accepted because Sri Vaishnava is the distinctive name of one group of "Brahmins" and the Satani community is not generally treated as a Brahmin community. The adoption of the new name would have been misleading ... The Aradhya sect in the Veerasaiva community desired to be treated as a Brahmin community. The three main groups forming the Brahmin community in the general Hindu fold do not accept the claim of the Aradhya to Brahminhood; but this by itself, would not be a reason for rejecting the claim ... The special reason applying to the case of the Aradhyas is somewhat different. They are Veerasaivas though they be Veerasaiva Brahmins and to class them separately would be to begin a classification of the Veerasaiva community into castes. This is not necessary from the Census point of view and it is also not certain that public opinion in the Veerasaiva community would approve of the division of the community into many castes in the Census Tables (*ibid.*: 317-8).

Such interventions on the part of the modern "enumerating" state - arbitrary as they evidently are and mediated by those who occupy the position of the enumerator - do not seem to have had any foundational impact on the ways in which the Brahmin community (or any such community) maintained its own boundaries; at least not immediately. Nevertheless, the ubiquitous presence of the Brahmins in such secular spaces does seem to have enabled them to 'contain' the claims to Brahmin status even at the official level.

In the course of this chapter, we have tried to map the contours of the emerging Brahmin self particularly in the wake of the non-Brahmin categorisation. We complicate the axes of these self-definitions and contestations in the sixth chapter while seeking to indicate towards the play of identities and identifications in the contemporary Brahmin self. But before moving on to that range of concerns, the next chapter delineates another important space in which the Brahmin identity and identification unfolds itself in the modern moment - again definitionally cast by the non-Brahmin imagination of the Brahmin self- that of the caste association.

Chapter Five

The Bounds of Agency: Engaging the Space of Brahmin Associations

This chapter profiles and describes the space of the Brahmin 'caste' associations ~ from the pioneering efforts marking the early decades of the last century to the contemporary moment. We suggest that the space of the 'association' presents the modern Brahmin identity with a very crucial problem for negotiation. The caste association is conceptually an enunciatory space; and, as such, brings into sharp focus the equivocation that the Brahmin self exhibits under the conditions of the modern non-**Brahminical** othering. Our first two sections profile and examine the different kinds of Brahmin associations that exist in Karnataka. Beginning from the earliest attempts to organise Brahmins within the space and language of the caste association, an attempt will be made to detail the trajectory of these efforts over the last century.¹ The different types of Brahmin associations that emerged, their socio-geographical spread, their spheres of influence, and their ways of recuperating the Brahmin identity and community is described here. This detailing will then dovetail into a third section that concerns the rather unique contours of the enunciatory space represented by Brahmin associations.

¹ In retrieving the history of the efforts to mobilise Brahmins, we have scanned many of the newspapers and weeklies of the early twentieth century. There is however very little that these report regarding the existence and affairs of Brahmins associations of those times. Apart from these, the AKBMS published a book that sought to map the history of Brahmin associations in Karnataka. Titled *Sanghataneya Hadiyalli Brahmana Samaja: Brahmana Samaja Andu-Indu-Mundu* [Brahmin Community on the Path of Mobilisation: Brahmin Community Yesterday-Today-Tomorrow] and published in 1988, the volume narrates the Akhila Mysooru Brahmana Mahasabha's activities and its conventions of the 1940s, and reproduces the speeches made there and relates the deliberations of these conventions. A volume (n.d.) that contains a report of the second Brahmin convention organised by the Akhila Mysooru Brahmana Mahasabha (in 1949), the rules and regulations of the Association etc. which was apparently published soon after the convention in 1949 was made available by the current General Secretary of AKBMS. Apart from these works, caste associations such as the Hoysala Karnataka Sangha have brought out souvenirs marking special occasions like celebrating fifty years of existence etc. which make fleeting remarks on their past. These too have been used here. The members themselves - including the office bearers - exhibit little knowledge of the history of the associations or about the compulsions that oversaw the establishment of their organisations. Consequently, while we have detailed information on some associations, in many other cases it is very scanty or even non-existent. Even in the case of the contemporary associations, the activists display very little knowledge about such matters. The geographical spread, differentiated ways of working of these associations and so on have also restricted our ability to be more exhaustive. It is under these compulsions that we seek to profile the Brahmin associations in Karnataka.

The fourth and final section is an attempt to delineate in broad strokes the relationship that the various associations share with the Brahmin community. Building on the historical description of the specific compulsions that animated the various Brahmin associations, this section seeks to demonstrate the tenuous relation that obtains between the Brahmin community and the demands of the caste association. While both 'community' and 'association' entail logics germane to the modern condition, they work with differing and often mutually contesting compulsions and demands, bringing about varying effects within the Brahmin fold.

I

Profiling **Brahmin associations**

We need to begin by noting that there exist two distinct kinds of Brahmin associations. There are those associations that claim a constituency over all the Brahmins irrespective of the internal differentiations and hierarchies (what we can term corporate associations). Alternatively, we have associations that are exclusive to single Brahmin castes (namely, single-caste associations). It could be suggested that the simultaneous existence of these two kinds, which incidentally also constitute forms of imagining the Brahmin community, represent a fairly unique state of affairs.

Corporate associations or associations which imagine and claim to represent a corporatised Brahmin community seek to actively override internal caste differentiations and distinctions. They believe in and espouse the position that any foregrounding of the internal differences and distinctions can only be at the cost of the unity of the Brahmin community. 'Brahmin unity', these associations aver, has become essential in the present context in order to fight against those who are seeking to marginalise the Brahmin community and place it under a state of siege. It is argued that any continued preoccupation with internal philosophical and ritualistic differences will only **further** weaken the community. These associations suggest that the internal differentiations retain meaning only within the confines of the household - for instance, in guiding the specific ways of performing the marriage ceremony or in conducting the annual death rites for the ancestors; but that in the public world, particularly in a context wherein the Brahmin community is under a state of siege, foregrounding such distinctions will only debilitate the community further. There are many such associations that exist in Karnataka.

The federating unit, the Akhila Karnataka **Brahmana** Maha Sabha (AKBMS), which seeks to represent all kinds of Brahmin associations', is the figurehead of such a viewpoint. It was established in the year 1972 (registered in 1974) and is permanently located in the city of Bangalore. It views all the Brahmin associations that function in Karnataka as its affiliates and most units in fact accept such a status. According to the AKBMS, there are more than 400 Brahmin associations at present in the state of Karnataka and it claims that 323 of these have taken its affiliation (*Vipra Nudi*, January-February, 2002).² Many of these Brahmin associations participate in the conventions that the AKBMS conducts, while proclaiming their affiliated status on their letterheads and in official communications. The AKBMS, apart from affiliating the already existing associations, has sought to establish district and **taluk** level units of its own, and these now exist in almost every district of the state (although its penetration into further levels has not always been uniform). Not all these district and taluk Brahmin associations (the Jilla/Taluk Brahmana Sabhas) were the result of the initiative of the AKBMS though, with many of them predating the AKBMS but having now become its affiliates. What more, many such associations continue to get founded purely with local initiatives even to this day, and only as an after-thought or after persuasion by the AKBMS, they become its affiliates.

Apart from these associations, another such form of corporate associations is the locality-based ones that are in a great number in the city of Bangalore but also the other large towns. These associations - such as, for instance, the BTM Lay-out Brahmana Sabha or the Jayanagara Brahmana Sabha - have as their constituency the Brahmin population residing in that specific locality/neighbourhood in the city, again irrespective of the caste distinctions. Most of these came up after the founding of the AKBMS, particularly in the late 1980s and early 1990s. But again, not all these were founded at the initiative of the AKBMS.

There are also Brahmin associations' that have been established within the large public and private sector industries and organisations intended as "employee welfare

² *Vipra Nudi* is a monthly journal brought out by the AKBMS from 1980. It was called *Vipra Vani* till 1986 when it was renamed as *Vipra Nudi*. It is meant to "document the contemporary happenings in the Brahmin community", while also publishing articles that "seek to inculcate community-consciousness, adventurism, self-reliance and progressiveness in the community" (*Vipra Nudi*, August-November, 1996). The frequency of the journal depends upon the financial health of the AKBMS. For instance, during 2001-2002, owing to a severe financial crunch, it appeared only twice.

associations". Thus, there exist associations like the Hindustan Machine Tools Vipra Vrinda, Indian Telephone Industries Brahmin's Welfare Association and the *Karnataka Rajya Sarkari Naukarara Brahmana Kshemabhivridhi Sangha* (Karnataka State Government Employees Brahmin Welfare Association). These too seek to work for the welfare of the Brahmin community as a whole and decline to recognise the distinctions obtaining from within.

Finally, among these corporatised associations are those that are issue-focused. They **function** exclusively as matrimonial bureaus; some as financial institutions, helping the unemployed Brahmin youth to set up small scale or cottage industries; while some others focus exclusively on extending educational services etc.

Contrasting with these various types of corporate associations, on the other hand, are the many **caste-specific** associations which seek to represent particular Brahmin castes. Thus we have associations such as the Mulkanadu Mahasabha, the Sri Akhila Havyaka Mahasabha, the Hebbar Srivaishnava Sabha and so on. Almost all these associations, except the Mulkanadu Mahasabha (formed in 1991), were established in the first half of the twentieth century, most of them in the 1940s. The membership to these associations is restricted to the caste members. Many of these associations are affiliated to the AKBMS as well, indicating thereby an agreement on the **latter's** principle of Brahmin unity. Almost all these associations have their head offices in Bangalore; and, as should be obvious they predate the AKBMS, some by more than half a century.

In spite of these **differentiations**, the agenda before most of these associations - apart from those that focus on a single issue - is largely similar. A typical active Brahmin association conducts a range of activities during a year. The scale in which these activities are conducted is reflective of the association's financial capability, the response from its supposed constituency (members as well as non-members), and the enthusiasm of its activists. Among the so-called 'religious' activities - the categorisation, note, is one that the various associations and the activists themselves invoke - the guiding thread is the perceived need to create spaces for imparting the Brahmin *samskara* (codes of being and conduct) and the related anxiety that the Brahmin youth in particular is loosing out on its heritage of *Brahmanya* (Brahminness). This, it is suggested, is either on account of indifference on the part of Brahmins themselves or due to the non-availability of such spaces particularly in urban areas.

The associations conduct a range of activities under this category. Many of them conduct the *Saamoohika Upanayana*, a mass initiation ceremony for Brahmin boys and young men. Initially, it was exclusively meant for those families that could not afford to conduct the ceremony by themselves. This is an important ritual event in the life of a male Brahmin, and the relatives and friends are usually invited. However, increasingly, it was felt by the activists that a significant number of Brahmin families postpone the conduct of the initiation ceremony till the occasion of the marriage of the individual concerned, a practice that is perceived as **un-Brahminical**³. This is held to be further fuelling the already weakening interest in Brahminical rituals among the Brahmin families. Consequently, the associations no longer care about the financial status of the applicants; they are happy as long as families show interest in getting their sons initiated. This change of position has not apparently changed the profile of the Brahmin families that opt for this arrangement nor has it increased the number of Brahmin boys who go through the ritual. The associations hire a 'kalyanamantapa'⁴ or a part of a temple premises (usually offered freely) to conduct the *Upanayana* ceremony.

The associations also conduct religious discourses on various holy scriptures by well-known scholars. They hold Vishnu/Lalita *Sahasranaama Paaraayanas* (chanting the thousand names of Gods, Vishnu or Lalita, over and again, on a particular day of the week, which is considered to be auspicious, 'healthy' and 'calming') and conduct the different Brahmin festivals and birth anniversaries of the Brahmin founding philosophers. All these activities take place in the local temple premises or in some member's residence. For all such activities, only the very old attend, with some spirited 'young' people (anybody before 50 years of age, that is) attending as an exception.

Under the label of 'socio-economic' activities, annual scholarships to the needy students are given after soliciting applications through the local press. These scholarships often do not amount to much, and is intended only as a statement of encouragement. So are the felicitation functions that are held annually to honour rank holders in SSLC, PUC

³ Indeed, the 'appropriate' time for a Brahmin boy to get initiated is at the age of eight years. In fact, a notice put up at the Poornaprajna Vidyapeeta, Bangalore by the Madhva Swayamsevaka Sangha soliciting applications for the *Saamoohika Upanayana* that it was planning to conduct clearly stated that the initiates should be between eight to ten years.

⁴ Large halls, owned by private concerns but also by temples, *mathas* and caste associations, which are hired out for the conduct of marriages, *Upanayanas* and such ritual ceremonies.

and degree examinations. Annual financial assistance is given to the old, destitute women and priests, which are again fairly paltry sums.

The AKBMS started a Brahmin Employment Bureau in 1990 and its office gets daily enquiries regarding job availability (*Vipra Nudi*, January 1993). *Vipra Nudi* has a separate column providing space for the prospective job seekers and job-providers. This initiative is largely targeted at the lower end of the skill-market. Most of the jobs that are on offer are for stenographers, accountants, fitters, plumbers, electricians, receptionists, cooks, drivers etc., which, in turn, corresponds to the proficiency levels of those who turn to these columns hunting for a job. Even those who have got jobs through such initiatives or those who have been rendered financial assistance through the different financial institutions that AKBMS has floated do not definitionally become active members of the association.⁵ What is more, even the financial help that is given to the needy in the community is not very significant. For instance, AKBMS disbursed a mere Rs. 1,33,559/- to 171 individuals (students, poor women, disabled individuals and priests) during the financial year of 2001 (*Vipra Nudi*, January-February 2002).

Many associations, particularly the caste-specific ones, have for a very long period of time concentrated on the single-point agenda of enabling the young men from the community get educated. Most of the caste-specific associations, and some of the AKBMS district associations, run hostels in Bangalore, and some in Mysore and Shimoga, which cater primarily to students coming from their own community. In the last decade or so, many of these have been thrown open to Brahmin students from outside their caste fold, even as they are charged half the expenses spent on boarding (while it continues to be free for students from their own caste). Most generous donations made to such associations are for such educational endeavours. These associations solicit, and manage to get, endowment grants from members (but also non-members) to sponsor a day's food expenses in memory of somebody of their family. Indeed education continues to be singular of the initiatives towards which most of the members and non-members make contributions. The Brahmana Vidyarthi Sahaya Sangha of Bangalore and the Shimoga District Brahmins Association are perhaps the only two corporate associations that run hostels for Brahmins of all castes. *Anathalaya* (literally an orphanage) located in

A long-standing and probably the most dedicated activist of the AKBMS claimed, during the office-bearers convention (13-14 October 2001), that they have provided livelihood to over 400 individuals. Of them, he was sad to state that not even ten were present during the convention.

Mysore is another such hostel. Many of such hostels situated in Mysore have been closed down in recent decades though. One of the caste-specific associations has recently started a working women's hostel (the Sri Akhila Havyaka Mahasabha) and another (the Hoysala Karnataka Sangha) has recently begun a post-graduate hostel and both are located in the Bangalore city. Apart from these, almost all the hostels that have existed from before are meant for males.

The AKBMS has **successfully** launched three co-operative banks, primarily to add teeth to its endeavour to make the community self-reliant. Despite governmental regulations stating that caste associations cannot hold banks, the AKBMS has managed to keep sufficient control over these banks by ensuring that only Brahmins get elected as their directors. Even as these banks work as autonomous institutions subject to governmental regulations like any other co-operative bank, being peopled by Brahmin sympathisers, they are generous in facilitating Brahmin ventures in the project of 'self-reliance'. The AKBMS has also started a Brahmin chit fund group along with a financial welfare association. Many Brahmin young men have been given loans to start small business ventures of their own. Every application for a loan from a Brahmin individual will have to be accompanied by an application for a membership of the AKBMS. Even as this measure has helped to swell the membership numbers, according to the admission of the activists of the association themselves it has not ensured their participation.

The AKBMS, besides, conducts state-level conventions of Brahmins, which are marked out as significant events in its history and a great deal of enthusiasm, work, fanfare and money goes into the making of such conventions. The Bangalore-centric tendency of the AKBMS is pointed at, with frustration and even anger, by many of the **non-Bangalorean** activists, particularly the North Karnataka ones.⁶ Even as such conventions indeed help individuals to forge a sense of community and unity, much of the enthusiasm witnessed do not carry long after the holding of such conventions. The caste-specific associations too conduct such mass-scale conventions though much more infrequently than the AKBMS, the location of which are not necessarily the major cities.

⁶ Interviews with the activists of the Bidar Jilla Brahmana Sabha and the Dakshina Kannada Brahmana Sabha.

Some even conduct world conventions, some of which take place in Western countries.⁷ Enthusiastic associations also periodically conduct free medical camps, blood donation camps, sports days, cultural events etc., often marshalling resources from within.

Many of the large Brahmin associations have a matrimonial wing keeping records of prospective alliances. The office-bearers claim that this is an activity that receives greater response than the other ones. These matrimonial wings are usually placed under the supervision of the Women's Wing. The one run by the AKBMS has regular visitors numbering to about twenty on an average, every Monday, Wednesday and Friday afternoons and the second Saturday of every month, when it is open. It restricts itself to providing contact addresses to the aspirants of the prospective families and suggests that the families carry out negotiations on their own. The information that is available with the association includes a photograph, educational qualifications, date of birth, elementary details of the horoscope, occupation and income, height, 'sub-sect', parents' name and address, and finally 'requirement of the bride/groom'. The association insists that if any marriage were to take place, the concerned families must inform the association about it. However, the activists claim, they do not get to know about most of the marriages that take place, and, if at all, they get to know, it will be usually when another applicant calls on such families soliciting a matrimonial alliance.⁸

But, apparently, approaching a caste association to look for a matrimonial alliance is a deferred option as interviews with most of our respondent families disclosed. There was just one instance among these families that kept up a sustained contact for over a year with the AKBMS matrimonial wing looking for a match for their daughter.⁹ Most of the matrimonial alliances within the respondent families are fixed by the individual professionals who do this for a livelihood or someone who catalogues such information as a matter of 'social service', or, most significantly, through word of mouth. Even active members keep the association option to the last while looking for matrimonial alliances.

⁷ For instance, the Havyaka Awakening - World Conference was conducted in Gokarna, an important religious centre in coastal Karnataka, in April 2002. The Millennium Konkani Sammelan (a millennium convention of the Gowd Saraswat Brahmins) was held in Chicago, Illinois in July 2000.

⁸ Interviews with activists of the MGSK Vadhu-Varanweshana Kendra, Bangalore and of the Tejaswini Brahmana Mahila Seva Sangha of the AKBMS.

⁹ Interview with Mr. Vasudeva Rao, 05/03/2000. This person is a retired Indian Air Force Wing Commander, who spent most of his working life outside Karnataka. He now works as a management consultant in Bangalore.

The MGSK Vadhu-Varanweshana **Kendra**, Bangalore is a Brahmin association that is exclusively working as a matrimonial bureau. It is of recent origin (established in 1998), but over the last four years has conducted monthly marriage conventions every month under the auspices of various Brahmin associations - primarily in Bangalore but also all over the state. The conventions take place on a Sunday, usually in the premises of a temple. In the three such conventions that this researcher attended, the number was fairly impressive, each with about 50 to 75 alliance seeking **families**.¹⁰

Primarily, only the federal association, the AKBMS, conducts events that are called political. These are not many; neither are they sustained and regular. For instance, before the last general elections, AKBMS convened a programme to which the representatives of most of the political parties were called, demanding that Brahmins in their parties be selected as candidates to stand for elections. Resolutions are also passed urging the state to give more number of Brahmins chairmanships to the different Boards and Corporations. More privately though, most of the activists support and even canvass for the Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP), the right-wing Hindu nationalist party. This is not an official position, but there appears to be a great deal of cross-participation of the members, activists and sympathisers in Brahmin associations as well as the affiliates of the Sangh Parivar. Even the 'natural' affinities shared by the spectrum of articles published in the journals such as *Vipra Nudi* (published by the AKBMS) with the ideological predilections of the Sangh Parivar leaves no one in doubt about the relationship.

There are occasional efforts by Brahmin associations to harness caste loyalties for purposes of canvassing for the BJP. An instance of this was provided during the recent (2002) by-election for the prestigious Kanakapura Lok Sabha seat. Pamphlets were being distributed at the Poornaprajna **Vidyapeeta**¹¹ soliciting voters to cast their vote to the BJP candidate by an ostensibly non-caste based, secular organisation called the *Jaagrutha Matadaara Vedike* (Awakened Voter Forum) of Shimoga. The pamphlet in itself did not speak from and on behalf of a Brahmin subject-position. It merely exhorted the reader to

¹⁰ In fact, in its monthly conventions the association restricts the afternoon session exclusively for widow/ers and the physically challenged people.

¹¹ A Madhva religious educational institution in Bangalore, run by a math based in Udupi, offering courses that ranges from two years to fourteen years. But more importantly, it also houses a temple and a community hall that is rented out to the Madhva families for the conduct of ceremonies, functions etc. and thereby is a nodal centre which draws a significant number of people on a daily basis.

vote for the BJP candidate. Thus it could have been distributed anywhere, as it indeed was. But there was an accompanying notice, written on the notice board, titled *Vote and Celebrate Madhva Birth Anniversary* which drew the connections. This notice was also by the same forum. It read:

A humble request with the revered Madhva kinsmen...

21/02/2002, Thursday, "Madhva Birth Anniversary Celebrations"

On that day itself is the Kanakapura By-election.

As the celebration of the Madhva birth anniversary is our sacred duty, so is the duty to vote. Therefore, let us celebrate birth anniversary of Madhva only after casting our vote.

Do not forget, 21/02/2002 is the polling date - Vote only for the right candidate (notice put up at Vidyapeeta on 17/02/2002).

Note that the notice does not say whom to vote for, even as the pamphlet distributed does not say anything about Madhva birth anniversary celebrations. But the visitors to the institution will not miss the connections being established. However, such canvassing undertaken by Brahmin associations is far and in between.

The associations, such as the Hindustan Machine Tools Vipra Vrinda and the *Karnataka fiq/va Sarkari Naukarara Brahmana Kshemabhivridhi Sangha* (Karnataka State Government Employees' Brahmin Welfare Association), which work for the welfare of the Brahmin employees of the organisation concerned, too have very similar agenda before them. They too conduct mass *Upanayana* ceremonies, offer scholarships etc. But their ability to take up cases from the work sphere is extremely circumscribed. Most of such associations cannot work from the premises of the organisations since they are 'caste-based' associations. The offices will usually be situated in the residences of the office bearers. They cannot officially represent grievances to the authorities on behalf of an employee, for instance. They express annoyance with the fact that SC/ST employees are allowed to form associations formally even when they are caste-based, and that the same is denied for them (Brahmins). But most of them work through informal networks, tapping caste networks that cut across bureaucratic hierarchies.¹²

This, in summation, is the range of activities that a Brahmin association undertakes during a calendar year. But of course, the endeavour to organise Brahmins within the modern space of caste associations has a history of almost a century now. By

¹² Interviews with the President and the General Secretary of the State Government Employees' Brahmin Welfare Association; and also with a member of the Hindustan Aeronautics Limited Brahmin Employees Welfare Association.

the initial decades of the last century, many initiatives to form Brahmin associations were already in place. While the caste-specific Hoysala Karnataka Sangha, representing the concerns of the Hoysala Karnatakas, was founded as early as 1908, many corporate Brahmin associations emerged during the 1920s, as did some caste-specific Brahmin associations. The Hebbar Sri Vaishnava Sabha was established in 1918. *Jaya Karnataka* (10 March 1925), a weekly, mentions a proposed attempt to organise the Brahmins of Dharwad in 1925. *Mysore Star*, during the 1910s, periodically reports the coming into being of many associations, particularly those that were **caste-specific**. However, most such efforts appear to have been local, and were unable to spread out or even sustain themselves. Many, like the Hoysala Karnataka Sangha, became inactive after the initial **enthusiasm**.¹³ The others, in particular the localised corporate associations, seem to have died a quiet death.

It was in the decade of the 1940s that a revival of sorts was recorded, with a considerable number of Brahmin associations emerging during this period. In 1940, Dharwad witnessed a Brahmin convention called the Akhila Karnataka Brahmana Sammelana (Murthy 2000: 250-1). The Akhila Mysooru Brahmana Mahasabha (seeking to organise the Brahmins of the Princely Mysore State) held two conventions ~ the first in Tumkur in 1944 and the second in Hassan in 1949 (Venkatanarayana 1988). Both these sought to work with a corporatised imagination of the Brahmin community. The decade also saw the emergence of many caste-specific associations, for reasons difficult to determine. The Sri Akhila Havyaka Mahasabha is founded in 1942; the Badaganadu Sangha gets established in 1943, the very year when the Hoysala Karnataka Sangha gets revived after decades of inactivity. The year 1945 also sees the establishment of the Sri Madhva Yuvaka Sangha, Uluchukamme Brahmana Mahasabha and the Bettadapura Sankethi Sangha. Such abundance is matched only by the more recent decades of the 1980s and the 1990s, when most of the locality-based, organisation/institution-specific associations emerged in great numbers, along with the many district and **taluk** associations that the AKBMS forged. Each of the **caste-specific** associations that were founded in the 1940s survives to this day.

¹³ The editorial in the souvenir brought out on the occasion of the golden jubilee celebrations of the Hoysala Karnataka Sangha in 1995 mentions these facts. It also reproduces the speech of the founding president made on the occasion of the establishment of the Sangha in 1908 (Venkatasubbaiah 1995: 9-11).

Looking at the history of these efforts to organise Brahmins, it is evident that caste-specific associations have demonstrated a proclivity to sustain themselves over fairly long periods of time (many for over half a century). This continuous existence is of course marred by periods of inactivity, internal dissent etc., but these associations have all survived. On the other hand, the corporate associations that sought to imagine a constituency that included all the Brahmins have been more unstable and more prone to being rendered non-existent. The 1925 Dharwad endeavour, the Akhila Mysooru Brahmana Mahasabha of the 1940s and the 1940 Dharwad convention, all these corporate initiatives seem to have become extinct immediately thereafter. Further, the Mysore initiatives of the 1940s show no awareness of the Dharwad convention of 1940 which in fact sought to talk in terms of the entire Brahmin fold of Karnataka. In fact, between the 1940s and 1970s there appears to have been no major initiatives in mobilising the Brahmins at the level of the state as a whole. The first such association which has had a fairly long existence is the AKBMS. Registered in the year 1974, it continues to survive till date, though with visible marks of fatigue, often threatening to get consumed by frequent lay-offs from activity.

II

Re-examining the initiatives in the associational mode: the case of the AKBMS and other caste-specific associations

In seeking an explanation for the rather curious coexistence of the corporate and caste-specific associations and their differential capacities of sustenance and endurance, this section is devoted to a historical rendering of the varied logics and distinctive trajectories of Brahmin agency (as emblematised in the associational mode). We begin with the pioneering efforts of the 1940s and devolve upon the contexts in which the AKBMS emerged. The axis of this re-examination is then counterposed to the trajectory and concerns of the caste-specific associations.

The registers of self that animate the associational activities of the 1940s point to the deeply contested space that the association seeks to inhabit. Primarily, the Brahmin persona that was resurrected in the wake of the non-Brahmin challenge had to be vested with greater moral force, energy and legitimation. In doing so, this self-imagination had to evade an exclusive focus on the 'materiality' of the community (in terms of its demands for resources) and instead foreground a **normatively** appealing Brahmin.

However, this elision works to subvert the very imperative of caste associations - of seeking to work towards improving the material conditions of the **community**. In an attempt to strike a balance between these two incompatible pulls, the non-Brahmin attack is itself made to work towards justifying the emergence of Brahmin associations. Accordingly, the first resolution passed at the Dharwad Convention of 1940 was that the “**Brahmin** class has a special responsibility to protect the *Sana. tana Samskriti*”. Indeed, the President of the convention had this to say:

The ultimate goal of the Brahmin class is to work to realise the dictum, *Sarvejanaaha Sukhinobhavanthu* [welfare of all]. His contribution to this task is through gaining the riches of meditation. But, for that to come true, there ought to be a conducive environment in the country which sadly does not exist today ... We have always held steadfast the belief that the Varnashrama **Dharma** is the most protective of the stability of our society. Just because the Varnashrama system builds the society on the basis of birth, it does not mean that it belittles qualities/character. A Brahmin without character is inappropriate. Let us not give unnecessary prominence to the accident of birth; but neither shall we accord it an unnecessarily lowly status. Our ultimate aim is to fulfil the *Brahmanatva* (Brahminness) that is there available to us at birth, through our character (cited in Murthy 2000: 250-1)

This statement is a good demonstration of the tensions that animate the space of the Brahmin association. In order to even begin talking about the perceived lacks in the material life of the community, one needs to undermine its very centrality for the everyday life of the Brahmin. It is also an invention of a language code that seeks to speak of caste status, if not hierarchy, in non-caste ways. It is at once invoking a scriptural imagination of the Brahmin, while also making a case for the non-availability of an environment that would allow the latter to pursue his ordained task. Unlike associations of other caste communities, the Brahmin associations have had to enact an extra exercise of legitimisation. Any straightforward and assertive statement of intent that argues for the need of associations to work for the upliftment of the community remains unavailable to the Brahmin associations. Consequently, they are forced to invest the space of the association with a wider moral force. The directive thus is to help the ones who are born into Brahmin families to 'achieve' Brahminness - with the latter posited as a quality aimed at the welfare of all. Even as it concedes legitimacy to the modern interrogation of the logic of caste that equates the fact of birth and the 'quality' of the individual, it is forced to set limits to this interrogation. This setting of a limit is important, for otherwise the associational space would itself be rendered useless.

To state the point differently - but also in order to highlight another definitional limit constituting the Brahmin association - the association cannot disown the Brahmin community in the ways that, say, the individual, secularising Brahmin could. It cannot repudiate and thus **normatively** stand outside the 'degenerated' contemporary Brahmin. More importantly, it cannot **justify** any equivocation with respect to the identity of being Brahmin. **By** definition, the association has to own up the community and speak on its behalf; and in doing so the category of the 'Brahmin' - as it exists and not merely as it ought to exist - will have to be frontalised and defended. Thus, the space of the association makes it inevitable that it confront the challenge posed by the non-Brahmin othering in the most direct manner possible. The founding statement of the Akhila Mysooru Brahmana Mahasabha, therefore, is more definitive:

The conditions in the country are changing resulting in lessening of opportunities of livelihood for the Brahmins. This is obstructing the service that the Brahmins render to the world. To think of ways to overcome this difficult phase, to protect the well-being of the entire Brahmin population of Mysore state, to alleviate their economic status, to improve education, **dharma** and good conduct among Brahmins so that their rightful service to the human world and to the entire society is ensured, a permanent organisation called the Akhila Mysooru Brahmana Mahasabha, inclusive of the religions of Smartha, Srivaishnava and Vaishnava [Madhva] as well as their branches has been formed during the all-Mysore Convention held in Tumkur on 8-4-1944 (cited in Venkatanarayana 1988: 3)

It is pretty obvious that the imagination of a self outside caste, available to particular Brahmins, could not contain the bewilderment and deep sense of siege that the non-Brahmin challenge had authored. So is it a division of labour that the community works out for itself? That is to say, is it the case that when the habitation of secular space and the strategies of the self thereof are insufficient to address the spectrum, the space of the association gets to be founded? A neat 'division' though does not obtain. Even as caste association activists are clearly distinguishable from the individual, secularising Brahmins, the former continue to partake of elements from many spaces. In occupying such a 'precarious' space, the association has not only to convince a wary state and the non-Brahmin articulation, it also has to engage an equally reluctant Brahmin self.

This latter dimension of encountering a reluctant Brahmin self we shall take up later. For the moment, it is important to note that the **overdetermining** role of the non-Brahmin articulation is evident in the resolutions that were passed at the end of the first convention of 1944. The anchoring ground that ties up the various resolutions (ten in all) passed at the convention was the need to negotiate with the non-Brahmin challenge. For

instance, after the customary deferences to the King and the *mathas*, and having sounded out the need for Brahmins to forge a united front, the fourth resolution passed at the 1944 convention states:

The Brahmin class sincerely believes that the highest tenets of the Vedic religion and its sacred goals are essential for the superiority of human life and for the well being of the world. For it is his ultimate duty to depend upon the harmony of the world, the Brahmin can never think of any community as not his own; and can never steer away from the national unity. Thus, the Brahmin community seeks the empathy and trust of all the communities of the nation, and this Convention proclaims that that the Brahmins can never disrupt the life of the society (Akhila Mysooru Brahmana Mahasabha n.d.: x)

Moving on to more **specific** issues, the two resolutions that followed implored the King;

It is a basic tenet, accepted by all civilised communities that under all circumstances seeking of education is a fundamental right of every citizen. The same is applicable to Brahmins too. The Convention requests the government and all **people** that the Brahmins be provided every possible access to get educated. The Convention suggests, with humility, that the Brahmins should get all the benefits, which others get from the government; that a Brahmin student should not be denied educational facilities merely because of his caste. And finally that it is the duty of the government to ensure that every meritorious student irrespective of his caste and Varna gets an equal opportunity to pursue education. Also, the Convention requests the Maharajah that, given that jobs are being cut down, Brahmins should get access to the job-oriented schools so that they can cultivate independent livelihoods.

Brahmins have no complaints regarding the Mysore government ensuring adequate representation to all communities in government services without affecting the efficiency of the bureaucracy. However the Convention respectfully suggests that once appointed all the promotions will have to be based solely on the candidates' efficiency, merit etc. and not on any difference of Brahmin and non-Brahmin (*ibid.* x-xi).

The Pontiff of the Vyasaraja *matha*, a Madhva institution, inaugurating the Second Convention in 1949 summed up, in some detail, the task before the community. Exhorting that the Convention in essence work for 'world peace' (since, as is claimed, that is the object of *Brahmanya*), the pontiff moves on to delineate the agenda before the Convention. Quite clearly locating the community as being under siege and simultaneously being keen to dispel the 'fears' of the Other regarding the motives behind the Brahmin **efforts** to mobilise, he begins by noting the importance of *Thrimathastha* (three traditions) Brahmins coming together, sinking all their differences. Characterising the times as "communal", the pontiff allays the fears expressed by some Brahmins who argued that such conventions could only aggravate the already entrenched anti-Brahminness. Likewise, it is mentioned that the Convention can never be seen as a

"communal" one, because Brahmins, who have remained enemy-less throughout history, are only trying to regain the "lost trust" in order to get back to the task of working for "World Peace". Reasserting and reassuring that Brahmins represent no danger to anybody, he is very clear that Brahmins can never fight for political spaces with others. Invoking time and again the scriptural idea of the Brahmin who wilfully refuses to take up positions of authority, he suggests that the day the Brahmin forgot the importance of the knowledge of *adhyatma* (spiritual/other worldly) his downfall began. Given that every Varna had a pre-ordained task to perform in society, the Brahmin is said to have had no competition as far as learning was concerned. But the advent of western education, acting as an easy passport to positions of authority and wealth, is held to have easily corrupted the Brahmin. It is also alleged to have brought in competition and a denial of rights to the Brahmins, leading to the present state in which the community finds itself in no position to eke out a living. Thus the agenda before the convention is looked on as fairly straightforward - the participants of the Convention are "not thirsting to indulge in philosophical debates on the right interpretation of the Shastras but merely gathered to discuss the economic, social and commonly endorsed religious matters" (*ibid.*: 3).

The President of the convention too charts a similar trajectory. Affirming the characterisation of the community as one under siege, a call is made for critical introspection:

It is pitiable that things have come to such a pass that the Brahmin society has to hold conventions to ensure its existence and development... In the days when the Brahmin was immersed in the Karma ordained by the Vedas in working for the welfare of all in the world, he had the devoted respect of not merely the Brahmin community but that of all others. Times have changed. The day the Brahmin left aside such ordained and appropriate task to take up, for his livelihood, a service occupation, his growth was stunted. Even as it was not apparent in the beginning, once the rate of the decline hastened it became more and more visible. To my limited knowledge, the solution lies in the Brahmin performing, with devotion, the task that is specified by the Vedas, enhancing his *Brahmavarchassu* [The power of the self gained by the acquisition of knowledge]; in not desiring taking to service occupations; by leading an independent life (*ibid.* 19).

But setting the agenda in these ways immediately subverts the logic of community upliftment and welfare, so that in oscillating between the imperative to speak on behalf of the Brahmin community "as is, where is" and the compulsion to circumvent the non-Brahmin othering, an eclectic range of issues is brought forward for the gathering to consider:

1. Need to impart those tenets of Brahminism that are common to all the three philosophies and ensuring that one is not pitted against the other.
2. While nobody objects to the government according special privileges for persons from backward communities, it is unfair to ask a forward community to stymie its development in order that others become equal to them.
3. Our rituals etc., which mark us as Brahmins, are only applicable and important within the four walls of the house. Since they have no role in shaping or guiding our lives outside the household, it is unfair to identify us as Brahmins and deny us our rightful share.
4. It is not useful, as is the practice today, to pledge all the resources available in the family to educate children. Only intelligent children should be sent for university education. Others should be given job-oriented training (culled from the President's Speech reproduced in *ibid.*: 18-33).

The remarkable continuities that one notices in the articulations and concerns of the Brahmin associations over the decades is therefore significant. This can be seen in the trajectory of the AKBMS. Before describing it however we will have to understand the larger socio-political context in which the AKBMS came to be constituted. In fact, this larger frame provides the setting for the contemporary phase of Brahmin mobilisation, beginning from the 1970s, across the state.

The context in which the AKBMS came into existence marks a watershed in Karnataka politics and caste equations. It was a context in which the trope of a 'community under siege' as an adequate representation of the condition of Brahmins could find a near universal acceptance within the community. In a manner of speaking, 'Mandal politics' had become an actuality and a potent force by the decade of 1970s in Karnataka, almost two decades prior to its birth at the national level. The elevation of Devaraj Urs (belonging to a tiny OBC caste, but one to which the Mysore royal family was also attached) as the first non-Vokkaliga, non-Lingayath Chief Minister of Karnataka had confounded political equations, while also upsetting the stable political dominance of the Lingayaths.¹⁴ His socio-political vision had serious implications for the Brahmin community. Specifically for the latter, the question was not so much of an anxiety about losing their political foothold; for, by then, it was amply clear that any visions of political prominence on their part were merely hallucinations of grandeur (at least at the state-level). However, a fairly successful land reforms measure and the famous Backward Class Commission Report prepared by L. G. Havanur (1975) lent a great deal of credence

¹⁴ See Manor (1980 and 1989), Nataraj (1980) and Nataraj and Nataraj (1982) for contending perceptions on the importance of this period and in particular of Urs himself.

to the long sustained visions of victimhood that the Brahmin community entertained about its own self. The modern state as the 'Other' was finally given a concrete shape during these years. These measures were perceived as a **wilful** attack on the community to the extent that even to this day many Brahmin families invoke Indira Gandhi (who was the Prime Minister during this period and lent support to Urs' measures) and Devaraj Urs as the two most anti-Brahmin politicians.

The appointment of the Havanur Commission to recommend guidelines for the welfare of the backward caste communities is seen, in particular, as the **defining** moment of the state's **anti-Brahminness**. Even though Karnataka had by then seen two Backward Classes Committees' (the Miller Committee in the princely state of Mysore and the Nagana Gowda Committee (1961)), the Havanur Commission was the first to enjoy quasi-judicial powers of summoning witnesses and collecting the evidence. This, many commentators have held, was an important move on the part of the government, one that sought to ensure that the Brahmin-dominated bureaucracy is forced to assist the Commission in laying its hands on important data. The bureaucracy was alleged to have dragged its feet in such matters previously. Even the Havanur report, despite its quasi-judicial powers, mentions the obstacles encountered in collecting data from the bureaucracy. Indeed, a biography of Urs notes:

When Havanur began to collect data from government departments, non-co-operation from them started. The upper castes who were occupying all the top positions of the government began to waste time by offering lame excuses to all the requests from the Commission ... Havanur, perturbed by being unable to start work even after four months of the appointment of the Commission, presented details to the Chief Minister of the wilful tardiness shown by the officers and requested him to grant the Commission judicial status [to which the CM **agreed**]. Soon after, a memo was sent to all the departments that the Commission has to be supplied with all the information that it seeks and those who do not comply with the order will be punished. A notification was also issued stating that the Commission has to be provided with all the facilities during its touring of the state (Shetty 2000: 96-7).

That the bureaucratic indifference survives to this day is vouched by a former Chairperson of the Karnataka Backward Classes Commission, Ravivarma Kumar, who remarked:

Our Commission presented the Government with a proposal to conduct a statewide census for the purposes of preparing our report. This project was supposed to collect far more information and data about the population than the decennial census does and at a far cheaper cost. This data would have given us a clear picture of the status of each community in the state so that one could

have arrived at a non-controversial, judicially acceptable manner of computing backwardness of different communities.

The reception from the government, from the Chief Minister onwards, to the idea was very positive and encouraging as it was felt that a comprehensive survey would give us a clear picture of the relative status of the communities. But the file never moved from one desk to the other ... The bureaucracy stalled the initiative **completely**. Not that the project was rejected. I never got any intimation stating that it is rejected but neither did I receive any information on the progress of the file. For three consecutive budgets, the proposal was kept pending. But then we had to submit the Report. We went ahead without any such comprehensive data at our disposal. What more, we were not even allowed to conduct a revision of the list of backward classes communities. Finally all we did was to deal with applications and requisitions.

This is not the first time it has happened. Many of the previous Backward Classes Commissions have aired similar grievances.

The effects of such sluggishness have proved to be rather drastic. The target of many academic and even judicial critiques of these reports and of the government orders thereon is precisely the lack of reliable data and the suspect measures of projection relied upon. Every Backward Classes Committee/Commission report has been challenged in a court of law, more often than not with success.

