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# Is India Becoming More Democratic?

ASHUTOSH VARSHNEY

(A) long tradition of ideological subjection has made (the lower castes) stagnate. . . . Centuries have instilled into them a meek acceptance of the existing (order). . . . This can change. In fact, this must change. The revolt against caste is the resurrection of India or, shall we say, the bringing into being of a uniquely and hitherto unrealized occasion, when India shall be truly and fully alive. Is such a revolt possible?

Rammanohar Lohia, *The Caste System*

A great deal of confusion exists on how to discuss, and theoretically characterize, political developments in India during the last decade and a half. There is, of course, a consensus that the Congress party, a towering political colossus between 1920 and 1989, has unambiguously declined. While there are legitimate doubts about whether the decline of the Congress party will continue to be irreversible, it is clear that much of the political space already vacated by the Congress has so far been filled by three different sets of political forces. The first force, Hindu nationalism, has attracted a great deal of scholarly attention (Basu 1997; Hansen and Jaffrelot 1998; Jaffrelot 1993; Varshney 1993). The second force, regionalism, has also spawned considerable research of late (Baruah 1999; Singh forthcoming; Subramanian 1999). A third force, not so extensively analyzed, covers an array of political parties and organizations that encompass groups normally classified under the umbrella category of “lower castes”: the so-called scheduled castes, the scheduled tribes, and the “other backward classes” (OBCs). How should we understand the politics of parties representing these groups? How far will they go? What are the implications of their forward march, if it does take place, for Indian democracy?

In an attempt to answer these questions, this essay compares political developments in Northern and Southern India. My principal claim is that our judgments about contemporary North Indian politics will be wrong if we do not place South India at the center of our analytic attention. In this century, the South has experienced caste-based politics much more intensely than the other regions of India. If the Hindu-Muslim cleavage has been a “master narrative” of politics in North India for much of the twentieth century, caste divisions have had the same status in Southern

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India (Dirks 1997; Varshney forthcoming).<sup>1</sup> Partly because electoral politics was organized around caste lines in the South and not around a Hindu-Muslim axis, lower castes, constituting an electoral majority, came to power in virtually all southern states by the 1960s. Our analysis of recent North Indian politics will be deeper if we appreciate how the empowerment of lower castes took place in the South. An exclusive focus on Hindu-Muslim divisions deflects attention away from what is clearly a significant caste-based churning in the North.

The major South Indian conclusion about caste is culturally counterintuitive but politically easily grasped. Socially and ritually, caste has always symbolized hierarchy and inequality; however, when joined with universal-franchise democracy, caste can paradoxically be an instrument of equalization and dignity (Beteille 1996; Dirks 1997; Kothari 1970; Rudolph and Rudolph 1987 and 1967; Weiner 1997). Weighed down by tradition, lower castes do not give up their caste identities; rather, they “deconstruct” and “reinvent” caste history, deploy in politics a readily available and easily mobilized social category (“low caste”), use their numbers to electoral advantage, and fight prejudice and domination politically. It is the upper castes, beneficiaries of the caste system for centuries, that typically wish caste did not exist when a lower caste challenge appears from below.

North India today, and in future, may not follow in South India’s footsteps entirely, but the rise of lower-caste politics in the North already bears striking similarities. Even Hindu nationalism, though fundamentally opposed to lower-caste politics in ideological terms and quite formidable in the North, has not been able to dictate terms to northern lower-caste politicians. By implication as well as intention, Hindu nationalism stands for Hindu unity, not for caste consciousness. Lower-caste parties are against Hindu unity. Arguing that Hindu upper castes have long denied power, privilege, and even dignity to the lower castes, they are advocates of caste-based social justice and a caste-based restructuring of power. Such has been the power of lower-caste politics in recent years that it has forced Hindu nationalists to make ideologically distasteful but pragmatically necessary political coalitions. For the sake of power, the Hindu nationalists—after the twelfth and for the thirteenth national elections held in 1998 and 1999, respectively—had to team up with other parties, several of whom were based among the lower castes. The latter, among other things, ensured that the ideologically pure demands of Hindu nationalism—the building of a temple in Ayodhya; a common civil code and no religiously based personal laws for minorities; abolition of the special status of Jammu and Kashmir, the only Muslim majority state of Indian federation; elimination of the Minorities Commission—were dropped and a program more acceptable to the lower-caste parties was formulated.

