

BEING BRAHMIN BEING MODERN

Exploring the Lives of Caste Today

Ramesh Bairy T. S.

ROUTLEDGE



Being Brahmin, Being Modern

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For my parents,
Smt. Lakshmi S. Bairi
and
Sri. T. Subbaraya Bairi.
And,
University of Hyderabad.

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Ramesh Bairy T. S.

Introduction: Seeking a Foothold

This study is about ‘caste’—about caste action and the survival of caste as an institution. 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 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.

The study takes on the dynamics of Brahmin identity in contemporary Karnataka. The decision to focus on Brahmin identity is driven by two reasons. One, it is a paradox that while the figure of the Brahmin has forever haunted all our thinking on caste, sociological descriptions of this figure, as it gets configured in modern times, are the hardest to come by. Often we work with a straw figure of the Brahmin, and surprisingly it seems to satisfy the requirements of even academic inquiries on caste. This assertion (concerning the paucity of descriptive accounts of particular caste contexts) can be made while speaking of other castes too. Indeed, this is yet another point of departure for this study that even as we increasingly seem to be presented

with touching certainties and theses on contemporary caste, we have a receding preoccupation with the need to describe, and describe sociologically, specific contextually animated dimensions of being caste. This paucity is so evident that it is surprising that it has escaped serious reflection.

Yet, the political and scholarly investment that is made in the idea and identity of the Brahmin is without parallel. It is perhaps the only consistent and continuous entity in the nearly two centuries of modern debate and contests over caste, even as what it is coupled against has consistently witnessed shifts—from the ‘Depressed Castes’ to the ‘non-Brahmins’ to ‘Backward Classes’, ‘Bahujans’ and ‘Dalits’. It is as if the Brahmin has retained a coherence and unity of self, immune, well almost, to the demands of time, and therefore is so self-evident that the figure needs no explanation and analysis. In seeking to embody the Brahmin with flesh and blood, with power and vulnerability, with capital enabled by identity as well as illegitimacies of the self, with ethics of the time and pragmatics of survival, this study explores the effects such an embodiment will have on our certainties of caste. ‘What is to be a Brahmin today?’ is the question that will haunt these pages. The contemporaneity of the ‘today’ is understood historically, implicating thereby the entire course of the twentieth century, with the latter seen as in many ways framed by the non-Brahminical articulation of the question of caste. At this level of engagement with the Brahmin world, the goal is above all to forward a sociological description of caste today, as it gets configured in a specific locale. All the same, I seek to return to an engagement with the enterprise of theorising caste but in light of the ways in which the Brahmin story compels us to interrogate it.

In another but related sense situating this study in an ‘upper’ caste such as Brahmins is deliberate. I hope to redress through such a contextualisation the skewed focus of most efforts within caste studies, as well as the inability to open up the matrix of caste identity and identification today. Situating themselves almost exclusively in the contemporary theoretical and ideological interest in recuperating ‘social identities’ as being decisively a question of empowerment, these studies have unwittingly furthered the ghettoisation of caste studies into an almost exclusive focus on ‘lower’ caste articulations. The

primary, even exclusive, mode of contemporary investment in caste, this literature seems to suggest, is as a modality of assertion. When probed to offer a mode of understanding a community such as that of the Brahmins, which more often than not has sought to keep its caste self under erasure, such a field of argumentation fails substantively.

The point regarding this skewed focus is not merely about its inability to say something about the ‘upper’ castes, it is also about the very possibility of addressing other varied dimensions of the workings of caste in the contemporary moment—the compulsions of secularisation within caste, the attendant equivocations in relating to the subject positions offered by caste selves, the differential investments in one’s caste self and so on. Of course, these dimensions of being a caste self today might obtain even among the subaltern castes, but the registers of identity as assertion and embodiment have overdetermined the trajectories of the current literature so completely that it remains largely oblivious to these questions. My effort here, however, is by no means a repudiation of these trajectories or of the specific works that embody them; only an attempt to open out to the different dimensions of contemporary caste that have not received the scholarly attention they deserve.

Taking the Brahmin community in Karnataka as a case in point, the book is devoted to delineating the contours of an identity both marked by and marking caste. In focus are the differential investments that the Brahmins posit in being Brahmin, the negotiations that they bring vis-à-vis this identity and identification, the dimensions of the very process of inhabiting the space of ‘Brahminness’, and so on. In frontalising a history of what has proved to be a deeply successful non-Brahminical othering of the idea of the Brahmin and the constitutive sense of siege that the modern Brahmin self has experienced (or perceived), I have sought to attend to some of the closures that contemporary caste studies face.