The Havanur report and the land reforms initiatives continue to act as important metaphors in the discursive field that the Brahmin associations inhabit. In what follows, we describe the history of the AKBMS. In its three decades of existence, the AKBMS has filed cases against the implementation of the Havanur and the subsequent Backward Classes Commissions' reports. It brought out booklets seeking to expose their 'inconsistencies' and 'unjust' conclusions, lobbied with political leaders to garner support, and even attempted to form a confederation of the communities designated as 'forward' to fight a common battle. A hostile state, the increasing inability of the community to regulate its policy directions, misgivings about an extending reservation policy, has all worked to accentuate these perceptions. The stated unwillingness of Brahmin individuals in positions of public authority and power to speak on behalf of the community has only rendered the perception of siege much more real and immediate.

In the year 1971, a small group of enthusiasts founded **Brahmana** Yuvaka Sangha in Bangalore. They were certain that the Brahmins are a community held under an unjustifiable siege by unscrupulous politicians and the government, and thus are in a dire need of organising and unifying so as to be fighting for their rights. The Yuvaka Sangha

¹⁵ Interviewed by researcher on 23/03/2001

decided to hold a daylong state convention in 1972 in Bangalore. The perceptions of siege, the always-already rendered illegitimacy of the space of the Brahmin association, and the compulsion therefore to invent newer justifications of legitimacy had to be confronted on the day of the convention itself. When the then education minister A. R. Badarinarayan (a Brahmin) came to address the afternoon session of the convention, he had to face a black flag demonstration by Dalit organisations, forcing him to quickly assuage feelings of suspicion and apprehensions regarding the motives behind the convention:

Brahmins getting organised is not wrong. Their coming together is not against anybody. It is indeed a matter of regret that the community, which served and made sacrifices for the welfare of the nation, is forced now to serve itself. Why hostility against this community that has not harmed anybody and is merely attempting to improve its conditions by organising itself? (cited in Venkatanarayana 1988: 2)

The opposition was primarily against the representative of the state participating in a Brahmins' convention. This opposition has been consistent forcing the politicians to be wary of attending such gatherings. The convention nevertheless resolved to establish the Akhila Karnataka Brahmana Maha Sabha, and a standing committee was formed to oversee the initiative. This group formulated the founding principles of the AKBMS - of 'Samskara', 'Sanghatane' and 'Svavalambane'. The AKBMS now exhorts that these ought to be the guiding threads for all the Brahmin associations:

Samskara [Culture]: Even as one is born a Brahmin, the real *Brahmanva* [Brahminness] is acquired only through good conduct and qualities, learning the Vedas, the strict following of the everyday rituals.

Sanghatane [Organisation]: Even as we preserve our *Brahmanva*, in order that we protect ourselves and our rights-duties in socio-economic milieu, coming together in order to organise ourselves is crucial.

Svavalambane [Self-reliance]: In today's context, it has become inevitable that we do not wait for the mercy of the government and look for individual initiatives in order that we become self-reliant.

Thus, religious activities for gaining 'culture', conventions, meetings and mobilisation for purposes of 'organisation', and economic activities such as establishing financial institutions, educational institutions and student hostels for 'self-reliance' are to be carried out (AKBMS - Sixth All Karnataka Brahmins' Convention Souvenir, 1989).

The terrain charted by these guiding principles indicates the structuring agenda that is in many senses given for the Brahmin association to work with. The imperative to address the status of being an 'other' is reflected in each of the three statements of intent.

The very first principle itself, as one would recognise, is an acknowledgement of the contested status of the Brahmin being. Even as the very emergence of the association presumes an empirically available, naturally given community with distinct and recognisable boundaries, the contexts in which it finds itself forces it to reframe even this very basic question. Thus the fact of birth which would have sufficed the requirement of a caste association is **further complicated**: one could have taken birth in a Brahmin family, but the **Brahminness** needs to be earned through the enactment of the code of conduct prescribed. Consequently, at best, the fact of birth is just a facilitator.

But this positioning immediately emerges as an oxymoronic problem, and indicates towards the schizophrenic status of existence for these associations. Any unwillingness to recognise and work off an already constituted community, formed as such by the fact of birth, will render the agenda of a caste association deeply contradictory and unviable. This status is reflected in the incompatible but simultaneous existence that the next two principles are forced to lead. The latter are already working within uncomplicated and naturally given boundaries of the Brahmin community; and yet, even these are being formulated in a dialogue with the othered status of the Brahmin self. Of course, every activist interviewed tended to dismiss the complications that are structured in the contradictory nature of the space that the Brahmin association is forced to inhabit.

After two years of hibernation, the AKBMS was registered in 1974. With the organisation coming into its own, the Brahmana Yuvaka Sangha that preceded it seems to have become inactive. The first major issue that the association took up was the fight against the Havanur Commission. Memoranda were submitted to the state government and to the President of India, and a case was filed against the order implementing the recommendations of the Commission. The AKBMS, significantly, started functioning from the premises of the Badaganadu Sangha, a Smartha Brahmin caste association that was already three decades old, possessed its own building in an expensive locality of Bangalore city and financially in a sound position. A former Indian Civil Service officer, P. H. Krishna Rao, took over the mantle of the association, not merely by becoming its president but more importantly by providing the AKBMS with the much needed intellectual flagship and dynamism. He wrote and published booklets on the present status of the community, prepared arguments against the Havanur Commission and the

subsequent government orders. Krishna Rao was also the president of the Madhva Yuvaka Sangha.

The second state level convention of the AKBMS, held in 1978, again at the premises of another established caste-specific association, Babburkamme Seva Sangha in Bangalore, primarily focussed on the question of self-reliance in the wake of the government order implementing the Havanur Commission report. Even as the problems dogging the question of Brahmin unity and the need to revive the Brahmin heritage (the *Sanathana Dharma*) were deliberated upon, the primary focus was the question of extending the contours of reservations. In the fourth convention of the AKBMS, held in 1983, the then Chief Minister Ramakrishna Hegde (a Havyaka Brahmin) in his inaugural speech reflected on the issue of owning up his community identity and of his inhabiting the space of the Brahmin association. He stated:

There were many obstacles, even threats, which I had to face in deciding to attend this convention. But I still decided to come here as the Chief Minister of Karnataka. We need to change our ways of thinking. Who after all is a Brahmin? Anybody who has good conduct will be called a Brahmin. It is not an identity acquired by birth. Isn't Dr. Ambedkar a true Brahmin in this sense?! We need to develop a broader outlook. We should never obstruct the development of the Dalits and the OBCs. We should all work for their upliftment (Venkatanarayana 1988: 36).

Gundurao, the former Chief Minister¹⁶, though was more unequivocal:

I will never hesitate to identify myself as a Brahmin. Today everything happens on the basis of caste. It is therefore meaningless to say no to caste. Let all castes get united and fight for their rights. We should also develop ourselves by focusing primarily on economic issues (*ibid.*: 37).

Some of the activists interviewed expressed impatience with the position taken by Hegde. For instance, an activist of the J. P. Nagar Brahmana Sabha, a retired employee of the public sector industry, ITI, who was also active in the ITI Brahmins' Welfare Association, was unreserved in stating his disdain:

This is all nonsense. Nobody will come and ask you whether you have qualified yourself to become a Brahmin. For all purposes, the state calls us Brahmins and discriminates against us. The state has neither the inclination nor time to engage itself with questions of quality, character etc. So whether we want it or not, whether we wish to hide it or not, our identity of being Brahmins is given. Hegde has always dilly-dallied and was never committed to the Brahmin cause like Gundurao was.

¹⁶ He and Ramakrishna Hegde are the two Brahmin Chief Ministers that the post-independence Karnataka has seen.

¹⁷ Interview with Mr. Venkataramana, 12/05/2000. He, a sixty year old Smartha Brahmin, is a former employee of the state-owned Indian Telephone Industries, Bangalore.

Likewise, a former president of the Mulkanadu Mahasabha was plain:

We can't go on conducting interviews to recruit the so-called "real Brahmins". Of course, the values that this persona represents are essential in our lives and everyone needs to strive to achieve such qualities. But imagine going to individual Brahmins and asking them to take a test. Particularly in our current context when people are unwilling to even attend our meetings, how ridiculous it will be to arrogate ourselves the role of testing Brahminness?! Associations will accept anybody who is a Brahmin by birth - that is the first and last criterion. Of course, the fact of birth in a Brahmin family will itself have given them a *Samskara* that makes them Brahmins.

These quixotic engagements notwithstanding, it may be useful to throw a cursory glance at the relationship that obtains between the federating organisation, the AKBMS, and its **affiliates**.¹⁹ The AKBMS claims to represent the Brahmin community in Karnataka, a claim that is largely accepted by the other Brahmin associations (as reflected in many of them accepting and proclaiming themselves as affiliates of the AKBMS). This acceptance is particularly true of Brahmin associations that are corporate in nature. The entire district Brahmin associations and the **taluk** associations, wherever they exist, are affiliates of the AKBMS. Further, almost all locality-specific associations functioning in the cities of Bangalore and Mysore too are attached to the AKBMS, as are organisation/institution-based associations (most of which exist only in the city of Bangalore). It is the caste-specific associations that do not willingly pronounce this fact of affiliation. Most of these, as already pointed out, precede the founding of the AKBMS and even enjoy a more stable foothold than the latter. The associations - particularly the district and taluk associations - that were founded at the initiative of the AKBMS remain the weakest and the most inactive. The caste-based associations and such associations that

¹⁸ Interview with Mr. Narasimha Shastri, 15/07/2000. He, a Smartha Brahmin, retired as a top-level manager with a leading brewery in Bangalore.

¹⁹ The equivocation that the Brahmin politicians have displayed vis-a-vis the association is largely thinning out now. The current Union Minister from Karnataka - Anantha Kumar of BJP - makes no efforts to hide his Brahmin identity as he attends even small functions like a book release organised by the Brahmin associations. Even state cabinet ministers are now more forthcoming in associating themselves with such 'caste activities'. The two cabinet ministers in the present state government - R V Deshpande and B K Chandrashekhara - are active participants in the activities of the AKBMS. The present opposition leader in the upper house of the state legislature - K H Srinivas - is an active member of the AKBMS and the Havyaka Mahasabha. The person who headed the administrative reforms committee instituted by the current state government, Harnahalli Ramaswamy, is also an active participant in the AKBMS's activities. Incidentally, all these individuals are members of the upper house. Gundurao's son is perhaps the only Brahmin duly elected as a member of the Lower House in the state politics today. Such equivocation is even lesser among the Brahmin women politicians. In fact, many of the women leaders of Bangalore-based Brahmin associations have enduring ties with political parties - particularly the Congress Party - and many are even part of the officialdom of these parties.

took birth due entirely to the initiative of some self-driven individual or group of individuals, on the other hand, are the most active.

The AKBMS implores repeatedly through its journal that the associations which have not become its affiliates should do so in order that the Brahmin community could present a united front to the outsiders. Addressing its affiliate associations, it repeatedly requests them to participate more actively in the deliberations of the AKBMS. It is also quick in assuring that affiliation does not take away the autonomy of the individual associations and that it is only meant to foster unity among the Brahmins and to project a formidable strength to the outsiders. The current president of the AKBMS²⁰ had the following to say to the members:

I am not happy with the work that has been accomplished during the last 15 months that I have been the president. Even as I am devoting all my resources towards my responsibility as the President, the inability to carry the community in its entirety along with the association has remained a limitation. It does not look like the currently existing associations - both old and new (including the sect-specific ones) - have fully accepted the AKBMS. Each such association, within its limitations and within their sphere, is doing good work and many are also financially strong. But to the activities of the AKBMS, their co-operation is not to the desirable level. Many leaders of these associations have been accommodated in the Central Committee of the AKBMS, but not many attend the meetings. When this is the case, how is state-level mobilisation ever possible? (*Vipra Nudi*, July-September 2002).

In spite of the fact that most of these associations accept that they are affiliated, clearly the AKBMS has had very little regulatory power in their affairs, even in regulating its own relationship with these associations. In comparative terms, caste-specific associations are far more stable and economically sound than the AKBMS. Most of these associations own large pieces of land right in the middle of the business district of the city of Bangalore, with expansive buildings in place. Most have commercial complexes too, which will generate a significant monthly income through rents. Many also have 'community halls' (*kalyanamantapas*) which are rented out to families belonging to the caste (not exclusively though; for most give it out to all Brahmins, and some even to the non-Brahmins) to conduct life-cycle events such as weddings at far

²⁰ A long time activist of the Brahmin mobilisational efforts, Mr. Srikantan is an industrialist. He gave away a fairly large piece of land that he owned in a middle class locality in Bangalore to the Bettadapura Sankethi Sangha, the association seeking to represent the concerns of the Bettadapura Sankethi caste to which he belongs. This gesture is interesting in the sense that the AKBMS even to this day does not have an office space of its own. This simultaneous existence of activists in both caste-specific associations and community ones is important to note.

cheaper rates than commercial establishments. This indeed is a great attraction for the Brahmin families, for in Bangalore community halls are not only prohibitively expensive for even the middle class families but are also usually unavailable when needed. It is indeed factors like this, and the matrimonial bureaus that these associations run, that bring many a family into the associational networks, even if fleetingly and **non-permanently**.

Perhaps reflecting this asymmetrical status, the caste-specific associations are wary about looking at themselves as affiliates of the AKBMS. The latter has always found it difficult to match up to the stability of **caste-specific** associations - not just financially, but also in terms of finding and sustaining a band of active and enthusiastic members. In fact throughout its initial years, the AKBMS was forced to feed off these associations. It still works out of a building that is owned by the Sringeri *matha*. In fact, the AKBMS is at present going through a severe resource crunch owing to its ongoing project of building a multi-purpose complex in Bangalore. It has never failed to surprise AKBMS office-bearers that such an unambitious project should debilitate the association so comprehensively. Besides, it is finding it difficult even to get along with its usual and relatively inexpensive routines like publishing the monthly *Vipra Nudi*, distributing scholarships to needy students, and assistance to the poor Brahmin women, priests etc. The building project had even led to a square division among the ranks of the AKBMS activists resulting in a bitter and animated fight. One group is represented by the outgoing president, who initiated the project, and the other by the incumbent one aided by the founder president of the association. The outgoing president was accused of impropriety and illegality in taking loans by pledging the endowments, which led to a very real threat of the association becoming completely pauperised.

It has remained a wonder to many Brahmin activists that the AKBMS should find it so hard to complete even such small projects. The thought is heightened particularly when smaller units like the Theerthahalli Brahmana Sabha (a **taluk** level Brahmin association, affiliated to the AKBMS) or even the Uttara Rajajinagara Brahmana Sabha (a locality-based association in Bangalore) have been **successful** in creating even bigger assets. Its sustained inability to become financially stable provoked the current General Secretary of the AKBMS to come up with an interesting metaphor during the recent State Level Brahmin Association Office-bearers' Convention that was organised by the AKBMS (during October 13-14, 2001). Comparing the financial status of the AKBMS with that of many of its affiliates, he said: "It is rather like today's situation found in

many a Brahmin household. The salary of the 'software son' is unimaginably incomparable to the pension that his father draws". He went on to plead, "Please do not send the parents to the *Vridhashrama* (old-age home)".

The AKBMS has in all 13,651 members (13,473 life members and 178 patron members) on its rolls, and 323 affiliate associations located all over Karnataka, as on 20/01/2002 (*Vipra Nudi*, January-February 2002). Almost in every meeting, through every pamphlet printed and in every issue of the association's journal, the incumbent president never fails to mention this "miserable state of affairs" particularly when (as is alleged) one considers that the Brahmin community of Karnataka contains "lakhs of people".²¹ Over six years, that is, between 1996 and 2002, almost 5500 members were inducted, registering almost a seventy per cent jump in the numbers. Such cycles of activity and inactivity mark the history of the association, largely reflecting the enthusiasm and personal initiative of the office bearers. Initially the AKBMS was conceived as an affiliating federal body without members of its own, but later it too began enrolling individuals as its members.

The associational endeavours usually receive a pronounced lukewarm response from their constituents and, as we have seen, the matter is an eternally articulated source of concern. The AKBMS has nonetheless been a prime mover in floating the All-India Brahmin Federation (AIBF), which aspires to co-ordinate the work of all Brahmin associations across the country. The AIBF was inaugurated during the fourth convention of the AKBMS held at Bangalore in 1983, with the reported participation of over 200 representatives from all over the country (Venkatanarayana 1988: 37-8). The federation continues to exist - its executive committee meetings are reported in *Fipra Nudi* from time to time - but with very little activities conducted under its banner.

These facts about the space of agency notwithstanding, what further complicates the agenda before a Brahmin association is the internal differentiations that mark the category of the Brahmin itself. As we sought to indicate in the previous chapter,

²¹ *Adhyakshara Nudi* (Words of the President) in *Fipra Nudi*, July-September 2002. Since caste enumeration was given up in the decennial census since 1941, much of the claims made by the different and contesting parties are primarily guesswork, as we have mentioned before. The AKBMS office-bearers often make rather inflated estimates of the share of Brahmins in the state's population. For instance, a previous president, while elaborating on the vision that he nurtured in regard to the Brahmin community and AKBMS, claimed: "There are about 40 lakh Brahmins in the state of Karnataka but the membership strength of the AKBMS is still about 8,000" (*Fipra Nudi*, November 1996). Forty lakhs translates itself into nearly 10% of the state's population!

contestations from within have been an important dimension that the modern Brahmin identity has had to contend with. These contestations also play themselves out within the space of the Brahmin association. Here too, the instance of the Saraswats brings to the fore the interesting dynamics at work. The reception that the other Brahmin castes have accorded to the Saraswats has not been uniform. Even to this day, marriages between Saraswat families and the other Brahmin families are much more an exception than between (say) a Madhva and a Smartha family. Their claim to **Brahminhood** is still strongly under dispute, particularly in the coastal districts of Karnataka. However, it is the reception they have received vis-a-vis Brahmin associations that point to what is perhaps an important dimension. The number of Saraswat members in Brahmin associations across the state is miniscule, including in that of AKBMS, even as they are accepted as partners in building and sustaining corporate Brahmin identity. The wariness is mutual, and has a complex profile. The AKBMS, in its last governing body, had a Saraswat Brahmin, a rich industrialist, as its treasurer who enjoyed a high profile and spent quite a bit of his own money on the association's initiatives. However, an activist of the Udupi taluq Brahmana Sabha (the coastal region where the Saraswats are a dominant caste), an affiliate and local representative of the AKBMS, was rather categorical in stating:

Saraswats are not Brahmins. That is the reason why they are not part of our association [the Udupi taluq Brahmana Sabha]. They have their own organisation.

When it was pointed out to him that the AKBMS is unhesitating in accepting them as Brahmins, and in fact does not think that it is an issue to be even discussed, he drew an allegory to state his case:

AKBMS is like the sea. It takes all into it. But we are a river. We cannot take all and sundry into our fold. And AKBMS cannot issue directives in such matters.

There is thus many an element at work here. At the level of the community as a whole, Brahmins might not be incensed or refuse to take on board the Saraswat claim to Brahminhood. But a non-Saraswat Brahmin family will not be very keen on proposing a

²² Interview with the General Secretary of the Udupi taluq Brahmana Sabha, 25/02/2001. The Udupi taluq, which was part of the erstwhile Dakshina Kannada district, has now been made into a district. The remaining part of the former district is now the Mangalore district. However the Dakshina Kannada District Brahmins Association continues to exist, covering both the districts and the Udupi taluq Brahmana Sabha has not changed its name.

marriage with a Saraswat family. Within the space of the association, the latter are accepted (even though the numbers are not many); whereas in Dakshina Kannada, they are officially not part of the Brahmin associations. Such complexities could be multiplied. For instance, the AKBMS is largely perceived as a **Smartha** dominated space, and most of its office-bearers are Smarthas. No corporate Brahmin association at any given point of time can escape the hold of such perceptions.

The act of tying together disparate and largely autonomous units into a corporate 'caste-cluster' is not a problem unique to the Brahmins. Even the Vokkaligas but more strikingly the Lingayaths have very complex internal differentiations and hierarchies. However, unlike Brahmins, in these latter communities the internal, hierarchised entities did not form caste associations; and where they did, these have not survived. This brings us to a crucial feature that marks the space of the Brahmin association - the existence, really, of caste-specific associations. Even as the Akhila Mysooru Brahmana Mahasabha and the Akhila Karnataka Brahmana Mahasabha of Dharwad were one-off attempts that failed to survive, almost all the **caste-specific** associations, some of which even preceded these corporate Brahmin associations, have not only survived to the present but also flourished. As we suggested above, they have a better economic standing and have been remarkably successful in being active, particularly when compared to the corporate Brahmin associations. One quick clarification is in order here. What we have just mentioned should not be taken to mean that the Brahmin caste associations have been great stories of forging identities and successful mobilisation of their caste constituents. Indeed, one can see rather similar exhortations and complaints emanating from both corporate and 'caste' associations, particularly regarding low levels of membership, the lack of enthusiasm on the part of the youth, and so on.

Nevertheless, how does one understand the continued sustenance of these associations? Besides, what is one to make of the better performance, even if in relative terms, of the Brahmin 'caste associations'? These questions are significant, and could be answered thus. The spaces of the Brahmin corporate associations, we have seen, have had to **definitionally** work with an already delegitimised category of the Brahmin. But no such animosity from the others - nor even embarrassment about an identity - appears to obtain within the space of the **caste-specific** association. Even as most of these associations came up in the decade of the 1940s, curiously they were neither expected to carry the burden of the Brahmin category nor did they articulate the need to foreground

their **Brahminness** or Brahmin unity. What did help such initiatives in keeping their 'Brahminness' invisible was the relative anonymity that these identities carried outside the Brahmin space. None of these associations pronounced their Brahmin identity in their names or in their emblematic statements, and even in their constitutions. It is not clear whether this was a deliberate move or not. But the point is that, being relieved of the burden of representing and articulating the concerns of the 'Brahmin community', caste-specific associations do not feel the need to speak on behalf of a besieged community identity.

The single-point agenda on which most of these associations have come into being is that of education - more particularly, of the need to make available spaces in the cities of Bangalore and Mysore for its students to stay and pursue higher education. It is quite stunning to witness an almost obsessive concern with this agenda within caste-specific associations. Many of them have hostels, which provide accommodation and boarding facilities to students coming to Bangalore and Mysore for higher studies (most admit students only from the pre-university stage). Till recently, most of these hostels were exclusively meant for their own caste-specific students. After sustained persuasion from corporate Brahmin leaders, most such hostels have begun to admit students from other Brahmin castes too.

In this wake, it must be pointed out that the most important distinction to be made between the caste-specific Brahmin associations and their corporate counterparts is the differential investments that they devote on the category of the Brahmin. This appears to define their trajectory over time and their very ability to lay claim to the space of the caste association. The differential demands placed by the two types of Brahmin associations' become apparent when one juxtaposes the 'statements of intent' governing either. While none of the caste-specific associations feel the compulsion to talk of or on behalf of a 'community under siege', the latter seems to obtain as the fundamental trope on which the Brahmin corporate associations legitimate their existence. Thus, not even once in the souvenir of the Hoysala Karnataka Sangha, published on the occasion of its completion of fifty years,²³ is the register of 'siege' invoked, which is very much unlike the calls to unity and adversity that underlie the more corporate forms of Brahmin agency. This is in

²³ The golden jubilee celebrations took place in 1995. As we have noted before, the association itself was established in 1908 but was dormant till 1943. The latter year is taken by the association as the year of its founding (Venkatasubbaiah 1995: 9-13).

fact true of all such caste-specific associations. Significantly, such a switching of codes also obtains within the articulation of a single caste activist. While conducting the affairs of the caste-specific associations they do not feel compelled to speak either of or as Brahmins, but switch, at the first instance, to an invocation of the siege register when inhabiting the space of the community association.

It is within these trajectories that Brahmin associations have come to be in the contemporary Karnataka context. Clearly, in perspective is the enunciatory space of the Brahmin associations, both corporate and single-caste, the delineation of which is the focus of the next section.

IN

The enunciatory space of the Brahmin association

Caste associations are undeniably a modern space. Paradoxically enough, while Brahmins were the first to inhabit almost all modern spaces, insofar as the space of the caste association is concerned, the trend is inverted: Brahmins follow - and not lead as in other situations - most of the non-Brahmin caste communities into inhabiting this space. The Vokkaligas, Lingayaths, and the many partners in the non-Brahmin alliance had established their community associations by the first decade of the twentieth century. Many of them have had an uninterrupted existence since then, with the Vokkaliga and Lingayath associations, largely in tandem with their community *mathas*, emerging as important players in the state polity during the post-independence period. Alternatively, as our foregoing sections have revealed, the first such determined effort on the part of the Brahmins to form 'corporate' associations (that is to say, associations speaking on behalf of the Brahmin community as a whole) came only in the 1940s. Besides, the other distinct feature that characterises the trajectory of the Brahmin associations is the 'caste-specific associations' established by particular Brahmin castes, many of which have survived for over half a century now. This is apparently quite unlike the tendencies that have obtained in the non-Brahmin castes, wherein the compulsion has been to corporatise (at least at the level of forming associations). Associations based on internal caste identities did not emerge among these communities, and where they did they have not survived for any noticeable length of time.

This certainly seems an anomalous state of affairs, recording at once the bounds of agency as well as the simultaneous institution of an identity and its displacement. The question is what we make of this process. Our prognosis of course is limited to the

Brahmin fold and its associations, and encounters an aspect of what we are terming is their enunciatory space. We shall discuss, firstly, in broad strokes the mandate that structures the possibilities and non-possibilities of the space of the caste association; and then go on to outline the specific pre-structured discursive ways in which the problematic of the caste association confronted (and continues to confront) the Brahmin community.

By and large, caste associations are primarily an 'assertion' in the sphere of modern civil society demanding that the state recognise their legitimacy and in the process respond to their needs of material and even symbolic resources. The dominant discourses - such as the nationalist discourse, for instance - within the emerging civil society in the late colonial period sought to delegitimise 'caste' as a legitimate resource for identity-making and as a rallying ground for interest-articulation. It is nonetheless crucial to point out that the state did not follow the dictates of the civil society in this matter. The modern Indian state (going by its aspirations as articulated in the Indian Constitution but prefigured before in the colonial authority) stood firm against the demands of the civil society that caste be an anathema in equations of governance and in policy matters relating to welfarism. It recognised caste as a measure of in/equality among communities. This recognition that the state accorded to caste is what has enabled the lower castes, over the last one-century or so, to articulate a demand for, and to some extent even 'experience', equality. A delineation of this process is not what is to be attempted here. However the point we are drawing attention to is that it is this legitimacy that the state bestowed, which allowed castes to mobilise and corporatise themselves as part of their quest for mobility and identity. Caste associations have been an important medium of this quest.

The demand for equitable and representative distribution of modern resources - particularly those of education and employment - has been the most constitutive reason for the emergence of caste associations. Interestingly though, many of the caste communities ventured to form associations in the late colonial period also as part of a strategy geared towards ritual status upgradation in the local and regional caste hierarchies. The Census classification of castes into specific slots in local ritual hierarchies based on the *varna* order was often a highly contested site, and many caste associations emerged during every census making a case for a higher slot for themselves in the caste hierarchy. These acts of material and symbolic upgradation were often bound up in inextricable ways. In the context of Karnataka, for instance, the founding of the

Akhila Bharata Veerashaiva Mahasabha by the Lingayath elites in 1904 actively foregrounded these concerns as its grounds of justification. While we cannot get into a detailing of this specific trajectory - some indications though can be had in our discussion of the Lingayath contestation of the Brahmin in the previous chapter - the point here is that ritual contestations, primarily geared towards status upgradation, were also an important reason for the emergence of caste associations. However, where Brahmin caste associations are concerned, the ground seems to shift, partly a consequence of the fact that the space and the language of caste associations is invariably non-Brahmin with the 'Brahmin' explicitly invoked as the usurper of modern resources. Perhaps an elaboration is in order here.

Where caste associations emerge primarily to contest the caste-regulated unequal distribution of resources (symbolic and material) and invoke the state to their cause, the very idea of a 'Brahmin caste association' is bound to strike one as an anomaly (even as being morally untenable and unjustifiable). And in fact, it did seem to appear so not only to the other communities but also to many Brahmins themselves. Both the founding grounds of justification that were available before any community seeking to mobilise itself in the space of the caste association were (and are in many ways) inherently unavailable for the Brahmins. The question of upgradation of ritual status, obviously, was not an issue for the Brahmins; on the contrary, it was becoming increasingly apparent to the community that their unquestionable supremacy in the *jati* order and *varna* scheme could precisely be the problem in the years to come. Besides, since the very bedrock on which other communities stood was marked by resentment against Brahmin domination of the modern resources, even the other ground was unavailable. In short: the agenda that came to animate the space of the caste association was in some senses always-already unavailable to the Brahmin.

Even more so, the illegitimacy and impropriety that seemed to structure the idea of the Brahmin association was not ephemeral; that is to say, it did not end by the late 1920s along with the subsiding of the non-Brahmin challenge. As late as 1972, when the first conference that oversaw the constitution of the AKBMS and inaugurated the contemporary phase of Brahmin associational efforts was held in Bangalore, it had to bear the brunt of a black flag demonstration organised by the different Dalit organisations and

some other 'progressive' groups.²⁴ Even the fifth state convention of the AKBMS, held in Hubli in April 1984, invited such public protests. This visible face of confrontation, it appears, has something to do with the unique position that the Brahmin community found itself in a context when all other communities were forging themselves as *legitimate* 'caste' identities. These identities were legitimate for the purposes of deployment vis-à-vis the modern idioms of upliftment, development and so on. What is more, by the initial decades of the last century, when many caste associations take birth in Karnataka, the idea of the 'Brahmin' was already under siege, making it not only more difficult but also undesirable for a great many number of Brahmins to articulate their concerns inside the idiom of caste associations.

Since the space of 'caste association' seeks a foregrounding of an assertive and legitimisable caste identity, any effort to forge a Brahmin association is caught in a paradox. A Brahmin association is **definitionally** a belligerent posture. It seeks to take an unequivocal and unquestionable pride in being 'Brahmins', and that too as a publicly enunciated and proclaimed stance and statement. Both these points are crucial - that the pride be unhesitating, and should be publicly articulated. However such posturing have also got to act out in a social field that is already, in many senses, given. Most crucially, it is a field that is already saturated with notions and positions vis-a-vis Brahmins, Brahminism *etc.*, and largely negative ones at that. Thus even belligerent postures will have to contend with such already formulated and powered discourses. This is a problem that is rather unique to the situation of Brahmins.

Brahmin caste associations, therefore, have had to painstakingly build a case for their existence. While the internal class hierarchies - the register of the "poor Brahmins" - does emerge as an important ground of justification for these associations as part of their everyday **functioning**, they have all through their history failed to convince their 'Others' (the state and the non-Brahmin communities largely) of the legitimacy of this register. A sense of siege - of the Brahmin under duress - has emerged as the single-most defining ground of justification for the Brahmin associations.

²⁴ Interview with Mr. Venkataram, 12/01/2000. He is one of the senior most activists of the contemporary phase of Brahmin mobilisation. He has been one of the moving forces behind the establishment and sustenance of the AKBMS. He is also the current General Secretary of the AKBMS, a post he has held before.

Furthermore, it is the emerging urban middle class and the modern educated elite that take the lead in the formation of caste associations in the case of all other caste communities. The Brahmin 'caste activist', on the other hand, is fairly distinct, even if within the range of positionalities that we have been encountering across the prism of the secularising Brahmin. Even as publicly spirited individuals such as Alur Venkatrao and Tataiah - the latter figure we shall come to presently - state in unambiguous terms their sympathies for the Brahmin cause, they cannot be identified as caste association leaders; indeed they never become the office-bearers of any of these associations. The Brahmin association's cadre, leaders etc. had to come from elsewhere.

The instance of Tataiah is particularly instructive in illustrating this point. For a greater part of its almost two decades of existence, the non-Brahmin assertion in the Mysore State projects Tataiah as the most identifiable representative of the Brahmin cause.²⁵ What is more, unlike many of his contemporaries, Tataiah himself was not hesitant to inhabit that subject-position. But it is equally striking that he does not seek to establish caste associations for Brahmins. Neither have there been instances of him taking official positions in any such existing associations. While Tataiah's instance is the most illustrative, it is true of many others too. As we shall see in the next section, Alur Venkatrao was also unhesitant in making known his sympathies for the Brahmin community under siege; his articulation, nonetheless, is consistently outside the space of the association. He seeks to speak like an outsider, an arbitrator, a judge while weighing the pros and cons, the needs and compulsions of setting up Brahmin associations.

²⁵ M. Venkatakrishnaiah - better known as Tataiah - was a greatly versatile public figure. He was a pioneering journalist (having founded many newspapers and magazines, but all of which were identified as the "advocates of the Brahmin cause" by the *MysoreStar* (11 November 1917) repeatedly), a member of the Mysore Representative Assembly, a founder of many public/Brahmin institutions, a pioneering activist of the Mysore Congress Party, a recognised reformist within the Brahmin circles, and so on. His extraordinary career - spanning almost two generations of the Brahmin community during which it witnessed tumultuous happenings - begins with the Mysore Brahmin vs. Madras Brahmin conflict and ends, with his death, in the late 1930s with the ascendance of the fortunes of the Indian National Congress in the Mysore State. Most significantly, through out his public involvement, he continued to be a chief exponent of the Brahmin cause in the face of a spirited and effective non-Brahmin challenge. He was instrumental in founding many institutions, with the most visible being the famous Mysore Anathalaya and the Sadvidya Patashala (both located in Mysore and still surviving), which were catering overwhelmingly to the Brahmin youth but in terms of their posturing open for all. See Sitaramaiah (1996) for a biographical note on Tataiah. Not only do many Brahmins themselves identify these institutions as catering to their community, but during the interview with the present Secretary of the Anathalaya that was done as part of the fieldwork for this study, the latter too claimed the same. The Secretary is even an Executive Member of the AKBMS. In fact, Anathalaya premises in Mysore and its functionaries are an important base for the present Brahmin association activities in Mysore today.

Interestingly, as we have seen, even for those individuals who worked as activists, the associational space is an ambivalent one. The fundamental contradiction that this space has to cope with is that even as it **definitionally** and inevitably has to speak for and as a community, it simultaneously has to negotiate with the modern antipathy to that very community. Given this state, the most foundational ground of justification that the Brahmin community associations work off is this very state of being othered. The self-description of being 'a community under siege' not only provides a context for these associations to spring up and justifies their emergence, it also lends the necessary symbolic and material resources of motivation too. This justificatory ground, it must be reiterated, is not one that is defined by a summary rejection of the non-Brahmin construction of the Brahmin. It is, as we shall describe, a spirited negotiation with that construction - taking some of its elements as its own, rejecting others, and reformulating the terms all along. Another way of handling this ambiguous space of the association is indicated by the sustained existence of the caste-specific associations, most of which decline to submerge their identities into the corporatised, internally homogenised whole called the Brahmin community.

All in all, the emergence of the 'corporate' Brahmin associations since the 1920s follows the establishment of such associations among other non-Brahmin communities in Karnataka. In almost all the founding statements of such associations there are explicit references to the dimensions of the non-Brahmin othering, and a quivering, fateful acknowledgement of the unmistakable sympathy that the state (colonial and post-colonial) exhibited towards such articulations. Indeed, the non-Brahmin articulation and its ideology certainly provided ample ground for Brahmin associations to work on, and the idea of the Brahmin had to be fortified accordingly. The narrative structuring the idea of a community under siege, therefore, is a complex **one**, responding at once to the non-Brahmin retrieval of the Brahmin figure, presenting an evaluation of the state of the Brahmin community, and offering an internal negotiation with the secularising Brahmin self that is rather uncomfortable with the belligerence that structures the standpoint of the Brahmin association.

Complicating the ontological space of the Brahmin association's response too is its perception of the institution of the modern state itself. The nation-state, invariably, is the principal agency on which caste associations make demands. Their primary axis of negotiation is with the state, and not with other caste communities and their associations.

The caste associations seek to make the state responsible to their demands of **upliftment**, community development, and social welfare. However, the Brahmin associations, quite unlike all other caste associations, look upon the state as its principal 'other'. The Brahmin associations have over the years primarily imagined the state as an institution that is deliberately working against the interests of the community. They have increasingly come to perceive their community as being victimised by the state and accordingly have moved towards articulating a community position in which self-reliance is held to be the only way out. This articulation has sustained its hold on the imagination of the community for long, but seems to have become acute during the decades of the 1970s and the 1980s, as reflected by the spurt in the formation of corporate caste associations across the state.

An acute sense of the siege that many Brahmins have felt in recent times can be had from an article titled 'Brahmins: A Critical Study' that appeared in the October 1990 issue of *Vipra Nudi*. The tone as indeed the contents of this article lends us a frame to chart the historical profile of the Brahmin associations in Karnataka. Arguing that the main cause of the contemporary "Brahmin degradation" lies in the fact that the Brahmins refuse to mobilise themselves, basking in the past glories, the article perceives an unmistakable "conspiracy" underway to "eradicate" Brahmins:

Hitherto Brahmins were great because of their deeds. But today they lack even the basic qualities to merit the very name Brahmin. They are only trying to exploit their original and past glories.

In a language that defies commentary, and vitriolic in its expression of discontent, the article goes on to state that non-Brahmins planned along with their politicians to create an atmosphere wherein the Brahmin community as a whole was suppressed:

Deliberately Brahmins were denied their prospects in government services ... in short, they were tyrannised ... The non-Brahmins still believed and even today they believe that this hibernation will end one day and the Brahmins will again charge at them with renewed energy and vigour. [So they felt an urgent need to] eradicate Brahmins forever. So a conspiracy was conceived as to how best this could be accomplished. The plans were discussed, methods were devised, tact and diplomacy were thought of and finally the best way to get rid of the plague called the Brahmin was launched in the form of reservations ... So in a cool and calculated manner the Brahmins were slowly and surely eliminated ... [But still] the Brahmins did not realise that their community was going to face extinction ... [Next the non-Brahmins] planned to improve their stock by a process of miscegenation. It was by a slow process of encouraging the boys of the non-Brahmin community to marry the girls of the Brahmin community, [which] caused some brilliant children as well as some dunces ... [Not satisfied] they planned for the annihilation of the very Brahmin community. They instigated the unscrupulous politicians to pass such legislations as to humiliate

and torment the Brahmin community to such an extent as to force the Brahmins to commit suicide. I presume that the non-Brahmins might even have plans for a mass genocide of the Brahmin community. [Therefore it is time that the Brahmin is awakened in order to] above all spiritually make him strong and efficient to wage a *Dharmayuddha* [Holy War] against the tormentors and oppressors of the Brahmins.

Let us pray to God Almighty to save the Brahmin community.

Another such expression is the poem reproduced below. Interestingly, it makes for an even more assertive and confident posturing of the self, while also giving expression to the all-pervading trope of a 'community under siege'.²⁶

Beware! We are Brahmins

O Brahmin-haters, are you now feeling satisfied keeping us under siege?
Why do you look at us with so much of hatred?
Shed that habit of yours - of hating us.
How much of anger you entertain, against us?
Can't you tolerate if we come up in life?
Please tell us - what is our crime?
Go ahead, ask your own soul that ...
Aren't we the Gurus who taught you?
Aren't we the ones who blessed you, and kept the God pleasant?
We longed for the good and peace of the world.
Alas, taken over you indeed is some loss of mind!
What harm have we brought upon you?
Then why do you seethe in your mind?
Dumped us in a corner, under the garb of reservations
In the name of *Jati*, you devoured everything, in stealth.
True, those who are oppressed ought to be lifted up
But tell me, is it fair to stamp out those who are already sitting upright?
You pull at our tuft; tear up our *Janivara* [the sacred thread]
Spew venom at us, just because we are Brahmins.
Pushing us down, even as you got work done from us,
On to a thorny bed of oppression, and censure.
Even with merit, we have no status or position.
How much do we tolerate this dishonour?
We burn from inside, cry in silence
Loosing on many an occasion, getting grounded ...
Sitting without resistance, we now know for certain,
We die a silent death in all this hullabaloo.
Forget it - we don't need your chains of salutations,
Only to heap, upon them, incredible abuses.

²⁶ The poem is reproduced in *Jaagruti*, a souvenir brought out by the AKBMS in 1994 on the occasion of its seventh state Brahmin convention held in Bangalore.

We have merit - why then do we need anybody's pity?
 Should men with moustache²⁷ need the pity called reservations?
 Do not bother - We need neither your prestations nor alms
 We have the *Dhee Shakthi* [Inner Strength] - that is our greatest protection!
 You say, "We won't let you live"
 And we will live a life of greatness.
 O evil Dushyaasanas, out to snatch away our honour and pride
 Will we just sit with folded hands and watch? We will become *Balabheemas* Beware!
 Beware!

Clearly then, and uniquely so, the space of the association comes to the Brahmin as a contested zone. Its existence is sought to be justified in terms of the need to protect the Brahmin self from a state of siege. In the process, it has to convince not only the others but also its own constituency that the siege is unjustified and needs to be publicly repudiated. The section that follows complicates the relationship that the community at large comes to share with its associational effort.