Thus, in their moment of glory, the Hindu nationalists have been ideologically deceived. As they have ended their long isolation in Indian politics and formed governments in Delhi, they have also been forced by lower-caste politicians to make programmatic compromises. While Hindu nationalists have indeed come to power in Delhi, Hindu nationalism as an ideology has not.

Can Hindu nationalism finally overpower the lower-caste mobilization in the North? Alternatively, are lower-caste politicians strong enough to defeat Hindu

<sup>1</sup>With the prominent exception of the former princely state of Hyderabad (Varshney 1997). As to how British rule may have turned caste into a master narrative of South Indian politics, paralleling the Hindu-Muslim narrative in North India, see Dirks (1987). In strictly political terms, Dirks says, Hindu Brahmins can be described as “the Muslims of South India” (Dirks 1997, 279).

nationalists, or, less radically, transform the character of Hindu nationalism as it tries somehow to accommodate a lower-caste surge? Our understanding of India's democracy will be shaped by how these questions are answered in the coming years. Hindu nationalism is majoritarian in impulse. In its ideological purity, it is deeply threatening to non-Hindu minorities, who constitute about 18 percent of the country's population. Lower-caste politics also endeavors to be majoritarian but, much as working-class politics was in late nineteenth-century Western Europe, its ideological aim is to put together a plebeian, not a religious, majority. It is nonthreatening to religious minorities and inclined towards the socioeconomically disadvantaged.

More than ever before, we need to pay greater attention to the determinants and dynamics of India's plebeian politics. As is becoming increasingly clear, lower-caste parties may not be able to come to power on their own, but it is unlikely that any government in Delhi in the foreseeable future can be formed without them. Even if the Congress party returns to power, it is almost certain that such a return will either incorporate the lower-caste parties in a coalition, or have many lower caste politicians as visible power-centers in the Congress party hierarchy.

### The Larger Picture: From a North-South Divide to an Emerging Southernization of North India

Let us begin with a brief comparison of the caste composition of Indian politics today with the situation soon after independence. In the 1950s, India's national politics was dominated by English-speaking, urban politicians trained in law. Most politicians came from the upper castes, and many leaders were trained abroad. Lower down the political hierarchy, an agrarian and "vernacular" elite dominated local and state politics (Weiner 1962), but even the lower-level political leadership tended to come from the upper castes in North India.

South India was different. Southern politicians were not only "vernacular" but, as the 1950s evolved, they were also increasingly from the lower castes (Hardgrave 1965; Subramanian 1999). By the 1960s, much of South India had gone through a relatively peaceful lower caste revolution: the Dravida Munetra Kazgham (DMK) came to power in Tamil Nadu as an anti-Brahmin party in the 1960s, and the Communist party, first in power in Kerala in 1957, was primarily based in the Ezhava community, a low caste of traditional toddy-tappers engaged in the production of indigenous liquor (Nossiter 1982).<sup>2</sup>

The social indignities inflicted on the Nadars of Tamil Nadu, another toddy-tapping caste of traditional South India, are all too well known (Hardgrave 1969). To appreciate how much the state of Kerala has changed, it would be instructive to get a sense of the humiliation the Ezhavas routinely suffered until the early decades of this century:

They were not allowed to walk on public roads. . . . They were Hindus, but they could not enter temples. While their pigs and cattle could frequent the premises of

<sup>2</sup>In the two other South Indian states, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, the lower caste thrust of politics, though present, has been less pronounced. For Karnataka, see Manor (1990); for Andhra, Ram Reddy (1990).

the temple, they were not allowed to go even there. Ezhavas could not use public wells or public places. . . .

. . . An Ezhava should keep himself, at least thirty six feet away from a Namboodiri and twelve feet away from a Nair. . . . He must address a caste Hindu man, as Thampuram (My Lord) and woman as Thampurati (My Lady). . . . He must stand before a caste Hindu in awe and reverence, assuming a humble posture. He should never dress himself up like a caste Hindu; never construct a house on the upper caste model. . . . The women folk of the community . . . were required, young and old, to appear before caste Hindus, always topless. About the ornaments also, there were restrictions. There were certain prescribed ornaments only which they (could) wear.