The Field

The abundance of caste studies in Indian sociology has led to the generation of various perspectives. 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 its continued primacy. This contradictory state of existence can be—and has been—productive of a reorientation and recasting of caste studies. Over the last decade-and-a-half, many scholarly convictions concerning caste have been subjected to severe interrogation. This interrogation has coincided with and thereby drawn heavily from a profusion of interest in caste within disciplines other than sociology. This book is a product of these intellectual contexts.

In seeking to mark out a point of departure, this study pursues the question of the ‘presents’ of caste, for that after all is the defining concern: what is happening to the hierarchical principles of caste, the meanings and the kinds of legitimacy that actors inside the world of caste are according to their ‘caste-ness’, the objective and subjective forms that caste takes in contemporary society, and the ‘modernity’ of caste expressions.

At the cost of considerable violence to the rich and diverse field of caste studies, it could be suggested that the latter has framed, and increasingly vehemently so in the last two decades, the question of caste in the twin registers of legitimisation–contestation and dominance–resistance. Indeed, it is striking that the many disparate and even contesting perspectives on caste can be summatively mapped within these two registers. It is in pointing to the inadequacy of these registers that we gesture towards a much neglected point of departure in making sense of the contemporaneity of caste.

M. N. Srinivas made an impassioned plea (1962a, 1962b) to foreground a ‘field view’ of Indian society as against the ‘book view’ which he thought had dominated works on Indian society. Accordingly, he argued that *jati* (the endogamous ‘caste’ unit) and not *varna* (the four-fold ‘caste’ classification) must remain the legitimate object of sociological/anthropological inquiries on caste. The proliferation of studies from the field (vigorous from the late 1950s and to which Srinivas and his students contributed greatly), primarily in the form of ethnographic monographs, indeed enriched and complicated the picture of an essentialised view of caste as produced by indologists.

This enduring and perhaps the most dominant tradition of caste studies in Indian academia was marked by a complete reliance

on the ethnographic method, which meant that while a desirable diversity was generated and the significance of attending to caste in embedded locations was demonstrated, it also resulted in a general state of theoretical indeterminacy about the contemporary 'avatars' of caste and that has been largely only reactive and piecemeal. Srinivas (2002) himself worked at foregrounding caste's modern transformations, and accordingly coined notions such as 'sanskritisation'/'westernisation'¹ (describing the ways in which change and mobility are possible in the caste world) and 'dominant caste'² (in describing localised networks of caste power in a modernising situation). In this tradition there has been little explicit exposition of the nature of caste and its specificities. It is easy to see that, for this perspective, caste is essentially a system of stratification and inequality, legitimated around notions of purity and pollution, but one that is gradually and surely dying out. Caste is also, simultaneously, resurfacing in newer avatars, nowhere more strikingly than in the arena of politics (see Srinivas 1996). Srinivas, all through his career, worked with this two-avatar view of caste—a long past of a stable stratificatory principle in which nothing changed *systemically*, and the chaotic present in which the system as stratification has died, only to take form as a modern associational solidarity.

This unwillingness to recognise caste as a contemporarily significant system of inequality has agitated many recent commentators. Before going on to that, however, some comments on understanding caste as a form of stratification are in order. 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.³ Scholars operating from a 'social stratification' perspective tend to construct the ideological element of caste as an obfuscation of its exploitative content by the beneficiaries of the system (Bailey 1957; Berreman 1971; Beteille 1966; Gupta 2000; Mencher 1992). They prefer to focus on the practices and material interests that caste simultaneously inhabits

¹ For a forceful contestation of the usefulness of these 'concepts', see Carroll (1977).

² For a critical reference to the concept, see Mukherjee (1979) *passim* and Mendelsohn (1993).

³ See Beteille (1969), a representative anthology on this subject.

and also makes possible (Beteille 1987, 1992). Refusing to impose a consensual ideological frame on caste (see Deliege 1997; Moffat 1979), the stratification perspective enables a foregrounding of the questions of context, agency and power. One form this has taken is to interrogate the vantage point from which the object is comprehended, thereby serving as a way of looking at caste from a 'bottom up' perspective (Mencher 1992). Looking at caste from below leads Joan Mencher 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 title of her essay cited here). Similarly, for Gerald Berreman, 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 '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.*). Therefore he writes:

I believe that there are fewer exceptions to be dealt with—that explanation of caste is simpler and more 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. (*ibid.*: 19)

This is the central understanding that perspectives from social stratification have yielded on caste.

All along, an impulse to 'demystify' (Mencher 1992) and 'level' (Gupta 2000) caste has driven this perspective. For Dipankar 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 such systems could be based on a valorising of differences as well. Hierarchy becomes applicable only when the system is based

on a criterion of differentiation that is quantitative or can be quantified. Says Gupta, difference ‘is salient when social stratification is understood in a “qualitative” sense’ (1992: 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).

Positing a distinction between rules and ideologies, Gupta argues, ‘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...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’ (*ibid.*: 67).