IV

Between association and community

In the year 1925, **Alur Venkatrao**, a figure we have encountered in the previous chapter (pp. 166-7 above), wrote:

To improve the material conditions of Brahmins, an association has been founded in Dharwad. The association is planning to immediately call a convention of the Brahmins of Dharwad to discuss this issue. Since this is an important issue we wish to write two words on it.
 Now in the entire world, Brahmins are rendered havenless. They, on the one hand, are unwanted by the people and, on the other, have become the recipients of the wrath of the government. To themselves they have become unfit for concern. They are neither welcomed in the Congress nor are they respected by the law and regulations. While it is true that, to some extent, the times are to be blamed for such a state, to a great extent, it appears to us, their loosing of *Brahmanya* is the main cause. Thus, regaining the lost *Brahmanya* ought to remain the principal duty of the Brahmins ... The superiority of Brahmins will neither be based on worldly authority or on material affluence but merely on their Dharma of service to the world. The individual who has gained this Dhanna - irrespective of his religion, his caste - can capture the entire world. When such is the case, what is there to say when an entire class earns such a Dhanna? Brahmins should not take on superiority (*shreshthathva*). The world should accord it to them. How exalted is the task of preparing such a class of people! How happy is it!
 But, how does the today's Brahmin class, which is spiralling downwards for the last 5000 years, acquire the ability for undertaking such a momentous task? The country is pitted against it, as are the times; and there is a failing in the self. Thus, with these three *dashas* (fault-lines) acting in

²⁷ It is a translation of a colloquial expression, wherein the moustache symbolises the masculine virility, strength. Thus all the reservation-beneficiaries are equalised to women, a 'potent' abuse in itself.

tandem, it is clear that the Brahmin class is only reaching its nadir. The greater are the heights reached, the deeper is the fall. Brahmins' *vrtti* (self/divinely-ordained task) is of Service to the World; Shudras' *vrtti* is that of Service to the Self. With such a similarity between the two, it was but natural that once the Brahmin became the Fallen, he took up the Shudra *vrtti*. Now that this service calling is obstructed, the God has given the Brahmin an opportunity to uplift himself. The whole world is keenly observing the Brahmin as to how he uses this opportunity. Earlier many, beginning with Buddha, using their brains attempted to obliterate the Brahmin class. Later the Muslims attempted the same with arms. But the Brahmin class has retained its identity in spite of these physical and psychological attacks. Compared to those challenges, the challenge of today is nothing great. However, given that poverty has increased greatly, the class cannot even combat the smallest of crises. In the earlier times of crisis, the material condition of the Brahmins was not in such a dismal state. Poverty kills the greatest of the virtues ... Isn't it obvious that the question of Dharma becomes relevant only after one's life is ensured? Therefore, the fundamental question the Brahmins have to think about is that of making an honourable livelihood. This has resulted in the question of economics becoming primary in all places. It is not that even in our times of such precariousness, there aren't Brahmins who have not protected their *Brahmanya*. Such are to be respected by all. But they are negligible and we need to think about the larger populace. In summary, the question that the association has taken up is of paramount importance. Nonetheless, we warn the leaders that while tackling this issue, they ought not to forget the primary mission of the community. Otherwise, they will have to bear the *papa* (sin) of destroying the society by luring it with the desires of this worldly pleasure. Other castes too have begun to uplift themselves. Thus there is no harm in Brahmins doing the same (*Jaya Karnataka* 10 March 1925)

This statement, cited at some length, represents the ground from which the secularising Brahmin sought to relate to the enterprise of the Brahmin association. The nature of relationship sought is also at once an agenda that is being set before the space of the association. Venkatrao here is unhesitatingly sympathetic to the project of the Brahmin association. He shares the perception of the contemporary Brahmin community as being in a state of siege. And yet, Venkatrao himself will not become an active constituent of the Brahmin association. He is already standing outside it and is seeking to take an 'objective' assessment of the possibilities of the Brahmin association. Moreover, he can only offer a non-material framework and agenda for such associations to adopt and work with. He begins with a conception of the Brahmin persona that has nothing to do with the fact of birth. Thus anybody who acquires *Brahmanya* can become a Brahmin. But he is also very quick to contain the ramifications of such a definition even at the cost of sounding almost contradictory. The fact that the state and the others have "obstructed" the pursuance of callings that "serve the self" – evidently, by containing the Brahmin predominance in the government services and other such spaces – this is, for him, an "opportunity" that the Brahmin ought to use to regain his *Brahmanya*. Thus even as

Venkatrao recognises the need for alleviating the "material condition of the Brahmins", he is quick to remind the leaders of the "primary mission of the community" - the "Dhanna of providing service to the world" without seeking returns.

This difficulty of not being able to speak of an agenda that is unhesitatingly and exclusively focused on bettering the material lives of the Brahmins is ingrained in all articulations made from the space of the Brahmin association. Thus even if the very **justificatory** ground of the caste association demands an unhesitating foregrounding of what can be termed the material agenda, the demand seems to carry an extra load in the case of Brahmins. There are, to be sure, many pragmatic statements that we come across in the pages of *Vipra Nudi*, which cogently argues for an "agenda of the possible". More specifically, charting out such an agenda, an article entitled 'What Should the Brahmin Association do?' states:

There is a consensus that, beginning from activities such as conducting Sanskrit classes, mass initiation ceremonies, religious lectures, the Mahasabha should be in such a position as to help in greater matters such as Brahmins' education, economic upliftment, and social development. The consensus is also that it is not doing any of these things.

But those who give innumerable suggestions do not contribute at all to our efforts. So what can be done? The only activity that is possible is the help that we can give to the poor and the middle class among the Brahmins. What could be of direct help is helping students, arranging loans for the association members, and helping the poor socially. For this we should undertake a finance mobilisation project. We should use the religious functions organised to mobilise the Brahmins for social causes but that is not happening. It has become a fashion to suggest that we should start engineering and medical colleges but it is highly impractical. Since the association has the help of only the poor and the middle class, with a sprinkling of the rich, the only possible agenda is of helping monetarily the students, the widows, the destitutes, and the *Vaidika Brahmin* (*Vipra Nudi* May 1987).

In spite of such clear statements of intent, most of the association spokespersons feel the need to keep referring to the scriptural imaginations of the Brahmin persona. But the constituency it seeks to stand up for and help out apparently will have no use of such **pontification**. This mismatch could be the most direct expression of a failure of the project of the Brahmin association. A former activist of the Jayanagara Brahmana Sabha expressed his unhappiness thus:

Why do you think an individual approaches a Brahmin association? Without doubt, it is at a point of desperation. As far as my experience tells me, caste associations are the last resort of an individual — whether it is to get his daughter married or to avail of the little monetary help that we give for the children's education. When such is your clientele, if you lecture them on the glories of the *Brahmanathva*, they have little use of it. Of course those are important. But one should

have a filled stomach to attend to these philosophical concerns. When I was in active in the Jayanagara Brahmana Sabha, I used to insist on focusing on such things*

Another highly respected and active AKBMS activist delved on a related point:

One of our major problems is that of getting the youth to take interest in their caste welfare and its culture. Everybody recognises all this too willingly but refuse to recognise the causes for it. If you go on conducting only Vishnu *sahasranamas* or arrange religious discourses on Upanishads, how do you expect the youth to take interest in the association or the community? They have very specific problems. They are ambitious, meritorious but, given the larger context of denial of opportunities, have no idea about realising their dreams. Daily students, young men like that come to me for advice. I offer them advice, particularly about going abroad - either to pursue education or careers. If our associations do not think along these lines, they will continue to get only retired people into their fold. I am not decrying the conduct of rituals or religious ceremonies or anything like that but we have to think of expanding our horizons of vision. I have been, with some others who share this view, trying to emphasise this orientation for so many years now, but I have not been very successful."

However, **significantly**, most of the respondents interviewed for the purpose of this study - except the activists - shy away from participating in the associational activities. Indeed, for the many that have membership of some association, the choice is not a deliberate one. That is to say, they did not decide to become a member and set out to look out for an appropriate association. Mostly the decision to join was incidental, often at the instance of a friend or relative; and being so, the commitment seems an ephemeral one. In fact, most of the respondents - except again the activists or those with close kin who take a proactive interest in such matters - have never attended a convention or a meeting of the caste association. Likewise, there is a widespread feeling of dissatisfaction about the ways of working of the existing associations. The latter are accused of focusing on 'unnecessary' issues like conducting religious functions, celebrating the birth anniversaries of the three Gurus etc. Most of our respondents were clear about the need for Brahmin associations, but were insistent that the agenda of these associations should be one of "development" of the community rather than one of

²⁸ Interview with Mr. Srirangan, 16/04/2000. This respondent, a Srivaishnava Brahmin, continues to work as a tax consultant and an insurance agent. He was an active founder member of a Brahmin association of his locality. One of his sons married a non-Brahmin girl some ten years ago, and the respondent still feels embittered about it. His other two sons are married within the caste.

²⁹ Interview with Mr. Sadashivaiah, 01/03/2000. Mr. Sadashivaiah (about 60 years) is a successful industrialist and has been an important adviser to AKBMS in the recent years particularly on matters of preparing the Brahmin young men to become self-reliant and shed their dependence on government jobs. He was the chief motivator of the grand show intended to kickstart such an agenda - the Vipra'97 - that the AKBMS organised in 1997.

conducting rituals, convincing the community to become "Brahminical" and so on. A respondent echoing the dominantly shared perception said:

We don't need associations to focus on instilling of Brahminical values. Individual families themselves will always inculcate the *samskara* that is appropriate to the Brahmin. Every family teaches its children to respect elders, perform the daily rituals. And almost every family strictly adheres to the conduct of [life-cycle] events. Besides, for such things we have *mathas* and temples all over.

The agenda before associations is unambiguously clear. They have to work towards helping out poor Brahmins in some useful way. In our context when Brahmin youth are not getting government jobs, the associations should focus on helping them to become self-employed. They should give poor merited Brahmin students scholarships so that their future is secured. They should open medical and engineering colleges and other higher educational institutions so that no merited student should remain deprived of education. I would say education should be the sole focus of these associations. Brahmin and scholarship are synonyms; if that is compromised then there is no pride in calling ourselves Brahmins. So that should be the focus of the associations.³⁰

It could still be asked: are the existing associations and the resources that they command in a position to meet these expectations? As we have pointed out, the financial stability of most of the corporate associations is almost always in a precarious condition. They find it difficult to sustain even the regular annual affairs and events. The caste-specific associations are much more stable, but even they would not be able to carry out the agenda that the community proposes. Here we need to recognise the fact that most of the Brahmin associations have failed to become 'mass' organisations, in the sense of

³⁰ Interview with Ms. Priyamvada, 26/10/2000. She, a 53 year old Madhva Brahmin, is a professor of Kannada in a degree college in Bangalore. She came to Bangalore from a village near Udipi soon after her marriage to a hotelier. She had passed out of her pre-university just then. She is passionate about Indian classical music and has practiced it for most of her life. It was this passion that resulted in a divorce, by which time she had three children. Her husband and his family firmly believed the music is not for Brahmin women (a belief that was strong and shared till say some two generations ago) and constantly abused her for her interest to pursue music. When she took divorce, her parents were not willing to take her back. She, along with her three children, decided to make a life all by herself. She rather courageously pursued her studies and against all odds completed her master's degree in Kannada and became a lecturer in a college. Now both the sons (one is in a Western country) and the daughter are employed and married. This respondent, even as she is remarkably vocal about her contempt for and anger against the "Brahminical conservatism" (her words) which refused to accommodate her passion for music, remains nevertheless positive about her 'Brahminness'. For instance, while talking about her experiences in her college, she said: "When a new batch comes in, I can recognise, instantaneously, who among them are Brahmins and who aren't. You can see a keenness and commitment among the Brahmin students and, as they would have been imparted the *samskara* at home, they have great respect for the Guru. Others are just the opposite. And in a class which has 110-120 students, you can attend to only a few. So naturally the Brahmins benefit. This happens across the subjects [disciplines] and with all the teachers irrespective of their caste background. In fact many lecturers who are not Brahmins rue this fact and say how the others just don't show interest. Now they are realising that it should come from within and no amount of external push by the government etc. will help much. This explains why it is always the Brahmin students who get ranks." We explore more fully aspects of this perceptual space in the next chapter.

having reached a stage wherein 'objective' structures begin to ensure their running and sustenance. Perhaps a crucial point that is not often recognised is the centrality of individuals in the lives, the trajectories and often even the longevity of caste associations. It is important to recognise that most of these associations are run in a democratic spirit, with formal rules and regulations and structures in place. Most have written constitutions, and most of them have elections duly conducted during their general body meetings (GBM), although most of the posts go **uncontested**. The larger associations submit their accounts for an audit with professional auditors, the results of which are again placed before the general body for its approval.

Indeed, many of the GBMs turn acrimonious with some determined member insisting on what the office bearers of the association would see as an "unimportant" and "inconsequential" matter. For instance, during one of the recent annual GBM of the AKBMS, a member insisted on knowing why the auditors have signed before the balance sheet is presented (in the memo sent to the members announcing the GBM) while they are supposed to sign after. Most of the questions that are asked in such GBMs are of this order, and more often than not the conductors of the meeting duly brush them aside.

There will, in many of the large associations, be some members who take these reports and meetings earnestly and get into arguments and debates. But the crucial point is that these associations run as collectives, retaining a character that is autonomous of its individual members. This is indeed true of such associations that are large and, even more so, those that are financially healthy. The caste-specific associations are instances of this, although the AKBMS too retains a sense of autonomy vis-a-vis the individual members. Most of the other Brahmin associations have their lives strung around one individual or a set of them. These include the district and taluq Brahmin associations that owe their very establishment to the AKBMS. Many of these associations are a testimony to the self-generated inspiration and commitment of such individuals towards the well being of the community. They are motivated primarily by a shared sense of frustration and moral anger against the outside world for treating the community - one which, in their eyes, has done great service to the society and the nation - in such an unjustified manner. But as soon as that individual or group of individuals become inactive, the association falls into a kind of stupor and many a time meets its end.

Many of the Brahmin associations across the state reflect a similar pattern. The president of any such association will usually be a locally significant industrialist, hotelier

or a retired government employee of a high rank.³¹ Most of them will be **figureheads** who lend an aura of respectability and, more often than not, will be the primary financial contributors to the different activities of the association. However, the critical mobilisational work of the association is accomplished by another set of individuals (in many cases, a single individual). These occupy the middle rungs of the associational hierarchy - more often than not, the general secretary's position - and the figureheads are almost entirely dependent on them for organisational support as well as assistance in articulating subject-positions. The bout of activity-inactivity, which every Brahmin association undergoes, is directly proportional to initiative displayed by these individuals. The following testimony of a former activist belonging to a locality-specific Brahmin association in Bangalore indicates towards the crucial roles that individuals play in the logistics of an association:

A group of five or six of us [all men, but from different Brahmin castes and all above at least 50 years] came together sometime in 1987 to bring together Brahmins residing in the neighbouring localities [all of which have separate associations now] and established a Brahmana Sabha, affiliated to the AKBMS. We were united by the vision that Brahmins needed to come together, forgetting their internal differences, in order to assist our beleaguered community.

Within a span of five years we were known as one of the few well-run and successful Brahmin association in the state. We were conducting a range of activities catering to the different sections in the community. Apart from the highly successful annual *Samoochika Upanayana* [mass initiation] programmes, we organised a range of religious activities like talks, film screenings, pilgrimages, publishing booklets on the significance of rituals etc. But what brought us unparalleled recognition and popularity were the publishing of calendars, which almost acted like a mini-almanac and conducting coaching classes for the SSLC students, irrespective of their caste. We were running our own library catering to poor students of engineering and other technical courses along with providing scholarships, honouring the meritorious students etc. We had even managed to get a plot of land for the association.

However, we were all grounded in no time. Ego clashes, entry of people who had neither a vision nor a commitment to serve the community, all forced us, literally, out of the association. As soon as that happened, the association fell into dormant days. GBMs have not been held for years now, elections have not taken place and accounts are not being kept. Even the whereabouts of the office and thus of the association itself are not known.

³¹ Interestingly most of the pioneering activists of the Brahmin associations (during the 1920s and 1940s) were advocates. Thereafter, however, the activists are predominantly self-employed in sectors that are largely non-institutional. Even as the bitterness that government and quasi-government employees have avoided getting involved with Brahmin associations is expressed, the leaders themselves forward their success in largely non-state spheres as 'testimonies' for the fact that Brahmins can and will survive despite neglect from the state.

³² Interview with Mr. Kumaraswamy, a 62 year old Smartha Brahmin (14/04/2000). As already disclosed (Ch. 3, fn.49), he retired as an Accounts Officer with a multinational company in Bangalore. He has been an active participant in the caste associations for the last two decades.

Even after this **frustrating** experience with this association, he still attends AKBMS meetings, GBMs, conventions etc., although his association is kept to the barest minimum. He has, all the same, become far more wary of jumping into the projects of Brahmin association unhesitatingly. However, he has taken up the initiative of forming an association of the tiny Brahmin community that he belongs to, one hailing from the coastal district of Udupi. He apparently feels more comfortable in such an intimate setting wherein he interacts with his own kin networks to a great extent, and within which he has an unquestionable reputation for integrity and commitment. But his is an isolated case of undying enthusiasm. Many of his friends who got frustrated with internal bickering and feuds never came back to any association.

In sum, then, caste associations are efforts of a voluntaristic kind. They are neither born with a moral authority nor by default receive the allegiance of the community. Here it is important to compare an institution that bears such legitimacy, the Brahmin *mathas*, with the caste associations. In the context of the Brahmin fold, the *mathas* have played a crucial role in organising and regulating the affairs of the communities that owe loyalty to them. They act, **definitionally**, as non-voluntary frames of divinely ordained authority, whose regulative powers go to the extent of proscribing and ostracising individual families and even entire castes seen to have transgressed group norms. Even as such powers are no longer vested with the *mathas* and, what is more, have undergone changes in respect of community perceptions and expectations, they continue to enjoy a great deal of goodwill, and the pontiffs are still presumed to possess great abilities. This goodwill is enough to ensure a state of material affluence, with most of the Brahmin *mathas* known to be very rich.

Caste associations have no such divine sanction. The leaders of such associations are 'secular' members, whose authority comes not from a divinity vested on their part but from a modern, democratically framed structure of rules and regulations; and which lasts for a **pre-determined** period of time. The goodwill of its constituency has to be gained, and is not given. Neither do these associations have any powers of proscription, which the *mathas* did enjoy and exercised till recently. The normative hold that Brahmin caste associations have over their constituent communities is negligible; they are at the disposal of the community and not the other way round. For instance, an individual may receive favours from an association - like getting some monetary aid from the AKBMS.

However, this does not translate itself into a bond or an agreement that his/her family remain loyal either to the association or to the community itself. This leads many association leaders to complain rather bitterly about 'being used'. Thus, it is a partial and selective interaction (largely as decided by the family or the individual in question and not the other way round) that the constituency chooses to have with (its) caste associations.

Furthermore, the domains of functioning of the *mathas* and the caste associations have had to be sorted out, even to begin with. In the second convention of the Akhila Mysooru **Brahmana** Mahasabha (1949), the Sosale Vyasaraja *matha* pontiff in the course of his inaugural address refers to some objections regarding the need for caste associations when the community has *mathas* to govern itself. The pontiff puts to rest doubts regarding the intent behind the formation of the Mahasabha:

[The Mahasabha] firmly believes that the convention has no intention whatsoever to snatch away the sole authority and responsibility remaining with the pontiffs in matters religious. Isn't it clear from the fact that a pontiff is asked to inaugurate the convention that the aim here is to seek their blessings and guidance in the attempt to undertake social reforms in the Brahmin community? Moreover, isn't it known to this convention that, if at all its resolutions are anti-dharma, then the pontiffs have the authority to modify them? (Akhila Mysooru Brahmana Mahasabha n.d.: 5).

Notwithstanding such clearly stated lines of division, the relationship between the *mathas* and the corporate Brahmin associations continues to be one of unease. Every major Brahmin convention, meeting or function that is held in the public begins in the presence of some important *matha* functionary; almost always, efforts are made to get pontiffs representing all the three traditions. They are brought to the venue amidst great fanfare, and their presence is made all the more majestic by according them the central place of authority in the conduct of the programme. The ritual conduct specified when a *Loukika* (the Brahmin who pursues a non-sacred/secular calling) is in the presence of a *Sanyasi* (renouncer) is followed with rigour and their sacred authority is never breached. The unease, however, crops up when the *matha* heads are made to respond to questions of the 'everyday', so to say. The AKBMS (or any such corporate Brahmin association) imagines and draws its representability from a united, even if internally heterogeneous, Brahmin community. The intent to equalise apparently puts many a *matha* head into a zone of discomfort. Even as recently as 1990, a Udupi Dvaita (Madhva) *matha* head called for a debate on the issue of Dvaita superiority over the Advaita **philosophy**, drawing sharp reactions from the office bearers of the AKBMS. The President of the

AKBMS noted that in a context wherein the efforts to organise the community is tardy and proving to be extremely difficult, such statements will have adverse effects. According to him, "the challenge by the **Phalimaru** [one of the eight Madhva *mathas* based in **Udupi**] pontiff for a public debate on Dvaita-Advaita superiority will prove to be an axe aimed at our efforts to unite the community" (*Vipra Nudi* February 1990). Likewise, in a book consisting of short introductory essays on the different Brahmin *mathas* of Karnataka, which a high-profile activist of the AKBMS edited (Prakash Rao 1981)³³, the *matha* heads who differed with the association's insistence on Brahmin unity were squarely criticised.

Again, it is not that all the *matha* heads are averse to the idea of Brahmin unity or are critical of the position that the three philosophies are "in essence" the same. At least as a public stance, many of the Brahmin pontiffs seem to agree on the need for Brahmin unity. In fact, the AKBMS at its fourth convention held in Bangalore in May 1983 (when pontiffs representing all the three traditions were present) suggested in a memorandum addressed to the *mathas*:

It is a matter of increasing concern that, leaving behind the real intention that lay behind the triple-philosophy, the tendency to create wedges in the community on the basis of the apparent distinctions is growing. You ought to, in no ambiguous terms, order that all the Brahmins be united and impress upon your followers that they are all one and the same (Venkatanarayana 1988: 16).

However, association activists are not willing to mince words in more private settings. Of the 35 activists interviewed during the study, only three thought that Brahmin *mat/ia* heads are indeed interested in obliterating **differences** in order to forge Brahmin unity. Of course, a few others, in a more conciliatory vein, maintained that since the *mathas* were founded on exclusivising philosophies, it would be difficult and even unfair to expect them to work like caste associations. But an overwhelming majority of the activists interviewed were unequivocal in criticising the 'divisive' nature of the *mathas*.

In a sentiment that is often expressed in almost every single Brahmin articulation, *mathas* are accused of being too rigid, unresponsive and self-absorbed. It is pointed out that the Lingayath and the Vokkaliga *mathas* have made stupendous progress in terms of

³³ Published during its third convention held in Bangalore in 1981

responding to the varied contemporary needs of their communities; indeed that they have, over the decades, built up impressive institutions of higher learning - in particular, of professional education like engineering and medical colleges.³⁴ Equally crucially, it is held that they have been successful in emerging as key actors in the political arena, attracting a great deal of patronage and goodwill from the political leadership and successive state governments. Thus, even as Lingayath and Vokkaliga *mathas* are seen to draw their legitimacy from being religious institutions, it is their success in being secular power centres that is the object of envious narration by the Brahmin activists.

Brahmin *mathas*, it is maintained, have remained immersed in their ritual jamboree and internal squabbles. Pointing out that none of the Brahmin *mathas* have opened a professional college of education or responded to the economic needs of the disadvantaged Brahmin families, it is argued that the problem is not one of economics since many of the *mathas* are exceedingly rich and influential. Indeed, the memorandum that was referred to above devotes most of its attention towards impressing upon the *mathas* to take on such a role. Invoking the trope of a 'community under siege', the memorandum states:

In times such as ours, wherein the atheists have grown stronger, our beliefs and customs are ridiculed under the garb of rationality, it is secure to see you [the *mathas*, that is] very much like the elephants which make their own way in the forest, taking up sanyasa with great loyalty towards our great heritage. However we wish that you should keep in mind the goal of *lokakalyana* [the material interests] as much as that of *atmoddara* [the needs of the soul], so that you could guide us in the urgent task of rescuing the Brahmin community from the great difficulties that it is passing through. Many of our *mathas*, which were instrumental in taking care of our cultures, are rendered unable to perform such a task, primarily due to the adversities of our times. It is nonetheless heartening that at least some of them continue to be in a good financial position primarily owing to the continued patronage extended by their followers ... In the belief that it is the most immediate need of our times to cater to the needs of the 90% of Brahmins who are below the poverty line, we bring the following six-point charter to your attention (*ibid.*).

Four of the six points raised in the charter pertain to the 'everyday' needs of the community, such as the opening of educational institutions, forming a common endowment **fund** with contributions from all the Brahmin *mathas* to help the community, establishment of financial institutions to help individuals become self-reliant, and working towards Brahmin unity. The specific contents of the charter notwithstanding -

³⁴ The Lingayath *mathas* have a longer history overlapping with but not exactly paralleling the Brahmin ones. The Vokkaligas, on the other hand, have just one *matha* and it was established fairly recently with the

and often echoed in association fora - it is important to note that apart from a few educational institutions established by some of the Udupi Madhva *mathas*, the response has been one of stoic silence.

Interestingly, many Brahmins contend that this silence also marks the activities of the caste associations themselves. The latter too are accused of whiling away their time in conducting Brahminical rituals, while completely neglecting the 'real' agenda of economically and educationally uplifting the community. Indeed, the demand that Brahmin associations open engineering and medical colleges is at least half a century old. But even as they have recognised the need for such institutions of learning, there does not seem to have been any concrete steps taken in this direction (a fact that invites sighs of despair and words of frustration from many of the Brahmins).

The point, note, is not that the *mathas*, caste associations and their constituents lead mutually exclusive and autonomous lives. They indeed depend on each other for the resources of self-definition and other identification. There is consequently a great deal of fluidity and hybridising in the conceptions of identity articulated - be it in terms of self-understandings about one's own condition, programmatic ideas about 'what is to be done', conceptualisations of the Other and so on. While these broadly translate into considerations that we shall be taking up in the next chapter, the immediate point that one can be making is that the actual participation of the community at large in the activities of the associations is highly restricted. There is a real difference between the number of members that an association has on its rolls and the numbers who actually participate in its meetings and conventions or write for its journal. Almost every convention or meeting of the different Brahmin associations that we attended during the fieldwork period exhibited a **profile** of participants that is strikingly similar. There is a great deal of cross-membership at the level of **office-bearers**, with the latter holding positions of authority in both the corporate and **caste-specific** associations. Most of the active members, across associations, are rather old (at least in their fifties and above). Any meeting, function or even convention and conference will invariably witness this composition. Almost all major associations have Youth Committees, which again are patronised by individuals who are in their late-thirties or early-forties. Most of the participants are men, with a sprinkling of women. Again, most of the associations have Women's Committees, which

objective primarily of setting up educational institutions.

are in effect an after-thought and clearly demarcated in terms of the agenda that they are to serve. These committees are made responsible for the running of the matrimonial bureau, holding cooking classes, etc. By the late 1980s, most of the associations had brought in **modifications** in their constitutions so as to accommodate two women members in the Executive Committees. Generally these positions fail to attract aspirants and the committee nominates and coerces two 'active' women members to the fray.

The **AKBMS** also has one Vice President's post reserved for women. It has an affiliate trust, the Tejasvini **Brahmana** Mahila Seva Sangha, which is managed by and works exclusively for Brahmin women. The Hoysala Karnataka Sangha and the Akhila Havyaka Mahasabha have had women presidents. Notwithstanding all this, women's participation is very low compared to the men. The space of the caste association, therefore, is definingly male. In a strict formal sense, all Brahmin associations are open to women and the membership registers of the associations indeed list a far greater number of women than are seen to be participants in the various meetings, conventions and activities. However, the very need to constitute 'women's wings' in associations' point to the fact that women needed to be 'added' to what is an otherwise naturally male space. While a typical active member at any association meeting will be a man, aged between 50-70 years, and usually leading a post-retirement life, most of the active women will be family members of the active males of the given association. There are very few women who have taken up "community work" on their own, and have gained respect for their work, articulation and ability to lead. These women have taken the 'male route' to the leadership of such associations. They have pursued a successful career of their own - in politics, industry, NGOs and so on- and are sought after by the associations to preside over their **functions**, meetings and conventions.

The selective and sustained refusal of the majority of the community to inhabit the space of the association is attributed by almost all to one predominant reason. In the words of a formerly active member of the **AKBMS**:

You must highlight this point in your work. The reason for the failure of Brahmin associations in mobilising the Brahmins on a united platform lies in the very persona of the Brahmin. Brahmins are an intellectual class. Every one of them is educated, has a thinking and questioning mind. Everybody is a leader. It is difficult to herd them together like sheep as in the other communities. If a Vokkaliga leader commands, all his caste-men will abide by it. Here, among Brahmins, each will ask - why should we, what is the desired impact etc. So it is a challenge to organise them. This quality, as far as I can see, is both positive and negative. On the positive side, you are assured that Brahmins will never become communal minded and act in a fundamentalist mode.

They will never hate anybody just because a leader tells them to. That is the primary reason why you have not seen Brahmins retaliate to the non-Brahmin abuse and ridicule. They easily could have because they occupied all top positions and in many cases continue to. But the dignified way in which they have sought to negotiate with the other communities is truly outstanding. For a contrast, look at the Muslims for instance. You tell them, "You have destroyed a temple in Ayodhya. So allow us to construct a temple there", and they respond by giving a call for Jihad! Brahmins have not been like that. On the negative side though, you will see them fight amongst themselves incessantly on petty issues. There in fact is a saying in Sanskrit to the effect that Brahmins can never unite.

This negligible participation of the Brahmins at large does not mean that the community and the associations exist in two exclusive zones of imagination. The following description of the way in which the AKBMS has sought to respond to the policy of reservation suggests that there is a ground that the community and the associations share.

To be sure, the response of the Brahmin community and associations to the issue of reservations is not one of an unequivocal rejection. From the days of the Miller Committee to the contemporary period (a context in which reservations as a policy is quickly losing its very effectiveness owing to the liberalisation of the economy), the Brahmin community has come a long way in negotiating with reservations. Three distinct phases of this negotiation can be mapped - those of rejection, negotiation and irrelevance. It must be emphasised that these phases are not mutually exclusive, for it is possible to draw a connection between the three modes of response. What has to be kept in mind here is that these three 'moments' (or modes of response) also fairly maps out the process of Brahmin negotiation with the question of the discourse of modernity itself.

To recall a facet of our last chapter, when reservations were first mooted in the princely Mysore State, the Brahmin community reacted to it with a sense of utter disbelief. For a community that had an unquestioned monopoly over modern education and thus on employment, the idea and the principle of positive discrimination was unfathomable. The position that the Brahmin spokesmen took is one of bitter opposition. However, the belligerent mood of rejection had to be soon retracted. By the time the first convention of the Akhila Mysooru Brahmana Mahasabha was held in 1944, the community had come far from the initial position of stubborn resistance. The convention,

³⁵ Interview (12/03/2000) with Mr. Vamanamurthy, a sixty-two year old Smartha Brahmin who was previously active in both his locality Brahmin association as well as the AKBMS.

for sure, pleaded with the Maharaja to reconsider the existing reservation policy so **that** only 'merit' could be made the criterion in the spheres of education and employment. **But** more frontally much of the deliberations at the convention focussed on the need for **the** Brahmin families to shed their exclusive reliance on government jobs and to focus their resources outwards. It called upon the community to take up independent vocations, and to begin looking beyond the government for its survival. The moment of active negotiation with reservation had begun.

Indeed, in much of the literature that such associations have produced over the years on reservations - as also in the various memoranda submitted to the state and judiciary - nowhere is the position simply one of negation. The Brahmin approach *vis-à-vis* reservation has been two-pronged. On the one hand, it was made unambiguously clear that the opposition to the policy was not one of principle but primarily one of implementation. Thus, almost every statement from the associations and, to a great extent, from the community itself began by making it clear that the opposition is not to the policy of reservations per se. It is even suggested that the community understands the need to provide special opportunities to individuals from disadvantaged sections; nor is the demand made that Brahmins be provided with some share within the reservation quota.³⁶ The points of objection, rather, are to (what is termed) the 'indiscriminate' increase in the reservation quota resorted to by the state governments; the 'arbitrary' implementation of reservations in promotions; the 'studied' **refusal** on the part of the government and various backward classes commissions to take the economic status as the sole criterion for extending reservations to OBC communities; and the larger ill-effects of morale and efficiency that the policy can have on the well being of the nation.

Clearly, the objections are free from any traces of self-interest and are often couched in universal terms. The community is not asking to be recognised as a backward caste, but is rather concerned to highlight the implications of such reports and government orders extending reservations on (to echo many a Brahmin activist) "the well being and development of the nation". Thus in a memorandum presented to the central and state governments in February 1978 concerning the "injustice done to Brahmin Community"

³⁶ In more recent times however, at the all-India level, there has been a demand made for reservations among economically dispossessed upper castes, including Brahmins. In the specific case of Karnataka, the demand is yet to gain ground. But note the arguments that follow in the text.

by the government orders implementing the Havanur Commission report, the AKBMS is vehement:

The Brahmin caste is socially and educationally advanced. But economically, it is very backward. It desires that it should not be discriminated against. The Brahmin should not be treated as a Second Class Citizen. The caste does not desire special treatments or privileges or concessions or advantages over other castes. But it should be treated as economically weaker section and should be given protection under Article 46 of the Constitution...

It is against national interest and the interest of the people as a whole to harass, penalise or victimise a gifted caste which by its own hard work and enterprise has come to occupy an important position in society. All that the Brahmins claim is justice and fair play (Venkatanarayana 1988: 27).

Even as the memorandum appeals that the government orders be revoked and the practice of caste enumeration be revived in census operations, it nonetheless suggests that the government appoints a fresh commission that is "more representative" and competent.

By 1986, however, in response to the Venkataswamy Commission report (the Second Karnataka Backward Classes Commission, appointed in 1983), the position of the AKBMS had taken on a more pragmatic overtone. While recognising that reservations have to be accorded to SC, ST and other backward communities, and reiterating that reservations ought to have economic criteria as their basis, the AKBMS in a pamphlet notes:

We, as Brahmins, have never asked for our community the tag of 'backwardness' and there is no point in asking for it too. In all our demands, the emphasis is merely that, in the best interests of the nation, merit should be welcomed irrespective of caste. Thus, isn't our demand that 50 percent should be reserved for merit and the remaining for reservation legal, logical, and rational? That is, the point is clearly that reservation should not exceed 50 per cent. We have not asked for anything for ourselves (Venkatanarayana 1988: 4)

Two courses of action are charted before the community, one "temporary/immediate" and the other "permanent". While the former are concerned with steps like approaching the court against specific government orders etc., it is the latter charter of permanent measures that represents a complex positioning of the community vis-a-vis the state and its agendas. This is a charter that aims to completely delink the community from the state, even if only as a matter of posturing and positioning:

1. In the next three years, schools, colleges, and technical educational institutions that are our own should be established.
2. It is clearly seen in the attitude of the government that, in the years to come, our community will be given less and less opportunities. Moreover, even in the merit pool our students are not dominating, calling bluff of the commonsense that Brahmins are ahead in merit. In

talking about opportunities being denied to our students, we will have to realise that there are limits to our fight against the government. Therefore, along with our fight, we have to open our own educational institutions and begin to think beyond government jobs, in agriculture, industry, trade et al, particularly since only 2% of the entire state's population is employed in government services ... Even as we try to get ourselves educated, it is not desirable that we struggle for government jobs alone.

3. In the endeavor to start such institutions, our Math heads, industrialists, well-off individuals will have to lend a helping hand.
4. Along with educational institutions, there is a dire need for financial help ... Since it is desirable that we have one such institution across the state, the recently established *Akhila Karnataka Kshemaabhyudaya Sangha* [All Karnataka Welfare Association] will have to assume a leading role ... (*ibid.*: 7-8).

The position articulated herein reflects the growing belief that the state has actively connived in denying opportunities to the community. Clearly the initial steps towards the formulation of a discourse of self-reliance are being taken. That the situation on the ground did not really reflect such an independence from the apparatuses and institutions of the state is not seen to be problematic. Particularly, the grouse and frustration against reservations is such a constitutive element in the contemporary Brahmin discourse that the community indulges in a plethora of stories about some relative or friend losing out in the race for a technical education owing to reservation quotas. The experiment of *Vipra-97*, a three-day convention organised especially for the Brahmin youth by the AKBMS in 1997, was in some ways a culmination of the rhetoric of self-reliance. It was an overtly ambitious project of the AKBMS, the central idea being the "need to provide the youth with a new vision" (from the souvenir brought out by the AKBMS during *Vipra-97*). The language delivering that vision is equally informative:

It is the first such attempt to stamp out the general belief that Brahmins can only be priests or become top officials, and that neither industry nor trade is their cup of tea, and to show to the world that if a Brahmin makes up his mind he can and will succeed in any field ... It is the driving Mantra of the convention that, hereafter, it is only self-reliance that is the right path that exists before the Brahmin youth.

The present context of reservation, which harms the interests of the Brahmin youth the most, necessitates *Vipra-97*. In reality, Brahmins are never opposed to reservations. Indeed they sympathise with the argument that the communities, which for historical reasons were left behind in education and employment, need to increase their representation in these fields. But they cannot sit idly in the face of a government policy of social justice that seeks to compromise the very survival of the future generations of Brahmins. Even as it is very important that we fight

against such unfair and unjustifiable policies of the government, it is equally important to realise and adjust our strategies in the changing social and economic contexts.

Various caste activists view the convention that was held over five days in Bangalore as a historic moment in the history of Brahmin mobilisation. Structured in the model of a exhibition fair, it contained stalls acquainting Brahmin youth with the diverse opportunities for self-employment that are available along with offers of financial assistance. The latter are invariably arranged through the two successfully running co-operative banks established by the AKBMS - the National Co-operative Bank and the Vishveshvaraiah Co-operative Bank. Last year a woman's co-operative bank was also established at the initiative of the AKBMS)

By the 1990s, nevertheless, the phase of 'irrelevance' had made its entry. The following is the text of an article that was published in *Vipra Nudi*, in its September 2000 issue. Audaciously titled even for a caste periodical - *Wake Up, Brahmin/ You are Unconquerable!! The Field of the Meritorious, the Computer Softw are Industry' - Untainted by the Hangman's Noose, the Government Reservation* - the article speaks of a new confidence marking the self-description and evaluation of the community:

The computer field, which recognises only merit and is rid of caste, community etc., today is overflowing with brilliance. It is indeed the greatest achievement of the 21st century that the Brahmin community, which was being stamped out in the name of reservations, is occupying 60 percent of this field...

Even before the angry eyes of the government and the politicians fall on it, it is generating billions worth foreign exchange and according an important place for the country in the eyes of the world... Even as it is a matter of pride that our boys are getting greater opportunities, it is sad that their services are being put to use by foreign countries.

Since even students who have finished their PUC but are proficient in computers are extended invitations to work abroad, it is clear that the foreigners have noticed the sorry state of government degrees. It is now commonsense that more than 60 percent of ranks at the SSLC and PUC levels are taken by Brahmins and also that they dominate the computer field. It is indeed the sad story of our times that the evil-minded politicians, with the sole intention of choking the brilliant Brahmins who are in the lead everywhere, are bringing reservations in more and more fields. But it is the greatest achievement of the 21st century that the Brahmins, recognised as the most superior in the Varna hierarchy, are evading all such obstacles and are monopolising the computer field.

Even as the politicians attempted to contain the computer field by providing reservation in government colleges, it grew in mammoth proportions much beyond their ability to contain. It is indeed the defeat of the 'reservation politicians' that in foreign countries only merit is being recognised and not reservations.

³⁷ *Fipra-97: Yuvakarige Hosa Guri Thorisuva Daarideepa* (Vipra-97: The Path-light that shows a New Aim to the Youth) *Vipra Nudi*, January 1997: 23-26.

This field, which can grow without any hindrance for the next 15 years, can bring the greatest of respect for India in the eyes of the world. The Brahmin families, which were economically backward, can sport a smile of contentment... However, in spite of all this, Brahmin young men will have to inculcate the tradition-honoured Brahmin culture and conduct. They will have to understand that it is precisely these that are keeping their brilliance alive and helping them in times of crisis like the present. They ought not to become casual about it, which will lead them to lose the blessings of Gayathri, the mother of all that is meritorious and brilliant (*Vipra Nudi*, September 2000, emphasis in original).

Indeed many such articles have appeared in *Vipra Nudi*, particularly in the latter half of the last decade, each giving testimony to the growing confidence of the Brahmins in the policies of liberalisation and the emerging new economy. The perception, of course, is not restricted to the participants in the space of the association; even those unconnected with association affairs lend voice to such perceptions. In fact, it is the wider perceptual field characterising the contemporary Brahmin that is the focus of the next chapter. Primarily based on the interviews conducted with individual Brahmins families, an effort will be made to highlight some dimensions of the formation of the contemporary Brahmin identity. We shall be doing so by juxtaposing the respondents' narratives with the descriptions foregrounded in this and the previous chapters.

Chapter Six

Identities and Displacements: On the Selfhood of the Contemporary Brahmin

Although the schema of caste and its 'substantialisation' was served up in our introductory chapters as an overarching framework for both theoretical and empirical elucidation, we have hardly encountered the frame in our substantive chapters detailing the dynamics of Brahmin identity in contemporary Karnataka. The avoidance is somewhat deliberate, meant primarily to resist the totalising thrust of the substantialisation theme (without necessarily repudiating it either). We shall be tackling the latter theme in the light of our reconstruction in the concluding chapter. To be sure, a problematic stringing together notions of 'community' and of 'association' has been evolving, but again this is an axis we shall take up for more detailed discussion later. In keeping with this narrative strategy, our foregoing chapters detailing the dynamics of Brahmin identity in contemporary Karnataka have actively resisted patterns of theoretical determination. Broadly in the context of introducing some key fragments of the modern world of Brahmins, we were concerned to integrate and present the differential investments in the agency and category of being and becoming 'Brahmin' across three registers: namely, in the person of the Brahmin, at the level of organised complexes of action such as the caste association or even the public culture of print, and in the context of a longer (albeit modern and contemporary) history of **non-Brahmanical** othering. The registers themselves have not been sequentially arranged as such, with the chapters criss-crossing the distinctive profiles yielded by each of them.