(Rajendran 1974, 23–24)

By the 1960s, in much of the *public* sphere in Southern India, not simply in Kerala, such egregious debasement and quotidian outrage had been radically curtailed, if not entirely eliminated. A democratic empowerment of the lower castes was the catalytic agent for the social transformation. The lower castes were always numerically larger than the Brahmins, but were unable to use their numbers before the rise of universal franchise.

A classic distinction between horizontal and vertical political mobilization proposed by Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph (1967) captured the essence of North-South political differences at the time. In South India, lower castes had already developed their own leaders and parties by the 1950s and 1960s, whereas in North India the model of mobilization was top-down, with lower castes dependent on the upper castes in a clientelistic relationship. At the national level, the Congress party aggregated horizontally, as it brought together different linguistic and religious groups, but at the local level, it was a typical clientelistic party, building a pyramid of caste coalitions under the existing social elite (Weiner 1967).

In the 1980s and 1990s, a southern-style plebeian politics has rocked North India. The names of Mulayam Singh Yadav, Laloo Yadav, Kanshi Ram, and Mayawati—all “vernacular” politicians who have risen from below—repeatedly make headlines. They are not united. Indeed, substantial obstacles to unity, both vertical and horizontal, remain. Vertically, though all lower castes are below the upper castes/*varnas* (Brahmins, Kshatriyas, and Vaishyas), there are serious internal differentiations and hierarchies within the lower-caste category. And, horizontally, even though *caste system* is present all over India, *each caste* has only local or regional meaning, making it hard to build extralocal or extraregional alliances. Thus, horizontal mobilization tends to be primarily regional or state-specific, not nationwide.

Nonetheless, these and other lower caste leaders have often made or broken coalitions in power. Their total vote share continues to be lower than that for the Congress and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) respectively, but it is enough to force concessions from the two largest parties. In the three national elections held between 1996 and 1999, the various parties explicitly representing lower castes, in the aggregate, received between 18 to 20 percent of the national vote, as against 20 to 25 percent for the BJP, and 23 to 29 percent for the Congress Party.<sup>3</sup> Disunity at the

<sup>3</sup>Based on the Election Commission 1996, 40–51, and Election Commission 1998, 49–56. The 1999 data are provisional. The explicitly lower-caste parties are: JD (various versions), RJD, SP, BSP, JP, ADMK, DMK, MDMK, PMK, BJD, and RPI.

level of political *parties* notwithstanding, lower-caste *politics* has come to stay.<sup>4</sup> It has pressed the polity in new policy directions, and introduced a new coloring of phrases, diction, and styles in politics.

The power of the new plebeian political elite is no longer confined to the state level, though that is where it is most prominent. The center has also been socially reconfigured. Delhi has twice had primarily lower-caste coalitions in power—between 1989 and 1991 and between 1996 and 1998. In K. R. Narayanan, India today has its first ex-Untouchable President. In a parliamentary system, of course, the President is only a head of state, not a head of government. What lends Narayanan's election a special political meaning is that no political party in India, with the exception of a regional party (the Shiv Sena), had the courage to oppose his nomination. Narayanan was elected President by a near-consensus vote in 1997, a feat not easily achievable in India's adversarial polity.

Government policies and programs have also acquired a new thrust. An enlarged affirmative action program and a restructuring of the power structure on the ground—street-level bureaucracies and police stations—have been the battle cry of the new plebeian elite. By far, their most striking national success is the addition of an extra 27 percent reservation for the lower castes to central government jobs and educational seats. In the 1950s, only 22.5 percent of such jobs were reserved, and more than three-fourths were openly competitive. Today, these proportions are 49.5 and 50.5 percent, respectively. At the state level, the reserved quota has been higher for a long time in much of southern India.

Indian politics thus has a new lower-caste thrust, now prevalent both in much of the North as well as the South. Democracy has been substantially indigenized, and the shadow of Oxbridge has left India's political center-stage. Does the rising vernacularization mean that India's democracy is becoming more participatory and inclusive, or simply more chaotic and unruly? Or, are such developments mere cosmetic changes on the surface, a political veneer concealing an unchanging socioeconomic structure of power and privilege?