Gupta has only reasserted this position in his recent work. He argues, ‘ritual dominance in no way determines the nature of caste interactions in contemporary India’ (Gupta 2004: ix), for the new contexts caste finds itself in today (urbanisation, democratic politics, etc.) have allowed identity (‘discrete castes’ in the earlier formulation) to triumph over hierarchy. It is merely the differentials in power—of authority, of economy and of polity—that allowed the textual/Brahminical renditions of hierarchy to masquerade themselves as universal and accepted by all. Accordingly, as the Untouchable and Sudra communities are released by the socio-economic bondages that constrained them to the village economy and social organisation, their own hitherto less publicised articulations of caste hierarchy, which are marked by an unhinged expression of pride in one’s own caste and its exalted origins, are questioning textual elucidations and are even leaving these ‘unattended on the wayside’ (*ibid.*).

Gupta’s emphasis on the discrete nature of caste entities has already been contested (see Chatterjee 1994: 179–81). But perhaps more importantly, there is little here that will aid us in

understanding caste as an intersubjectively made reality. For intersubjectivity to exist, it is necessary that there exists a larger, shared universe of meanings and conceptions. This shared universe will have to necessarily involve something more than the will to legitimise and conversely to contest. Moreover, social conceptions, ideas and meanings have an autonomy of their own, and they too have a certain hold on the people. It is not as though it is always people who do things to their contexts but also the other way round. Gupta increasingly moves towards totally discounting the importance of values and ideas, to see them as merely a façade that remains true and loyal to the groups in question. These may either remain hidden or become visible, depending upon the circumstances of power and domination, but *never* change themselves nor work upon their carriers. The prism of stratification thus provides an easy conduit to get on with decoding the apparently universal thematic of inequality, of which caste is but a local form.

For Srinivas, Andre Beteille and Gupta, as we have indicated before, caste as system of stratification gradually fades out, losing its economic and cultural hold over people, only to be available as a ‘secular’ identity. For them, nowhere is this new avatar more prominent than in democratic politics. Beteille has only consolidated and hardened this view by suggesting repeatedly that caste has lost—well almost—all traces of its former moral-social legitimacy, only to survive rather fiercely and undesirably in politics and in matters of governance. Gupta (2005) too has echoed this sentiment regarding the collapse of the system, if only to buttress his ‘many ideologies’ thesis. Even as a wishful modernisation perspective, which fondly predicts the death of caste at the ruthless hands of urbanisation/secularisation/modernisation, intimates and writes itself into these proclamations (see, for an instance, Gupta 2004: xix–xx), this evaluation, in some strange ways, resonates with the postcolonial analysis of the caste question, in that the latter makes so much of questions concerning the ‘governmentalising’ of caste.

Srinivas was among the first to urge scholars to attend to the theme of caste as a political mobilisational tool.⁴ His essay ‘Caste

⁴ Srinivas was preceded by G. S. Ghurye (1969) in proposing a similar evaluation of this dimension of caste.

in Modern India' (1962c) is the frame which structured the debate, and is still customarily visited by its adherents. This view concretises the consolidation of caste in politics as the revival of what is thought to be an outmoded primitive institution. 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).

Unsurprisingly, such a perception often gathers itself under the rubric 'resurgence of caste'. The presumption here is that caste, which would have died a natural death because of society progressing from a traditional to a modern one, 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. While political scientists have worked since the 1950s with a more open-ended and processual framework (pioneered by Rudolph and Rudolph 1967 and Kothari 1970), the first wave of such studies (till about the end of the 1980s) were premised on the apparently contradictory nature of caste and politics, animating thus a version of the then dominant modernisation perspectives.

In the last two decades—the 1990s in particular—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. Generating extensive data on elections, voting patterns and the composition of legislative bodies, as well as querying what democracy means to caste articulations from below, this scholarship convincingly charts a picture of the Indian polity as a democracy from below. It argues that in the post-Independence period the lower castes have used their franchise as a tool of empowerment to rally against discrimination and denial and have successfully wrested the state legislatures from the hands of the upper castes (see Alam 1999a; Jaffrelot 2003; Michelutti 2004; Shah 2002; Varshney 2000; Yadav 1996).

Notwithstanding such differences between the two moments, this trend exhibits certain predilections. 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 political logic, they remain as no more than mere 'names of groups and interests of other kinds' (Hawthorn 1982: 213). There is little attention paid to the fuzzier areas of caste mobilisation and more nuanced questions about caste negotiation. 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.