The focus, of course, has translated into a concern with 'caste' as an axis of identity and identification; and it is this focus that the present chapter is meant to consolidate. An attempt is made here to reinforce the identity thrust of our foregoing pages, with the intent being to deliver upon the enunciatory space of the contemporary Brahmin self. Framed by a deep sense of being subject to siege and ambivalent about its own sense of belonging to a caste, the Brahmin self seeks to construct a coherent sense of its identity. While the foregoing chapters (that is, Chs. 3-5) sought to profile the parameters of identity and identification in terms of the community's 'others' (both those

internal to the Brahmin fold and external to it) and against the backdrop of its own organisational space, this chapter seeks to describe it more fully from the standpoint of the Brahmin person - situated within the individuated worlds of kin, family and **friendship** networks. The primary material that we will be using here is the interviews conducted with the Brahmin families themselves, although this will also be anchored by some of the considerations that have formed the focus of our previous chapters. Specifically, we shall be calling attention to the varied contestations that were staged between the 'pro-reform' Brahmins and the 'orthodox' Brahmins, and which often obtained simultaneously with and influenced by the non-Brahmin othering.

The field of this contestation allows us an entry point into understanding the ways in which the contemporary Brahmin selfhood manages to resolve itself into a secularised imagination. Indeed, even as we begin to speak to the Brahmins of today, the contest over who is suitable to represent the Brahmin self from among the different contending imaginations is resolved in favour of the secularising Brahmin persona. This resolution though has not meant that the Brahmin has been able to coherently answer the question of what is to be done about one's caste self, or, more pointedly, about the fact of being Brahmin. The equivocation with regard to their Brahmin-ness, the varied attempts to reimagine their caste selves, the differential investments in the self-identity of being Brahmin - all these contours of identity and identification **find** expression in this chapter. In short: we shall be bearing on the question of what it means to be a 'Brahmin' today. It is also fitting that our narrative should devolve on this question, having traversed aspects of the modern world of Brahmins in the foregoing chapters. The narrative, of course, has set up a whole new context for negotiating the bases of caste action, as indeed of caste as an axis of identity and identification.

Of 'progressive' and 'orthodox' Brahmins

By the early decades of the last century, the question of 'community reform' emerged as an important issue before the Brahmins. Brahmin men who were educated and were occupying secular positions of power were at the forefront of demanding that the community shed many of its practices that were seen as regressive and against the

¹ To recall, one or more members of one hundred households - in all 135 persons - were interviewed for the purposes of this study. The details have been presented in Ch.2 above.

tide of the times. The opponents - represented by both Brahmin individuals as well as institutions like the Brahmin *mathas* - were dubbed as the orthodoxy. This confrontation, and the specific ways in which it was staged, proved crucial in providing an idiom for restructuring the possibilities of the modern Brahmin identity. The confrontation plots itself as an encounter between the 'orthodox Brahmin' and the 'progressive Brahmin', which culminated in **successful** validations of the space of the latter and often at the cost of the former. Of course, the justification for reform often did not exclusively originate in any modern ground of individuality, equality, emancipation etc.; it was also rooted within the justificatory ground of tradition. The point of divergence was on the ground of 'correct' interpretation of the tradition, and a decision about what the 'original meaning' of the tradition could be. The 'place' of the woman was often the site of this contestation, especially since the issues concerning Brahmin women and reform - whether it was the issue of age at marriage or of according women equal rights - always provided the non-Brahmin leaders a lever to gesture at the "double standards" adopted by the pro-reform Brahmins when it came to supporting the non-Brahmin cause.

During the late 1910s and early 1920s, there was an ongoing debate on the need to allow women to become members of the Mysore Representative Assembly. There were many members, including Brahmins, who were opposed to this rule. However, as the reports on the proceedings of the Assembly illustrate, the 'progressive' Brahmin was increasingly gaining legitimacy against the 'orthodoxy', and it was only a matter of time before his demand that women be allowed to contest for membership was accepted (as it did in 1927). The non-Brahmins though saw it as a conspiracy to increase the number of Brahmin members in the Assembly (Hanumanthappa Vol. II n.d.: 175-186). In a 1921 session, D. S. Mallappa, a Vokkaliga leader, was (as he claimed) "surprised" to see his Brahmin friends pleading earnestly on behalf of the women on the ground that they were backward and facilities should be provided to make them forward; and goes on to wonder why they should not have extended the same hearty support when the question of advancing the interests of backward communities came up for discussion in the Assembly (*ibid.*: 181). Paralleling this are the debates over the age at marriage, which gets articulated at different fora - from the Representative Assembly to the many *Shastrartha* (publicly conducted debates among the scholars on the 'correct' meaning of the Shastras) held before the different *matha* heads, as indeed 'progressive' Brahmin individuals

confronting the institution of the *matha* and so on. What the issue primarily animates is the clear decline in the authority of the institution of the Brahmin *mathas*. However, as we shall see, the erosion of the authority of this institution does not simultaneously announce the weakening of the legitimacy of the Shastras or the hold of the Shastras over the definitions of appropriate (and inappropriate) conduct. The terms of conduct, doubtless, are re-framed but do not become obsolete in their ability to provide meanings and structures of legitimacy.

Besides, it is also important to note that the reformatory zeal exhibited by many of the 'progressive' Brahmin individuals did not necessarily entail the latter championing the cause of the non-Brahmins, a point that many non-Brahmin leaders repeatedly make. This is of course no smug statement of a re-invention of the Brahmin will to successfully define and legitimate itself in the changed circumstances. In fact, as the respondents' **self-descriptions** will adequately exhibit, the challenge to the identity of being Brahmin was rather foundational, one that was sought to be endured in a markedly ambivalent state even as the quest for self-seeking continued to be essayed. These ambivalences are important, since they obtain as integuments of the process by which the modern Brahmin self gets to be constructed.

The particular issue of reform, namely, the age at marriage, was primarily a concern of the Brahmin community. It was chiefly among the Brahmins that the age at marriage was relatively very less, which had such consequences as the predominance of young widows, significant rates of child mortality, and so on. The 1893 memorandum presented before the Representative Assembly on the proposed Infant Marriages Act that aimed at raising the age at marriage of both men and women had 81 Brahmins arraigning against the passing of the legislation as compared to 33 who were in favour of it. The major participants in this debate were Brahmin members of the Assembly, with the proponents deliberating primarily on the high rates of Brahmin widows and their pitiable conditions (Hanumanthappa Vol. I n.d.: 155-163). There were public meetings discussing the issue in which the Shastras were taken to be the sole legitimating authority. For instance, at a public meeting held in October 1893 and attended by 89 Brahmins and a single non-Brahmin, it was resolved that there was no objection in the Shastras for prohibition of such [child] marriages (*ibid.*: 158).

What is significant here is that the Brahmins championing the cause of women were also at the forefront of opposing the non-Brahmin demand, as against the

'orthodoxy' which was consistent in its opposition to both. Indeed, it is often the leaders of this 'progressive' group that remain the primary 'other' for the non-Brahmin articulation. For instance, Tataiah was at the forefront of all such reform measures - widow remarriage, raising the age at marriage, extending the clause of compulsory education to girls. But he is also the single-most representative symbol of Brahmin will to deny the non-Brahmins their equitable share in the modern resources, as far as the non-Brahmins were concerned.

Tataiah was consistent in his support for the measures of 'reform' of the Brahmin community. In a prolific public life spanning close to half a century, Tataiah uses every opportunity presented before him to argue for such measures. He was most active in the debate on age at marriage too. The *Mysore Star* details, sympathetically, one such instance in which Tataiah argues against the 'orthodoxy' on the issue. In its issue of 30 May 1915, by way of a report titled *Vivahacharche* (Debate on Marriage), the *Mysore Star* relates the discussion that took place in the presence of a Madhva pontiff of the Uttharadi *matha* in an advocate's residence.² In that meeting, reportedly, Brahmins of all denominations had gathered in great numbers. Tataiah headed the pro-reform side in arguing how the Shastras are there for the community and not the community for the Shastras; indeed that the Shastras have always advocated modifications according to the changing times, and that the tide of the times was for raising the age at marriage. He cites many of the *sutras* (classical injunctions) in making his case. Even as he loses out in the debate - in the sense of convincing those present - the moral authority that he had at his disposal was **unmistakable**.³ Significantly again, even the reformers' group does not undermine the authority of the Shastras in regulating the conduct deemed proper for a

² Hosting and felicitating pontiffs of those *mathas* to which a family owes its allegiance has been an important practice, and continues to this day. While the reaffirmation of one's allegiance to the *matha* is the obvious intent behind such felicitations, it is also an occasion to assert one's own standing in the community and an attempt to tap the highly connected networks of the *mathas* for one's benefits. During the late colonial period, such occasions were also employed to discuss critical issues concerning the Brahmin castes to which families belonged. Significant among them were matters concerning the propriety of *Samudrayaana* (Crossing the Seas, a proscribed act for a Brahmin but which had to be rendered acceptable as there were more and more Brahmin men who were going to abroad for higher education), age at marriage, female education, etc. Such debates used to go on for weeks together, although the intensity of discussions has considerably declined in more recent times.

³ Conlon (1977) narrates, in greater detail, the conflict between the Saraswat caste and its *matha* again on the issue of reform.

Brahmin. The difference of opinion is primarily based on the correct modes of interpretation of these texts and their malleability in deference to the times.

While this is not by itself a testimony to the weakening authority of the Brahmin *mathas vis-à-vis* their subject communities, the fact is that the terms of deference were certainly becoming circumscribed and even circumspect. The trend coincides with the coming to be of a secularising Brahmin self, one who acknowledges the authority of both the institution of the *matha* and of its figurehead, the pontiff, but whose space of negotiation is by no means unequivocal. Indeed, the erosion of the authority of the Brahmin *mathas* was a sub-text that ran through the story of the Hale **Karnatakas** that we narrated in the fourth chapter. The fact that the *matha* in question there was the Sringeri *matha* makes the point even more accentuated, for the latter is the defining institution for **Smartha** Brahmins and their identity. Its authority, the few available records but particularly the documents available in the *matha* supposedly point out, was not merely spiritual and symbolic; it both represented and is vested with a great deal of temporal power over the material lives of its subjects. Shastri (1997) indicates the extent of temporal power that the Sringeri *matha* exercised over the Smartha community. It apparently ranged from confiscation of property of the heir-less to buying destitute women and ostracising of families that have violated 'caste' prescriptions and proscriptions.

The following narration from DVG (1997: 479-82), which we shall cite at length, makes the point rather well. DVG is narrating an incident wherein a highly influential official in the British bureaucracy (a Smartha Brahmin) is debating with the Sringeri *matha* pontiff the issue of the imperially constituted Sarda Bill (1929)⁴ proposing a rise in the legal age at marriage. Even DVG, an intensely celebratory votary of the *Vaidik* Brahmins (who, for him, represented the *true essence* of **Brahminhood**)⁵, was clearly seeking a position that in many ways was at odds with the 'orthodoxy'. The official here is Right Honourable V. S. Srinivasa Shastri, a Privy Council Member, and DVG had accompanied Shastri on that trip to Sringeri.

⁴ The reference is to the Child Marriage Restraint Act 1929, popularly known as the Sarda Act named after its chief architect Harbilas Sarda, a member of the Central Legislative Council in 1920s.

See his *Vaidikadharma Sampradayaastharu* (The Followers of the Vaidikadharma), a collection of his thoughts on figures who were undeterred in following the *true Dharma* of the Brahmins even in the face of overpowering influence of modernity (DVG 1997).

In the course of an audience, DVG reports the pontiff's expression of anguish:

It is very good that you came here at this point. ... It appears that there is a legislation that is being debated in the Imperial Council in Delhi and that it is called the 'Sarada Bill'. What has become of our times? Why name a legislation, which is totally disagreeable to Mother Sharada, after her? This anomaly has to be put a stop to. You are the one to do it, for you are a Privy Council Member and have access to the Viceroy in person. You should use your power to meet the Viceroy and put an end to this epilepsy called Sarada Bill.

Shastri suggests that since it is *pūja* (prayer) time, they could discuss the matter the next day. The pontiff gives him a hymn to chant daily, and even as this is accepted by Shastri with grace the former is told that although he (Shastri) would not chant it, he will definitely keep it as a mark of respect. DVG is supposedly intrigued, and later enquires as to what is being meant. Shastri clarifies:

I do not even do the *sandhyavandane* [the daily ritual that a Brahmin male who has undergone the initiation ceremony is required to do] every day. It is already ages since I left it. Then how can I assure that I will chant this hymn everyday? Moreover, the hymn itself is nothing great. Don't we have hundreds of hymns like this one? What is so special about it? But the *Gurupeeta* [the authority vested in the position of the Guru, the matha pontiff really] has given it to me with some *abhimana* [patronising respect and love] and it is our duty to respect that sentiment.

The following day they discuss the Bill. Shastri reportedly gives a long response to the pontiff, and quoting the **full** conversation might be necessary for identifying the contours of the secular Brahmin self:

Shastri: You are referring to the Bill that seeks to increase the age-at-marriage for girls. I too, for one, hold the same opinion as is encoded in the Bill. A few years ago, when I was a member in the Madras Legislative Council, I thought such a change is necessary and had prepared a Draft Bill proposing the same. However ... my proposal did not make it. My opinion though has remained the same. Therefore, now when somebody else has proposed the same, how can I oppose? Not only that, in many of the marriages that have taken place in my own family, the bride had crossed the age that is now considered to be appropriate. Thus, it is not merely my thinking but also my action that is pro-modification. Due to all these, it is not proper for me to stop the Bill.

The naming of the proposed Bill as 'Sarada Bill' is neither to name it after the Goddess Sharada nor to hurl blasphemy at her. It is merely named after the proposer, whose name is Har Bilas Sarada. He is himself somebody who is greatly devoted to the Hindu religion; a good person too. He has authored a book in English titled 'Hindu Superiority', wherein he has presented a collage of the opinions of the European scholars praising the Hindu religion. Thus he is a man who takes pride in his religion. People have merely kept his name for the Bill that he is proposing.

Now the second point. I believe that the Shastras prescribe and advocate the marriage of only those who have reached the stage of puberty and not before. I have myself studied this prescription as found in the Shastras ... (and) they do not show any basis for the present practice of marriage before puberty. It has become a common practice that girls should be married off between the age of eight and ten but it finds no authentication in the Shastras. We can only guess

that this has come into practice due to some unknown historical pressure and thus is not ancient. Please see the hymns that are chanted during the ritual of marriage. [He reproduces the hymns]. Their meaning is clear. It is not something that is appropriate to be told to a girl of eight to ten years. It is appropriate only to an adult. One should also analyse the ritual of marriage. It says the couple should spend three nights together. [Quoting an injunction, he says] it means that the bride is ready to undergo this ritual at the time of marriage. This is what the *Grhya Sutras* say too.

The Pontiff: We have not seen the *Grhya Sutras*.

Shastri: That is because the *GrAya Sutras* are irrelevant to the life of a *Sanyasi* [renouncer] like you. But the present contention belongs to the sphere of *Grhastha* (householder) Dhanna, and therefore I think *Grhya Sutras* ought to guide us in the matter.

The Pontiff: That appears to us to be an important point. We will get back once we read the *GrAya Sutras* (DVG 1997: 479-82).

There are several crucial elements that mark the secular Brahmin self in the above narration. Firstly, the differential position that Shastri is articulating for himself vis-a-vis the pontiff. He is no longer the obedient subject that unquestioningly bows before the authority figure of the Guru. But it is also a subjectivity of silent and yet firm deference vis-a-vis the Guru that Shastri keeps intact, honouring the authority, if not the particular figure, occupying that position. He even thinks of ingenious ways to avoid the pontiff from coming across as incompetent - as, for instance, the suggestion that the Guru, being the renouncer, is perhaps not aware of the issue that concerns the householder. Secondly, and following from the first point, he is somebody who can question the Guru and still hold ground. Note also that Shastri is not questioning the legitimacy of the Shastras in determining community life and affairs. In fact, he is arguing his case precisely on the grounds of a 'correct' and thus more 'authentic' reading of the Shastras. He is not bringing modern justifications of individual choice etc. to forward his argument on the need for favouring adult marriages.

It is one of the clearest expositions of the emerging Brahmin self, particularly because it is transposed against the terms of a 'traditional' characterisation. Indeed, many individuals such as Shastri are much more "informed" about their Brahminness than those inhabiting the authority structures of *matha* or the priesthood, even as they remain unsure about owning up that identity. They make articulate defences of the entity and identity of being Brahmin, and many even do so with generous citations from the scriptural texts. Their newer contexts allow and even spur many of them to be reflexive about their identities. There is a keener, more critical and argumentative self-perception of their Brahmin selfhood, which, as we shall see, also comes across in the perceptions of

the families and individuals interviewed as part of this study. It is not a mere identity that is taken on, but one that is variously and critically received; refashioned, for sure, as a response to the larger processes of secularisation, non-Brahmin othering and the variegated demands that other contending self-perceptions seem to be making on them. A. N. Murthy Rao (encountered earlier on in the fourth chapter, p. 180 above) expresses a similar incredulity in his autobiography (1990) while making a stronger point about the institutions *of mathas and orthodoxy*. He observes:

It is the pontiffs and religious leaders who can objectively analyse tradition to guide the community in its perception and negotiation with it. Moreover, their word carried greater weight than [he is referring to the early decades of the last century]. But even in them a social consciousness had not developed. Even they thought that 'tradition' is itself 'religion' and were anxious to protect it. They, often, did not even bother to find whether the scriptures authorised the tradition and the prevailing customs. ... I would expect our religious Gurus to be well versed in all the scriptures. Or at least that they defer taking positions until after they have had a close look at the authority of the scriptures. It even surprised me that the pontiff had not even known about Har Bilas Sarada for his name was routinely mentioned in the newspapers then. It appeared to me that those who have taken sanyasa, even if it be the pontiffs, should not lose interest in the outside world so completely (1990: 52-4)

Similarly, the 'progressive' Brahmin persona shared an increasingly ambiguous relationship with the 'sacred' Brahmin - particularly that construction of the Brahmin self that was seen to embody the oppressive regimes of the caste as a social system. This ambiguity was itself radically textured and encompasses a range. While, for instance, Kailasam (1884-1946), known as the father of modern Kannada theatre, was contemptuous of what he described as the "priest-craft", DVG is more sympathetic albeit setting an agenda before what he characterises as *Vaidika* (priestly) Brahmins. It would be interesting to map the contours of this negotiation through precisely the figures of Kailasam and DVG.

An England educated geologist, T. P. Kailasam reportedly led the life of a maverick, and that too for a Brahmin of his generation. Coming from an influential Iyer family of Mysore, Kailasam gave up a bright career with the government to lead an aimless life writing plays in Kannada and English. While all his Kannada plays were contextualised to the middle class Brahmin families of his times - and therefore can be seen to be reflections on the contemporary state of the community - his English plays were primarily about characters from the *Mahabharatha* epic. Somebody clearly not

drawn into the politics of his day (even while being greatly impressed by Gandhi), Kailasam can be, if anything, put under the category of a 'reformist'.

While most of his Kannada plays are about the contemporary Brahmin community, the one titled *Nam Brahmanke* [Our Brahminness], encountering the space of conduct of the annual death rites (the *Shraddha*) of the wife of a Brahmin High Court judge, is the most pugnacious. Its subtitle (which is in English) is "A Satirical Farce to titilate and ventilate To day - Orthodoxy". The "place, language and situation" of the play is, as it affirms, 'modern'.⁶ The famous proclamation from the *Bhagavadgeeta*, claimed to be made by Lord Krishna, namely,

Chaathurvarnyam mayaa srishtam
Gun a Karma Vibhaagashaha
[I created the four-fold Varna division
Based on Quality/Character and the Deeds]

is prominently positioned along with the list of the characters, and frames the intent behind the play. There are three short poems, in free verse - the first and the last is in English by Kailasam himself and the middle one in Kannada by Sali Ramachandra, a poet.

When Greed, the demon, djinn or elf,
Obsesses Brahmin's Soul,
'Its lust of flesh or pow'r or pelf
Distorts his God-bound soul!
Poor fool! Confusing sense of Self,
He plays dread Satan's role!!

Brahmins today are a gone case, falling prey to the lust of consumption (*Bhoga*)!
Become the butt of ridicule of all, slaving after money!
It was *Then*, renunciation was their greatest wealth!
The renouncers are indeed the rich in the world; indeed, the kin of the world!

A Craft? No! Graft! A Creed? No! Greed!
Gang North, gang South, gang West, gang Hast,
The foulest foe of man indeed,
This pest!!... inhuman beast... this priest!

6 All the citations that follow in the text are from the collection *Kailasam Kritigalu* (Collected Works of Kailasam) edited by Thipperudraswamy (1987: 475-505).

The quote from the *Bhagavadgeetha* and the above three verses set the stage for a no-holds barred and thoroughly vituperative indictment of the Brahmin *vaidikas* (priests) of his day. The story builds on the resourcefulness of the Brahmin family-priest in not merely chopping the rituals to suit the requirements of the busy judge and his college-going, cricket-enthusiastic son, but also in cooking-up rituals for commonplace actions like the of lighting a cigarette. Incidentally, the priest himself is a failure in his pursuit of modern education, having been a classmate of the judge during early schooling. Of course, he does all this for money, without an iota of regard for the image of the *Brahmin* *Then* which the foregoing middle verse alludes. At one level, it is the 'downfall' of the idealised Brahmin (in particular, the *Vaidik* Brahmin) that this play bemoans; lamenting, in its terms, the degradation of a 'creed' into 'greed', of 'priesthood' into 'priestcraft'. But at another level, this priestly degradation is counterposed against a secularising Brahmin self that is represented in the figures of the judge and his son and daughter. The latter are all on a mission of reconfiguring their Brahmin self, one that entails ambiguities in their identification of being Brahmin but which is in no sense a dismissal of such identification. The judge and his children all seem to be reconfiguring the terms of identity from their own locations, even as they share a similar ground in the need to be reflective about the process.

All this can be legitimately seen as Kailasam setting an agenda before the Brahmin community of his times - an agenda that is as much framed by the non-Brahmin critique as it is by the larger trajectories of secularisation and **individuation**.⁷ Indeed, almost every Kannada play that he wrote can be retrieved as an agenda-statement, wherein the need to become 'modern' is feverishly emphasised even as that 'modern-ness' is itself deeply implicated in and made responsible for one's **Brahminness**. The judge's son is clearly indignant of the purity-pollution principles undergirding caste. He wonders, while getting a shave done from the family barber, whether at least after death and in heaven his grandfather would be allowed to shake hands with the barber's

⁷ To be sure, Kailasam's plays nowhere foreground the non-Brahmin othering **self-consciously**; nor does such a frame present itself distinctly by means of a reading of the plays in themselves. For instance, in the play under consideration, some of the integuments for a mapping of the Brahmin self are provided by a Christian friend and the Muslim servant rather than by any non-Brahmin 'Hindu' characters. Nevertheless, some of Kailasam's other incidental remarks - a witticism that has acquired a **near-folkloric** status in the Kannada cultural firmament - point to a sensibility that is very alive to this larger thematic of non-Brahmin othering within which 'caste' seems to be operating in the Karnataka (and south Indian) context. These remarks have been variously collated in reminiscences, collections etc.

grandfather when they meet. Moreover, he has to play a cricket match in an hour's time when the family cook (a Brahmin) comes to remind him that it is the *Shraddha* day of his dead mother and that he needs to take a purificatory bath. The son replies:

Bath?! *Yes of course/ Mother's Shraddha... Say A./Constantoo/... father's Courtoo say C/ more constantoo!! But my Cricket matchoo say B./... most constantoo/ 1 should be ready by e/even/ But all three becoming Constant is absurdoo/ Therefore one of the three must become variable./ Nigh Court cannot be moved; Cricket fieldoo fixture; so a/so the matchoo/ It is impossible to put off the mother's Shraddha; so, all the three have to be constant! Therefore ... fourth factor taking bath ... must be variable!* Just get me the *moguta*[a piece of cloth made of silk, which at all times remains pure]. I will just wear it and be ready... for the *Ceremony*!

Notice not just the deployment of a mathematical logic in perceiving a 'sacred' phenomenon, but also the priorities that he assigns to each of the factors by dividing them into constants and variables. The everyday practices governed by a principle of purity-pollution (as represented in the act of taking bath in order to be in a state of purity) are treated with disdain, even as the very coherence of the need to perform the *Shraddha* is recognised and recouped. The son then wheedles the family priest into manufacturing a ritual, **firmed** up by a Sanskrit *sloka* (chant), for lighting a cigarette (of course by means of an offer of a rupee as the bait). He also cajoles the priest to finish **off** the ritual within half an hour so that he can make it to the match in time.

The widowed daughter of the judge, pursuing her postgraduate studies⁹, undertakes another disavowal of the "orthodoxy" of the Brahmins. She takes her Christian friend home in order to prove that Brahminism, as it is practised, has become a slave to the principle of "Greed! Thy name is 'Orthodoxy'". However, when confronted by the view of her Christian friend that 'Hinduism' has degraded itself by creating the caste system, she embarks on the most unambiguous covering-up of the question of caste. The daughter clarifies that caste was not meant to be a *system*, but a "Divinely deliberated organization" conceived for the "well-being of the society" by Lord Krishna. Elucidating the point, she states:

CASTE ORGANIZATIONOO...ACCORDING TO THE Bhagavadgeetha OBTAINS TO-DAY
... IN EVERY PART OF THE WORLD, EXCEPT IN INDIA! I shall explain it to you. The

8 The middle class Brahmin characters in all of Kailasam's Kannada plays generously use English words and sentences in their Kannada. The English words are made to work as Kannada words, by adding "u" or "oo" at the end. For instance, "constant" becomes "constantoo" and "impossible" becomes "impossible-u". In the quotation, the English words and sentences in the original are italicised.

⁹ Which is a statement against the Brahmin orthodoxy of his times, for the widowed daughter is sent for higher studies.

Benthamite cry of "the greatest good of the greatest **number**" is of a very recent origin. This is but a feeble echo of the "*sarvejanaaha.sukhinobhavanthu*" ... the Vedic dictum that reverberated from one end to the other of this earth! The basis of the relation of the individual entity ... to the communal entirety ... is to so use the talents that God has given him for ITS good, in requital of his receiving the benefits from **the** community as an approved unit thereof!! Thus, if you have nothing but brains, becoming a Brahmin ... if you have more muscles than brains, becoming a Kshatriya ... even if you don't have either ... as Milton said "They also serve who stand and wait" ... if you till the land, becoming a Shudra ... serving the talents that God has endowed to the society is the only human's duty!! **THUS NO PARTICULAR CASTE IS SUPERIOR TO ANY OTHER CASTE.** See, now with the war raging [the reference is here to the Second World War], every man who fights ... is a 'Kshatriya' irrespective of his birth; every priest who prays that "Well befall the right" and cheers the fighter is a Brahmin. Every tiller ... sower ... reaper ... cook ... merchant ... that provides the "sinews of war" is a Vaishya or a Shudra!! This is the ancient organization of caste that Lord Krishna made!! Now to the caste *system* that is peculiar to our India ... It is the subtlety of **priest-hood**, which, turning into priest-craft, has dominated the ninety two percent of illiterate Indians to the extent of giving lie to Lord Krishna's organization by making the small detail of Location of Birth in society to determine one's caste, while **THE LORD KRISHNA, HIMSELF A NON-BRAHMIN BY BIRTH, INSTITUTED FOR ALL TIME THE TRUE CRITERION OF REAL CASTE; NOT THE INTEGRANT INDIVIDUAL'S LOCATION OF BIRTH IN SOCIETY!, BUT HIS PARTICULAR VOCATION'S WORTH FOR SOCIETY! NOT ACCIDENTAL BIRTH, BUT INTRINSIC WORTH!!** (capitalised in the original).

Thus caste *system* is held to be an aberration, while caste as *organisation* is a principle that marks all societies. Lord Krishna - a non-Brahmin by birth, as pointedly referred to¹⁰ - made the caste identity of an individual determined by his vocation, while the "priestcraft" - authored by those who claimed Brahminhood by birth - has worked to make the accident of birth the determinant of one's caste identity. As we shall see later, this is pretty much the same frame that informs the self-recuperation of their Brahmin selfhood that most of the respondents worked with during our interviews. Kailasam does not have his characters ask the further question about what one is to make of the "accident of birth" in a Brahmin family and not, say, in a Shudra family, although our respondents seek to work through this puzzle by foregrounding a notion of *samskara* - that is, a culture of upbringing as indeed of a genetic make-up that is seen as being unique to the Brahmins. We shall be taking up the terms of this delineation later on in the chapter; Kailasam though returns to another ground for a refashioning of the Brahmin identity.

¹⁰ Framing him as a "non-Brahmin" as against the other probable modes of **recuperating** his identity - of being a Yadava or a Kshatriya, for instance ~ brings into perspective the over-determining impact the non-Brahmin articulation on the imaginary of the times.

Having noted the explanation, the Christian friend is even more confounded as to why the family continues to observe events like the *shraddha*, and in the process "foster hollow orthodoxy ... despite [its] contempt for the now-meaningless abracadabra and jargon of **mantrams** and **tantrams** of ... the **priest-craft**." The judge then offers to answer her - both "by proxy" as well as directly. By way of the former, he asks the old Muslim servant why he did not go home after his night duty at the judge's place. The old servant, with a quivering voice and tears welling up, evidently overcome by grief, says in Urdu:

Though my feet were dragging me homewards in the morning, my mind was unwilling, sir. The cook reminded me that today is Madam's *shraddha*. I have been brought up by the grandmother, the elder Madam and the younger Madam [judge's grandmother, mother and wife **respectively**]. I just can't forget that sir. Therefore, I couldn't get myself to go away.

The judge then turns to the Christian **friend** and clarifies:

... do not forget, he believes in his MOHAMED ... just as religiously as you do in your CHRIST ... and we do in our KRISHNA ... It is not the ceremonies that pulled this old man ... to aver that while his feet mechanically dragged him homeward, it was his heart that reminded him of the sunshine and the sweet love that these three women have been spreading all over us ... So, the religious part of these ceremonies commemorating the departing of our dearly beloved forebears ... is not so much in the ritual as in the spiritual; begot of love of present-past-and future being ... a love ruled not by brain or reason but by beat of heart, which binds a Mussalman - a Christian - or a Hindu! ... When human heart beat in tune, the differences of colour, caste, heredity of the flesh-built bodies ... are transcended and such hearts defy such differences!

Apart from the marginalisation of the act of ritual by foregrounding the trope of the "spiritual", what is also **significant** here is the elision of the question of caste in order to inhabit the more secularised and broad based space of being Hindu. This transference is one of the strategies of self the contemporary Brahmin engages consistently in while negotiating its caste self. Thus, moving on to what he terms a more "direct handling" of the Christian friend's question, the judge explicitly foregrounds an imaging of the self as Hindu:

These ceremonies in general and the annual ceremonies to commemorate the memory of our dear departed relatives in particular [are all] not entirely a matter of abstract discussion and cool reasoning ... The religion of the Hindus is so universally applicable in respect of the fact that it not only points out that while Science is but Relative Truth, Religion is absolute truth for all time; but it emphasises, nay, reinforces the tenets of all other creeds and religions which have faith and belief in all our ONE-MAKER!!! Science, by its own history, is truth, but nevertheless, relative to the limitations of resources and accoutrements in point of instruments and implements accessible to man for each phase of man's history! — But Religion is absolute truth for all times! Look here! (pointing to **Radhakrishnan's** portrait hanging ..) — a Hindu engaged by Britain of all countries,

to teach all Oxford in the subject of Comparative Study of Religions! (Pointing to ... portrait of Gandhi) the mute suffering humanity all over this war-ridden earth looking up to another great Hindu to usher in an era of peace and plenty, governed by AHIMSA and TRUTH! — should convince you ... that "When the Heart reigns rampant, Reason grovels Couchant!" (capitalisation in the original).

Now, if Kailasam was willing to dismiss and disown the contemporary 'degenerate' state of the Brahmin "priestcraft", DVG is more sympathetic and willing to accommodate the priests in the imagination of the community. Indeed, it appears that the latter was in some sense responding to Kailasam himself, for he employs the term "priestcraft" which is Kailasam's very own. In his memoirs of Shastri that we called attention to earlier, DVG narrates the following episode. In a Brahmin gathering, when a high-ranking Brahmin government official ridiculed the priests saying that they had no knowledge of the Shastras and that they offered their services in a mechanistic manner, Shastri is known to have retorted:

Tell me, how much do you pay your *hajaama* fa rather contemptuous way of addressing a barber, in fact the caste profession itself] for his services? It is a *Paavali* [in the earlier system of measure of currency, a *Paavali* was equivalent to the present quarter of a rupee], isn't it? Now, how much do you offer the priest as *Dakshine*? It's a *Paavali* again, is it not? Why is that you, who do not expect any great scholarship from your *hajaama* in return for a *Paavali*, expect it from the poor Brahmin priest? Leave that aside - if you are so keen in religious matters, how much time do you spend in a week reflecting upon religious or scriptural issues? (DVG 1997: 436-7).

In fact, DVG proposes an eight-point charter (*ibid.* 370-1) in order that the Brahmin priests could improve their "pathetic economic status" and also, more importantly, remove the contempt of being called the practitioners of "priest-craft". The charter, broadly, emphasises the need to reconcile the two Brahmin personas, with the priests being advised to determinedly stick to their calling (one that ought to remain a service, which does not seek returns even in times of duress such as the contemporary times) while the secular Brahmin is implored to preserve the value of the way of life of the *Vaidika* (priestly) Brahmin by according the latter an exalted status. DVG even seeks to deploy the imagination of being Hindu in arguing for the importance of such Brahmins:

[Moreover] nobody should feel that the tradition of the Vedas and Shastras concerned only the Brahmins. Their protection is the duty of the entire Hindu creed, for it is a property that belongs equally to all the Hindu Varnas. Why just the Hindu society, they are a great treasure to the entire world. The *Vaidika* Brahmin, if anything, functions only as a trustee in this matter. He is somebody who protects his traditions of knowledge and customs for the well being of the entire

people. *Brahmanasamrakshane* [protecting both the Brahmin person and the Brahmin persona] is essential, thus, for the benefit of the Hindu society in its entirety, and for the well being of the entire world (*ibid.*: 374).

The negotiations over the space of being and becoming Brahmin were thus multiple and varied. We have been **encountering** - in the foregoing but also in the previous chapters - the secularising Brahmin self across the spectrum of negotiations that the Brahmin identity is forced to contend with. The secularising Brahmin self attempts to reconfigure its **Brahminness** so as to more adequately respond to the demands of the modern situation, and in the process actively strives to displace and marginalise competing constructions of the Brahmin self. The contestation, as we have seen, is as much against the external 'others' that seek to categorise it as it is against the other competing internal 'others' that seek to authorisably speak on behalf of the Brahmin. There are some reminders with regard to this play of identities impinging on the personhood of the contemporary Brahmin that need mentioning, before we proceed to an analysis of the self-descriptions of the respondents themselves. They have to do with the limits of representability, of the legitimacy of these identity manoeuvres in the eyes of the Brahmin community as a whole and of its textured nature.

One is the gentle proscription that *speaking on behalf of*, most certainly in the case of the modern Brahmin self, need not translate itself into or become equivalent for *speaking as* (leave alone *speaking for*) the Brahmin. This is linked up with an associated point, namely, that even as the secularised Brahmin self is consciously seeking to distance itself from given, pejorative imaginations - often but by no means exclusively linked to the non-Brahmin othering - the selfhood that get to be postulated is not thereby an alienated subjectivity. It is not a simple rejection of the Brahmin identity *tout court*, not even a refusal to inhabit or even take on that space. The reworking of the self-perception of being Brahmin is a *legitimised* enterprise - in that the refusal to follow everyday caste rules or question the traditional structures of authority is all within the limits of tolerance. What is not within the limit however is the breaking of the rule of endogamy, an act that continues to remain the clearest statement of dissent. However, as a respondent pointed out (cited later in the chapter) the limits of tolerance keep shifting.

Another reminder has to do with the fact that the emergent Brahmin self is not by itself a monolithic and coherent entity that encompasses all those Brahmin individuals who undergo a process of secularisation and individuation. Even within this space, we

come across a textured and differentiated spectrum, with individuals negotiating with their own self-identification of being Brahmin in different ways. The heterogeneity **that** marks this emergent self can be seen as a testimony to the deep impact that modernity has had on the Brahmins. Nonetheless, even as we take note of its heterogeneity, one could identify the larger matrix that unifies and renders this self a sociologically identifiable entity. It is in the direction of such an identification that we shall move in the sections that follow.

II

Regrouping the strategies of Brahmin selfhood

Recuperating from our discussion thus far, the primary strategies of the self that the Brahmin works with can be mapped as the following.¹¹ The persona of **the** contemporary Brahmin that comes to be thus posited lends us a determinate sense of the enunciations of the respondents as they seek to reflect on their identity of being Brahmins.

Firstly, the Brahmin begins to articulate himself in the modern condition as being a 'self under siege'. Even as the secularising Brahmin would like to be seen as operating in spaces that are beyond the pale of caste signification, the vehemence of the non-Brahmin articulation forces him to confront his 'Brahminness' as the prime marker of self-identification. As the South Indian Brahmin official whom we encountered in **the** beginnings of the fourth chapter (pp.151-2) suggested, this self under duress (or siege) sees no hope for its future, particularly since the modern state itself is seen **to** be enthusiastically complicit in the processes of othering the Brahmin. More acutely, as we saw in the last chapter, the associational endeavours foreground and feed off such imaginations of a self under siege.

Secondly, the Brahmin self accepts, to a great extent, the image of the 'oppressor' that the non-Brahmin articulation builds for it. The Brahmin actively participates, as we saw in the case of Kailasam for instance, in othering itself. Of course, such a self-evaluation comes to Brahmins even independent of the non-Brahmin articulation; for, the intellectual resources that the two were drawing from were largely the same, namely, the modern grounds of reflexivity and accountability in the public sphere. Accordingly, the

¹¹ Note this section compresses much that is derived from the previous chapters and the present ongoing one.

construction of a 'past' that was abominable because it was seen to have been organised around the 'caste system' is shared by both; and, what is more, both see the 'oppressor Brahmin' as a 'degenerate Brahmin' in that the former represents a distortion of what was originally a well-intended system of identification and principle of organisation of social life. However, the contemporary Brahmin denies this 'oppressor' status a structural coevalness in time, in that it is claimed that although Brahmins have been generally oppressive, it is no longer the case that they are so. The Brahmin's own life situation of secularisation and individuation suggests to him the impossibility and the undesirability of successfully enforcing the caste norms upon oneself and on others.

Thirdly, feeding off and into the foregoing, the Brahmin - both at the register of his individual self and at the level of the association - also sets up a distinction between the 'ideal' Brahmin (the *idea* of being Brahmin) and the 'real' (the empirically available Brahmins, with all the frailties and corruptions of being human) and argues for the former space of conduct and identification. Here the Brahmin is turned into a value (or valuation) that is detached from the fact of birth. It is asserted that merely because a person is born into a Brahmin family does not automatically render him a Brahmin; indeed that in order to become a Brahmin, the individual should acquire an inventory of qualities. Consequently, anybody (irrespective of where he is born) can become a Brahmin, and the birth-acquired Brahmin identity is just that - a mere label. What matters therefore is whether one has the qualities becoming of a Brahmin, and not whether one is born a Brahmin. The Brahmin identity is thus universalised detaching it from its several or particularising specificities.

Fourthly, following from all the above, the emergent Brahmin self seeks to keep its caste identity under constant erasure or at least seeks to displace and marginalise it in its modes of self-retrieval and self-perception. Since the identity of being Brahmin is increasingly made to take on a normative and evaluative load, the descriptive axis of the label is made to look like either marginal or redundant. Thus, as the Headmaster Nanjundaiah (cited in the fourth chapter, p. 152) states, its descriptive value is nothing more than being a "list" of people - a mere 'association' rather than being a 'community'. What then is made to take centre stage in the Brahmin self-imagination is its secularising function - of being Indian, Kannadiga or even Hindu at one level and of being a bureaucrat, lawyer or teacher etc. at another. This in many ways also enables a recuperation of the Brahmin self as a mere associational affinity even as one can and

ought to ideally aspire to **Brahminness** in its ideal sense. The ambit of this articulation resolves many of the tensions that the Brahmin persona is forced to address in the contemporary context, even as it restructures the modern Brahmin identity in important ways – making possible certain enunciations and forbidding others, even rendering some more legitimate than others and some more normatively defensible than others.

One can, for sure, profitably make sense of the emerging contours of this identity and identification as constituting a will-to-legitimate, especially in the face of contestation. For, as we have tried to demonstrate particularly through the course of the fourth chapter and beyond, the secularising attributes of the Brahmin situation did act as a highly utilitarian cultural resource that was put to use in the emerging public sphere of print and officialdom. The position(s) that the Brahmin had begun to inhabit largely as a result of his status as one mediating tradition and modernity had endowed him with great capacities to articulate such realities to the remaining population. The non-Brahmin articulation was definitely a queering of this pitch, but as far as the status of being Brahmin was concerned this was a position of power that was at once ubiquitous and far-reaching. The attempt to speak from a position that is, as it were, '*de-casted*' almost always gave it the power of an universal self-definition, and which often forced the non-Brahmin articulation into defending (what from the Brahmin viewpoint seemed to be) its sectarian agendas. As we saw, the non-Brahmin articulation as well as other caste communities did perceive and resent such a mediating role presumed by the Brahmin, but were not always successful in avoiding the restrictions of that enclosure.