To understand what the rise of lower castes can do to politics, state institutions, and policy, we need to understand the twentieth-century history of South India, where the lower castes have exercised remarkable power since the late 1950s and early 1960s. Plebeian politics in South India was primarily conceptualized in terms of caste, not class. Even the ideologically class-based Communists in the state of Kerala found it necessary to plug into a discourse of caste-based injustice in the 1930s and 1940s, and they relied heavily on the traditionally depressed Ezhava caste for their rise (Nossiter 1982).

Indeed, with isolated exceptions, caste rather than class has been the primary mode of subaltern experience in India. The rising middle class of a low caste has customarily had to fight social discrimination and disadvantage. For contesting hierarchy and domination, therefore, the emerging elite of lower castes has every reason to use caste identities in politics. Whether this strategy means that in the long run caste itself will disappear, as some lower-caste intellectuals and leaders have long wished (Ambedkar 1990), remains unclear. What is clear is that, relying on a horizontal mobilization, a large proportion of the lower castes would rather fight prejudice here and now, whatever the long-run consequences.

<sup>4</sup>In the 1999 elections, it was widely predicted that the electorate would deal a serious blow to lower-caste parties in the North. In Uttar Pradesh, SP and BSP increased their share of seats, even as their votes marginally declined; in Bihar, RJD kept its vote share intact, but lost seats due to the BJP's superior coalition-making strategy.

## The Scheduled Castes, the Scheduled Tribes, and the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in North India

The papers in this symposium go beyond the aggregate profile summarized above, and address in detail the recent political fortunes of three different and historically underprivileged social groups in North India:<sup>5</sup> the ex-Untouchables, officially named scheduled castes by India's constitution, and often also called the *Dalits*; the tribals, called scheduled tribes since 1950;<sup>6</sup> and the other backward classes (OBCs) among the Hindus. Technically, the term OBC incorporates two different disadvantaged communities—Hindu and non-Hindu. Of these, Hindu OBCs are the low castes whose traditional social and ritual status has been above the ex-Untouchable scheduled castes, but below the upper castes (figure 1). Hindu OBCs overlap mostly with the Sudra *varna* of traditional hierarchy, a category consisting mainly of peasants and artisans.

According to the 1991 census, the scheduled castes constituted about 16.5 percent of India's population, and the scheduled tribes 8.1 percent. Because no full caste census has been taken in India since 1931, statistical exactitude on the OBCs, Hindu or non-Hindu, is not possible. We do have approximate figures, however. The Mandal Commission, the only nationwide source available on the OBCs, suggests that Hindu OBCs constitute about 43.7 percent of the total population (OBCs hereafter, unless a distinction is necessary between Hindu and non-Hindu OBCs).<sup>7</sup> These three groups constitute a majority of India's population and electorate.<sup>8</sup>

Since independence, the scheduled castes have primarily supported the Congress party in India. Though the leaders of the Congress party typically came from the upper castes, they were able to get scheduled caste support partly because the Congress party was the first architect of the affirmative action program, and partly because traditional patron-client relationships in villages were on the whole alive and robust. In 1984, a new political party of the scheduled castes—the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP)—was launched. Receiving 4.0, 4.7, and 4.3 percent of India's vote in the 1996, 1998, and 1999 national elections, respectively (up from 1.6 percent in 1991), the BSP may not yet be a powerful force in national parliament. However, on the basis

<sup>5</sup>Strictly speaking, the arguments in this essay apply only to North and South India but they can, in a modified form, be extended to the western states of Gujarat and Maharashtra too. Lower-caste parties may not have played a similar role in the West, but a lower caste churning from below has affected politics seriously (Wood 1996; Omvedt 1993). It is, however, not clear how far these arguments will apply to states east of Bihar.

<sup>6</sup>Though technically scheduled tribes are not part of the Hindu caste system, there has been a consensus in political circles that along with the scheduled castes, they were historically the most deprived group in India. It should also be noted that in some circles, the term "tribal" is viewed as pejorative. However, we don't yet have an appropriate substitute. For want of a better term, I will use the term "tribal" in this essay, without implying anything pejorative.