Almost concurrently, sharing a great deal with the stratification perspectives, a concern to describe and analyse caste communities that are ranked low in both local and textual proclamations has emerged as an important approach. However, what starkly marks them apart from the troika of Srinivas–Beteille–Gupta is a recognition of caste's continued resilience in determining the life chances of individuals. The pioneering instances of this scholarship were primarily studies in social stratification and mobility, cast largely in terms of the effects of the ameliorative practices of the modern state, formation of a middle class (or an elite) among them and the mobilisational efforts (Abbasayulu 1978; Ram 1988; Sachchidananda 1977). The perspective of 'social movements' became prominent in the last two decades, in the context of the study of the Dalit and Other Backward Class (OBC) movements, wherein the focus was no longer on individual caste groups but on larger, internally heterogeneous categories like Dalits and OBCs. The first wave of such studies constructed these movements as animated by the impulse of relative deprivation and thereby as staking claim to a share in modern resources.⁵

These works have come to be increasingly replaced in the last decade or so by studies which represent the issue of consciousness (and thus of an assertive identity) as being central in such articulations. They attempt to concretise the disjunctive or contradictory consciousness that such articulations and/or movements from below are supposedly 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 history itself. Without doubt, it

⁵ See, for instance, M. S. A. Rao (1982, 1987); also Guru (1993). Chinna Rao (2003) has a useful bibliography.

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. While Kancha Ilaiah (1996) is indisputably the most voluble in this regard, Gopal Guru (2000 [with V. Geetha], 2002) has consistently foregrounded a concern about attributing an epistemic privilege to the experience of being Dalit/Sudra/Bahujan. What is perhaps at stake here is an argument about authenticity, i.e., of an authentic self that can represent not only itself truthfully but also the larger reality (of caste, here). Yet, clearly the very question of who bears this authentic identity remains contested—Dalit, Bahujan, abrahmani, etc.—even by the proponents themselves.⁶

They also set the question of caste as one exclusively of domination and in this they are one with the stratification theorists. Caste, for them, is overdetermined by the imageries of identity, leaving little space to questions of internal structuring of caste consciousness and change (cf. Khare 1984). The result is that even as they reinforce and over-visibility the presence and the success of caste-based movements and articulations, they seem to add very little to our knowledge about the lifeworlds and 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’.⁷ Besides, these categorisations themselves

⁶ For instance, compare Guru and Geetha (2000) with Rege (2006: Ch. 2).

⁷ This could also be the reason why the Dalit movement and its intellectuals differed so sharply from other sociologists on the caste-race question that was debated during the UN’s Durban conference on racism (2001). See Visvanathan (2001) for details. The debate continues till date (see Natarajan 2007; Gupta 2007). How irrevocably linked these articulations and movements are to the issue of modern—or more precisely modern governmental—framing of the caste question is a very significant question but it will not be pursued here. Nonetheless, such instances of ‘muddling up’ categories are on the rise and increasingly it is participants in the caste world who are indulging in that. Scholars like Beteille and Gupta have fought hard to protect the purity of their categories, but apparently theirs is a losing battle.

are alien to the ‘traditional’ logic of caste, deriving as they do from a very modern mode of self-assertion and which this framework seeks to foreground and circumscribe. The category ‘OBC’ is a case in point, in that even as it is proposed by the state, the subject position announced by this labelling 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—as in much of recent scholarship—an *a priori* conceptual and even historical coherence and validity, which indeed is a much bigger problem than their assumed complicity in the ideology of an inegalitarian system.

The specific ways in which the notion of identity gets to be constituted in projects that seek to recover dominated voices—whether Dalit or Dalit woman (see Rao 2003; Rege 2006), whether scholarly or political—render recourse to a construction, in some form or the other, of authenticity and/or experience inevitable. This makes it almost impossible to escape the chronic particularisation and thereby a definitional inability to articulate a notion of the universal. Yet implicated as they are within the parameters of a project of liberation, they cannot get away from an enunciation of some notion of universal. This constitutive tension animates such projects and ultimately could well be irresolvable.

It would be no exaggeration to assert that there has been a great recession in the area of caste studies in sociology.⁸ The only significant area that has gathered and retained some momentum in the recent years within sociology is the study of (lower) caste movements and the study of social mobility among the lower castes. Perhaps paradoxically, these studies, even while

⁸ One affirmation of this assertion comes from the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) Survey Reports. ‘Caste’ was a theme only in the first round (early 1970s) and not in the subsequent surveys. After the first round, caste makes a ‘shamefaced’ entry in terms of ‘stratification’, ‘SCs’ and ‘social movements’. While surely it is legitimate to argue that this is an appropriate reflection of the transformations underway in caste currently, it is also a reflection of our increasing denial to engage with the totality of caste, on its own weight, as an analytical tool. Also see the flow of the discussion below.

resisting the dominant scholarly impulse of relegating caste to the past, themselves unwittingly ghettoise caste studies into an almost exclusive and unrelenting focus on 'lower' castes. In doing so they buttress another dominant scholarly refrain that argues that caste is increasingly ceasing to be a significant cultural-economic resource for the 'upper' castes. Contesting the latter strain, over the last decade some scholars have insistently drawn attention to the ways in which caste persists as a system of economic inequality (see Thorat and Newman 2007, and the four accompanying articles). Satish Deshpande (2003) insists that we need to recognise that caste continues to be a fundamental determinant of life chances in contemporary India.