Nonetheless, it is greatly important to recognise that these processes impinging on caste action were even beyond the ability of the Brahmin to mediate and contain. What is more, it is this inability that explains the deeply ambivalent relationship that the Brahmin entertains vis-a-vis his own casteness - with the identification of being Brahmin, that is. Thus, even as he seeks to mediate the realities of the others, his own sense of being gets mediated and transformed. He too finds himself to be an inexorable part of the very process that asks questions about his own casteness. The terms of this interrogation would also come from 'the others' of the modern Brahmin self - primarily the consistency of the non-Brahmin construction and the changing role of the state. We here suggest ways of making sense of this range of action-patterns that obtain within the space of the modern Brahmin identity. Broadly, it would be within the terms of this architectonic that one should receive the narrations and self-descriptions of modern

contemporary Brahmins, the more precise contours of which we shall present in the sections that follow.

Subjected to such processes, most Brahmins strive to avoid speaking as a caste subject. Their caste **identification** is circumscribed to the 'private' realm, being acknowledged as important only when discussing matters pertaining to marriage, for instance, or while detailing individual decisions to either give up or conform to the daily rituals ordained for Brahmins. This is all the more stark when we witness almost all the Brahmin intellectuals and the public persona writing and articulating, even at the height of the non-Brahmin movement, an almost complete silence vis-a-vis that challenge, which in many ways sought to make the Brahmin take on his caste self as his primary identity. In fact, there is very little of consequence that is said about the non-Brahmin challenge in their writings. While individuals like Kailasam and B. M. Srikantiah never brought themselves to engage frontally with the non-Brahmin articulation, Tataiah, for one, was willing to take on the non-Brahmin challenge more directly. However, all these personages were all seeking a space that they thought would be beyond the influences and imperatives of caste.

In a manner of speaking, they were always-already secularised owing to the spaces they inhabited. Even the most assertive public defenders of the Brahmin cause, like Tataiah, remained distinct from the enunciatory space of the Brahmin caste association activist. This is an important distinction, for while a caste association activist is definitionally required to not only speak *on behalf of the* caste self but also *as the* caste self, this is a positionality that the secularising Brahmin is unwilling to take as his own. What's more, as we sought to disclose in the previous chapter, even the space of the caste association had to be re-forged and re-articulated by the Brahmin for the very idea of a Brahmin association was being rendered illegitimate at their point of inception. The new spaces that the Brahmin individuals found themselves in provided them with fresh markers of self-identification, and it is these identities that they foreground while negotiating with the non-Brahmin challenge and their own positionality of being Brahmins. Nonetheless, the very fact that most such secular spaces were peopled almost exclusively by Brahmins themselves renders the secular self that emerges as one that is deeply Brahmin-ised; and it is such a naturalisation of secular spaces as one's own that also works to erase the casteness of such spheres. Accordingly, for the modern Brahmin any suggestion that he is still acting as a Brahmin - *as a caste self* - comes as a surprise,

an accusation. The caste identity, as far as he is concerned, is merely a "list" (an associational sense of belonging, which holds no moral authority either over him or for him) to which he, purely by the accident of birth, belongs.

Irrespective of such strategies to marginalise the significance of his caste self and displace it on to the terrain of an associational identity, there are other compulsions that oblige the Brahmin to come to terms with a Brahminness translated as a sense of being a community - that is, as a moral collective that constitutes one's primary reservoir for meaning-making and also obtains as the chief provider of material resources. On the one hand, these compulsions are concretised by the imperatives of the non-Brahmin othering, since for the latter the Brahmin represents a focal point of both moral collective and associational hegemony. On the other hand, the Brahmin's own life trajectories emblemise aspects of existence which, more often than not, entail spaces marked out as distinctively or exclusively Brahmin. These manifold demands on the Brahmin self leads the modern Brahmin to remain **definitionally** equivocal vis-a-vis his Brahminness. Interestingly therefore, there is no singular, unified and coherent Brahmin self that emerges as a response to such challenges. The Brahmin self inhabits a contradictory and ambivalent space, drawing upon a spectrum that implicates both senses of community and senses of association. Note the point is not that each Brahmin individual can be plotted somewhere along this spectrum; not even that each such individual deliberates, according to the demands of the context, to inhabit one sense rather than the other. The ambivalence is more fundamental than that. One comes across rather blatant instances of the will to hegemonise, but equally frequently there are instances wherein the Brahmin remains truly unsure as to what to do about a Brahminness that the modern normative order despises so completely.

It is this embedded equivocation, an oscillating sense of self, which we witness in the narrations and self-descriptions of our respondents. The rest of the chapter is a description of this, and brings to a head the dynamics of identity that we have representing in the foregoing pages and chapters. More frontally, we engage the question of what it is to be a Brahmin today - a question informed by the contexts we have been recapitulating and testifying to secular processes of transition and self-identification within the community. The focus will be on the differential investments that they make on the category and identity of being Brahmin, as well as on the varied reasoning that is

offered by way of negotiating between the self and its others. The delineation is divided into shorter sections, each informing and interjecting the others.

III

On being and becoming Brahmin: the oscillations of the respondents

The perception of a self under siege comes fairly automatically for the respondents. It was largely while responding to the question "How would you characterise the Brahmin community of today?" that this perception is foregrounded. However, this evaluation of the state of self and community is circumscribed to the contemporary moment, even to certain states within the contemporary moment. There evidently is a "pre" phase to this moment of siege, as they see it, as indeed a "post" to this moment. We shall venture to describe these constructions herein.

A sixty-two year old respondent, a practicing advocate and well-known singer, stated:

"Blame it on Brahmin" is the catch-all mantra in the country today. The atmosphere is so vitiated that for anything and everything that is affecting the society, Brahmin-bashing is taken to be an adequate explanation. We have a proverb in Kannada that reflects this state very well - *anishtakkella shaneeshvarane kaarana* [For all ills, *Shani* {a god, but one with an innate propensity for harm} is responsible]. Brahmins are reduced to the state of being the *shani* of this society.¹²

The sense of being a scapegoat, an identity therefore under siege contains many facets and is often articulated as being total and incessant. An erudite respondent described in detail the various ways in which Brahmins are being attacked:

The attack comes from various directions and threatens the community in all walks of life. We are a community that is excessively dependent on education to eke out a livelihood and that is why we are predominantly middle class. But because of the reservation policy, Brahmin students, even if they score 90 percent, fail to get into professional courses, which render their future very bleak. Brahmin students are even systematically discriminated against - they are given fewer marks so that they can never make it to the top ranks. I see it happening in my own college and also when I go for annual evaluation to the university. There is a collective conspiracy all around to exclude

¹² Interview with Mr. Subramanya, 30/01/2000. As already disclosed in Ch. 3 (fn. 47), the respondent is a - inactive - member of the AKBMS. He came to Bangalore in the early 1970s seeking to further his career in music and has been a Bangalorean ever since. Even as he actively repudiated the significance of caste - in his personal life, as indeed in the affairs of the public - he was very keen on knowing the researcher's caste background — not only whether he is a Brahmin but also to which caste among Brahmins he belonged. He showed a rather deliberate knowledge about the particular castes of the Brahmins he spoke of, and was keen to make it a point to mention it each time. Of course, he insisted that he gathers such information for curiosity. Himself a Smartha Brahmin, he was a veritable fund of stories, anecdotes, origin stories etc. concerning the different Brahmin castes.

Brahmins from the mainstream. The idea is simple - deny education to Brahmins, and you have strangled the community. We neither have money nor the acumen to do anything else. We cannot become rowdies or racketeers because our upbringing doesn't allow that. Where does one go?

Politically we are decimated. Being a mere three to four percent of the population, we can never hope to have any say in democracy. Because democracy is basically oppression of the minorities. And we are so conscientious about the country that we are very bothered about population explosion - family planning is a major success in our community making us a fast dwindling entity. In two centuries or so, there will not be any Brahmins left in this country. Muslims can go on producing children and make our Hindu country Islamic, but Brahmins who are the protectors and perpetrators of the great *sanatoria dharma* [the ancient religion - primarily referring to Brahmin-centric Hinduism] are getting decimated. The so-called Dalits and non-Brahmins, instigated by the unscrupulous politicians, are targeting us for anything and everything. They think that we have oppressed them for the last 2000 years and that it is **payback time**. There is only venom against us in society.

Furthermore, many respondents in the course of conversations pointed to the "demeaning" representation of the figure of the Brahmin in popular cultural constructions. This is an issue that the AKBMS has also fought against intermittently. What hurts them the most, a respondent pointed out, is the fact that many a time it is Brahmins themselves who participate in such constructions:

You just open your mouth and you are ridiculed for being Brahmins. There is only Brahmin-bashing that happens. In cinema, it is only the Brahmins who are pointed finger at. There were many movies that were banned because they made fun of other people. But you have a series of Kannada films like *Samskara* and *Phaniyamma* targeting the Brahmins but they won awards - all in the name of being intellectual or art movies. The irony of it was that all such films were made by Brahmins and Brahmins themselves saw the film three or four times. They all thought they were making a statement - they wanted to tell the world that they are no longer Brahmins. That irritates me to no end. But for those who care, survival itself has been rendered so difficult that there is no time to react in any organised manner. Neither do we have numbers nor money. So Brahmin-bashing is a fashionable political gimmick and they are also very sure that they won't be resisted. ... If you look at the history of Brahmin-blaming, the front-runners will all be Brahmins themselves who will be turning themselves upside down to convince the so-called oppressed about their de-Brahminised credentials ... It is a criminal offence to abuse a *Holey* (an untouchable caste) by calling him a 'Holey', but if you abuse a Brahmin by calling him a Brahmin one is called a reformer!

¹³ Interview with Mr. Padmanabha, 24/03/2000. Forty eight years old, Mr. Padmanabha is a Madhva Brahmin hailing from North Karnataka, and teaches biology in a Lingayath-owned under-graduate college in Bangalore.

¹⁴ Interview with Ms. Spandana, 15/08/2000. Spandana, a thirty eight year old Shivalli Madhva (married to a Shivalli Smartha) is a housewife. Her husband is self-employed with uncertain income levels. She is a graduate and previously worked in a secondary school.

The foregoing is only a glimpse of the more intensely articulated reflections of the experience of siege. What **further** deepens this mentality, as the above cited respondent points out, is the inclination on the part of many Brahmins themselves to participate in othering the Brahmin self and to **refuse** to own up their Brahmin identity. But as we have been asserting and will become apparent, this refusal to own up the self and identity of being Brahmin is inherent to the contemporary Brahmin self - even to those who articulate deeply felt perceptions of siege. The difference could only be a matter of level or range, depending on the definitions of 'Brahminness' that one works with. A seventy-year-old respondent marks out the 'beginnings' of this moment of siege:

It is when the 'economic' takes over that the crisis **for** the Brahmin community began. We, as a community, were always bothered only about the pursuit of knowledge and the society recognised it by giving us the *Rajashraya* [Shelter of the kings] through *Brahmadevas* [gifts of land] and other such gifts. And obviously we were never expected to look after the lands, or engage in any manual labour directly. There was a group of people who were asked by the society to do that. Everything was thought of in terms of the whole. The tiller thought, "He doesn't till; it is I who should till the land". Nobody questioned the basis of *Chaturvarna* [the four-fold varna scheme] because it was the most natural thing to do. Neither did the Brahmin feel superior because he was a scholar, nor did the Shudra think that he was lowly because he was tilling the land. But then the partitional thinking got in, and the 'everybody is equal' logic came about. So the others began to think, "If he doesn't till the land and I do, why should he be the land-owner and not myself?" This logic spread to other spheres of life, aided by the British's policy of divide and rule and later by our very own politicians who saw an easy scapegoat in Brahmins to further their careers.

The egalitarian moment confounded the Brahmin community, assert our respondents. One began his testimony rather eloquently stating:

Brahmins are at the crossroads today. They are not sure which path to take. Indeed they are not even certain that there are such choices available. They could be mirages that don't in fact exist.

This respondent, a sixty-two year old Srivaishnava Brahmin, is a retired officer of the state-owned life insurance behemoth, the Life Insurance Corporation of India. Typifying his generation of Brahmin men, he migrated from his village near Hassan early in his life to Bangalore pursuing his college education. After the completion of his degree, he

¹⁵ Interview with Mr. Srirangan, 16/04/2000. As already indicated in the previous chapter (fn. 28), this respondent, a Srivaishnava Brahmin, continues to work as a tax consultant and an insurance agent. He was an active founder member of a Brahmin association of his locality. One of his sons married a non-Brahmin girl some ten years ago, and the respondent still feels embittered about it. His other two sons are married within the caste.

¹⁶ Interview with Mr. Prakash, 22/07/2000. We have already encountered this respondent in Ch. 3 (fn. 34).

joined the LIC from where he has retired recently. The translation of the capital resources available at the disposal of the family too has been remarkably typical of the larger trajectory of the community itself. While the respondent's parents were agriculture dependent (nonetheless as non-direct participants), he translated those resources into education and government employment for himself. He owns a house in a middle class locality in Bangalore. Being a beneficiary of the welfare state's governance agenda, the next generation in his family has successfully benefited from subsidised education and has now transcended its dependence on the state. Two of his sons are based in the US, while the third one works as a journalist with a national daily in Bangalore. Now retired, the respondent regularly visits his sons abroad. Thus although his eloquent delineation of the contemporary moment of "crisis" of the Brahmin community that we cite below apparently has very little to do with his own life situation, he evidently shares the space of perception of a siege along with his fellow-Brahmins. The respondent however has remained an inactive member of the Hebbar Srivaishnava Sabha for long.

What is more, for him, the 'crisis' or 'disarray' (turns of phrase that he himself identifies) characterising the community has to do with something definitionally intrinsic and inherent to the Brahmin persona:

We are all prisoners of our values, values that are ingrained in us by the upbringing that our families and our community provide us with. We should behave appropriately, we should be pure, we should not speak harsh and inappropriate, vulgar things, we should not adopt devious means to achieve anything, our intellect is our primary and only instrument for doing well in life, we belong to a community that has given the others values of life and indeed has lived a life according to those values. In short, we have been given a *samskara* (codes of conduct) which hangs heavy over our heads. I am carrying all that baggage and strive to give it to my sons.

I consciously used the word 'prisoners', for they now [in today's life] work more as a restriction than as a facilitator. When I see other communities, like the Vokkaligas or Lingayaths, the characteristic of their community is to be a go-getter. And in the present context because of that, I feel, they are able to get on much better than us.

Education has remained, from times immemorial, the only pursuit for the Brahmins - the one and only thing that they have pursued with passion ... It used to work just fine earlier. Population was less and so was competition. They used to work hard, be intellectually unmatched and set very high standards for themselves and the society. But that doesn't work in all ages. The demand of the times is one of flexibility. And that is where I think other communities have scored over us. Brilliance and education have not remained the exclusive property of our community. There are brilliant people among Gowdas [those belonging to the Vokkaliga fold] too. And they have something else too. If you get the first rank in the CET [the Common Entrance Test that the Karnataka Government holds for entry into professional (engineering and medicine) colleges] then

fine. If not, give Rs 50,000/- as donation, and join. We have no such capacity. If you cannot get the first rank, than you are dead and I have seen absolute duds among Brahmins.

While a Gowda would say, "OK, if you can't get a rank, then open a provision stores!" the Brahmin will tell his son, "It is your karma that you couldn't get a rank. You will have to repay that!" And that will be the end of his life. He begins to blame himself for being born a Brahmin, and his family starts feeling guilty. We have become like that *pandita* of *Panchatantra*.¹⁷

Earlier, there was a belief that if you give a Brahmin a job he will do it honestly and sincerely. And the Brahmins reciprocated such trust. Now all that is gone. Look at the Bangalore City Corporation, where you find less and less Brahmin officers ... If you become an engineer, you can keep digging like a bandicoot. Now no morals exist there. I am not saying those who are there are bad, but they are not brought up with those values. A Brahmin engineer cannot become corrupt to such an extent. Even if he does, his values start eating him up with guilt unlike others who think that there is a lot of public money and they must get their share of the booty. It is a kind of torture for us - *that* way of life is not right but *this* way of life cannot happen. We still think, we are Brahmins and so things must be delivered to us. But that era is over.

We have become like the proverbial horse wearing a bind. The bind allows the horse to see only one path, the one that is straight ahead - both metaphorically and literally. When that path either comes to an end or is strewn with too many hindrances, the horse, because of the bind, neither can physically see that there are other paths too; nor, even if it does, is very comfortable in pursuing them (*ibid.*).

Another respondent, a proprietor of a small-scale industry, also echoes this conflict between the ethics of the times and that of the Brahmin selfhood:

The Dharma of this era is economic. Today finance speaks from the position of authority, but the Brahmin's position of authority came only from religion. This is a period of transition during which the Vyakhidharma [Dharma of the person] of the Brahmin is clashing with the Lokadharm [Dharma of the times or era]. We are like the Brahmin who sports cropped hair but there will be a tuft hidden inside that.¹⁸

What gets instituted here is a very strong notion of self as *community* - the self-identity of being Brahmin being accorded with an inalienable sense of a moral collective, a social morality that is the basis of self-description and meaning-making in life. This notion of the self is so foundational and rooted that the Brahmin persona fails comprehensively to modify and change according to the changing rules of the external

¹⁷ The reference is to the parable in the *Panchatantra* in which a scholar (a *pandita*) boasts with the boatman about his multifaceted scholarship. Midway through the stream the boat begins to sink; and when the boatman enquires whether he knows how to swim, the scholar replies in the negative. The boatman, pitying the uselessness of all the erudition that the scholar has gained, swims to safety.

¹⁸ Interview with Mr. Diwakar, 10/04/2000. Mr. Diwakar, 60 years, owns a small-scale industry in an area which was till recently perceived to be the outskirts of Bangalore city. He has been the President of the confederation of small-scale industries of Karnataka. He is active in the effort to publish and popularise Vedas in Kannada and Karnataka, and has also been an active participant in various classical music fora in the city.

world. The resultant sense of siege can also be characterised, therefore, as springing from an inability on the part of the Brahmin persona to meet the new demands that are placed on it. There is something intrinsic, even if the object of conscious socialisation, that bears on the circumstance of being Brahmin - namely, the transmission of (and into) a *samskara*. But this process now finds itself difficult to navigate through the external world, which has begun to play itself out by new rules. This 'new' normative world, supposedly, has come into existence without any agential intervention on the part of the Brahmin self. The Brahmin persona and its normative framework, whose value and status had been accepted by the society at large, are no longer either legitimate or being legitimated by the present.

It is primarily this 'crisis of legitimacy' of the self as Brahmin that confronts the respondents. In fact, the narrative of a painful and sudden break, as it were, from an age when caste operated as a non-hierarchical arrangement (or rather as an archimedean instrumentality, uninformed by notions of either equality or inequality) to an age when the "talk of equality" pervades caste is fairly evenly spread across the respondents. The narrative, of course, is often variously inflected or foregrounded through such ideas as "social reform", "equality", "precedence of the economic", "predominance of equality over contentment" and so on. A respondent, one who is a well-known Kannada writer and aged about 84 years, put it thus:

Brahmins were made to feel anxious right from the moment the British came to India. They brought with them the idea that caste is divisive and Brahmins are exploiting the others etc. Don't take me wrong here. I am not saying that what they said was wrong and caste system should have continued. All I am pointing to is that there was no notion of high and low before that. The Brahmin did what he was supposed to do and the Shudra did what he was supposed to do. **And** nobody thought one was above the other. Brahmin had accepted caste but others did too. Others did not feel targeted by Brahmins; they didn't see it as oppression and saw it as natural. When all this talk about equality came in, both the upper and lower castes were equally confounded. Suddenly the Brahmin community was made to feel that they were doing something horrible and were a blot on the country etc. Simultaneously, the Shudras began to feel that they were being exploited, oppressed and suppressed by the Brahmins. But if you read history, it tells you that despite such allegations, it was the Brahmins who were at the forefront of eradicating untouchability, opening schools for Harijans etc. They were the first to understand the idea of equality and tried to reform themselves. But the notion of Brahmin oppression has stuck from then on and the governments and politicians have made ample use of this canard and have driven the community to desperation and to leaving the country in great numbers.

¹⁹ Interview with Ms. Savitri, 30/06/2000. As already mentioned, she is a well-known Kannada writer; and has had an urban existence all through her life, her father having been a government official in Mysore.

All the same, for many of these individuals, the sense of siege is not a personalised perception - in the sense that they, as individuals or even as persons located in a given familial or kin network context, do not feel beleaguered about their own life situations.

The sense of siege is then primarily about the idea and identity of **Brahminhood**, about bearing or carrying the weight of that identification itself. Of course, when it gets actualised into personal contexts, it is also then circumscribed into specific individuals occupying recognisable contexts. Thus, for instance, the articulation:

The crisis is primarily because Brahmins are not getting government jobs. Education is now available to all and there is competition. And by giving reservations according to caste and not looking at economic background, Brahmins further lose out. So those Brahmins who couldn't compete with others and create opportunities for themselves feel a sense of crisis. I have seen it in my legal profession itself. Recently there were recruitments held for vacancies in the lower level judiciary, and many of the Brahmin candidates did not qualify. Of course, many other non-Brahmin candidates who fared much worse than these people got through because of reservations. Then those who did not get the job said, "Oh, we are Brahmins and that is why we were denied". The crisis is for individuals like them who are average performers but cannot make a decent living because of policies like reservations.

But the moment of the present is yet constructed as being **fundamentally** opposed to the very idea of the Brahmin. Not surprisingly, this moment is also cast as being overdetermined by its casteness, and obtains as an important reminder of the resilience of caste in public life. The contemporary moment, it is repeatedly pointed out, does not allow them to obliterate the significance of caste, even as the latter is asserted as a goal towards which they (our respondents chiefly) strive hard and in a genuine spirit. More accurately, it does not allow them to treat their 'Brahminness' as a diminished emotive

She has been an active participant in different civic associations from very early on in her life. This engagement though excludes the space of the caste associations. Being a conscious decision - "I did not want to have anything to do with caste", she emphatically declared in the course of the interview - it made her refuse even an invitation to be the Chairperson of the Karnataka Brahmin Women's Convention that the AKBMS organised in the year 2000. These choices - of association and dissociation - indicate towards the boundaries that the secularising Brahmin self drew, and still draws in defining the question of what is to be a caste self. Clearly, it is not that she is participating in any unequivocal rejection of her Brahminness, of being a Brahmin self. Indeed many of the traditional significations marking the Brahmin persona - legitimated by notions of purity - were invoked in her narrative. In fact, in the course of the interview, she uttered many times over "I am proud to be a Brahmin. The word 'Brahmin' brings to my mind images of purity", and the marks of this self-identification also obtain in the statement quoted in the main text.

²⁰ Interview with Mr. Shivaram, 12/04/2000. This respondent is a retired civil court judge and a practicing advocate. Though a member of the Mulkanadu Maha Sabha, he prefers to be active in the activities of the Ramakrishna Mission since it does not "make much of one's caste" but "seeks to inculcate true Brahminical values in all irrespective of their caste".

and meaning-generating identity - to render, as it were, their Brahmin identity as a mere "list" to which they belong, an *associational* attribute they happen to have. As our respondents see it, the identity of being Brahmin that they carry is the primary tool of recognition as far as the outside world is concerned. Thus:

See... I am reminded of my caste when I have to fill up an application form, any form that is related with the government that is. You apply for a government job, school or college admission, loan from a bank, apply for a promotion - see it is only these places which ask for your *jati*, reminding me that I am a Brahmin. Otherwise, nobody asks me what my caste is or I don't ask people their caste before I sit next to them.²¹

And again, in this instance a Smartha housewife, that:

It is the government that gives birth to caste and keeps it alive. The government encourages caste. They make **tall** claims that ours is a secular nation but continuously talk of Brahmins, **Harijans**, Gowdas etc. Why is that? If the politicians stop talking about caste and stop using **it** for their petty election purposes, then caste will vanish in ten years. See in our house, we have never followed any caste. We treat everybody the same way. **In** fact my own daughter married a non-brahmin and once we knew that the boy is cultured, educated and comes from a good family we had no **problems**.~~

On a more generalised axis, however, it is asserted that not only has the identity of caste changed in the contemporary situation, also that the play of caste identities (although ever present) has lost its meaning and significance:

It is only to justify the votebank politics and reservations that caste is made out to be oppressive and all that. Otherwise what is caste? It is just a group. To talk about caste in this age is blasphemy. It is long dead and gone. Caste has become like being journalists, engineers etc. If people permit, even an IAS officer's son will automatically become an IAS officer, like the Brahmin's son becoming a Brahmin. I don't do rituals, I am not a teacher. Thus I do not have the merit to be called a Brahmin. It just comes along shedding all its original values. But I still get called Brahmin only to deny my legitimate share.²²

Thus the respondents seek to project the 'external' world around them as requiring that they make sense of their lives and life-worlds primarily and exclusively as being Brahmins - from the standpoint of being fully embodied as caste selves. And yet, this demand is being received as inimical to a sense of self that the Brahmins - our

²¹ Interview with Mr. Ravi, 20/04/2000. He is a Madhva Brahmin aged about 50 years. He is a clerk with a nationalised bank. He is an active founder member of a locality-based Brahmin association in Bangalore.

²² Interview with Ms. Seeta, 30/01/2000. She is 58 years old and, as already pointed out, is a housewife. She came to Bangalore along with her husband, who was seeking to improve his career prospects. She is not a member of any caste association.

²³ Interview with Mr. Nagesh, 19/10/2000. Mr. Nagesh is a Smartha Brahmin, aged 59 years. He retired as a senior clerk in the Life Insurance Corporation of India.

respondents primarily - seem to be (pre-) possessing or at least voicing, one that oscillates between a conception of identity approached as a communitarian attribute and as an associational identification. On the one hand, it is antithetical to that sense of self which seeks to derive a moral universe from a putatively ascribed Brahminness - self as community - and which, in a transformed idiom, now constructs (or accepts) the Brahmin as an oppressor, an usurper of life-opportunities. On the other hand, it stands in sharp contrast to an inclination to render the idea of caste as a mere associational sense of belonging which is taken on (like being a journalist or engineer) without any moral or normative hold over that self-identification. Consequently, the beleaguered status of the contemporary Brahmin self, one that is pretty marked out in the self-descriptions of our respondents.

The 'Brahminness' that they see themselves as vested with is at once peripheral and central to their selfhood, and it is the terms of this equivocation that is sought to be further amplified in the following. Let us chart the space of denial, geared towards avoiding unambiguously inhabiting the identity space of being Brahmin. As we have shown, and as we shall further see, in describing their relationship with that identity space, our respondents seem to issue ~~off~~ a process of labelling.

"We are 'branded Brahmins' / We are branded as 'Brahmins' "

The relationship that modern-day Brahmins (and not just, one would think, our respondents, although the latter seem to offer particular maps of a more generalized subjectivity) have with their identity is marked by an unwillingness to take on the subject position that the status of being a Brahmin accords them. By arguing for a certain dynamic and mobile conception of the caste system in *some pre-*era, when Brahminhood could be conferred if and only when certain characteristics came to mark the person in question, they seek to distance themselves (both spatially and morally) from the **memory**, history and location of the Brahmin subject-position. Thus it is only in *the past-* of any such era (which roughly translates into the contemporary moment of Brahmin subjects, the existential and lived moment, that is) that the status and identity of being 'Brahmin' is held to be tacked on to the question of birth (or descent) and separated from personal exemplary attributes of the individual. Most of these subjects, significantly, go on to deny for themselves the Brahmin identity that is "thrust" upon them. In fact, a significant

number of our respondents termed this latter process as "labelling" ("They labelled us as Brahmins"²⁴) or "branding" ("We are branded Brahmins"²⁵).

Almost constitutively, every person who was approached began by suggesting that the researcher should not have come to him or her since *s/he* is not an '*appropriate*' or '*representative*' or '*adequate*' Brahmin. Everybody accordingly ventured a list of names of those whom they think are more completely Brahmins. Most of such 'appropriate' Brahmins would turn out to be mostly men who had taken a self-generated interest in the *Shastras* (classical texts) and thus known within their circles as those who could authoritatively speak for *real/Brahmins*, as ones authenticated by the classical texts. Significantly, however, this referential behaviour excluded both caste association activists as well as those who might be seen to be following everyday notions of purity-pollution as indeed commensal and marital restrictions (and whom one might characterise as 'traditional' Brahmins). Such a reordering of the parameters of appropriate conduct (as indeed of adequacy of self-identification) is indicative of the notions of community and identity that the contemporary Brahmins seek to imagine.

Thus, as already mentioned, in describing their own status as Brahmins, the respondents coined various characterisations like "the branded Brahmins", "the labelled Brahmins", "the so-called Brahmins" and so on. One respondent, while mapping an agenda for this researcher, suggested that a petition should be filed in the Supreme Court on the official identification of the community:

My own observation of the present-day Brahmins tells me that they cannot be called Brahmins by any stretch of imagination. And I am pretty certain that your study will also reach the same conclusion. Then, once you complete your thesis, you must approach the Supreme Court with a Public Interest Litigation.

You go to the court and tell them that since most of the Brahmins do not perform *sandhyavandane* [the daily ritual that the Brahmin males post-initiation are required to carry out] three times a day like the Muslims offer their *namaz* (prayer); since most of them do not wear their sacred thread; since most of them drink alcohol and eat meat; since they sit with the untouchables without caring for the norms of purity-pollution; since they no longer pursue knowledge for its own sake and contrarily pursue education to get a job; since they use abusive language like others; since many of them have taken up all kinds of proscribed occupations like working in shoe

²⁴ Interview with Mr. Santhosh, 12/02/2000. He is a Madhva Brahmin, aged 45 years, and works as an accounts officer with a garment export company.

²⁵ Interview with Mr. Kumaraswamy, 14/04/2000. As previously mentioned (Ch.3, fn.49), he is a 62 year old *Smartha* Brahmin. He retired as an accounts officer from a multi-national company located in Bangalore. He has been an active participant in the activities of the AKBMS, his own caste-specific association and the locality association.

companies; since their women wear jeans and work as models or even film stars; since they, instead of lighting the lamp as our tradition ordains, put out candle lights while celebrating their birthdays and so on so forth - this community should not be labelled as Brahmins. Merely because they are born in Brahmin families they do not become Brahmins. You can consult any *shastra* on this and it will tell you the same. And since this community is no longer Brahminical and does not follow any of the practices that make it Brahmin, they cannot be called as Brahmins. Therefore their rights should not be snatched away from them in the name of their caste.²

Echoing a similar sentiment was another respondent, a journalist:

I don't perform *sandhyavandane* everyday, leave alone my children's or grand children's generation. And that is the basic minimum one should do to be identified as a Brahmin. My grandchildren don't even know the caste the others say they belong to! If you talk about their sects, their *mathas* etc. they would be completely blanked out. Then what is the point in keeping this label on our head, which only works to our disadvantage? Then why do you call us Brahmins, only to suppress us?"

In this wake, since they themselves are *insufficiently* Brahmin, our respondents assert that the label of 'Brahminness' imposed are aimed primarily at debilitating them. Such an othering, they complain, continues to be attempted even after the Brahmins themselves have come a long way from the stereotypes that shore up the labelling. Even further, it is asserted that these negative representations are deployed in specific contexts and spaces in order that they serve the goal of defining Brahmins exclusively through their caste identity and, what is more, being constantly reminded of being so. For instance:

I first realised that I am a Brahmin and belong to a community that is discriminated against when I was denied a B.Com. seat in spite of having all the necessary qualifications. A fellow with 45 percent got in ahead of me. It was then I was made aware of my caste.²⁶

Likewise, here is a doctor comparing her work environment with that of her husband in reflecting on her status of being a Brahmin:

I work in a government hospital. The sense of being targeted is more acute. See, I was denied a promotion because an SC got it. I didn't feel strongly about it but wherever reservation is an issue, there it hits you. Government is so pro-them that you tend to feel threatened. Of course, beyond my own individual feelings, I think reservation is unfair to society at large because merit is

²⁶ Interview with Mr. Kumaraswamy, 14/04/2000. Biographical details are in the preceding footnote.

²⁷ Interview with Mr. Vishnumurthy, 26/10/2000. Fifty one year old Mr. Vishnumurthy is the editor of a local daily in Mysore. He is an active member of the Mysore Jilla Brahmana Sabha and the Mulkanadu Maha Sabha.

²⁸ Interview with Mr. Srinivasan, 25/10/2000. A 33 year old Srivaishnava Brahmin, he works as a human resources executive with a multinational company in Bangalore. A recent migrant to the city (one and a half year before), all his education has been at Chennai.

not given its due. It is driving Brahmins away from the government institutions. They are now thinking: go to places where merit matters. Our own institution is witnessing that - Brahmins are leaving one by one. Others, on the other hand, can't talk properly, can't speak English properly. So they would find it hard to get a job outside. The institution has suffered; there is a lack of excellence. One doesn't want to stretch oneself and improve because the positions are guaranteed, promotions are time-bound. They should also be worthy of their positions. It is increasingly becoming a mediocre institution. Even in terms of the work environment, my SC colleagues do not become friendly, are not open and transparent; in fact, it is far easier to communicate with a Brahmin colleague. Ethically too they are not up to the mark which may be because of their upbringing unlike Brahmins.

But my husband works for a multinational company. For him, his caste doesn't matter. Nobody asked him for his caste while applying or in his entire working life. It just doesn't enter his mind at all.²⁹

Circumscribing caste, privatising and erasing

Accordingly, most of the respondents suggest that outside of these spheres, caste - both as a principle of recognition and as a structure of legitimation - does not exist or should not matter. In fact, such a suggestion takes one or both of the following forms: that caste remains significant only within the privatised zones of family, matrimony etc. and/or that outside the sphere of government, caste is rendered insignificant and irrelevant and that it is the state which for its own reasons of expediency has kept caste alive. As one respondent, a senior journalist with an English newspaper, argued:

I come across people who are very critical of our practices like wearing the sacred thread or performing *sandhyavandane* etc. I myself have left all that for quite sometime now. But these religious practices are private and no one should get disturbed by it. Every caste has its own set of practices and nobody seems to get hassled by others continuing to practice them. And, moreover, community practices and ways of living are guaranteed by the constitution.

Another even delinked the issue of caste from those practices that are invariably seen as emanating from one's caste location:

My everyday beliefs, practices are personal and have got nothing to do with jati. And if you take a closer look, there is no uniformity among Brahmins too. Such beliefs and practices are diverse

²⁹ Interview with Dr. Rathna, 08/08/2000. She, a Smartha Brahmin, works for a specialised medical institution in Bangalore.

³⁰ Interview with Mr. Balan, 17/07/2000. Mr. Balan is an Iyer Brahmin, who has lived a large chunk of his professional life in Bangalore. Being a political and investigative journalist, he displayed a keen sense of awareness of the contemporary state of the Brahmin community in relation to the other caste communities and its relationship with the state. Accordingly, even as he is not a member of any caste association, he believes in the need for their existence - if only as a scarecrow.

within the community - say, for instance, among the Iyengars and the Smarthas. Cleanliness, rituals, food habits are all personal and have no caste monopolies.

What seems to be propelling such assertions is also the larger context of an increasing legitimacy attaching to discourse of Hindutva. This context enables another universalisation of the persona of the Brahmin, the terms of which is heralded as being available to anybody provided they take an interest in it. Since this is a theme to which we shall turn later on in the chapter, its discussion can be deferred. More pointedly, however, it can be pointed out that the strides - perceived to be remarkable - registered by the community in the new professional spaces opened up by a liberalising economy unfettered by government and the constraints of reservation has convinced the respondents that such spaces are unimpeded by the logic of caste. They seem to believe that this new economy will play a leading role in restoring their rightful place in society. The trend towards transnationalisation of the community called attention to in the chapter introducing the modern world of Brahmins (Ch. 3) - "Nobody asks your caste when you are applying for a visa. And once you leave India, you will forget your *jati*"³² - has also fuelled a sort of righteous indignation at the state of affairs and a renewed sense of assertion.

Let the Shudra shakti celebrate and rejoice its ascendance in the government, in government offices, in politics. It has not missed anybody that these are precisely the things that are beginning to rot. Let them pay the price for ejecting the Brahmin unfairly. They want democracy - so let the 96% decide for themselves and forget about the remaining four per cent. Let them rejoice becoming "Government Brahmins".

The phrase "Government Brahmins" - or the "*sarkaribrahmanaru*" in Kannada - is incidentally a coinage that is used by many of the respondents. It is used to refer to the dalits and other backward castes that have entered educational institutions, jobs in government services etc. through reservation quotas. For the respondents, they are the 'Brahmins' within the space of the government, receiving patronage of the administration on the ground of inheriting a certain caste identity (like the Brahmins themselves who were patronised by the kings earlier). The phrase packs a lot of derision and usually

³¹ Interview with Mr. Nagesh, 19/10/2000. Personal details presented in fn. 23 above.

³² Interview with Ms. Savitri, 30/06/2000. For personal profile, see fn. 19 above.

³³ Interview with Mr. Ravi, 20/04/2000. Personal details in fn. 21.

invites disdainful laughter in a Brahmin conversation.³⁴ This renewed sense of assertion and **confidence** is made possible by an ability to articulate a position beyond the nation-state, as a means of consolidating its social, symbolic and economic capital:

In the Silicon Valley there is no reservation. If you have merit, you will survive; otherwise you don't. ... Here you might de-recognise us on the basis of our caste, but we will always remain indispensable because of our brains. Why is Narayanamurthy drafted in the Bangalore Agenda Task Force [an ambitious project to develop Bangalore on the lines of Singapore], why is his opinion sought after for every policy initiative? When we were begging, everybody was anti-us; but now it is reversed.

You cannot forever rule the society with a crown, but it is possible with knowledge. And who else but the Brahmin is the knowledge centre? Who else but Brahmins have pursued knowledge for its own sake? The new economy they say is a knowledge economy. Advocating the power of knowledge, the new economy is again coming back to seek out the Brahmins.

Nevertheless, it is also the presence of a history of othering and its continuing significations that they have to contend with. A large number of the respondents themselves perceive the community in ways that are similar to the non-Brahmin articulation - namely, Brahmins as the fountainhead of the hierarchical system of caste, as perpetrators of inequality, the ultimate casteists, and so on. But they produce significant spins on this representation, in particular, by instituting a series of displacements ("not me, not here, not now" etc.). For the respondents, then, the quintessential 'Brahmin, the Oppressor' does not exist any longer.

Internalising or resisting the external categorisation?

Most of the respondents take the imagery of Brahmin oppression as an **irrefutable** fact of history, but actively seek to distance their own location and themselves from this figure. Even the act of retrieval of this 'oppressive Brahmin' is not uniform. Some

³⁴ A Dalit Kannada writer used this phrase - *Government Brahmana* as the title of his **autobiography**, primarily as an act of assertion and challenge against the derision. See Malagatti 1994; see also Siddalingaiah 1996.

³⁵ Interview with Mr. **Sadashivaiah**, 01/03/2000. As already disclosed (Ch. 5, fn.29), Mr. **Sadashivaiah** (about 60 years) is a successful industrialist and has been an important adviser to AKBMS in the recent years particularly on matters of preparing the Brahmin young men to become self reliant and shed their dependence on government jobs. He was the chief motivator of the grand show intended to kickstart such an agenda - the Vipra'97 - that the AKBMS organised in 1997 (which we also referred to in chapter five). The reference to Narayanamurthy in the voice just cited is to the chief mentor and brain behind *Infosys*, the Indian software company that has registered a great deal of success (as well as generating mythologies about itself). The company, as indeed Narayanamurthy, is perhaps the contemporary icons of the community. The number of respondents and caste journals that invoked his and his company's name has been significant.

retrieved this fact of caste discrimination as natural and inevitable in the times they occurred:

It is definitely possible that the Brahmins have oppressed. It is a human instinct that anybody with power tried to oppress those without and the others did not resist. It might have happened long ago. I have not seen it, I have not done it; neither have my father or grand father. But why accuse only Brahmins for caste exploitation? Every caste would have exploited every other caste below itself.

But now those things are no longer there, and are definitely impossible in cities. I go and eat at many of their places because they are not like the Holeyas and Madigas [untouchable or dalit castes basically] of earlier times. They are clean and even call our priests and our cooks on the occasions of the conduct of rituals.

For most others though, the exploitation was illegitimate and unacceptable, at least by today's standards:

I myself have witnessed my mother in law rinse the vessels washed by the maidservant. That was unnecessary. Earlier it seems they even had rules about the distance to be maintained between the low castes and the Brahmins. That was unfair.'

However, a number of caveats follow. It is claimed that in the present, 'caste' as a *social* principle structuring reality has lost its relevance and legitimacy; and that if it continues to, as a respondent put it, "rear its ugly and repulsive head"³⁶ then it is solely due to the votebank politics. While some call attention to the "fact" that *those* oppressed in the name of Brahminism were "pseudo-Brahmins", some others point out that the "discrimination" and the "denial" were only within the space of the sacred and not the secular sphere. References also get to be made about the need to make a distinction between "influence" and "domination" – that Brahmins wielded more of the former than the latter – and that one ought to judge practices only in terms of the "times" in which

³⁶ Interview with Ms. Spandana, 15/08/2000. For personal details, see fn. 14 above.

³⁷ Interview with Dr. Apoorva, 14/08/2000. The 35-year-old respondent is a Smartha Brahmin working in a government owned specialised hospital in Bangalore. She is not a member of any caste associations but the local Brahmin association did approach her family for membership. She and her husband have not become members only because they "don't find time to participate". But she knows the Brahmins families around well enough because she calls them for *arishina-kunkuma* widely prevalent practice among Brahmins wherein the Brahmin *mutthaid* married *and non* -widowed) women of the neighbourhood are called on auspicious days to partake the appropriate symbols of the *mutthaid* status - turmeric powder and vermilion (*arishina-kunkuma*) In fact it is these routinised ritualistic affairs that are still widely practiced which generate and preserve neighbourhood caste networks and are indeed a strong and reliable network in times when help is needed - from occasions like marriage to times of crisis. These informal networks work more reliably than formal associational or institutional networks such as the caste associations and the *mathas*.

³⁸ Interview with Ms. Swapna, 10/08/2000. She, a Madhva Brahmin aged 22 years, is a resident of a village near Shimoga. She is pursuing a post-graduate degree in Mangalore.

they obtain. All such constructions play an important role in formulating a picture of the "past", one relating to the community, for the respondents.

It all dates back to 2000 years ago when lots of interpolations happened. The vested interests within the Brahmin community like the self-styled scholars and pontiffs, twisted the original essence of Hindu *Dharma*. To further their own interests, they misinterpreted the *Varnashrama Dharma* into a system that accords primacy to the accident of birth. Lots of superstitious rituals were invented that did not have any sanctity in the Vedas, only to exploit the non-Brahmins who were not only ignorant but also innocent. That is when the others began to talk about Brahmins being "cunning, calculated, selfish, conservative people". But these were actually pseudo-Brahmins masquerading as Brahmins.

A former activist of the AKBMS proposes a more subtle distinction that would be required if one has to grasp the past of the Brahmin:

While trying to understand the Brahmin and his history, we have to make a distinction between what I call an "influence over" and "domination". While the Brahmin's role was understood as the former all along and was accepted as such by everyone including the non-Brahmin, the latter understanding is only recent.

Brahmins exercising "influence over" the society was only natural if you take into consideration the preoccupations of the community. They were the only learned class, who were devoted to the acquisition of knowledge. Look at their occupations - they were village teachers, priests, astrologers etc. So what else would one expect but an influence over the other castes? It is only in the fit of things that the Brahmins exercised a great deal of control. Obviously, there would have been black sheep among them who would have used this trust and confidence for selfish means, but why blame an entire community for that?

Understanding the legitimate influence that the community exercised over the rest as a practice of "domination" is only recent, and is put to only political uses. The fact that even those who abuse us on political platforms, the politicians, come to us for advice and counselling demonstrates that. Take any political leader worth his name; his personal assistants will all invariably be Brahmins.⁴⁰

Thus the benign and legitimate influence the Brahmins exerted over the rest of the society, one that was duly accepted by the others, is transformed into a fact of domination and exploitation merely by a change in perception. Such retrievals of the past of the community bear striking resemblance to the early nationalist deployment of the orientalist constructions of the Aryan (and later British) benevolent civilising mission.⁴¹ Even more pointedly, a respondent asked:

³⁹ Interview with Mr. Nagesh, 19/10/2000. A profile is in fn. 23.

⁴⁰ Interview with Mr. Muralidhar, 20/03/2000. He is a 42 year old Smartha Brahmin, working as an office manager in an academic institution in Bangalore. He took active part in the activities of the AKBMS in the early 1980s, particularly in seeking to mobilise Brahmins from across the state.

⁴¹ See Dirks (1996), Trautmann (1997), and Upadhyaya (2002) for an account of the various uses that the orientalist knowledge was put to.

But what is wrong in Brahmins dominating? They have not made any mass executions like Hitler did. They have not grabbed land. Brahmins from the beginning were selfish about only one thing - their quest for knowledge, *moksha* (personal salvation). It is precisely this attitude that nothing else but knowledge is power that brought them respect. They have never been rulers in the entire history of India. And no miniscule community, which makes up a mere four percent of the population, can command the remaining 96 percent to give it respect. If the others respected the Brahmins, if the British took them in all high positions, the others will have to explain why they did it and not the Brahmins. You cannot blame the Brahmins that they occupied all the positions.⁴²

Further, in what is perhaps a constitutive manoeuvre, a distinction is posited between a religious, priestly space of “denial” and a secular space of accommodation:

In so far as religion is concerned, we have been exclusivist and controlled everybody powerfully and been manipulative. The priestly class has been largely responsible for this. For instance, an astrologer would scare an illiterate non-Brahmin out of his wits. But I wouldn't agree that the non-Brahmins have been denied in other spaces like education. In fact, we have been extremely helpful in paying their fees and with practices like *Varanna*.⁴³

The respondents, accordingly, are quick to point towards their own individual pasts in documenting how denial was exclusively in the realm of the sacred and not in other realms. It is also insisted that even the former priestly form of restriction is steadily loosening out:

My father [who worked as a teacher in a school in a village near Mangalore] was a liberal. He used to take **non-vegetarian** food. He never followed rituals. He was known more as a teacher than as a Brahmin. He was never bothered about caste and he never attended Brahmin *sabhas* (congregations). He was active in the local *Bhajana Mandali* (a prayer congregation in which devotional songs are sung by the assembled) instead.

He had no restrictions on his students coming home and all caste students used to come in. It was his mother who used to ask those kids their caste; and my mother's mother [whenever she came visiting] used to purify the place once they left. But as far as other things are concerned, my father really went out of his way to help all his students. In fact even the two old conservative women sometimes used to feed the poor students in the afternoons. I think Brahmin dominance in education and bureaucracy etc. can only be explained as a natural and ingrained urge to seek education among them and its absence among others.

⁴² Interview with Mr. Ravi, 20/04/2000. A profile is in fn. 21.

⁴³ Interview with Mr. Nagesh, 19/10/2000. A profile is in fn. 23. The practice of *Varanna* was detailed in the third chapter.

⁴⁴ Interview with Ms. Anuradha, 03/08/2000. Again, as already mentioned (Ch. 3, fn. 48), the 32 year old Anuradha is a Namboodiri Brahmin. She is a journalist working with a newspaper in Bangalore, married to another journalist who is a Syrian Catholic Christian. A recent migrant to Bangalore, she was a resident of a village near Mangalore.

Another respondent too qualified the figure of the "oppressive Brahmin" with the following:

I think, to some extent, it is true that the Brahmin community has been exploitative. They went too far on *madi-mailige* [purity-pollution] for instance in temples. Everybody used to come to temples and the Brahmins discriminated against them. We see it in films, isn't it? Others will feel sad. They will tolerate to the extent they can. But when they become a group they revolt. Rituals and notions of cleanliness should of course be there, but shouldn't be taken too far. But they did not deny them access to education or anything like that.

The above riders are very crucial for the identity that the Brahmins construct for themselves and for the 'Others' today. The willingness to recognise caste as a set of ritualised practices, distinct and separate from its secular and material content, to even 'take responsibility for' (or 'atone') the discrimination against the non-Brahmins, while positing the same as in the past and largely absent in the present - all these represent a framework of negotiation in which a series of displacements are effected upon the space of self. More frontally, there is a tendency to position the self within a schema of what we referred to earlier as 'not me, not here and not now'.

Caste, understood exclusively in terms of ritual practices and hierarchy, is located outside themselves and even outside the community itself. As a respondent asserted:

If a Brahmin is expected to live like a Brahmin ought to, he cannot survive. Ninety five percent of today's Brahmins are not Brahmins; likewise the Vokkaligas. We have lost all qualities to be Brahmins. Caste is now no more than an identity or a designation, merely giving one a sense of community. I did not take it, I can't give it up. It is with me, even if I don't want and deserve that label.⁴⁵

It is significant that the respondents understand by terms such as caste and caste structure a 'system' that draws its sustenance and legitimacy from a complex of relationships between primordially-defined entities based on the principle of purity and pollution. They fix caste as a system to a particular period in history - indeed, as an aberration - that neither exists prior to this period nor post- this period, that is, in the

⁴⁵ Interview with Ms. Pooja, 17/07/2000. As previously noted (Ch. 3, fn.44), she is a 21 year old Smartha Brahmin pursuing her under-graduate course in Bangalore. Her family migrated to Bangalore from a village near Shimoga recently. Pursuing a women studies course and keen to articulate those ideas in evaluating her caste self as indeed of being a woman, she was vehement in stating how Brahmin women are more liberated than the other caste women. This, she felt was primarily due to the high educational levels among the Brahmin men but also due to the *Samskara* that is ingrained in them from childhood to treat women with respect.

⁴⁶ Interview with Mr. Nagesh, 19/10/2000. A profile is in fn. 23 above.

present. Thus caste as a systemic relationship between primordial entities is characterised as neither sanctified by the heritage nor useful and legitimate for the present. Not even the various Brahmin associations, which are ideally the most direct embodiments of a sense of community that one can get within the Brahmin discourse, seem to contradict this picture. There are of course self-representations that complicate the space of this characterisation, as in the following set of claims:

Our *shastras* prescribe that we should, to the maximum extent possible, have relations and interactions with only those who belong to our own *varna* - that is, people who possess our own level of purity - or with those who are of a higher order. The classical texts clearly warn us that it is harmful to interact with the lower orders.

But some of us don't like the practices of the Brahmin community; they are not willing to follow them. They don't want *japa* [ritualised daily prayer prescribed for a Brahmin male post-initiation ceremony], *janivara* [the sacred thread] or *shraddha* [the annual rites for the departed ancestors], *samskara* [codes of conduct] ... They do not have the practices of purity-pollution. They mix Brahmins with Shudras and *Musalman*s [Muslims] even during religious occasions like marriage and *upanayana* [initiation ceremony for Brahmin males]. If the community goes along the dictates of such people, then our *Brahmanya* [Brahminness] will be destroyed in 20-30 years, as it happened among the Saraswat Brahmins⁴⁷ ...

But still they want the use of our temples when they need it, the *purohita* [priest] should come running when and if they call him. They are keen that their Brahmin identity is guarded - I am Brahmin, my children are Brahmins, I want kin relations only with Brahmin clans etc. They will never give up the uses of the Brahmin institution.

The above are statements from K. V. Karanth's booklet *Devasthanagala Sadupayoga* [The Proper Use of Temples], part of a series of tracts that he wrote during the 1980s and published them himself⁴⁸. All his works enunciate and accept the legitimacy and relevance of caste as a system based on the principle of a hierarchised complex of purity-pollution. As can be deduced from the remarks cited, he takes a sharp position against the processes of secularisation that is underway in the caste system. Consequently, it was surprising that many of our respondents referred approvingly to his works during the interviews, even as they affirmed that they had themselves come a far way from those prescriptions. The point really is that caste practices will not be

⁴⁷ This, the claim that is made vis-a-vis the Saraswat Brahmins, is an interesting one but we have no leads to pursue it any further.

⁴⁸ The edition of the book that we have had access to, and from which we have just cited (pp. 27 and 98-99), is dated 1993, but this work and his other publications were published before this date. None of these new editions carry the original date of publication. His other works include *Namma Brahmanya: Loukika*

legitimised as appropriate in an unqualified manner, and not definitely as a public enunciation. Such equivocations as those that tack caste to some place (or some era) are inevitable:

I am from **Dakshina Kannada** [southern Karnataka]. We have relatives there and we also go to visit the pilgrimage centres there. There, even to this day, Brahmins don't let other caste people into their houses. They are given food on leaves, which they themselves have to throw away and the place has to be purified. When I go there, I will have to abide by such practices. My relatives do that because the other caste people are very dirty - for months on they don't take bath, they eat all kinds of things etc. They are literally untouchable. So caste continues to exist there. The gods there - particularly the *Naga Derate* [the Snake God] - are very powerful and very particular about the *madi* [purity]. They brook no breaking of such rules. Such state of purity cannot be disturbed. In Bangalore though, anything goes. Here I have no caste and anybody, as long as they⁴⁹ are clean, can come into my house and I will eat with them.

Thus, neither is the Brahmin (in and of himself) seen to embody purity nor do the other castes embody impurity. The legitimacy of caste as a sentiment, clearly, is on the wane - norms of the purity-pollution complex no longer can legitimise the superiority of the Brahmin. What is more, the contemporary Brahmin recognises and even approves of it; but as has been seen it is a qualified recognition and approval, in more ways than one.

Constructing the other

In a very real sense, the category of the non-Brahmin is no longer available - even to the Brahmin. The 'non-Brahmin' stands disaggregated albeit invoked, both within and outside the discourse of the contemporary Brahmin. This sub-section reconstructs the figure of the non-Brahmin as configured by the Brahmin community, both as a constellation of discrete communities as well as a singular unified identity.

The 'non-Brahmin' - approached primarily as a residual category and postulated as one who is not a Brahmin - is constructed as a figure who remains non-agential. As a respondent opined:

They don't know anything primarily because of lack of education unlike Brahmins among whom everybody is educated and aware. So while it is very difficult to organise Brahmins, the non-

Brahmana Vibhaga [Our Brahminness: Tract for the Loukika Brahmins], *Namma Purohitaru* [Our Priests]; *Brahmanyada Rakshane* [Protecting Brahminness]; and *Dana Madabeku* [We Should Offer Gifts].

⁴⁹ Interview with Mr. Shivaprasad, 15/08/2000. The forty two year old Shivaprasad is a Smartha Brahmin. He runs a jeep for the Kannada film shooting units. He is a member of the AKBMS, as he is of the caste-specific association, the Shivalli Smartha Brahmana Parishath.

Brahmins are being used as pawns in the anti-Brahmin game that is being played out by the
⁵⁰
 politicians.

Indeed, many of them point to the respect that they, as Brahmins, are still accorded by the non-Brahmins in quotidian and 'non-politicised' interactions:

Those who attack Brahmins from public platforms for political purposes don't really hate us. Why should anybody hate us? What makes Brahmins respectable is our single-minded devotion to gain knowledge and not power or wealth. If the Brahmins wanted wealth, they could have had it in abundance as they had great influence over the kings. Look at Vishveshvaraiah. Gowdas, who today have become the major Brahmin-biting community, worship Vishveshvaraiah. Every Gowda house has a portrait of him. Why is that? Because he never thought about caste when he planned and built the KRS dam. It is precisely because of such an inherent disposition of Brahmins that we are being treated as *karibevu soppu* [a green, which is used in South Indian curries only to give it a flavour and is often set aside while eating] ~use them for all their brains but when it comes to politics castigate them.⁵¹

This respondent also vouched for the continuing significance of the 'aura' that attaches to the Brahmin persona in everyday interactions:

When I was doing my graduation in Mysore, I stayed in a hostel. On the day of the exam, my roommate, a non-Brahmin, came and fell at my feet seeking my blessings so that his ability to memorise is enhanced. He said, "You are a Brahmin and I need your blessings". I of course told him not to fall prey to such superstitions because I was a Brahmin only by birth and not by practice. How do you define him doing that then? As a slave of Brahminical oppression? Did he think of it as a superstition?

My SC colleague calls Brahmins '*Brahmapinda*', meaning that we have great intelligence. He says only Brahmins have equipped him to pass all the bank examinations. What to do you say about that?

⁵⁰ Interview with Mr. Gopikrishna, 13/02/2000. He is a Mulkanadu Smartha Brahmin and is 48 years old. He is a musician, and makes a living as an accompanying artiste to a music group, while also working as a temporary music teacher in a school. He has struggled to make a middle class living in the city of Bangalore, which most of his community members take for granted. He lives in a rented house in a predominantly lower middle class, non-Brahmin populated locality in Bangalore. This habitation often jolts him into contending with matters of *being* Brahmin in everyday circumstances. What complicates issues is the fact that he has a black complexion, which, he says, has often made fellow-Brahmins doubt his very Brahminness. Lacking a kin network in Bangalore - he is a migrant from Davanagere - he has found it difficult to establish his claims over being Brahmin. Thus even as he blames the pernicious effects of reservations which denied him a permanent job in a government school, he is equally indignant about the 'elite' Brahmins who refuse to work for the upliftment of the community by helping Brahmins like him "who are in huge numbers".

⁵¹ Interview with Mr. Ravi, 20/04/2000. A biographical note is in fn. 21 above. The reference to the KRS dam is to the one built across the river Kaveri in Mysore that has transformed the formerly dry agrarian zone of the plains of the princely Mysore state into fertile lands, and which apparently has been a major benefactor of the Vokkaliga community.

Further, since the non-Brahmin is seen to have been denied access only within the sacred realm, any attempt made by the non-Brahmin to “**Brahminise**” himself is seen as legitimate and necessary. As an engineering graduate who now runs a **successful** spiritual centre in Bangalore teaching Yoga, meditation, the Gayathri Mantra etc. to the general populace, proclaimed:

My life's mission is to 'Brahminise' the entire world. I teach everybody, irrespective of caste, creed, sex, age, etc., the Gayathri Mantra - that *mantra* [religious chant] which has protected and stimulated the famous intellect of the Brahmin mind. That these qualities have nothing to do with the accident of birth is clear from the students I get. I can confidently say that some of the Muslim and SCs that come to my centre are better Brahmins than the so-called Brahmins themselves are.

Likewise, a respondent, who is a priest at a temple and oversees the performance of rituals at the residences of his clientele (which includes non-Brahmin families), ruefully pointed out that even as Brahmins are quickly giving up traditional practices, the non-Brahmins are taking them up with great devotion and respect.

Brahminism is not working today, among Brahmins themselves. In fact, the outsiders have become the insiders and the insiders have become the outsiders. Today lower castes want Brahminism and Brahmins themselves are least bothered. Lower castes have great reverence for our customs and they treat the priests with high regard. But Brahmins, particularly those who are rich, just don't care. They look at it as a purely business deal. I think the society expects Brahmins to be in a state of purity and to be the flag bearers of our *sana/nana* heritage. When they see them not up to the mark, that is when the ridicule begins and not when, as these Brahmin pseudo-intellectuals assume, we live up to it. Brahminical way of life is still greatly respected and held in high esteem. Indeed the number of lower caste households who conduct *Satyanarayana pooje* [a ritualised prayer meeting invoking Lord Vishnu] or some other *vratas* [religious vows] at homes has increased significantly in the recent years.

Nevertheless, these respondents feel rather wronged and peeved at any extension of the image of the "denied non-Brahmin" to the 'secular' settings of work and achievement. Among the most vocal of the respondents, a retired Wing Commander with the Indian Air Force formulated it thus:

⁵² Interview with Mr. Ramachandra, 13/09/2000. He is 41 years and is a **Smartha** Brahmin. His spiritual centre is widely recognised, and was referred to this researcher by many other respondents as representing the true spirit of Brahminism. He articulated, accordingly, a skepticism towards Brahmin associational efforts, for they are satisfied with the criterion of birth and do not bother about *making* individuals Brahmins. Nonetheless, this skepticism did not amount to a rejection of such endeavours because he not only attends major conventions of AKBMS and other Brahmin associations as a resource person, but also expressed a strong agreement with their objective of uniting Brahmins and its urgent need.

⁵³ Interview with Mr. Narayan, 26/08/2000. He is 34 years old and is a **Smartha** Brahmin who came from a village near **Udupi** to Bangalore to take up the priest's job in a temple. He was making these remarks in the presence of a non-Brahmin client who had come to consult on a horoscope for a matrimonial alliance.

The SCs [Scheduled Castes] will die as a 35 percent community. The so-called 'non-Brahmins' will hang on to reservations because they know that they can't compete with Brahmins.

Brahmins were merely considered as isolationists. If you read *Samskara* [a novel written by the Kannada author, U. R. Ananthamurthy], there you get to see that isolationism practiced by the Brahmin caste - they were physically distancing themselves from the others. But anyway why should I hobnob with a fisherman, I say? That question apart, now anyway there are no such barriers, no **untouchability**. So any talk of oppression and suppression now is complete nonsense. It is only making them so dependent on reservations that it has become a permanent **crutch**.

Indeed, explaining the predominance of Brahmins in education and other modern spaces, a respondent opined that it has more to do with attitudes than with any explicit caste discrimination:

The attitude among the non-Brahmin parents was, 'What will he do going to the school? Let him work as a coolie and earn some money.' They had absolutely no interest in education. For instance, before the 1960s, government jobs came to the very doorsteps of even an SSLC pass. Why did only Brahmins go into the government service? Now they [non-Brahmin parents] think: 'anyway we have quota; why should we work hard?'

In fact, in a recent issue of *Vipra Nudi*, Harnahalli Ramaswamy [a Karnataka Congress leader, a Brahmin] has narrated how a Gowda minister rued the fact that there were very few Brahmin teachers in village schools. Because when they were in big numbers, it was they who went to every house and insisted that the children went to school regularly and took personal interest in those kids' education. Now there are no Brahmin teachers and those who are there don't bother. Teaching is just a job for them.⁵⁴

In so far as the non-Brahmin attack on the community itself is concerned, most of the respondents came up with a story from the *Panc/iatantra*. In fact, the invocation of this imagery across the respondent sampled is consistent and striking.

The Brahmins have become like the lamb of that famous story in the *Panc/iatantra*. A lamb was drinking water in the downstream. A wolf, coming from the direction of the upstream and looking out for food, caught the lamb and sought to justify its action on the ground that the lamb had polluted the water. The lamb pointed out that it couldn't have polluted the water because it was at the downstream and the wolf at the upstream. For which the wolf had a ready answer: "if you

⁵⁴ Interview with the 69 year old, Smartha Brahmin, Mr. Vasudeva Rao, 05/03/2000. We have already encountered him in the previous chapter (cf. fn. 9). He, as his words sufficiently indicate, showed no inhibition in articulating a contempt for anything and anybody non-Brahmin. Nothing of the utter contempt and anger he displayed against non-Brahmins, the state policies of social justice etc. was visible in the newspaper articles that he had penned though, copies of some of which he made available to this researcher. Having pursued a rather atypical calling for a Brahmin (as far as the community from Karnataka is concerned), Mr. Vasudeva Rao is still active as a management consultant to large private companies in Bangalore. He visited the AKBMS office for almost one whole year seeking a matrimonial alliance for his daughter through the centre that AKBMS runs. But, apart from that, he does not think much of these associations. He, nonetheless, is active in Rotary and Lion's clubs' and the local residents' welfare association.

⁵⁵ Interview with Mr. Shivaprasad, 15/08/2000. A profile is in fn. 49 above.

have not done it, then your forefathers must have" and devoured the poor lamb. This is the logic with which others work today. If I point out that I don't discriminate, they will say but your forefathers did! Now tell me why should I pay for the alleged mistakes of my forefathers? Till how long should I be paying for the history that I am supposed to carry on my **shoulders**?⁵⁶

It is also along this representational axis that the disaggregation of the non-Brahmin - not just across distinct caste communities, but also within each such community - is foregrounded by our respondents, and often in order to highlight the misplaced nature of the anti-Brahmin assault:

Take a look at the cases filed under the SC/ST Atrocities Act. I am very sure that most of the cases will be against Vokkaligas, Lingayaths and Kurubas, and there won't be a single case against a Brahmin. So who is practicing caste today? It is these dominant castes against the lower castes. Is the Brahmin in any position to oppress others? But then why is the Brahmin singled out for attack?⁵⁷

Even more explicitly, the disappearance of the Brahmin from the very space of caste discrimination seems to be so complete for the contemporary Brahmin mind that the mantle of caste oppression is increasingly and exclusively ascribed to other caste communities. A respondent had a ready inventory on offer:

I have Dalit friends who tell me, "It is not the Brahmins who oppress us. Where are they now anyway?" It is now primarily a conflict between the landlord castes and the landless Harijans. It is the Vanniyars versus Harijans in Tamil Nadu, Yadavs versus Harijans in Uttar Pradesh, Gowdas and Lingayaths versus Holeyas here and so on. Where are the Brahmins?⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Interview with Mr. Lakshman (05/06/2000) a private college lecturer who has found it hard to get a permanent job as a teaching faculty. He believes that he lost out on a civil service job because of his Brahmin tag. He is 30 years old and is a Madhva Brahmin. The imagery of pollution contained in the story is itself interesting, for it appears to invert the principle of purity-pollution on his head. Its significance however is uncertain.

⁵⁷ Interview with Mr. Subramanya, 30/01/2000. A biographical note is in fn. 12.

⁵⁸ Interview with Mr. Harinarayana, 23/05/2000. A Madhva Brahmin, the respondent is fifty years old. He teaches in a high school in Bangalore. His daughter recently got married to a Lingayath - an alliance about which he had no reservations. He said: "They were in love. When she [my daughter] told me of her desire to marry him, I only said, 'if you think you can lead your life with him, then go ahead. But also be certain that if it fails then everybody will shun you. If the alliance is within caste and then it fails, then the relatives would be sympathetic.' Of course, I will always be there for her. But relatives are important. Interestingly, it was the boy's family that had major problems with the alliance. They were greatly reluctant but somehow I convinced them. Now anyway my daughter and son-in-law are staying separately. So the problems of adjustment that would have come up if she [daughter] were to stay with them are not there. But the point anyway is that while the Brahmins are willing to forget and forgive [this was in reference to the attacks mounted by the non-Brahmin discourse about which he had just talked about] and treat everybody as equals, the others remain stuck with their caste loyalties."

What is more, the perceived marginalisation of Brahmins in the Indian political landscape only augments this feeling of obliteration from spaces that are seen as caste-marked:

The first Brahmin chief minister that Karnataka saw was only in 1980 - that is a full 33 years after Independence! Brahmins just cannot win elections. Caste considerations are crucial in elections because our people [the general (non-Brahmin?) population] are uneducated and easily understand the language of caste. All that one has to say is, 'Hey! He is our own; so vote for him', and they will all go vote. Even if that fellow who wins does nothing to these people, again next time the same thing is repeated. So caste is kept alive and kicking.⁵⁹

Again, pointing out that hierarchisation is built into the structure of participation in caste, many suggest:

See, caste awareness is inbuilt. For all that they talk about being Dalits and being oppressed because of their caste etc., let a Holey drink even just water at a Madiga's house. The government itself had allocated wells according to caste - this is Madigas' well and this is Holeyas' etc. When the Brahmins are shedding all these practices, the lower castes and the Holeyas and Madigas are holding on to them all the more dearly.

Even more insistently, it is pointed out that internal differentiations obtain within each non-Brahmin community:

Those SCs who have availed of the government benefits and become rich detach themselves from the community. They don't want to be identified as SCs. They want to hobnob only with Brahmins; eat like Brahmins; speak like Brahmins. They perpetuate discriminations from within - only IAS officers' sons and daughters avail of all the benefits. But the elite will go on making noises about being the oppressed and hold the poor Harijan as their mascot.

To be sure, this need (to other the other, as it were, even to remove the self from the space of caste, as they see it) does not take one away from the positive significations and enunciations that they (our respondents) make of their identity of being Brahmins. In making these formulations of self, they continue to negotiate the perception of siege simultaneously. It is also the space within which caste identity and action as inhabiting different shades of the community-association dynamic can be vividly grasped.

⁵⁹ Interview with Dr. Apoorva, 14/08/2000. A profile is in fn. 37 above.

⁶⁰ Interview with 46 year old Madhva Brahmin, Mr. Sripathi, an agriculturist and a Congress party functionary residing in a village near Bangalore, 17/09/2000.

⁶¹ Interview with Mr. Nagesh, 19/10/2000. A profile is in fn. 23 above.

Formulating a sense of self/as Brahmin

I am reminded of the word “*parishuddhate*” [purity] when I imagine the meaning of the word Brahmin. I am proud to be a Brahmin; it is a clean caste and an intellectual caste, traits that have come in their blood.

I don't go out and make friends or interact with people only after making sure of their caste. I don't even want to be overtly identified as and with Brahmins. In fact I refused an invitation to become the Chairperson of the Brahmin women's convention that the AKBMS organised recently. I did not even take part in the proceedings. But when I look at most of my friends they are Brahmins themselves. I have wondered about it. There has to be something that explains it but I fail to explain it.

I am an artiste and I know no boundaries of caste, creed, nation or anything. I am beyond all that when I am on stage performing. But then when the attacks on the Brahmins became intolerable during [Devaraj] Urs' time, assisted by people like Basavalingappa⁶³, people asked me to come into the caste. They said, first please concentrate on setting right your own house. I took part in initiating the AKBMS then. Other people then asked me - should they look at me as a Brahmin leader or as a caste-less artiste. Then I told them Ravana's story. Rama before embarking on the battle with Ravana wanted the services of a Brahmin priest to conduct a *homa* [a sacrificial Brahminical ritual], seeking blessings of the gods for a victory. Hanumantha, Rama's aide, solicited Ravana for a suitable priest. Then Ravana himself came to conduct the ritual, for he was a great and accomplished Brahmin himself. Being a Brahmin, he could not refuse to carry out the role ordained for him by the society, knowing well that a successful completion of the ritual will bring defeat to himself. I am Ravana, the real Brahmin, when I come on stage. If I find wrongs in Brahminism, I never mute my criticism, as people very well know it. But within the complex of my *kula* [lineage] I am an ordinary Brahmin worried about the welfare of my fellow-Brahmins.

The above enunciations from two Brahmins come from identifiably different standpoints on the question of an overt association (or identification) with the category of the Brahmin, but they both capture the sense of ambivalence that constitutes the contemporary Brahmin self's perception of itself. While the former avoids (or **refuses**) any public identification with the fact of being Brahmin, the latter not only owns it up, it also does not flinch from giving the self-identification an assertive form in the shape of

⁶² Interview with Ms. Savitri, 30/06/2000. A profile of this respondent can be had in fn. 19 above.

⁶³ A high profile Dalit minister in Urs' cabinet, who was very vocal about upper caste oppression and their ability to subvert Dalit/lower caste aspirations.

⁶⁴ Interview with Mr. Suvarnaiah, a popular dramatist and the founder president of the Akhila Karnataka **Brahmana** Maha Sabha. Interview held on 21/05/2000. He is part of a family that has over the last three generations made a livelihood running a theatre company. **Suvarnaiah's** plays, particularly those that satirise on the contemporary politics, corruption etc., have been staged by the company and proved greatly popular.

inhabiting the definitive space of a caste association. Nevertheless, both these articulations still feel compelled to 'explain' their Brahminness.

The ambivalence is not so much one of *either/or vis-à-vis* the category of the Brahmin - that is to say, whether to reject or own up that identity and identification. It is more in terms of negotiating with the given identity or category and all its attendant packages of history, memory, association, and affective investment. Many of the respondents, consequently, understand their 'casteness' (of being a Brahmin, say) as a given - something that they have to carry along whether they like it or not. As a 20 year old, college-going respondent stated:

Even if I go and claim that I am an SC, nobody will accept that claim. The government will not **give** me the benefits that SCs get. It is possible that I could be leading the life of a Holeya. But I will have to die as a Brahmin. Anyway, I am born as a Brahmin and I am not repenting it. I would rather be a Brahmin because **broader** outlook is possible only for us. I am proud to be a Brahmin, of the heritage that the community has given to the entire world, of the Brahmin intellect and single pursuit of *jnana*[knowledge]. I get respect from the Gowdas and Reddys for being a Brahmin, and I will try to stand up to what other communities expect of the Brahmins.

Of course, as a young executive put it, "there is definitely a reluctance to say they are Brahmins", since (as he observed) "the pressure is to say that we are also human beings like others".⁶⁵ All the same, "the positive things that this birth in a Brahmin family has given me far outweigh any debilitations that I am supposed to be suffering from for being a Brahmin", suggests a psychology professor working in an undergraduate college in Bangalore:

It has given me *samskara* - those practices that have helped me evolve as a better human being. The way we dress, the food habits, our customs and rituals - they all instil a sense of discipline which is passed on from generation to generation. I attach great value to our practices - lighting a lamp before the god, performing pooja, watering the doorstep each morning, etc. - we are brought up on those values. Not telling lies, speaking out your mind honestly - I am like that and because of that I have often found myself in trouble. But we are an intellectually evolved people; we shouldn't stoop down to the level of other people. There are other customs - like distributing *ellu* [sesame seeds] during Sankranti festival and inviting people on the *Krishnashtami* day **etc.** - which gives me an opportunity to meet people, which otherwise I would never given the hurried everyday lives we live.

My husband though is a typical *abrahmana*[un-Brahminlike] and he takes pleasure in announcing that he is not a Brahmin. He keeps ridiculing our customs and rituals. He says he lost his

⁶⁵ Interview with Mr. Guru, 19/07/2000. He is a Madhva Brahmin, pursuing his graduation studies in Bangalore.

⁶⁶ Interview with Mr. Sarathy, 12/06/2000. He, a 31 year old Smartha Brahmin, works as General Manager in a garment export firm.

Brahmanathva [being a Brahmin] the day he ate chicken. But when he suggested that our son should be given non-vegetarian food, I just put my foot down and protested. He doesn't need to break norms. It is nothing about Brahminism but about being gentlemanly.⁶⁷

Such positive enunciations of their Brahminness are legion. Almost all of them refer to the '*samskara*' that their Brahmin context accords. It is defined both as a set of practices as well as a habit of the mind, which makes possible a disposition of the self that helps them to sustain their level of intellect and purity. It is this '*samskara*' that is held up as the criteria distinguishing them sharply from those who are born into other caste communities. But it is also a state that leaves them debilitated in facing up to an external world that has begun to play by new rules. In most of the narratives of the respondents, this '*samskara*' is at once genetic as well as learnt. It is affirmed:

It is all in the genes. Knowledge has come naturally to the Brahmins. Like they say, "*hutu guna sutroo hogolla*" [The character that came with birth will not erase even if burnt]. For others, keenness for knowledge has to be learnt unlike for the Brahmin. Not everybody can chant the Veda mantras because their tongues are not supple as it is for a Brahmin.⁶⁸

Alternatively, as the psychology professor cited above suggested, it is also learnt in the family, as part of growing up. Thus, '*samskara*' which is most often held up as the 'distinction' separating Brahmins from the rest of society is what makes them so. Consequently, many remain upset by those "Brahmins who bend backwards to show they are not Brahmins", as a respondent on a visit from the US to her parents in Bangalore chose to express it.⁶⁹ Likewise:

Some Brahmins may have thought that their birth as Brahmins itself is a crime. They think they have to convince the society that they are like any other human being and are not Brahminical.

⁶⁷ Interview with Ms. Aruna, 03/05/2000. She is a 48 year old Iyengar Brahmin. She is very proud to be a Brahmin, and asserted so many a time during the interview. However, when asked to name the caste she belongs to and the *matha* to which her family is affiliated, she gave a rather confounding answer - "It must be Advaita". There is, of course no Brahmin caste called Advaita, which is a Brahminical philosophy whose followers call themselves Smarthas. Nonetheless, when she returned the questionnaire filled, it mentioned her caste as Iyengars - the followers of the Srivaishnava tradition, a contending and testatory tradition vis-a-vis the Smarthas. What is more, the definitions she offers for what is to be a Brahmin and, more importantly, for what is to lose it are interesting but largely shared. Defying vegetarian food restrictions is often held up as a signifier of having broken caste rules and become un-Brahminical.

⁶⁸ Interview with Mr. Sadashivaiah, 01/03/2000. For a profile, see fn. 35 above.

⁶⁹ Interview with Ms. Poornima, 12/05/2000. She, a Shivalli Madhva, is 31 years old. She married a north Indian (Uttar Pradesh) Brahmin - previously her colleague in the software development firm she worked in - much to the discomfort of her family. However, during the interview, her mother said, "We didn't mind as long as he was from a Brahmin family. The marriage took place in accordance with both traditions. The customs were really very different."

⁷⁰ Interview with Mr. Balan, 17/07/2000. For a profile, see fn. 30 above.

Just as the limits of this "backward bend" remain hazy even for those who articulate it, the anxieties regarding fellow-Brahmins themselves breaching the boundaries of identity and **identification** remain high. The object of this sense of anxiety needs to be distinguished from those behavioural modifications that get legitimised. Accordingly, even as the community itself is acknowledged to have undergone **transformatory** shifts in the recent history, much of such redefinition and repositioning is legitimised within the rubric of "changing with times". Even if the preceding generation articulates such changes as discomfiting, they still were not seen as questioning or rebelling against the community norms. Thus when the respondents' talk of a fellow-Brahmin as being a 'rebel from **within**' or having gone beyond the boundaries of Brahminhood, one should take care not to assume that they themselves measure up to any given constructions of who a Brahmin is or what is to be Brahminical and so on. For instance, not wearing the sacred thread, breaking food, commensal and touchability restrictions etc. are all now accepted by a large number of Brahmins, including the caste activists as being 'normal'. But it was not so during the previous generation. Kannada litterateur U. R. **Ananthamurthy** - not only his works were seen as being anti-Brahmin by the community but also his marriage to a Christian was a necessary confirmation of this intent of breaking out - is invoked by a significant number of respondents as the iconic representation of that rebel. However, as a respondent put it:

Now *Samskara* [Ananthamurthy's novel, which created a great deal of resentment among the Brahmins when published for what was seen as a slander] is normalised. It doesn't create any ripples or hits one as being anti-Brahminical.

Interestingly, what marks out conduct as an act of breach is if they come attached as an announcement, explicitly voiced statements of intent, an intent, that is, of "breaking away". Otherwise, it is acknowledged that each generation defines, albeit not in any formal manner but in recognisable ways, what constitutes rebelliousness. Such definitions are bound to vary across the class status, age composition and the specific trajectory of the family in question. However, breaking the endogamy barrier - boundaries of marriage now encompasses all Brahmin castes, although perhaps still excluding the Saraswat Brahmins - continues to be seen as an important act of breaching that is still largely illegitimate.

⁷¹ Interview with Mr. Muralidhar, 20/03/2000. For a profile, see fn. 40 above.

Defining aberrant forms of conduct cuts across a wide spectrum - from breaking food restrictions to commensal strategies, "hobnobbing with fishermen", publicly speaking against and writing critically of the community, etc. But, as we said, it has to be enacted as a public statement, as a statement of intention to breach. A successful industrialist who has worked extensively with the AKBMS defined the basis of caste action and the attendant anxieties thus:

Brahmin symbolises a value. So when somebody says, "He eats chicken in spite of being a Brahmin" that did not constitute ridiculing of the Brahmin. That basically reflected an anxiety on the part of the larger community that the value that the Brahmin community symbolised is being sacrificed. The others want us to set an example for them and the society and when the Brahmins don't measure up to such expectations, they target us. Reading it as an attack against the Brahmins has been the greatest mistake that we have committed.

Again:

Brahmins themselves are responsible for this targeting. In the name of getting modernised, they drank [liquor] with the Gowda, ate [meat] with the Muslim and announced that they don't believe in caste. We've ourselves given up caste.

Consequently, therefore:

Though there is a sense of guilt amongst us, atoning for it won't help either them or us. I am a Brahmin, so I am a Brahmin - that is all. There is no use going to other jatis and doing all that they do. You go drink [liquor] and eat mudde [a dish made of ragi, a staple diet of the Vokkaligas of southern Karnataka], and they will only sneer at you and say that there is degeneration among the Brahmins. How will that bring about social equality? ... Brahmins have tried to reach out to other people but that has not helped anyone. OK! Leave it - as an individual and at the individual level do whatever you want to do.⁷²

Indeed, as a respondent, a Sanskrit scholar, pointedly ventured to say:

Just before you came for the interview, I performed *agnikarya* [a ritual that the initiated Brahmin males are supposed to perform during the *sandhyavandane*, but has almost become an exception]. Did I insult anybody by that? But the leftists among us want to believe so. An average Brahmin is as uninformed about Brahminism as any outsider. So he wants to believe that calling oneself a Brahmin, helping a fellow-Brahmin, speaking on behalf of the heritage of the Brahmins, identifying with the community - are all communal and orthodox. There is an onslaught from within the community which is much stronger than that which is coming from the others. What

⁷² Interview with Mr. Sadashivaiah, 01/03/2000. For a profile, see fn. 35 above.

⁷³ Interview with Ms. Aruna, 03/05/2000. Biographical details in fn. 67 above.

⁷⁴ Interview with Mr. Prakash, 22/07/2000. Biographical details on pp. 267-68 above.

these pseudo-secularists don't know is that outsiders respect me precisely because I value my heritage and attempt to follow them.

As we can see, definitions of breach or identification of aberrant forms of conduct still largely get marked off a presumed Brahmin figure, one who keep to his rituals, commensal and food rules. And yet, what render these acts either acceptable or otherwise are the stated (or imagined) intentions that mark their enactment. Although most of the respondents did not see themselves as meeting the requirements of that presumed figure of representation, they are not exactly those that one would characterise as standing outside (nor were all seen by fellow-Brahmins as being so). For instance:

In me you will see a rebel. In the first thirteen years of my life, I was what is referred to as a 'good' Brahmin - doing *sandhyavandane* etc. But I found that it limits. Conformity always means choking and being non-creative. I found that Brahminism had lost its ability to be mobile and thus had become static. That is when I found Ramakrishna *matha*, Chinmaya Mission, Yoga, meditation etc. more liberating, of which I am a follower for the last thirty years. But our community is contented in conducting *poojas*, *homas* etc., forgetting the Vedas and Upanishads which they think is nothing but a lot of complicated rituals.⁷⁶

Since this enunciation does not seek to voice an intent that stands out amidst the general flux of statements, and indeed seeks to reimagine the problematic of what is to be Brahmin - and accordingly seems to stand resolutely within - the respondent who is making this statement will not be seen as a rebel. Even as the contemporary Brahmin sees himself or herself clearly outside the given notions of what is to be a Brahmin -

I stay in the outskirts [of the city] like a true Brahmin ought to. I would have felt suffocated and restricted living in a Brahmin *agrahara* [broadly, neighbourhood, but a usage restricted to Brahmin households]. I hate their rituals. For instance, they say the *Gayathri* mantra should not be uttered for the non-*dwijas* [non-Brahmins generally] and women to hear. That is nonsense. I have gathered 60-70 people (without asking about their caste) and taught them the *mantra*, so that they can chant it whenever they want its energy. Not that they showed any great enthusiasm for it. But still I am a rebel within the community. Not many so-called Brahmins understand me. A Brahmin in the real sense is supposed to stay outside the thick of things but still be a teacher to the society. Thus I represent the community figuratively too.

⁷⁵ Interview with Mr. Vinayaka, 15/04/2000. He is about 35 years old and is a Smartha Brahmin. An engineering graduate, he is now completely into Sanskrit studies and is an exponent of a Sanskrit game called *Shatavadhana*. He gives public performances of his skills in that game. He has emerged as a recognised articulator of the glories of the Indian/Hindu heritage and is a regular invitee in public events, TV shows etc. He also participates in Brahmin associational conventions as a resource person or a speaker.