This receding interest among Indian sociologists in caste has coincided with an abundance of studies on caste in other social sciences, particularly history. Works such as Lucy Carroll (1978), Rashmi Pant (1987), Nicholas Dirks (2002, 1989), Ronald Inden (1986, 1990), Carol A. Breckenridge and Peter van der Veer (1994), Arjun Appadurai (1986a, 1986b, 1988), and C. J. Fuller (1996), taking the lead from Bernard Cohn (1968), have demonstrated the far-reaching effects of the colonial configuration of caste (see also Fuller 1977). The demand here is to historicise the phenomenon of caste and, more crucially, to make our understandings of caste contextually sensitive. Srinivas himself had recognised both the existence of mobility within the caste system (1968; contributions in Silverberg 1968) and the effects of colonialism on caste (1987). Frank Conlon, in charting the formation of a caste (the Chitrapur Saraswat Brahmins) over a period of more than two centuries, had argued 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' (1977: 8). Nonetheless, the feature that distinguishes the Cohn-inspired 'post-colonial' studies of caste is the claim that caste (or at least the ways in which we have come to recognise it today) actually gets invented in the colonial moment, responding to the pragmatics of colonial governance. It is argued that the tendency to reduce the logic of societies to a single theoretical and substantive lever as 'caste' is problematic. For one, as has been noted, 'the discussion 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-à-vis Indian society. Consistent with this function, it has been postulated that 'the ghost of colonial sociology' still haunts Indian studies, even that the '(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).

Yet, through some curious modes of argumentation, these works, invigorated and charged by a moral-political desire to re-vest the caste-d subject with agency, which they allege is denied by such totalising, exoticising and essentialising discourses (of which Louis Dumont is taken to be the most articulate explicator; cf. Parkin 2003: 115–26), themselves end up denying agency to all excepting the colonial authority. Once it acquires the magical brush—of either Orientalism or colonial governmentality—it has little patience or even the need to attend to the seemingly useless yet endless finer distinctions between a Weber and a Dumont, a Dumont and a Srinivas, an Ambedkar and a Gandhi. Further, it is the suggestion of a radical break in the moment of colonialism, vis-à-vis both Indian society as a whole and caste in particular, that is perplexing. If 'caste today' is indeed an 'invention' of colonialism, guided primarily by the imperatives of governmentality, then the most interesting and important (if not the only) aspect of the 'presents' of caste is the question of the modern requirements of governmentality and, therefore, the entire realm of the anthropologically interesting questions of community formation, identities and identifications, horizons of meaning, ethics and rules of behaviour vis-à-vis the self and the other, patterns of action and innovation, etc., either become suspect at worst or at best useless. Setting limits to this 'invention' thesis is an urgent task for at least two reasons: it could decry the need to attend to the very many ways in which the very many differently situated actors responded to the making of caste by the (post)colonial authority; it could even deny consideration of the possibility that governmental imperatives barely touched many significant aspects of caste.

Notwithstanding their differences with one another, what appears to characterise much of the dominant diagnoses of contemporary caste is a will to partialise and particularise caste to certain spaces and people. Contrary to Fuller's reading that 'on the subject of caste...anthropologists and sociologists have generally been more confident about structural continuity than contemporary change' (1996: 1), it appears that the scholarship is increasingly driven to posit structural breaks. The anointment and strict circumscription of caste in politics, 'lower castes' and their movements and assertions, governmentality, villages, private/domestic realms, 'tradition' and so on, and consequently its erasure from the converse—urban, secular, modern, 'upper caste', etc.—is clearly problematic. The most significant corrective to such invisibilisations has not only come from the lower-caste movements and intellectuals (Phule, Periyar and Ambedkar being the early articulators, but it continues in various hues) but also from traditions of scholarship sympathetic to these articulations (studies of the non-Brahmin movement in Tamil Nadu is a particularly rich instance). These have insistently drawn attention to the ability of caste (and caste-regulated resources and practices) to reinvent in newer, even antithetical circumstances. They have pointed to the myriad subtleties with which elite castes present themselves as secularised modern subjects, supposedly shorn completely of the 'abhorring' traces of caste and thereby arrogating themselves with the role of spokesperson of the new nation, modernity, etc. (see Geetha and Rajadurai 1998: esp. Ch. 1).

These are important correctives to the growing blindness to caste and this work on the Brahmin identity seeks to further this trajectory. Yet, the present proposal for a reorientation sees even this call to attend to dimensions of distributive justice in terms of caste as again being too restrictive. What is at stake here really is the question: what are the ways in which we can think of caste in contemporary circumstances that are, of course, intimated by caste's ability to discriminate and oppress but still not subsume everything else that happens in the world of castes in the rubric of legitimation—contestation and domination—resistance?

To be sure, any such recuperation of the caste question will have to begin with acknowledging the very modernity of caste—

of the fact that caste can and has reinvented itself throughout its history and especially in modernity. Yet, such an acknowledgement must not blind us to both issues of continuity and mere renovation. By far the only conceptual lever that has sought to grasp the diverse and contradictory changes that caste has undergone in the modern period is Dumont's thesis on 'substantialisation'.

Seeking to account for the changes that have occurred in the world of castes, 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. (Dumont 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), if only in the secondary domains of economy and politics. A large body of scholarship that either feeds off or into the 'presents' of caste seems to validate the 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) levels 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) (see Fuller 1996; Hawthorn 1982).

Clearly, community and village studies (even by the 1950s) were testifying to a weakening of the hierarchical values of commensal restrictions and those of touchability (Mayer 1996; Sharma 2002: 60–62). In urban areas, the studies ventured to suggest, 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. Gupta (2005) recently has analysed some of the foundational effects of the ongoing changes in the Indian village structure on caste, none more arresting for him than the assertion of caste patriotisms. Beteille (1991, 1996; also 2002) 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’. While most of his recent proclamations on caste have arrived with little evidence, the certainty marking them is startling. 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)

Many scholars (Beteille 1996; Gould 1990; van der Burg 1991; Jain 1996) understand ethnicisation as the contemporary form that caste assumes. Some (Barnett 1977; van der Burg 1991; Dirks 2002; Fuller 1996) even suggest that substantialisation is in fact the ethnicisation of caste. Thus, Steve 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)

Yet, summing this scholarship within the language of substantialisation demands that the burdens of the larger Dumontian framework be addressed. Evidently, the scholarship would struggle—and even refuse—to bear such a load. Thus encoding the existing body of work on the contemporary avatars of caste as *post facto* authorising, the thesis of substantialisation remains problematic. Further, it appears that conceptualising substantialisation as ethnicisation does not help much, primarily because it strips the former of any distinctness, especially 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.

While Dumont might himself be faulted for this conceptual indistinctness, the thesis of ‘substantialisation’ seems yet valuable in furthering engagement with the contemporaneity of caste. In his introduction to the edited volume *Caste Today* (1996), Fuller renders this formulation as a gradualist one. He seems to believe that the trope of caste is no more meaningful than as an obfuscation of more secular concerns—of class, for instance—and increasingly so. He 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. Fuller 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) 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); it is ‘remembered or imagined as their own past, a social and ideological reality that is now on the wane’ (*ibid.*). 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 this study of the dynamics of Brahmin identity in Karnataka. There could be more at stake in this formulation of substantialisation though. Gupta has recently remarked, ‘what made Dumont’s admission [in terms of the substantialisation thesis] less appealing is that he provided no analytical reason as to how and why a pure hierarchy could become parcellised into competing substantialised units’ (2004: xi). This criticism is perhaps mistaken, for one could argue that the influence of the modern ideological sources of self-making is so defining at certain levels in modern caste society that it enables caste to get substantialised at those levels. The key aspect here is the levels or spaces vis-à-vis which this is true. Even if one were to disagree with Dumont’s hierarchisation of primary and secondary/interstitial levels, the thesis itself keeps open the problem of which aspects of caste get substantialised and which escape this. If this is not treated carefully, then substantialisation gets to be conflated with ethnicisation, which is a less useful line of investigation; but, what is more, it also can lead one to overstate the impact of modernity—or colonialism or egalitarian ideology in some versions—on the structures of caste.

This still leaves out the question: does the adoption of this frame commit one to the instituting protocols of Dumont’s theory of caste—that is, 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? Answering this question might not be a precondition for taking on ‘substantialisation’ if one were to take the latter to be just a heuristic device to make sense of the present. As far as my own purpose here is to present the problem of caste today as an open-ended question, Dumont’s thesis works as a point of departure—a useful one nonetheless, as long as it allows the dynamics of this process

to emerge from the field itself and thereby renders it as an empirical question, unfettered to a large extent by the very many predetermined agendas available for approaching caste. While the thesis is open to acknowledging and accounting for the far-reaching effects that colonialism/modernity has had on caste, it can take on the Dalit perspectives that animate a historical sense of oppression and domination and not reduce these to a mere reactive (to colonial remaking) stance. It is also capable of addressing aspects of continuity, and of the everyday-ness of caste. Substantialisation also enables an analysis of the dynamic in terms of a collapse—or more precisely, a severe interrogation—of the meaningful universe of caste, its language and practices, and how individuals and communities respond to it.