⁷⁶ Interview with Mr. Diwakar, 10/04/2000. For a note on the respondent, see fn. 18 above.

⁷⁷ Interview with Mr. Nagesh, 19/10/2000. For a profile, see fn. 23 above.

- it is not as though fellow-Brahmins do not understand or empathise with the terms of such self-identification.

Conceiving their **Brahminness** in such open-ended terms, they find it difficult to reconcile with the othering that they encounter as a community. Indeed, it is this sanctioned image of a self that is sincerely and genuinely attempting to transform itself according to the demands and sensitivities of the times that renders the continued othering of the community incomprehensible to itself. What fortifies such a difficulty is the construction of the past of the community exclusively in terms of a scriptural imagination that positions the Brahmin as one who had always treated "this worldly" pursuits - economic and political - as being an anathema, being dictated solely by a passion for knowledge. It is not surprising, therefore, that most of the respondents foreground the image of a 'poor' Brahmin as constituting an adequate representation the community.

Why do you think that almost all the folktales, *puranas*, stories that your grand mother told you begin with the statement, "There lived a poor Brahmin in a village". Doesn't it tell you that that has always been the case with the Brahmins? Of course, emperors and kings used to fall at his feet, seeking his blessings and advice. Every king had a Brahmin as his chief advisor. But still the Brahmin chose to remain poor. Why doesn't he become the king himself? He is respected precisely because he doesn't aspire for the worldly, materialistic things. It is the only culture which took '*sarve janaaha sukhino bhavanthu* [welfare of all] as its lifeline. What does every Brahmin pray for while performing *japa* [meditation]? Not "give me that or this" or "let my son get a computer science seat" or "let my daughter get a good match" etc. He beseeches the Gayathri to light the lamp of knowledge that exists within him - "*Dhee.yo.yonah prachodayath*" That is why our community has been held in high regard by the rest of the society, withstanding even the sustained politically motivated rant against them.

The reproduction of this enunciatory position, one that we would like to believe has been rather important to the Brahmin self-representation through recent history, is consistent. It frontalises an image of the *poor Brahmin* who, in spite of being vested with unparalleled brilliance and intellect, in spite of being very close to the powers that be through out history, has consciously remained outside the structures and institutions of power and wealth. Accordingly, the figure of Dronacharya, a character from the epic *Mahabharatha* who is the unmatched guru (teacher) of the Kuru dynasty but who remains in a state of abstention and penury, is time and again invoked to represent the

⁷⁸ Interview with Mr. Suvarnaiah, 21/05/2000. Our fn. 64 above has the relevant biographical details. To recall, Mr. Suvarnaiah is the founder president of the AKBMS and a popular dramatist.

Brahmin community. The imagery is one of Drona in a state of helplessness to provide even milk to his infant son **Ashwatthama**, and this gets to be posited as a historical, ideal and even personalised image of the Brahmin condition:

Indeed the downfall of the Brahmin began when Dronacharya, no longer able to see the plight of his family, went on to accept the offer to become the Guru of the Kuru dynasty. As Kailasam once remarked: "The moment Brahmin called gold *suvarna* [(of) good colour], his **Brahminness** began its **downslide**".

Further compounding perceptions of the illegitimacy of the attack against Brahmins is the imagination - one that we have encountered hither and thither - of a generalised self as a product of active making, the self as an achievement. Broadly, in the terms of this representation, the self *becomes* a Brahmin; it *is* not Brahmin. Such a positioning of the self enables the postulation of the figure of the Brahmin as being largely incidental to the "accident of birth". Thus, it is maintained that anybody can become a Brahmin and that many in the past did become - from the sages of yore to the more recent B. R. Ambedkar and K. R. Narayanan (the former President of India, a Dalit) who were all by birth non-Brahmins⁸⁰ - although the probability (as held by our respondents) is mostly that only Brahmins by birth will attain Brahminhood. A respondent who runs an institution that teaches meditation, yoga etc. to all and sundry was categorical:

Not all the great sages of Upanishads were born in the Brahmin jati. But they all became great Brahmins. Moving towards the cosmic, towards the Brahma is what one makes a Brahmin and even to this day the society respects such individuals. My life is itself an instance of that. My life mission is to give Brahminism to all and that is the primary intent of the Indian heritage - to make the entire universe *Aryan*. The real concern of our society is to make everybody a Brahmin.

Even if this missionary zeal is non-existent in many others, the thought does:

Why do you make the accident of birth a denominator? Many SC/STs could be and are good Brahmins. Look at Ambedkar - he is a true Brahmin unlike many of the so-called Brahmins themselves. I wanted K. R. Narayanan to become the President not because of his caste but because of his merit. If I were to be at the level at which today Gowdas are, I would have said he is not ours and if I were to be at the level of Harijans, I would have said he is ours. But since I know the ideal of Brahmin, I would call him a true Brahmin.⁸¹

⁷⁹ Interview with Mr. Subramanya, 30/01/2000. For a profile, see fn. 12 above.

⁸⁰ Indeed, the number of respondents who invoked Ambedkar as an example of the 'real' Brahmin was significant.

⁸¹ Interview with Mr. Ramachandra, 13/09/2000. Some aspects of personal biography are in fn. 52 above.

⁸² Interview with Mr. Nagesh, 19/10/2000. Background details are in fn. 23.

This gesture to universalise the state of being Brahmin is abetted by the increasing success that the Hindu Right is witnessing in the recent years - a phenomenon which the contemporary Brahmin views with a certain sense of relief and triumph. As a respondent put it:

This is something Brahmins said from the beginning - "Others are trying to weaken our Hindu **dharma** by pitting one against the other. The problem is not the Brahmin; look elsewhere for it." Now they [the non-Brahmins] are realising it. We said this when the British were here; we are saying now when the *saabaru* [a derogatory term referring to Muslims] are taking all the benefits now. Then, before independence, before they realised the reality, British had completely plundered us leaving us a poor nation. Now *mullahs* [again referring to Muslims derogatorily] will squarely divide us if we don't realise it. The only encouraging thing is that they [the non-Brahmins] have slowly begun to support Hindutva.

By thus imagining the self to be Hindu, as inhabiting a Brahminical Hinduism pitted against an aggressive and invading Muslim, the problematics of a certain inherited caste self is sought to be elided. There is accordingly a resolution of the Brahmin-non-Brahmin contestation into a perceived need for Hindu unity.

They have all realised that we cannot quarrel amongst ourselves, which in the past has allowed invaders to rule over us. The realisation that we are all Hindus is seeping in. Otherwise how will you explain Dravidian parties [of Tamil Nadu] which had Brahmin bashing as their one and only issue, supporting BJP now?⁸⁴

Of course, this intended resolution of the contestation does not mean that the 'non-Brahmin' - be it as representing a politics and an ideology, or even as straightforward caste communities - ceases to become important in the self-construction of being Brahmins. This is evident in the enunciations that we have mapped through out this chapter.

All these ingredients - of the branded status of the Brahmin self, of the idea of the *samskara*, indeed the re-invocation of the scriptural imagination of the Brahmin persona in seeking to universalise it, as also the self-assertion of being Hindu - inhabit an articulatory space that is **definitionally** oscillating between a sense of 'community'

⁸³ Interview with Mr. Ravi, 20/04/2000. A personal profile is given in fn. 21 above.

⁸⁴ Interview with Mr. Vittal, 12/11/2000. Mr. Vittal, a Madhva Brahmin aged 62 years, is a resident of a village near Udupi. He retired as a Head Master of the high school in Barkoor, the nearby town. He has been an active participant in the Barkoor Brahmana Sabha. In fact, an overwhelming number of the respondents expressed explicit sympathies with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the Hindu right-wing party, and its other more strident affiliated wings such as the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS) and the *Vishwa Hindu Parishad* (VHP). By and large, they had all over the last decade or so consistently voted for the BJP in both state and central elections.

(approximated as a moral collective sense of belonging) and a more fluid space of associational endeavour and self-articulation. We shall seek to engage this oscillatory space more fully in the next, our concluding chapter, while also striving to formalise a “**community-association**” dynamic as constituting the contours of Brahmin identity in contemporary Karnataka. Needless, we shall also be elucidating a revised historical focus for the sociology of caste to pursue in the years to come.

Chapter Seven

Overview and Conclusions: Agency and Identity in the World of Brahmins

It will readily be admitted that a *generalised* matrix of theoretical and substantive concern and a *particularised* focus drawing on and dwelling within a given socio-historical field do not form the terms of a binary opposition. One might even imagine a continuum between the two. In this, our concluding chapter, we propose to tie together the various theoretical, methodological and empirical considerations forwarded by this work. Indeed, as we pointed out at the start of our previous chapter, the study has all along striven to resist a totalising thrust, to subsume and contain the field of articulation into rough **enclosures**. Our substantive chapters especially seemed to be tracking relatively independent courses. This is as it should be, tracking as we were the dynamics of identity and identification within and across fields of agency characteristic of particular caste subjects. But to leave the issues there, in an imponderable state, would be to restrict the possibilities of this investigation.

We need to bring the several threads constituting this study into a form of facilitative closure. This chapter, at once an overview of the tracks pursued and a **suggestion** about its potential, is an effort in this direction. Accordingly, the first section reconstitutes our points of departure, while the next three, offering an overview of the substantive chapters, reconstructs the considerations that we have proposed, if disparately, all along our delineation. Exploring the limits of the thesis of substantialisation through a recounting of the narrative of the 'Brahmin' identity, in the second section we suggest that a framework that accommodates the crucial aspect of identification is in order. The third and the fourth sections work towards structuring such an account, implicating the ideas of secularisation and individuation and the contending logics of 'community' and 'association'. The fifth and final section charts a potential trajectory that caste studies might pursue.

Reconstituting our point of departure

Some years ago, at the start of a project that has overseen three volumes of exciting work, the British social theorist, W. G. Runciman (1983) lists four levels at which we may come to understand a phenomenon:

- *Reportage*: a sequence of events or happenings that are observed and narrated in a socio-historical space;
- *Explanation*: why the events in question happened the way they did and its after effects - the choices of the actors involved being set against the backgrounds of history, social structure, and political economy;
- *Description*: what it felt like to be caught in that moment, and in the process reconstructing broadly the human significance of those events;
- *Evaluation*: what is right and wrong with the ways of living and feeling that the events encode; can there be lessons to be drawn from them?

Ideally, our study of the dynamics of Brahmin identity in contemporary Karnataka should have tried to advance an understanding at all these levels, both independently and consecutively. But it obviously has not, without necessarily being slack for all that. Even more pointedly, these levels have been pretty mixed up in our narration, confounding the terms of reportage with those of description, explanation with evaluation.

The effort, clearly, has been to produce an account that would strictly not be subsumable under a monographic format. To be sure, such a monographic constraint would have been equally facilitative of the terms of our investigation, although it would have slanted the investigation differently (besides necessitating methodological protocols that are not quite the same as the ones incorporated by this study). In formulating our research problem, we were ever mindful of the larger theoretical and ideological matrix undergirding caste studies, and interested not to reproduce its biases. At the same time, we were very clear that sociological and historical studies have not been sufficiently attentive to what is happening to caste in 'upper caste' contexts; indeed, that the perceptual bases of particular caste subjects and of caste action today need more nuanced theoretical and empirical elucidation.

At any rate, the parameters of evaluation undergirding our study have been passed over in the density of the narration; and our effort here, as already mentioned, is to bring the data put together in the foregoing pages to some kind of evaluative closure. This

point, among other things, brings us to an issue that had been furtively mentioned in the chapter on method (Ch.2), namely, the problem of normativity. For, all too often (and especially so in the recent years) articulations within and outside caste studies have been concerned to deliver solely upon the twin axes of the contestation and legitimation within caste. Even the literature on the substantialisation of caste (see pp. 33-8 and 52-4 above) has been prone to this tendency. But more importantly, from the standpoint of our study, the question of the Brahmin has been *overdetermined* by this mode of normative contextualisation, with the figure of the Brahmin privileged or arraigned herein (as the case may be) acquiring the shape of an evaluative principle rather than as a reference to real people with such a self-identification. In fact, it would not be an exaggeration to assert that in the recent scholarship on caste, 'Brahmin' as an embodied person or community is conspicuously absent. The latter is invoked more as a representative of the 'past' of caste or as a value or symbol that represents the hierarchical and systemic elements of the 'traditional' caste system. What is important is that, on either count, the 'Brahmin' is rendered absent from the 'present' of caste. In training our attention on the contemporaneity of the modern Brahmin therefore - contextualised of course to a regional context - we are concerned to reverse the axes of contestation and legitimation within caste: to substitute for the absent figure of the Brahmin in the latter frame a specific focus on the agency and selfhood of the Brahmin within caste.

Along the contours of this substitution, besides, one is also actively resisting the temptation of framing the Brahmin problematic in terms exclusively of domination - as indeed one of hegemony. To be sure, the framework of a 'will-to-dominance' is ail-too-easily grafted for the purpose of a study of the Brahmin *community*¹, while in fact any excessive and exclusive reliance on such a *framework* can prove to be delimiting. It could indeed, when framed in the context of a longer historical narrative, offer exciting and novel insights regarding the institutionalisation of caste through the figure (real and nominal) of the Brahmin. And, what is more, one could see this as a window into several questions - about the ways in which Brahmins are reinventing their power and domination over the caste society; the will to dominance as representing a secularisation of the contemporary Brahmin self; their continuing predominance in matters of cultural

¹ See, for a particularly forceful instance of framing the Brahmin in such an axis, the chapter titled 'The Brahmin in the Tamil Country in the Early Twentieth Century' in Geeta and Rajadurai's work on the Tamil Nadu Non-Brahmin movement (1998).

and social capital; their much talked about ability to adapt to newer challenges or, more crudely, the figuration of the "cunning Brahmin", and so on. Ultimately, however, the framework of dominance is seriously delimiting and restrictive in a very primary sense, in that it refuses to give the subject - the Brahmin - a voice of **his/her** own. Any sociological analysis framed thus is seriously compromising of the scholarly rigour. It is almost as if a certain normative standpoint has to be taken and vindicated even before the research is undertaken.

One could, for all that, recognise the fecundity and value of reaching such **normatively** ordered conclusions about the contemporary Brahmin; but foreclosing a conclusion by prefiguring it is methodologically dubious and politically jaundiced. Accordingly, it is a doubly qualified normative axis that we have been working with all along. On the one hand, we have sought to 'caste', as it were, a social space that is often represented as moving towards a trajectory that is either outside caste or non-caste determined. On the other hand, we are quick to contain the normative implications of this over-determination, as also of the easy characterisations of such a move. This mixed positioning is also one of the grounds on which we avoided taking on a 'social movements' framework of appraisal to understand the dynamics of the contemporary Brahmin identity.

All the same, this study has tried to bear the results of a conviction that 'caste' - both as a substantive social framework and as a category of analysis and appraisal - ought to remain a legitimate and unavoidable preoccupation for the discipline of sociology in India in its attempts to make sense of Indian social realities. This conviction remains notwithstanding - or perhaps, because of - the recent veering away of the practitioners of the discipline from studying caste - both in its *traditional and modern* avatars. This drift has had to do with a confluence of historical as well as epistemological reasons, which have not been comprehensively mapped. Of course, the discipline has learnt crucial lessons in the process of diverging away from the more immediate invocations of caste that it has had to live with. However the desire to dissociate has almost driven the discipline to the point of jettisoning caste studies altogether, for which there appears to be very little justification. The predominant disposition seems to be one of inscribing and determining the relevance of caste in certain locations of life and not in others. Our refrain has been that even as the discipline needs to guard itself against essentialist and gate-keeping conceptions of caste, it cannot afford to repudiate a sociological and

anthropological focus on caste, as indeed caste-mediated phenomena. All this formed the focus and content of our initial chapters - particularly the first but also the second.

The methodological protocols animating our study of the Brahmin identity, therefore, have in no way sought to depart from the trajectories - historical and contemporary - of caste studies. We have all along sought to innovate from within this ground, while actively ensuring that the innovation remains consistent to this space. Now, recasting the 'presents' of caste in the languages of self-representation and identity-formation - at least in the ways in which we have delineated them - seems to suggest a way out. What is important is that it is not logically necessary for one to presume ethnic-like formations of caste as partaking of the processes of identity and identification. Not only do we need to bring into focus the spaces beyond caste - in terms of alternative identity "choices" available - for the purposes of understanding caste action, we must also remain sensitive to the logic and demands of caste structure and signification. The latter especially are open to varied and differentiated meanings and negotiations.

Indeed, a defining characteristic of the now burgeoning literature on identities and identification is its insistence on conceiving the same as being dynamic, processual, multiple and historical. Predictably, most of the scholars working in this framework have consciously attempted to veer away from any **primordialist** understanding of identities and towards a 'constructionist' account of them. Thus, for this constructionist strand, identity is not given, is not "is"; "it must always be established" (Jenkins 1996: 4) and therefore "can only be understood *as* a process. As 'being' or 'becoming'" (*/did*). The following description from Hall (1990), one of the most influential theorists within this literature, represents and encompasses this approach very well:

Cultural identity ... is a matter of 'becoming' as well as '**being**'. ...It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. ...Far from **being** eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a mere '**recovery**' of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past (Hall 1990: 225).

Evidently, the specific ways in which we have framed the question of identity and identification has tried to depart from the 'constructionist' appraisal, without completely denying it all the same. It is instructive to identify caste both as a social identity and an identity choice that is available to individuals and groups in India. It may nevertheless

not be sufficient to reiterate that identities - even caste ones - have to be approached and grasped in relational terms, for all too often castes in a substantive sense have broken with (or attempted to undermine) the relationality constituting them.² The strength of this insistence is that it helps us to approximate to caste as an axis of identity and identification, at once given and constructed. Broadly, this is what we were getting at in the section "On identity and identification and the question of **othering**" in our second chapter (pp. 55-8 above).

Such a mediated understanding has been foundational to our focus on the dynamics of a particular caste community over a period of time, as well as facilitative of **further** grafts upon the space of identity as well. It not only avoided attaching any primordality to the 'casteness' of the Brahmin community as such, but in historicising it also allowed us to situate it in a larger field in which other such identities and identifications were attempting to categorise and reorder the space of its operation. Underwriting these complex negotiations has been the way in which self-fashioning takes place, often marked out as a project of self-realisation - the idea of becoming Brahmin - and yet coupled with a sense of the external categorisation grounding the sense of self - the self-identity of being Brahmin. Broadly, this is what we were getting at in the course of our substantive chapters (Chs.3-6) reporting, describing and in a manner of speaking explaining and evaluating the problematics of Brahmin identity in contemporary Karnataka.

Comprehending identity and identification in these ways - indeed as being a fundamental resource for individuals and communities to engage in sociologically interesting behaviour - prepares us to centralise caste as the prism through which one can get at the action patterns that individuals and the 'community' (*ಸಮುದಾಯ*) in India inhabit and exhibit. This is a crucial point for, as we think our thesis has shown, the invocation of a caste identity as a representation of the self is not a given - at least not in the case of the contemporary Brahmins. They have to be, in a manner of speaking, coerced into enunciating from that standpoint since the relationship they share with their '**Brahminness**' is constitutively ambivalent and even contradictory. What this must entail for our accounts of **self-fashioning** and the concomitant grasp of identities and

² Broadly, this is what Dumont was gesturing at in fashioning the construct 'substantialisation of **caste**' to record changes in the nature and structure of caste entities. See pp. 33-4 above for an elaboration. We shall return to discuss this axis in the light of our presented data.

identifications is that the fashioned 'identity' must necessarily be situated and approached in a field which is dynamic and shifting. Even more categorically, the point that identity must always constantly strive to be **established**³ brings to fore the agency that is involved in the formulation of a (caste) identity. The latter involves active enunciations as well as repudiations - in short, ambivalences - which the caste subjects foreground in their relationship with parts of their own 'self' and the 'other(s)' they negotiate. These negotiations keep open the varied possibilities of assertive identification and active denial vis-a-vis one's casteness, and need thematisation in and by the scholarship.

II

Recounting the narrative of the 'Brahmin' identity

The foregoing points both recapitulate and reconstitute aspects of the ground on which the study went about mapping the dynamics of the Brahmin identity in contemporary Karnataka. The question arises as to the specifics of the dynamics itself. Broadly, in keeping with the architectonic traced above, we examined aspects of the non-Brahmin categorisation of the Brahmin identity (as indeed the modern state's complicity in such a categorisation), emphasising in particular the figurative aspects of the 'Brahmin' response (both within the fold and outside, as for instance in the case of the Lingayaths [see pp. 159-75 above]). Even as we attempted to show that the non-Brahmin othering of the Brahmin identity has had enduring effects on the ways in which the contemporary (or modern) Brahmin has identified him/herself and the differential recuperation and foregrounding of his/her self thereon, we were also concerned to deliver on the limits of this 'othering' and get at the resources and constraints that the Brahmin self depends upon in order to respond to the **othering**

Of course, as our chapter (# 3) recounting a broad history of the modern world of Brahmins sought to demonstrate, the self-realisation of being and becoming Brahmin also obtains in many respects independent of the othering and its ways of categorising. The Brahmin self - and the community at large - has, over time, borne the brunt of larger processes of urbanisation, secularisation, and corporatisation; and an assessment of this impact cannot be gained from an exclusive focus on the non-Brahmin's ways of recuperating and defining the Brahmin. Even more pointedly perhaps, the sting in the

³ But of course overstating the plastic nature of (secular) identities is both unwarranted and indefensible. More on this below.

latter (that is, the non-Brahmin) only confirms the proactive transitions within the Brahmin community as a whole, while lending a purely reactive edge to the non-Brahmin articulation. Moreover, self-identity or identification (the process of having an identity) on our register is neither exclusively in terms of a self-conscious activity of imagining one's own contours in a dialogue with the 'other/s'; nor is it, by that same token, determined necessarily by its own contexts. As we saw in the course of our substantive chapters - that is, Chs. 3-6 - 'Brahmins' (of course, sectarian differences and caste classifications are important) continue to retrieve and put to use the 'scriptural/traditional' imagination of the idea of the Brahmin in negotiating with 'modern' demands. The narrative of the self, therefore, both within and across castes (and especially so, we suspect, for the Brahmin identification) always exhibits an excess that cannot always and completely be explained in terms of its dialogic relation with its other/s or in terms of its own self-recuperation in particular contexts. The process is more enduring than ephemeral, even as it is subject to change and transformation. Therefore there is a need for more full-bloodied appraisals of the modes of investing in the idea of the 'Brahmin'. Our study is but a **fragment** of an unfolding prognosis.

The foregoing might seem a paradoxical formulation. Let us try to recount it from within the narrative presented by our study.⁴ Our narrative has sought to work itself out, simultaneously, at three levels (or registers, as the chapter on method briefly posited it). While this was broadly reflective of our data sources - those gathered from the caste associations, from the historical recuperation of the non-Brahmin othering and the Brahmin's negotiation with it, and finally from the Brahmin individual **her/himself** - it has also served as a kind of grid for locating the dynamics of the Brahmin identity. These three registers (or levels) have entailed various spaces of enunciation, both communitarian and individualised, each feeding off and into the category of being and becoming Brahmin. Indeed, as our substantive chapters would have disclosed, these registers are constitutive of the processes by which the dynamics of the modern Brahmin identity plays itself out, and accordingly are not strictly translatable as mere sources or conduits of information about Brahmin castes.

⁴ Of course, we shall keep returning to it in the sections that follow, sometimes tacitly and sometimes explicitly. More frontally, it would entail juxtaposing claims of 'community' and modes of 'association' in an ambiguous logic of confounding totalities - of an 'association' aspiring to be community and a 'community' unable to shed the dimensions of its associational life. More on this, especially in Sect. IV.

All the same, both in our narration and with reference to the ground, these registers remain indistinct and always work off and into each other. For instance, the enunciatory space of the caste association often makes itself visible through the non-Brahminical othering of the Brahmin, even as the Brahmin persona at an individual level constructs itself in negotiation both with the dynamic of the association and with the othering. This intertwining of the registers across which the Brahmin self and identity articulates itself is something one has to remain alert. Besides, to the extent that the contemporaneity of the Brahmin identity and identification is here being approached historically - implicating the entire course of the twentieth century - it was clear from the very outset that one of its constitutive motifs, of being a community (or an identity) under siege, had to be historicised. Likewise, our initial forays into and interactions with the caste association activists brought home the point about the inextricable ways in which Brahmin enunciations were conjoined with a non-Brahmin history of othering as indeed with individual Brahmins' secularised narratives of the self.

Quite clearly, an effort has been made to graft a historical trajectory onto an ethnographic present, which only made the task of consolidating the results of our inquiry in a monographic format that much more difficult (if not impossible). The recuperation of the narratives of the Brahmin self, in the specific ways accomplished by this study, would apparently have been impossible if the historical axis - the operationalisation of the demand to historicise caste - were not to be foregrounded. But of course the demand also followed in the wake of another theoretical suggestion - about mapping the nature and sources of caste action today. Indeed, as our first two chapters disclosed, this would entail coming to terms with the thesis of the 'substantialisation' of caste. As Fuller (1996) has suggested, it is productive to view substantialisation as a 'self-contradictory' process. This **self-contradictoriness** is embodied in terms of both the increasing differentiation within each caste (even as it gets substantialised) and the propensity for relational hierarchical values to remain salient in the *private*, domestic domain, while being displaced by 'substantialist' ones in the *public* domain (*ibid.* 12-3 has the details). This, undoubtedly, is a **useful** way of recuperating the operative dimensions of the process of substantialisation. However, in the light of our delineation of the dimensions of the contemporary Brahmin identity and identification, one sees that the nature and sources of caste action today are much more muddled than the neat divisions and 'phases' that the concept of substantialisation is able to muster.

At any rate, the point about the 'displacement' of caste values as being the primary mode of recuperating one's **casteness** (hinted at by Fuller) is undeniably witnessed, as we saw in chapter six particularly, among the Brahmins. They articulate the 'significance' of caste as being relevant only in a past that they imagine or remember as their own. What is more, this imagination of 'caste' in ritual hierarchy-centred terms is almost always deployed in order to convince themselves - as well as the observer/outsider - that they now are indeed 'outside' caste, even 'non-caste-d' selves. More pointedly, compared to their own foregoing generations, this assertion begins to appear like a truism, for the transformations that each generation opens out to seem radical and foundational. Each generation believes that its succeeding generations is either "losing out on its "heritage" or that it is "adjusting according to the demands of the times" depending upon the disposition of the individual evaluating such changes - but more of the former than of the latter. Interestingly however, this positively imagined "past" is carefully distinguished from a negatively evaluated Brahmin-centric *caste system*. The privatisation of caste - the tendency to see caste and its rules, meanings and normative legitimacy as being relevant and salient only within the confines of the home, or more accurately a private world - is also a strategy that the Brahmins adopt in looking at and making sense of their casteness. Nevertheless, the point that Mayer (1996) makes regarding beliefs and attitudes that emanate from relational hierarchical status values being coded as statements about cultural difference seems a better approximation, which too finds corroboration in the instance of Brahmins.

But the picture is hazier than these recuperations suggest. Beteille's analysis of the urban middle classes and Fuller's enthusiastic affirmation of the same only confounds it further. In an essay that is punctuated with subtle assertions, Beteille sees caste (in the context especially of urban middle classes) as a residue from the past that has lost much of its significance in reproducing structures of inequality; rather, it is the institution of family that is in many important ways replacing caste (Beteille 1991: 20). Beteille also makes much of the differentially endowed cultural and social capitals across families in determining the patterns of inequality (*ibid.*: 24-5), but interestingly proffers hardly any evidence to buttress his claims (a problem that dogs his 1996 and 2002 too). Given the data that we have worked with - concerning our respondents and their networks but also the data that the backward classes commissions have brought to the fore - it appears that Beteille is overstating his case. Not only there appears to be a successful reproduction of

inequality - understood in terms of access to critical resources and life-chances - based primarily on caste distinctions, there is also severe and extensively shared sentiments of disapproval against breaching the rule of endogamy (restricting thus the possibility of the varied forms of capital from becoming available to the 'outsiders'). We have of course **suggested** the ways in which the boundaries of endogamy are changing in contemporary times among the Brahmins - from being restricted to the individual Brahmin castes to any which family so long as it belongs to the Brahmin fold. Nonetheless, as we suggested in the third chapter, the preferences are still to observe 'caste' endogamy rather than 'community' endogamy, even as acceptance and legitimation in terms of (say) "as long as they are Brahmins, we don't mind" is growing and even if the grounds of legitimation have shifted from ritualist assertions to those mounted on "cultural compatibility".

Moreover, in a very foundational sense, family is where caste gets its most effective mode of embodiment and reproduction:

In any case, to say that 'family' is now becoming more important is not of itself to indicate any sea-change since family pedigree is precisely what caste has always been about (Quigley 1994: 37).

Apart from the continuing significance of endogamy, we also attempted to point out that even the everyday fields of interaction of our respondents - spaces that are ostensibly secularised - are overwhelmingly contained within the Brahmin fold. This is a point that Sivaprasad's study (1987), albeit on a different register, too corroborates. These interactive fields might have, in normative terms, very little to do with the fact of one's casteness. For instance, these individuals or families might not deliberately choose to seek out and interact with each other solely because they are Brahmins. And what is more, given their contexts - largely urban and middle class - they are today faced with greater choices and networks of interaction. But the fact that they still cluster around and look up to each other for a sense of security and comfort is a testimony to the resilience of 'caste' in providing a moral and meaningful frame through which to make sense of one's lifeworlds. One can still gather a coherent and unifying structure of ideas and feelings that binds and formulates the contemporary Brahmin community.

In his 1996a, Beteille is far more guarded, even as he largely makes the same assertion. He argues that both the dimensions of caste - those of quotidian practices and of morality - are unmistakably losing their legitimacy. This is definitely the case, he asserts, in the case of the urban middle classes, even if for the rural "cultivators, artisans

and others" they might still be more legitimate and meaningful. He suggests that caste is no more a "complete system" that it was before. Thus:

Until the nineteenth century, Hindu intellectuals could argue with force and conviction about the significance and value of caste. Their counterparts of today, who are still mainly upper caste, have lost the capacity not only to explain and justify caste, but even to describe it coherently (*ibid.*: 162).

And that:

fC]aste distinctions were considered significant and legitimate by most members of society, and particularly by those belonging to the upper castes whose descendents in contemporary India are precisely the ones who are most ambivalent and troubled about its meaning and legitimacy today (*ibid.*: 160-1).

Accordingly caste today is a "truncated system" (*ibid.*: 161). The future of caste lies with politics, and not in being a moral frame regulating the everyday lives of the urban middle classes and a resource for meaning making. For the latter, caste is a cloak, a readily available and easily understood language, a metaphor to talk about other, more significant and relevant **signifiers** of status - such as education, occupation and income. The implications of these claims are made explicit by Fuller (1996: 16-7) as he summates Beteille:

[T]o extend Beteille's argument further than he explicitly does so himself- status distinctions may be expressed in the language of caste, but they may no longer pertain to caste hierarchy, which has lost all its legitimacy, or even to caste as an array of culturally distinct groups which has become largely irrelevant in comparison with mainly class-based cultural variations.

On these terms thus, the retrenchment of the urban middle classes "belonging to the upper castes" from the normative and even quotidian space of caste is doubly complete. Not only do they loath the increasing "**casteism**" in the political arena (in which ostensibly the future of caste lies) they also consider it morally reprehensible to think and act in terms of their caste identities. But if politics is going to overdetermine the trajectories of caste and if any caste, which begins to populate the space of the urban middle classes, will **definingly** move away from caste, then what remains of 'caste'? Indeed, how do the Brahmins we spoke with, read about, and observed match up to these claims? If politics is where caste's present and **future** lie, then evidently Brahmins will have very little role to play in the process. Neither do they have the numbers to retain their significance nor is the "politics of patronage" that supposedly enabled them to thwart the logic of representation from taking fuller effect successful any longer (see Jaffrelot 2003). What is more, Brahmins themselves increasingly realise this, as we saw

in our sixth chapter: not only do they articulate their retrenchment from the space of politics as a direct fall-out of the growing “**casteism**” in the polity (like the “urban middle classes” of Beteille do), they also put to work a distinctly **non-substantialised, definingly relational** idea of being a Brahmin in making sense of their own retrenchment. They **suggest** that the ‘Brahmin’ has never been meant to occupy seats of power - even as he is the most knowledgeable and has always wielded unquestioned influence over the powers-that-be. They point instead to the continuing dominance of the community in positions of decision-making - such as the higher echelons of the bureaucracy, **academia**, judiciary, the ‘knowledge economy’ etc. - in order to recreate a classical (scriptural?) and structurally-ordained Brahmin. So, even while being out of the space of caste and politics in an empirical sense, is the Brahmin in it or not?

Further, if Brahmins are literally and metaphorically outside the space of politics - **supposedly** the most dominant space for the survival of caste as an institution - then what **is** happening to the other, more traditional, spaces of influence of caste? If it is endogamy, then the Brahmins seem to jealously guard it, as we saw in chapter three (see particularly the fourth section). If it is strictures founded on rules of ritual purity, it has weakened and yet assumed a different shape, a different legitimacy. In some of the testimonies presented in the third and sixth chapters, the respondents were in no way jettisoning the sacralised imagination of the Brahmin. In seeking to reinterpret the ‘given’ idea of the Brahmin, they were according it a newer legitimacy as indeed deploying it as a significant cognitive resource to make sense of their worlds. If it is a social **network** or a ‘habitus’ within which lifeworlds are constructed and on which dispositions, tastes and structures and frames of action are built, then ‘casteness’ continues to be a significant, if not the sole, resource for the Brahmins. Further, do they mean by caste, jati or varna? In many ways, it is both.

Our substantive chapters, accordingly, have been an attempt at gaining a measure of the perceptual space of particular caste subjects and of caste action today. The non-Brahmin retrieval of the Brahmin as the ‘Other’ - not merely for its own self but also as embodying the very anti-thesis of the normative frame of being modern - has had very deeply felt effects on the formation of the contemporary Brahmin self. Indeed, in constitutive ways it is this othering that renders the oscillation on the scales of identity and identification (which the Brahmin experiences) a more urgent and real one. Nonetheless, even as the non-Brahmin challenge acts as a crucial resource for the

formulation of a coherent modern Brahmin identity, and brings home to the Brahmin the urgent need to speak as a secular (or 'non-caste') voice, it does not exhaust this enunciatory space. The intersections in the space of 'voice' too are **definitive** of the making of the modern Brahmin identity. We showed - in the fourth chapter - the varied ways in which this concatenation of voices has meant a series of shifting **identifications**. The internal contestations, the challenges from outside that interrogate both the secularising function of the Brahmin as well as the continued signification of the ritual status that he wields - it is in responding to these often oxymoronic pulls that a deeply ambivalent Brahmin identity emerges.

As our later chapters (five and six) disclose, the non-Brahmin othering has remained enduring. That is to say, it did not subside with the 'resolution' (by way of a regime of quotas) of the non-Brahmin challenge in the 1920s. It has remained critical, even to this day, to all the registers of Brahmin identity that we have presented, be it the space of the caste association, the testimonies of Brahmin individuals and their families, and the reflective commentary of its literateurs and official subjects. The associational efforts, right from the pioneering efforts of the early decades of the last century to the present, have consistently engaged in a dialogue with this state of being othered. Not the least, even at the level of the individuals and their families, this othered status has been foundational in structuring the ways in which the self as Brahmin is evaluated and related with. Being a caste self gets articulated on all these registers as a burden - a burden that has been unfairly imposed on the self. Indeed this, coupled with its unique 'secularising' experience⁵ - its exposure really to the modern space of jobs and education - should have been the most pressing reason for this caste community to complete the journey (that Beteille and Fuller chart as the immanent trajectory of caste) towards a total unmaking of even the substantialised avatars of caste. That this has not happened among the Brahmins and that they, on the contrary, in many ways continue to use their 'caste' knowledge and experience as indeed the caste identity in their narratives of self is obvious from our rendering of the dynamics of the Brahmin identity.

So, then, is the continued deployment of the caste idiom a mere case of obfuscation or even an active instance of misrecognition by the Brahmin that is deployed

On this, more below in the next section that we have titled 'of secularisation and individuation: explanatory sketches'.

only because there is a reassurance of the familiar in it? It is apparent that it is more crucial and grounded to the contemporary Brahmin self than that. The Brahmin continues to make use of his 'casteness' as a critical resource in formulating a sense of self. Of course, the significations of being Brahmin, the meanings and investments that are made in the category of Brahmin, have all undergone significant transformations over the course of the last one century. Also, these transformations have been definitely in the direction of an increasing dilution of the normative hold of the ritual status-centred frame of caste. Even the quotidian caste practices - such as the rules of commensality and touchability - are steadily being delinked from the definitions and adequacy of Brahminhood. The performance of practices such as the *sandhyavandane* is increasingly left to individual discretion; families are indeed becoming the regulatory (or otherwise) institutions in either maintaining or shedding the Brahminical practices. Endogamy however still holds its legitimacy, jealously guarding the boundaries of the community from getting breached. Notwithstanding all such changes, narrated in the course of the third chapter, these cannot be taken to mean an unequivocal break from the 'past'. Through the testimonies of our respondents, we presented the complex ways in which many such practices as indeed their normative legitimacies feed back into the lives of the community.

Such oscillations also mark the space of the Brahmin association. In presenting the various *kinds* of Brahmin associations - probably a unique feature that obtains only in the case of the Brahmins - we sought to demonstrate the continuing significance of the non-Brahmin challenge in bringing to life and legitimacy the space of the corporate Brahmin associations. It is also this challenge that enables the proliferation and enduring existence of caste-specific associations. The non-Brahmin articulation of the Brahmin identity renders the very idea of a Brahmin association an illegitimate one even before it takes birth. It is precisely in seeking to negotiate with this state of immanent illegitimacy that the associations seek to constantly move between claims of community and associational solidarity, but which, in this enunciatory space, is grafted on to a different plane. While defending the idea of the Brahmin association, activists are forced to foreground an agenda that perceives the persona of the Brahmin as a value, one that had to be achieved - even by the Brahmins themselves. More sharply posed, on our terms, this means that the Brahmin identity as a mere associational solidarity can and ought to be transformed into an inalienable sense of community. But this positioning, we also

argued, undercuts the very logic of caste associations, which **definitionally** demand a putative and immanent casteness, of being born Brahmin whose existence remains irrespective of the individual relationship with one's casteness and the attendant demands. The histories of Brahmin associations – particularly the corporate ones - have always had to endure this vacillation or, more accurately, oscillation.

Such deeply embedded and embodied dilemmas obtain most critically in the persona of the contemporary Brahmin individual, whom we encountered more fully in the sixth chapter. Continuing to be marked by the non-Brahmin othering, the Brahmins foreground a dominant sense of burden in evaluating their caste identity and location. The primacy that the 'Other' (the non-Brahmin) seeks to attach to it (that is, Brahmin) is sought to be vigorously denied by articulating the identity proffered by caste as being incidental or peripheral to its existence. It is, to recall a term used by a Brahmin in the journal *Mysore Star*, merely a "list" to which they all belong by default (Ch. 4, p. 152 above). However, and all too paradoxically perhaps, the logic of this retrieval is undercut by thick notions such as *samskara* (character and codes of conduct) that uniquely and exclusively endow the Brahmin with his 'Brahminness', and a consequent logic of immanence attached to it. Such recuperations of caste self as inhabiting the space of 'community' is most **forcefully** articulated when the respondents speak of a self under siege - a 'siege' that is not always the making of the non-Brahmin Other but a more fundamental mismatch between the logic of the times and an inexorable ethics of the self. The narratives of identity and identification that the contemporary Brahmins place on record are again, thus, defined by an oscillation between 'community' and 'association' sense of self.

Can all this be understood by situating ourselves within the framework of 'substantialisation'? The answer broadly is in the negative. Most importantly, the thesis of substantialisation renders caste action determined and deterministic, in that it carries a certain assumption of hardness and internal homogeneity attached to it. Consequently, it does not allow for an equivocation vis-a-vis one's casteness. It also carries an evolutionary idea of how castes transform, of a passage of caste from 'structure' to 'substance' (see pp. 35-7 and 53-4 above for an elucidation). Clearly, an account, which allows the caste actors to remain responsive to the *structure* of caste even as they make new meanings out of their caste identities, is in order. In the sections that follow, we work towards an architectonic of such an account, implicating secularisation and

individuation and the contending logics of 'community' and 'association'. Our final section, of course, is a projection ahead and into the **future**.

III

Of secularisation and individuation: explanatory sketches

For more than two centuries, philosophers and social scientists have predicted the death of God and the decline of religiosity. It may not be possible to review all these arguments here, most of which can be subsumed under the heading '**secularisation**' or '**de-sacralisation**'. A popular hypothesis postulates a negative relationship between economic wealth and (church) religiosity. According to the Bible, it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to get to heaven. In taking up this old idea, we might expect that religiosity increases under deteriorating economic conditions and declines under improving economic conditions. Others have attributed a different meaning to the same principle and derived from it a long-term trend. In particular, Inglehart (1990) argues that traditional religion satisfies the need for shelter and safety, but the unprecedented wealth of post-war Western societies has, for the first time in history, satisfied these basic needs, thereby destroying the basis of church religion. Thus, whereas in the early stages of industrialisation materialism and church religiosity co-existed, the traditional forms of church religiosity are expected to gradually wither away in advanced industrial societies. In contrast, Stark and Bainbridge (1985) have argued that religion will persist because it provides "general compensators" for not directly satisfiable desires.

According to a second approach, the decline of church religiosity is largely due to the development of 'occidental rationality'. Max Weber is often credited with outlining the basic features of this process (Collins 1986 has the details, although Weber's **own** writings [1978] are also **useful**). Obviously, underlying the whole process of western rationalisation is the belief that the world is calculable, predictable and controllable (cf. Wilson 1976). These beliefs, it is held, apply as much to the physical world as to the psychological and social worlds. Western rationality disenchants the world because God is no longer required in explanations of natural and social phenomena, each of which are seen as the outcome of **this-worldly** processes. Moreover, the basic tenets of a rational science may come into conflict with the requirements of religion (see also Schluchter 1981).

Other authors stress the effects of functional or structural differentiation (Dobbelaere 1985; Luhmann 1995) on secularisation and individuation. Functional differentiation, it is claimed, has produced societal subsystems, which have become increasingly specialised in their functions, and some have developed increasingly rational organisations. Doubts are expressed whether religion still has a societal function in a rational world, especially since control is assumed to be no longer based on religious or moral principles. What is more, it is held that religion may even be a menace to modern, rational institutions. Accordingly, functional rationality typical of a societalised environment may conflict with the value rationality of religion, which is community oriented (Fenn 1972). Thus secularisation is claimed to be more than a social-structural process. Indeed, as Peter Berger has maintained, "(i)t affects the totality of cultural life and ideation, and may be observed ... most important of all, in the rise of science as an autonomous, thoroughly secular perspective on the world (1967: 107)

Following on from these arguments, others claim that the religious subsystem has not only lost its function at the macro level, but that religious and other beliefs are also transformed at the individual level. Since science and the technologies dependent on it make up the major part of modern education, it is held that the content of learning is de-sacralised (Wilson 1976: 68, 128). Indeed, as Durkheim suggested, the more general and vague God becomes, the more removed He is from this world and the more ineffective (1964: 168-9). The same could be held for traditions associated with belief in an entire sacred realm, so that in a society where role relations have become impersonal and segmented, observance of the sacred seems an *anachronism*.⁶

These formulations link the idea of secularisation at the macro level to changes at the micro level. The link between the 'impersonal society' and the sacred as an abstract notion is set within this framework because the impersonal and specialised character of rationally organised institutions seems to be a typical experience of modern citizens. In fact, one may extend the idea of individuation associated with modernity in this context. Broadly, the individuation thesis about the transformation of beliefs and practices under conditions of modernity has been elaborated within the framework of *neo-functionalism*.⁷

⁶ For a contrary view, see of course the later Durkheim, especially of *The elementary forms of the religious life* (1965).

⁷ For the content and thrust of *neofunctionalist* reasoning, see Alexander (1985). Luhmann (1998) has much to say on the individuating dimensions of modernity, as also Giddens (1991); while for the Indian context,

At its core, the thesis is rooted in the assumption that, in contrast to the non-modern (or **pre-modern**), religious and other matters can be decided by autonomous individuals. Since individuated subjects as self-respecting persons demanding dignity and equal concern from others can **satisfy** their needs and aspirations from a large basket of competing religious and non-religious offers, their belief system (as also the structure of their practice) becomes a kind of patchwork of heterogeneous elements. More sophisticated sociological arguments use complex notions of collective identity and identity construction to address this state of affairs. In traditional societies, it is argued, a homogeneous lifeworld gave people their identity; whereas, in 'modern' times, people live in a kind of disengagement, with the lifeworld of family, neighbourhood, community and formal and informal association becoming dissociated from the social system and its subsystems. Typical of this dissociation is the privatisation of the space of belief in the world of the subsystems (Luhmann 1998). In advanced modernity - sometimes referred to as postmodernity - individualisation is assumed to extend into the lifeworld, and a de-traditionalisation of the lifeworld is held to occur (Giddens (1990: Ch.5). This, it is claimed, has led to a 'liberation' in which people faced the new experiences of having to make their own decisions, their own choices, to build their own identity (Beck 1992). Collective identities are held to no longer obtain, and fixed identities may only survive in older **generations**.⁸

It should be clear, then, that although 'secularisation' has been used to designate a process of long-term change involving specifically religious beliefs, value-orientations, and institutional functioning, it could be made to yield a perspective on individuation as well. What is more, secularisation nuances (in the sense of adding dimension to) the process of individuation. To be sure, approaching secularisation from this perspective has two advantages. First, by analysing long-term change in beliefs and practices, it becomes apparent that changes in norms and values often cannot be reduced to the emergence of some new preferences or needs. Rather, 'religious' change (if one were to so restrict secularisation) may be better understood as a complex process of re-interpreting old, even

see Alam (1999b). For a more comprehensive, even if theoretically subtle, overview of modernity and its theorising in India and elsewhere, see Hegde (2000).

⁸ Contemporary events of course seem to suggest otherwise. Particularly after September 11, 2001, the world seems a transformed place with contesting imaginations and indeed the postulation of fixed collective identities.

abstract, value concepts. Secondly, conceptualising secularisation as a process of changing interpretations of value concepts and thereby connecting up with individuation emphasises the role of intellectuals and institutions in the process of change. Since the translation of values into coherent sets of preferences and norms requires special skills, the task is frequently assigned to 'experts' or specialized institutions. As long as they have a monopoly of interpreting norms and values, they may also influence the pace of religious and purely secular change. However, it is important to analyse not only the influence of institutions on changes in beliefs and practices, but also to investigate the consequences of institutional decay (indeed, and not often seen as so, an aspect of individuation). More particularly, is the loss of institutional power accompanying secularisation also accompanied by increasing value pluralism and value instability (read, individuation), as many conservative authorities suspect?

In sum: interest in the secularisation process can translate into a concern with not only aspects of religiosity, but also changes in behaviour, changes in beliefs and a concern with whether moral norms are more heterogeneous among people emancipated from institutionalised practices (whether these be connected with particular religions or not). Accordingly, '**secularisation**', although a term used to designate changes in religious behaviour - the decline in church religiosity, for instance - can be extended to capture a wider gamut of changes in non-religious or purely secular realms as well. The latter scale of changes is connected particularly with the processes of modernity and modernisation, so that 'secularisation' may be approached as marking out further dimensions within a modern logic of the individuation of identities and selves.

We have made much of secularisation of caste in invoking the persona of the **secular/ising** Brahmin in our previous chapters. Of course, as our delineation above makes it amply clear, the concept of secularisation has primarily, if not exclusively, been deployed to animate debates on the relationship that obtains between religion and society in a modernising context, and what is more in the western **context**.⁹ The overpowering debate on secularisation has largely missed the attention of the Indian sociologists. In the Indian context, it is 'secularism' and not secularisation that has occupied the minds of the academia, particularly recently in the wake of what has been called the

⁹ The *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, among others, is a good source for current debates on the question.

'communalisation' of society. This seems singularly unfortunate because, as we have been maintaining off the explanatory sketches recounted above, the debate on secularisation (even as it remains mired in the question of religion) is open to the conceptual possibility of acting as a grid on which any discussion of a social formation negotiating with 'traditional' identity-markers in a modernising context can be mounted. Moreover, it can also facilitate a charting of the processes of individuation within identities and identifications as well. The same however cannot be said of the Indian debate on secularism.

This is unfortunate, for secularisation as a concept and as standing for a social process could be profitably used outside the sphere of religion - for instance, as we have attempted to talk off (and about) the 'secularising' Brahmin. Through this figure, we have sought to frame the varied, often contending, pulls and pressures that a caste self experiences in a context which increasingly seeks to legitimate itself by de-legitimising aspects of a 'traditional' (albeit changing) scheme of things. This is as much a secularising demand, as the demand to secularise vis-a-vis one's religious affiliations and **affectations**.¹⁰ Indeed, as it is being increasingly accepted in the debate on secularisation, the demand to 'secularise' need not and has not effected a complete erasure of 'traditional' identifications or even their significance in people's lives. Thus even as the Brahmin self copes up with the demand to secularise, it in many crucial ways remains 'Brahmin', a sacred signifier. Even as one admits to this possibility, however, it should not lead us either to dismiss the influence that the demand to secularise exerts on the caste self or, in relation to our problematic, constrict the ability of the Brahmin self to mediate its effects completely on its terms and with success. It is a window into these processes of negotiation that we have sought by implicating the idea, indeed the figure, of the 'secular/ising' Brahmin self. To be sure, secularisation is a process that all castes have been negotiating, but Brahmins, given the historical processes both embedding and disembedding the specific instances of this fold, seem to present an acute instance of the process. The demand to secularise has also been especially stringent for the Brahmins

¹⁰ In prefiguring the process of secularisation in this way, it is important to note, we have sought to make a crucial distinction that many scholars (of course epitomised by the modernisation theorists but also evident in the works of the recent celebrities such as Giddens) ignore. Secularisation need not necessarily be unique to or even equivalent to modernisation. That is, a demand to secularise need not necessarily be a demand to modernise, and the latter could take shape even in non-modern or post-traditional contexts.

because, invariably, the non-Brahmin 'Other' seeks to **over-sacralise** the persona of the Brahmin in its recuperation. '*The*Brahmin' came to symbolise all that the 'traditional' caste order stood for and legitimised. This often leads the Brahmin self to engage in a complex process of reconfiguring its identity - a process that involves simultaneous acts of denial and recuperation.

More importantly, the theme of the secularisation of caste accents the processes of the 'substantialisation' of caste (if any). In negotiating with the demand to secularise - that is, to subject itself to an overt delegitimation or even a privatisation of the space of caste-mediated belief and practice - and consequently in seeking out newer grounds of justification, caste entities move towards becoming aggregative formations founded on a will-to-power. The moot point however - and this is where, to reiterate, we think the thesis of 'substantialisation' confronts its limit - is whether this process is ever complete in that it comprehensively obliterates the terms of an older moral order. And, what is more, if it does not, then whether it obtains merely as a cloak (a metaphor?) seeking to mask or even to actively **misrecognise** what is really something else? Clearly, there is more to the processes of secularisation and individuation than what the substantialisation theme can command.

IV

The logic of 'community' and 'association'

To be sure, one can accept much of the preceding analysis without adopting the whole conceptual **framework**. Even though one may be uneasy about the notions of identity-construction and individuation - an unease that is even more accentuated for contexts such as the Indian one, where plasticity of identity and identification need not imply elasticity - hardly anyone disputes that individuals are now confronted with a larger number of alternatives in the lifeworld than in the past. But, and this is important, as our study of a particular range of caste subjects (namely, Brahmins) has revealed, the availability of options both determines and is determined by the relative homogeneity and stability of structurally-ordained beliefs and practices. It is this duality of determination that has to be captured, and we strive to do so in terms of a schema of 'community' and 'association'. While the schema is a derivative of the results encoded by our study of the dynamics of Brahmin identity in Karnataka, in documenting the latter we now seek to present it as an encompassing framework undergirding the whole investigation. It is towards an explication of this schema that we shall now turn, of course in the light of our

study of Brahmin identity and identification(s). In the process, a key motif of our investigation, namely, the idea of the secularising Brahmin, will find further elaboration.

In grafting the entire spectrum of caste-based invocations, recuperations, enunciations and significations onto a logic of community and association, one is of course drawing on the inspiration provided by Ferdinand Toennies' (1955) classic statement on the subject of *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft*. For Toennies, all social formations evolve from a state of 'community' (that is, *gemeinschaft*) to one of 'association' (*gesellschaft*). He seemed to deploy these concepts less as formal or formalised types than as terms designating forms of social relations. This perception itself had its echoes in most of the classical sociological thinkers like Durkheim, Marx and Weber. But often such perceptions work on a presumption of determinacy - the terms 'community' and 'association' taken to represent contrasting types of social organisation - and are often served up against an evolutionary backdrop. Surely such a mode of characterisation is problematic, and it should be evident that we, in invoking Toennies, neither partake of his model nor scale transitions by means of an evolutionary schema. Social theorisation has evidently come a long way off.

The intent behind the invocation of the 'community-and-association' schema, nevertheless, lies simply in its ability to gesture in the direction of the contradictory bases of caste action today - their oscillation between contrasting senses of 'community' and 'association'. The sense of community, of a being-in-common, invokes, as Toennies and many others following in his wake have suggested - Upadhyaya (2001) details the career of the concept in social theory - a certain transcendent character, a recognition that obtains on a moral collective plane beyond the calculations of contract and interest. Although enmeshed in social relations, 'community' is taken to be the primary resource of legitimacy and normativity in those relations, and thus obtains as an involuntary, inalienable and accordingly 'natural' commitment or solidarity offering the participants a collective sense of belonging. As the popular dictionary definition spells it out, community is a state of "joint ownership of liability, being shared and being held in common" (*Concise Oxford Dictionary* 1976: 204). It is, in short, a thick notion. The idea of 'association', on the other hand, seems a much thinner one, and can be usefully deployed as a form of identification and/or recognition that is more malleable and open to

change, contestation and **disavowal**.¹¹ It is an axis that is much softer and subject to the vagaries of individuation and individuals. In being the very anti-thesis of 'community', it stands for a voluntary, deliberated *choice* to associate.

In suggesting that the contemporary state of caste identity and identification can be approximated as a definitional oscillation between the two states - embodied by the terms *community* and *association* - which, it is important to note, are not mutually exclusive to each other, we demonstrate the possibilities of transcending the current closures that contemporary caste studies face. But before getting on to this tack, we need to firm up what our substantive chapters has been registering, namely, the idea of the secularisation of caste, and the attendant notion of individuation, as obtaining within the Brahmin fold.

The contemporary Brahmin 'community' - note, used here as a shorthand symbol for a particular, numerically defined, grouping - in very important senses foregrounds the prevarication of being a 'caste' today. The 'traditional' moral order is plainly not going away. Even as it has lost legitimacy in many ways in the views of the Brahmins, their retrieval of it is in no way marked by summary rejection. The negotiation with the fact of being Brahmin - especially, of being a caste self that was/is driven to respond to a very active and **fundamental** 'othering' (silently from within, but overtly from without) - can be mapped as oscillating between the senses of 'community' and 'association' as disclosed above. By 'oscillation' we do not mean that Brahmins at any given point of time would deliberately decide to invoke one sense over the other, nor is it meant to bring into focus a sort of schizophrenic self. The idea we are keen on foregrounding is, as we mentioned, a duality of determination - that caste (as a structurally 'given' resource of identity and identification) both determines and is determined by the creative ways in which a people who possess it as a socio-cognitive resource put it to use in organising their lifeworlds and derive an ontological sense of security. This is also a point we made above while explicating the idea of the secularisation of caste - that even as the Brahmin is subject to the transformative processes of the latter kind, these do not leave him dispossessed of the sentiments and structures of caste (in a word, of being 'Brahmin').

¹¹ Of course, the personification of 'community' can obtain at various levels, including that of association as deployed here. But the key to 'community' is its transcendent character - that distinguishes the community from what might otherwise be called an association, be it a group, locality, family or even political society. For a thought on this, see Frazer (2000 *passim*)

What is obtaining is an active process of negotiation in which each transforms the other and gets transformed in turn.

Evidently, this **framework** cannot be superimposed uncomplicatedly onto the thesis of substantialisation. Unlike the latter, by introducing the dynamic of community and association, we have sought to point to the simultaneity of caste being (in terms of the Dumontian register) both relative and substantive to individuals and groups alike. It is also a suggestion to remain sensitive to the different levels at which 'caste' is - or particular castes are - undergoing transformation. What happens at the level of castes as relational social groups need not necessarily reflect what is happening *within* a caste or even to individuals who are, as it were, caste-d. '*Caste as community*'⁷ is often deployed to signify the state in which one's casteness - of being a caste self- remains the primary, if not the sole, universe of meanings and legitimacy. Conversely, '*caste as association*' is made to stand for a state in which casteness signifies a mere aggregation - a loose conglomeration, an association which might not be binding, either morally or emotionally; perhaps standing-in for a mere reassurance of the familiar.

The terms of this **dichotomisation** could nonetheless be made to work on behalf of the substantialisation thesis. Dirks interestingly, but only **fleetingly**, uses these terms when he attempts to make sense of the process of substantialisation:

Caste may no longer convey a sense of community that confers civilizational identity to the Indian subcontinent, but it is still the primary form of local identity and, in certain contexts, from Dalits to **Brahmans**, translates the local into recognizably subcontinental idioms of association far more powerful than any other single category of community (Dirks 2002: 7).

This is another productive way of retrieving the ideas of 'community' and 'association' underscoring our investigation. However, the formulation remains too closely wedded to **Dumont's** thesis - ironically enough Dirks remains an important luminary in the post-Dumontian approaches to caste - in that it invests the "idioms of association" with a hardness, a substantiveness betokening our sense of community. The formulation that we foregrounded following Toennies was one in which the idioms of association are **definitionally** amorphous and peripheral as opposed to those of the **community**.¹²

Again, the self-contradictory nature of the process of substantialisation that Fuller refers to can be redeployed so as to make sense of the very structure of oscillation that the perceptual space of Brahmins exhibits. However, this '**self-contradictoriness**' is much

¹² Cf. also our fn.11 above.

more fundamental to the contemporary Brahmin identity than a mere 'privatisation' of the space of caste or even the increasing differentiation that obtains within each caste in terms of class, status and power (as identified by Fuller). What is more, retrieving this state of being that the Brahmin finds himself in the grip of as a contradiction might also be misleading.

Pointedly, such contradictory bases of caste action are rendered much more central and acute in the state of being Brahmin, for it has had to negotiate with a very articulate othering of the self in the context of the non-Brahmin articulation. Its very casteness - of being Brahmin - was rendered illegitimate and anachronistic vis-a-vis the demands and normativities of the present. The interrogation, or, at the least, an active negotiation, of one's caste self was thus not only immediate but also inevitable for the Brahmin. Thus, paradoxically enough, the 'burden' of being a caste self is probably the most acute in the Brahmin - a feature that was unmistakably visible in the respondents' narratives about themselves and their families. At any rate, resolving the demands of this historical moment has not been unequivocal; nor has it been complete. The Brahmin persona in responding to the non-Brahmin othering has not unambiguously disowned the identity and identification of being Brahmin. On the contrary, it has sought to actively bring into its formulations of self the 'given' (traditional?) significations of associational worth and community belonging.

Of course, the possibilities of disowning the caste identity and the attendant significations exist before individual Brahmins, perhaps to an extent that was hitherto unavailable. This is particularly since the moral force behind the codes of conduct originating from the fact of being Brahmin have been diluted (without losing their imperativeness), but also since such choices have begun to obtain from within other identities and identifications that a person takes as his or her own - be it class, occupation, or quite simply the fact of **change**.¹³ The non-Brahmin othering, if anything, only heightens and even demands such a repudiation. But that precisely is the point - that in spite of the apparent 'burden' and in spite of the availability of alternative ways of imagining the self, the Brahmin does not engage in summarily evicting his/her casteness.

¹³ We need to consistently remind ourselves of caste's historicity that we made much of in the course of our introductory chapter. Thus such statements of comparison - 'now' compared to the 'past' etc. - must remain alert to the historical rootedness of such time frames, and not indulge in constructing timeless pasts as against a momentarily transformative present.

Or, stating it differently, that the caste identity continues to be resilient enough to remain a significant resource for both meaning-making and making possible coherent action.

In the third chapter, we presented a schematic historical trajectory of the Brahmin community of Karnataka. Through a deployment of disparate sources of data - that included the Mysore Representative Assembly Reports, Backward Classes Committee/Commissions' Reports, auto/biographies, and of course the secondary scholarly literature - we argued that the specific ways in which the community underwent the processes of urbanisation and modernisation structured the very possibilities in which the modern Brahmin identity retrieved itself. This, we have been maintaining, can be seen as a process of secularisation and of individuation. To be sure, a great deal of scholarly work - in particular that seeking to understand the non-Brahmin movements - rest content with recuperating the Brahmin mostly as an embodiment of a will-to-power and of a will-to-masquerade as a secular self. Such retrievals of the modern Brahmin self are of course true but only partially so. We did, in a fairly detailed manner, narrate the Brahmin's predominance in what were increasingly becoming key spaces (the modern bureaucracy and education, for instance) in generating social and cultural capitals, the different subtle and not-so-subtle ways that were deployed in consolidating this dominance while denying the same to the others, the remarkably successful reproduction over generations of this position of dominance, and so on. These unique trajectories place the Brahmin in a position to emerge as a secular self that ostensibly partakes very little of the casteness that is vested within.

Nonetheless, it is not often that scholarship has commented upon the dimensions of this positionality for the very selfhood of the Brahmin, one that is seeking to formulate a legitimate identity for itself in the modern situation. This has meant allowing a space for the Brahmin to reflect upon his own state of self. In doing so, we have looked beyond the scholarly literature on the 'non-Brahmin movement' and the data produced by the state, and turned to the narratives of the Brahmins themselves - present in different forms such as the autobiographies and reminiscences, the debates in the newspapers of the late colonial period but most importantly in the narratives of self that our respondents (both caste association activists and individual Brahmins) elucidated. It is by allowing for such voices to speak out that we have come to realise that the story of the modern Brahmin identity is not a simple one of hegemony, whether abetted by a will to secularise or not. Conceptualising 'caste as secular self' (see Dhareshwar 1993 for a piecemeal

formulation) does not allow for a concomitant dynamics of a 'self under siege' that the Brahmins experience; nor, importantly, does it account for the demands of secularisation itself.

The dynamics, clearly, has to do with the availability of a description - from within the narratives foregrounded by our study, it has to do not only with a sense of siege, but also the confounding logics of 'community' and 'association' that we have been alluding to - and requires also an imagination of agency. The substantive chapters have each presented a complex process of negotiation with the demands of the new normative order and the Brahmins own unique positioning in that order - a positioning that is at once dominant and embattled. Lest it be misunderstood, we need to reiterate the point again. The recuperation of the self as a secularised one has been constitutive of the Brahmin's ability to be resilient even in the face of an articulate othering. But as we witnessed through the course of our expositions, the modern Brahmin self has also been at a loss in coming to terms with its casteness. The agency of the Brahmin - presented herein at the individual, associational and historical levels - has **fundamentally** been an ambivalent one - at times deeply dependent on its 'Brahminness' (that of being and becoming Brahmin) representing the logic of 'community' and at other times willing to or drawn to repudiate the very state of being Brahmin, representing the movement towards the logic of 'association'. In bringing to life this complex identity and identification, Brahmins do not summarily retrench the old values and meanings. Instead, they engage in a process of re-interpreting such resources in the context of the world **find** themselves in

Of course, the question of the availability of a description and the attendant requirement of an imagination of agency is more complex than what our formulations above have sought to record. Because, again in keeping with the contending logics of 'community' and 'association' instantiated by our narrations, the dynamics of the Brahmin field is also a matter of an 'association' aspiring to be community and a 'community' unable to shed the dimensions of its associational **life**.¹⁴ Quite clearly, the demands of secularisation as bearing upon and borne by Brahmin castes - mark the plural - entail classifications and identifications that defy the Toennies dichotomy between *gemeinschaft* (community) and *gesellschaft* (association). The anxieties and dilemmas

¹⁴ Cf. again fii.4 above, and the portion of the text from which this springs.

writ large over the space of Brahmin associations, their variety notwithstanding (Ch. 5 has the details), implicate a question about losing out the concept of community and the boundaries and membership that go with it. The challenges before the space of Brahmin castes and their associations (both corporate and caste-specific ones) are, we suppose, **clear**. Without hard boundaries circumscribing a community and a clear notion of its membership, how does one articulate a sense of agency? And yet, if the secularising experience that particular Brahmin castes have been privy to is further crystallised, would it not be the unmaking of both a community and the peculiar facets of its associational life?

Surely there cannot be determinate answers to these precise questions. All the same, it has been primarily in order to steer clear of the partial retrievals of the modern Brahmin self, while remaining active to the singular significance of the demands of secularisation on the spaces of caste action, that we foreground the dynamics of community and association. It is nowhere an unambiguous, conscientious steering away from casteness or a sense of 'community'; nor, on the other hand, is it a simple story of associational peculiarities and communal belonging. It is in some sense both: of nested boxes and complex networks, the fact really of community *and* association respectively. Consequently, it needs reiterating that the 'community-association' dyad by itself cannot do all the work of explanation, as indeed summarise the precise ways in which caste structure and sentiment successfully forges complexes of action and gets people to act on behalf of and in terms of a 'casteness' that they carry around as their own. For instance, the spaces of the caste associations (the problems notwithstanding) demand a harder sense of identification with the category of being and becoming Brahmin. Paradoxically enough, these very spaces even while apparently speaking in terms of and drawing their legitimacy from a 'systemic' identity serve to undercut that very identity. What is more, the logic of this cross-cutting identification also serves up the ground for a resistance to the very space of the association. Even as a 'collective' on the moral plane is affirmed, its **instrumentalisation** through the modality of an association is resisted.

Thus one will have to strive to complicate the formulation of the 'community-association' dynamic. Identities in order to be socially meaningful cannot be eternally in a state of oscillation; they have to be working towards freezing this movement - to invest a certain sense of stability and seeming permanence to the oscillation. If identities do not appear unequivocal and unruffled and unambiguous, they cease to be of any worth. Often

the axis of identity and identification embodied in and by individuals and communities mediates the **oxymoronic** pulls of a sense of community, on the one hand, and of association on the other. Accordingly, the caste location serves at every point as both medium and outcome of the mediation between community and association. What is more, in obtaining thus, it persuades individuals and groups to act and think in terms of those identifications that they share and others provide. This can obtain even **as** ambivalence reigns large over the matrix of caste identification.

It is nevertheless important to emphasise that the logic of 'community' and 'association' - both as schema and as process constituting the field of action today - seeks to foreground the experiential and agential dimension of caste-mediated totalities. Particularly, in addressing this logic across the various registers of Brahmin identity, we have consistently recuperated a Brahmin self that is engaging itself in an act of reflexively enunciating its space. It is perhaps one of the routes to undertake the journey of making sense of caste action in our times, which **successfully** steers clear of the normative pitfalls (as recapitulated in **Sect.I** above) characterising contemporary discussions of caste - scholarly and otherwise.

V

Integuments for a sociological ethnography

As already mentioned in our chapter on method, the work that has been represented here is not an ethnographic study in any classical manner. It shies away from claiming any 'totality' in its comprehension of the subject of inquiry and from recuperating itself in a monographic form. This, for sure, is an important step in disabusing the method of its anthropological biases, and to make it deployable in more complex settings that sociology, for one, has claimed as its own. The British sociologist, John Goldthorpe (2000), has cogently reminded us that ethnography, unlike survey research, has remained reticent in meeting the demands of methodological **rules**. According to him, in seeking a special status for itself by way of a 'reflexive' or 'critical' social science, ethnography has more often than not sidestepped the key issues of method - namely, of obeying a logic of inference (a matter of relating evidence and argument, that is) and of resolving the problem of variations in and across contexts. Again, in our chapter on method (especially PP. 70-2 above), we made clear the rationale by which we chose the locales in which we carried out our fieldwork and the ways in which we arrived at the sample, allowing thus the reader to evaluate the problems of variation and thus of

representativeness with regard to our study. These problems may yet remain, but quite clearly, in terms of our research focus and the consequent narration, the onus has been on capturing aspects of the world experienced by **secular/ising** Brahmins. This kind of determination, we believe [in deference to the logic of Goldthorpe (*ibid.*)], is itself an important step in rendering the ethnographic space of narration accept the 'same rules of the game' as other methods of sociological research.

The Brahmin identity and agency in contemporary times are obviously unfolding in much more complex locales than those addressed by classical anthropological studies. There are, consequently, a plethora of questions that a sociological ethnography of the Brahmin community would have to contend with, some of which our study has sought to foreground and help elucidate. The challenge, of course, is more context-specific studies in contemporary settings, sufficiently disaggregated to make sense of the patterning of caste action and identity choices obtaining today and yet not giving-up on a logic of relating evidence and argument. Quite clearly, we need to get at the evidence - innovations at the level of method, in the sense of experimenting with techniques of data collection are welcome. But we also need to be honing up our tools of argumentation, something which can follow independent of a fine-tuning of the methods of data-collection. Ideally, we need to be stringing these two imperatives, although commanding our methods need not be the same as giving sense to arguments.

Broadly, in keeping with this imperative then, we would urge the following from within the spaces foregrounded by our study of the dynamics of Brahmin identity in contemporary Karnataka. More than simple ethnographies of particular Brahmin communities, we also need to be crafting the possibility of a sociological ethnography between and across Brahmin castes in different regional contexts. Although we have hesitated in presenting our investigation in these very terms, there is a model of sociological ethnography to be contended with in our foregoing pages. All the same, we must concede that it needs more effective positioning and methodological innovation. But more substantively, a sociological ethnography of the Brahmin community in Karnataka would require that the theme of 'substantialisation of caste' - or, more accurately, on our terms, the secularisation of caste - be broached as an unfinished project of caste in modernity. This formulation cuts deep into the very logic of the **Dumontian** thesis, for, even as Barnett (1977) has shown that the 'narrative' of caste hierarchy gradually but surely loses out to the 'logic' of caste identities, the elements of an

evolutionary determinacy and gradualism undergirding this schema would have to be transcended. The problem with this assessment has as much to do with its inability to recognise the contradictory dimensions of the processes of change as a certain naivety about caste dynamics and structure. At any rate, any presumptive evaluatory schema building on notions of change and rupture is problematic and, as our data has shown, unsustainable. Thus if **substantialisation** - or again, on our terms, secularisation - is the modern condition of caste, then the process needs to be adduced to in our sociological and ethnographic descriptions in all its textures. It also logically follows that in the transformations being wrought upon this condition - can we term it late-modern, or even post-modern? - 'caste' even as a substantivised or secularised identity and entity might lose its critical purchase. The framework of a sociological ethnography would need to be attentive to these possibilities. On a different register, yet, the more recent and fashionable interest in identity-theorising and politics is far too obsessed with its retrieval of the idea of caste as social identity as an always-already resource of empowerment and assertion. Evidently, this axis of appraisal is not sufficiently sensitive to the problems of **identification** and of the specific ways in which a caste identity fluctuates in its self-recuperations. The formation and survivability of a social identity can and ought to be conceptualised as a product of a simultaneous project of self-realisation in which autonomy plays a crucial role along with a process of negotiation with 'others'. Of course, all this takes place in the context of a horizon of value and shared allegiances, even a community of belonging historically registered and cognitively mapped.

This must entail that caste as a system-induced identity-marker, a horizon of value and shared allegiances, serves to stabilise what our study has presented as the dynamic of 'community' and 'association' as obtaining within the Brahmin fold. Caste identities (like any social identity), for reasons of their own **self-maintenance** and perpetuation, seek to accord themselves a state of permanency and eternity. In doing so, they strive to demonstrate their immutability and character to be unruffled by contextual and historical pressures. Indeed, they have to succeed, in order to survive, in making those individuals and communities which embody such identities to act on their behalf and in their name. Now, while any strictly synchronic study of caste communities will drive home this point, a sociological ethnography of this dynamic can serve to complicate this presumption. 'Casteness' (of being a caste self, that is), even as it serves to contain the 'community-association' dyad, is equally subject to the pressures and pulls of this dynamic.

Accordingly, the primary impulse animating such a sociological ethnography would have to be making sense of the *contemporaneity* of caste. The present study has sought to stand as lowest common denominator of caste's contemporaneity, inflected of course to an 'upper caste' context. **Hopefully**, it has demonstrated the legitimacy of **the** conviction - at any rate, of this researcher - that caste continues to be **significant** as a crucial frame of self-understanding and categorisation and accordingly as a parameter of socially meaningful action in India. If this claim is accepted, then sociology - of all the social science disciplines - cannot run away from this fact.

Perhaps we need to be getting back to the instituting protocols of our study; only, this time round we can and ought to be naming explicitly the idea of a sociological ethnography.

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Appendix

Questionnaire administered to the respondent households

- Name: _____ Age: _____
- Educational qualifications _____
- Details regarding education:

Degree	Where	When	Private/ Govern mental instituti on	Caste hostel? (If yes, name of the hostel)

- Occupation: _____
- Details Regarding occupation:

Instituti on/Orga nisation	Designation	During	Salary

- Name your sub-caste/sect¹ _____
- Marital status: Unmarried/Married/Widow/er/Divorcee _____
- Your marriage:
 - a) Was within religion? Yes/No _____
 - b) Was within Brahmin caste? Yes/No _____
 - c) Was within Sub-caste/Sect? Yes/No _____If the answer to any of the above is 'No', please state what else it was? _____

- Which *Matha* (like Udupi, Sringeri) does your family belong to? _____
- What is the relationship that your family shares with the *Matha*? _____
- Total income of the household: _____
- Food Habits:

Are you/your family a vegetarian or a non-vegetarian?

Do you/your family eat wherein people from other castes too are partaking food?

Do you/your family eat wherein non-vegetarian food is being served?

- Does your family own a house? Yes/No _____

When asked for their 'caste' most of the respondents used to say "Brahmin". And the word sub-caste was used by them to denote to the specific Brahmin castes they belonged to. The usage in the questionnaire is consistent with the respondents' invocation.

Is it rented out: Yes/No

If Yes, what caste does the tenant belong to?

If you/your family is residing in a rented house, state the caste of the owner of the house.

- Family history of education and employment:

	Resident of	Education	Employment
Paternal Grandfather			
Paternal Grandmother			
Maternal Grandfather			
Maternal Grandmother			
Father			
Mother			
Siblings (Brothers'/Sisters')			
Children (Sons'/Daughters')			
Grandchildren			

Marital History of the Family:

	Sub-caste	Caste	Religion	Year
Paternal Grandfather				
Paternal Grandmother				
Maternal Grandfather				
Maternal Grandmother				
Father				
Mother				
Siblings and their spouse's				
Children and their spouse's				
Grandchildren and their spouse's				

- Details about the history of migration of your family:

(Beginning from your grandparents' generation till the generations of children and grand children (wherever applicable), provide details briefly regarding migration. The details required are: the place of birth; if migrated, what were the reasons - education, employment, marriage etc.)

- Membership in associations:

Are you a member of your sub-caste association? If yes, name the association?

Are you a member of your caste association? If yes, name the association?

Is any other member of your household a member of such associations? If so name such associations and the member(s) of the household who hold(s) membership?

Are you, or any member of your household, member of any other associations - resident welfare associations, recreation clubs, and religious associations?

Briefly summarise the reasons for which you/any other member of your family decided to become (or not become) sub-caste/caste association members.

- List the rituals that you and your family members perform daily. Do you think these practices have come down in the recent past?
- Do you/your family members wear caste markers in public?
- List the religious functions - life cycle and others - that have been held in your household over the last one year:
- Of the following, how frequently do you/your family interact with?
 - Relatives
 - Friends
 - Neighbours

Interview schedule for individual Brahmin respondents

- Name: Age:
- Education: Occupation:
- Sub-caste: Marital status:
- The personal history of the respondent -
 - In terms of life trajectory;
 - Details about educational and occupational choices;
 - Circumstances of marriage ('arranged', if so how; 'love', if so how);
 - If a migrant to the present locale, ties that exist with the 'native' place;
 - Details regarding income and property.
- The everyday life of the respondent -
 - Primarily in terms of the rituals observed;
 - Wearing caste markers;
 - Values attached to the observation of such rules;
 - Networks of primacy.
- Retrieving the history of the Brahmin self and community -

- Who are Brahmins and what is their origin?;
- The evaluation of the Brahmin self by the society;
- Evaluating the idea of caste itself;
- Evaluating the past of the Brahmin.
- Reflecting upon the 'presents' of being Brahmin -
 - How to describe the contemporary state of Brahmin community?;
 - Being Brahmin, a state of siege?;
 - Is Brahmin an oppressor?;
 - Questions about the **non-Brahminical** othering.
- Questions of identification -
 - Would you identify yourself as a Brahmin?;
 - Would you identify yourself as being part of a putative community of Brahmins?;
 - Questions about the project of self-realisation of the identity (the 'ideal' Brahmin) and the attendant evaluations of its current state (the 'real' Brahmin);
 - What does it mean to be a Brahmin in contemporary situations?;
 - What are the positives and negatives of being born in a Brahmin family?
- Strategies of the **self** –
 - Perceiving and relating to the space of caste associations;
 - Political behaviour;
 - What is to be done? - Questions about Brahmin unity etc.

Interview schedule used for caste activists

- Name: _____ Age: _____
- Education: _____ Occupation: _____
- Sub-caste: _____
- Details of the association working for:
 - Name of the association:
 - Year of establishment:
 - Affiliated to AKBMS?: Yes/No
 - Membership strength:
 - Who are eligible to become members?
 - Membership fee
 - The purpose and requirements of the organisation
 - Activities undertaken in the last one year
 - Important activities undertaken since the inception of the organisation
 - Ever since the organisation began, has there been a consistent growth in the number of members?: Yes/No. What are the reasons?
- Perceiving the constituency:
 - Is 'Brahmin' the name of a caste? Which individual can be called a Brahmin?
 - What is Brahminism? Is there a need for it to change in the present times?
 - What is the significance of the sub-castes among Brahmins? Is there a significance for these differences in the present times? If so, in what aspects?
 - Is it true that 'there is no unity among Brahmins'? What are the reasons for it?

- In the present situation, what are the challenges before the Brahmin community? How should it face these challenges?
- Is there a need today for the Brahmin community to unite? What are the reasons?
- In today's situation, should the Brahmin community continue with practices like '*Madi/Mailige*' [largely purity/pollution] and rituals/traditions specific to the community like '*Upanayana*' (Thread ceremony)? Reasons?
- Are the Brahmins losing interest about their own community, and in the practices of the community? Is this seen more among the youth? Reasons?
- The space of caste associations:

What is the significance of Brahmin organisations? What are the activities in which they should involve themselves?

What is the relationship between Brahmin community and Brahmin organisations as it exists? What should the relationship be like?

Is the elite in the Brahmin community (in the economic/political/cultural/educational fields) concerned about the **upliftment** of their community? Does this category of people show interest in the activities of your organisation?

Largely, to which economic classes do most of your members belong?

Which are the incidents (positive as well as negative) in the last two decades that have made an impact on the Brahmin community? Has the community reacted sufficiently to these incidents?

Has the **AKBMS** been effective in instilling unity among the Brahmins?

How have the Brahmin organisations reacted to people who have had inter-caste marriages? Do you have such members in your own organisation?

Appendix 2

List of Brahmin associations sourced and interviewed

I. Corporate Brahmin associations:

a) Federating association:

Akhila Karnataka Brahmana Maha Sabha, Bangalore

b) District and Taluq Level associations:

1. Bengalooru Jilla Brahmana Sabha, Bangalore
2. Bidar Jilla Brahmana Sabha, Bidar
3. Dakshina Kannada Jilla Brahmana Sabha, Udupi
4. Holenarasipura Brahmana Sabha, Hassan
5. Hospet Brahmana Sabha, Bellary District
6. Mysore Jilla Brahmana Sabha, Mysore
7. Shimoga Jilla Brahmana Sabha, Shimoga
8. Taluq Brahmana Sabha, Nelamangala
9. Tumkur Jilla Brahmana Sabha, Tumkur
10. Udupi Taluq Brahmana Sabha, Udupi

c) Locality-specific associations:

1. Barkoor Brahmana Sabha, Udupi District
2. Brahmi Welfare Trust, Rajajinagar, Bangalore
3. Hosakote Brahmana Sabha, Bangalore Rural District
4. Jayanagara Brahmana Sabha, Bangalore
5. J. P. Nagara Brahmana Sabha, Bangalore
6. Kengeri Upanagara Brahmana Sabha, Bangalore
7. Kundapura Brahmana Sabha, Kundapur, Udupi
8. Uttara Rajajinagara Brahmana Sabha, Bangalore
9. Vijayanagara Vipra Vrinda, Bangalore
10. Vipra Trust, Shimoga

d) Organisation/institution-specific associations:

1. Karnataka Rajya Sarkari Naukarara Brahmana Kshemabhivridhi Sangha (Karnataka State Government Employees Brahmin Welfare Association), Bangalore
2. Indian Telephone Industries Brahmins Welfare Association, Bangalore
3. Hindustan Aeronautics Limited Brahmin Employees Welfare Association, Bangalore

e) Issue-specific associations:

1. Anathalaya, Mysore
2. Brahmana Vaidika Dharma Sahaya Sabha, Bangalore
3. Brahmana Vidyarthi Sahaya Sangha, Bangalore
4. Brahmins' Finance & Welfare Trust, Bangalore
5. Magadi Karanikara Veda Patha Shale, Bangalore
6. MGSK Vadhu Varaanveshana Kendra, Bangalore

7. South Indian Brahmin Marriage Bureau, Bangalore
8. Sri Raghavendra Go **Ashrama** Trust, Bangalore
9. Tejaswini **Brahmana** Mahila Seva Sangha, Bangalore
10. Vedabhashya Prakashana **Samithi**, Bangalore

II. **Caste-specific associations***:

1. Akhila Bharata Madhva Maha Mandala, Bangalore
2. Ananda Balaga, Bangalore
3. **Babboorkamme** Maha Sabha, Bangalore
4. Badaganadu Sangha, Bangalore
5. Canara Union, Bangalore
6. Dakshina Kannada Koota Brahmana Mitra Mandali, Bangalore
7. Hebbar Srivaishnava Sabha, Bangalore
8. **Hoysala** Karnataka Sangha, Bangalore
9. Maithri **Samootha**, Bangalore
10. Mulkanadu Maha Sangha, Bangalore
11. Poornaprajna Vidyapeeta, Bangalore
12. Shivalli **Smartha** Brahmana Parishat, Bangalore
13. Shri Shukla Yajurveda Yuvaka Sangha, Bangalore
14. Sri Akhila Havyaka Maha Sabha, Bangalore
15. Telugu Smartha Vedike, Bangalore
16. **Uluchukamme** Brahmana Mahasabha, Bangalore

* Most of these caste-specific associations are Bangalore-centred, both in terms of their activities as well as membership. Accordingly, the main offices of all these associations are located in Bangalore. A few, nonetheless, like the Hoysala Karnataka Sangha have a history of running caste hostels in other cities, particularly Mysore.