So my starting point then for a rethink on the current certitudes on caste is to escape the particularisation of caste to specific times, places and people. This should not be taken to mean that caste claims the status of a gatekeeper in relation to Indian society, in that it mediates and permeates every social phenomenon that is worthy of our attention. Indeed as my own engagement with the Brahmin community will show, even studies that foreground the theme of casteness will have to encounter and then account for the ways in which casteness is at many levels sidelined, even if not transcended. The insistence to rethink particularisation is merely to, for one, remain alert to the many furtive ways in which caste gets to be articulated today. And more importantly to point to the necessity of a certain return to the much trodden path of crafting sociological descriptions of caste embedded in particular locales and moments.

My engagement with the Brahmin question, it must be admitted, began as an endeavour to re-cast(e) the Brahmin, seeking to deconstruct his/her will/pretension to masquerade as *the* modern secular self. I, quite effortlessly, found much to validate this line of enquiry (more on this in the next section). Yet, as I moved along looking at the varied registers of Brahmin self-making, many aspects of contemporary caste that have almost completely missed scholarly engagement began to take shape foregrounding both the necessity to study the single-caste contexts and study them in an ethno-historical mould. Susan Bayly, 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). While the insistence is important and is even authenticated by the recent trajectories of caste studies, the need for a certain return (of course, on grounds that are majorly reformulated) to studies of single caste groups is urgent. It enables us to foreground the dynamics of practice, identification and of becoming rather than being caste. This is important because, notwithstanding recent preoccupations with contextualisation and with 'process' as against 'product', most recent works have tended to treat castes as finished, available products/identities that are then deployed by people in various ways and for different purposes. They have, in their anxiety to posit structural breaks, largely ignored the often contradictory pulls that a 'traditional' entity such as caste faces in a secularising situation. The burdens of the past engage critically and innovatively with the demands of the present, both of which bind but also enable the caste-d actors to re-make identities and identifications. It is this consistent oscillation between senses of community and association that characterises contemporary caste, as I hope to show in the case of the Brahmins.

But, clearly, these questions and the processes I analyse in the Brahmin instance might perhaps obtain in all caste contexts, including the 'lower castes', if in different consistencies. As suggested earlier, constituting the subaltern caste space as one exhausted by the logic of domination–resistance, animated exclusively in terms of assertion and collective mobilisation, appears to have led to a near-complete negation of this line of enquiry. Studies of the kind presented here can be conducted in any caste context. The Brahmin case though facilitates this line of inquiry, even if the specificities of this case are itself important and demands critical engagement. These specificities are outlined in the next section.

Representing the Contemporary Brahmin

This book seeks to disclose aspects of the world of caste by taking recourse to what may be putatively described as the study of caste in an 'upper caste' context, namely, the Brahmin community in

contemporary Karnataka. The categories ‘upper caste’ and ‘lower caste’, even as they are handy and ready-to-use, are ambiguous and slippery. They enter sociology (or 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, in which case the usage fixes on a certain systemic and relational notion of the ‘upper’. Most of the times, however, 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, since they are substantive, they vary across regions.

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 the upper castes, particularly when ritual hierarchy is the issue.⁹ But if one brings economic and political factors into reckoning, then the category of upper caste would have to be expanded to include the Lingayats and the Vokkaligas (Srinivas’ ‘dominant caste’). What is significant is that the Brahmin community is represented as ‘upper’ on either or both of these counts, although, paradoxically enough, its visibility as commensurate with its status of being ‘upper caste’ has been diminishing in contemporary Karnataka.

My intention to focus on the dynamics of Brahmin identity does not derive exclusively from such shifting contexts. 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. It is almost as if the lower castes come marked out as embodiments of an entrenched (and traditional) system, while the upper castes and the profiles

⁹ The case of the Lingayats is a more contested one. They have been insistent that their community is treated on par if not better than the Brahmins. Some of these contests are discussed in [Chapter 4](#).

attached to them represent a changing present, one whose contours must await a delineation of the traditional system. Even more ironically, the choice of a focus on the Brahmin community need not—and indeed does not—entail the possibility of a perspective from above. Given a now-long history of the non-Brahminical othering of Brahmins, the latter feels even more as 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 dynamics of Brahmin identity in contemporary Karnataka, something that this study sets out to do.

In a more constitutive sense, objectifying the Brahmin subject 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/her presence is more as an idea or ideal than as an entity (an embodied person or even community). Indeed, T. N. Madan (1965), R. S. Khare (1970) and, more recently, Gilles Chuyen (2004) are arguably the only full-length studies that deal with the contemporariness of the Brahmin community, apart from the studies of Brahmin priests like the ones by K. Subramaniam (1974), Fuller (1984) and Jonathan Parry (1994).

While the ethnographic profiling of Brahmin contexts has remained a non-starter, summative evaluations of the Brahmin present have been attempted sporadically and in a piecemeal fashion, wherein two distinct lines of understanding can be noticed. 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 as we will demonstrate in [Chapter 3](#), 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. Caste would have lost a great deal

of legitimacy and influence, and could thereafter obtain as a form of ethnic or ethnicised identity, one that the 'de-casted' Brahmin individuals perceive to be significant in choosing life partners. My study will severely interrogate this prognosis. More recently, Fuller (1999) has proffered a formulation which understands contemporary Tamil Nadu as a situation wherein the Brahmin community faces decline and invisibility even as Brahminical cultural values themselves find greater acceptance. Again, this study of the Brahmins of Karnataka will critically engage with that representation.

At the other end as it were of the evaluative spectrum concerning the Brahmin figure are studies that frame the Brahmin question exclusively in terms of domination, as indeed of hegemony. A 'will-to-dominance' is seen as driving the contemporary Brahmin self that seeks, often successfully, to portray what really is its caste-propelled enunciation as secular. Some recent scholarship devoted to making sense of the non-Brahmin articulation in the Tamil-speaking region constructs the modern Brahmin in these terms. A particularly forceful instance of framing the Brahmin along such an axis is V. Geetha and S. V. Rajadurai's work on the Tamil non-Brahmin movement (1998). More recently, M. S. S. Pandian, in his attempt to 'plot the genealogies of the opposition between Brahmin and non-Brahmin' in the Tamil context (2007: 6), has closely followed the script that the former work had outlined. While this is a useful point of entry into the dynamics of the Brahmin problem, it is inadequate in that it exhibits little patience with the rich 'internal' differentiations of the Brahmin. Neither does it accord integrity to the many enunciations of the Brahmin self. Before getting on to disclosing the methodological protocols of this study of the Brahmin community, it is useful here to articulate a position on these extant works.

These works place the crux of Brahmin domination in the Madras Presidency of the late colonial period in 'the brahmin's assumption of the status of a spokesperson for [the native] society, his appropriation of the voice of the people and his substitution of his resonant voice for that of the commonweal' (Geetha and Rajadurai 1998: xiv–xv). In emphasising this rather than the Brahmin predominance of the colonial officialdom, they offer an important corrective to the earlier 'intra-elite heartburn' thesis of

David Washbrook (1976) and Christopher Baker (1976) (for a critique of Baker, see Pandian 1995). Evoking the multivocality of this Brahmin enunciation through an analysis of the discourses of nationalism and caste, they insistently draw attention to the ‘practice of a highly sophisticated art of self-representation’ (*ibid.*: 19) by the Brahmins seeking to ‘secure for [themselves] a universality’ (*ibid.*: 41). But the problems are many in such a construction of the modern Brahmin. Most importantly, a corporateness around the idea, identity and identification of Brahmin is attributed *pre facto* in their analysis. Of course, they strive to demonstrate the many-sidedness of this persona, for instance, in terms of a reformist as against an ‘orthodoxy’; yet, the range of Brahmin self-recuperation and articulation that they bring forth are insistently and consistently understood as a stable ‘will’ to dominate, to mediate the newer reality and its demands for preserving its ‘own privileges’ (*ibid.*: 29). What is more, they even gesture towards the ‘flexible and accommodative’ nature of the ‘discursive energy’ of the Brahmin (*ibid.*: 37). Yet, this flexibility and accommodation does nothing fundamental to the stability of the Brahmin will, which remains unreflexive, unchanging and impervious to the force of both ‘external’ contexts (collapse of a meaningful universe, availability of new tools for self-crafting, non-Brahmin interrogation of its pretensions, etc.) and internal flux (resulting from being privy to processes and demands of secularisation, urbanisation, enlargement of boundaries of the habitus, etc.). Brahmin, in this understanding, is an already done entity, cocky about what his/her ‘interests’ are (Pandian 2007: 68) and with a finished and unitary consciousness privy to the powers, privileges and status of both the traditional dispensation and the emergent reality. Contrast this with the non-Brahmin who has to cobble together a self out of its myriadness and contradictory consciousnesses, privileged neither by cultural and symbolic nor by economic capitals. This one-dimensional imagination of the Brahmin figure and consciousness is simply untenable, as I hope to demonstrate.

Pandian begins with the assertion that in tracing the genealogies of the categories of the Brahmin and non-Brahmin in the Tamil region, ‘the Tamil Brahmin is the central figure around whom [his] book revolves. The very term “non-Brahmin”, in its lexicalisation, makes the Brahmin central’ (2007: 6). For