<sup>7</sup>Non-Hindu OBCs are about 8.40 percent of India's population. Thus, in all, the OBCs constitute 52 percent of the country (Mandal Commission, 1980, 1:56).

<sup>8</sup>There is some dispute over whether the Mandal Commission overestimated the size of the OBCs, but the nature of that dispute does not change the professional consensus that these three groups together constitute a majority of India's population. Since the population growth rates, according to demographers, are typically higher at lower ends of economic scale, it also means that the OBC proportion of the electorate is likely to be higher than their percentage in the population.

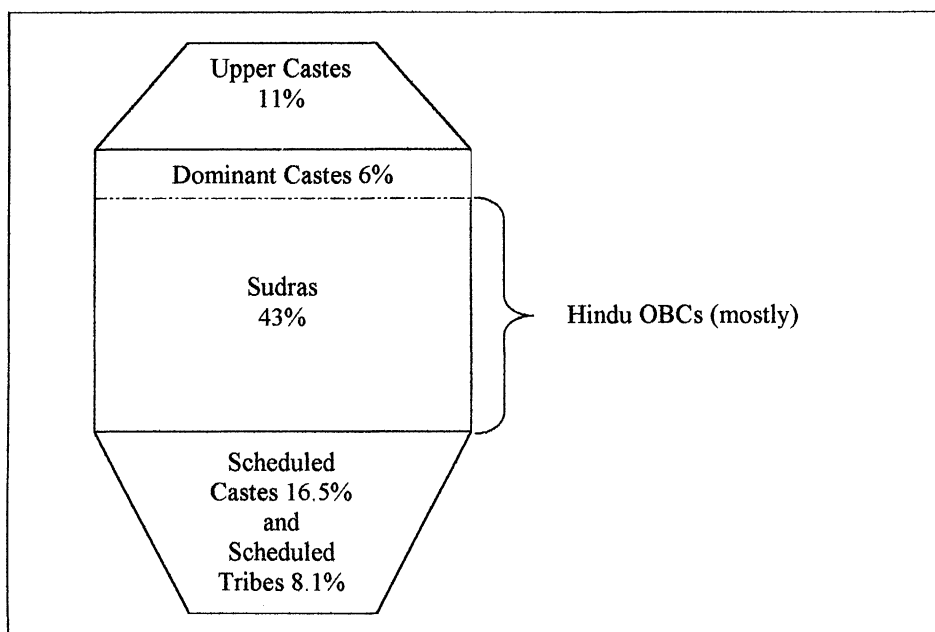


Figure 1. All-India Hindu Ritual Hierarchy. Note: (1) The non-Scheduled Castes and Tribes figures are best guesses. Beyond the Scheduled Castes and Tribes, caste census has not been taken since 1931. These best guesses, however, are widely viewed as statistically reasonable, if not statistically exact. (2) Since a fraction of Scheduled Tribes are Christians, the numbers above add up to more than 82%.

Source: (1) For Scheduled Castes and Tribes, Government of India, *Census of India*, 1991; (2) for other castes, Government of India, *Report of the Backward Classes Commission (Mandal Commission Report)*, First Part, Vol. 1 (1980).

of the share of national vote, it has already become the fourth largest party in India, following the Congress, the BJP, and the Communist Party Marxist (CPM).<sup>9</sup>

More importantly, the BSP has developed a substantial political presence in almost all North Indian states, especially Uttar Pradesh (UP), Punjab, Haryana, and Madhya Pradesh (MP). In UP, India's largest state, the party has been twice in power, though each time briefly and with the support of other parties. By 1996, the BSP had started receiving a whopping 20 percent of UP's vote, crippling the once-mighty Congress in its citadel of great historic strength. In the 1996, 1998, and 1999 national elections, the Congress party's vote in UP was considerably below that of the BSP. Well until the mid-1980s, such scenarios for the Congress in UP were altogether inconceivable.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup>At 5 to 5.5 percent, the CPM's share of the national vote has been only slightly higher than that of the BSP in 1996, 1998, and 1999. But the CPM has each time won many more seats than the BSP, for the BSP's vote is not as geographically concentrated as that of the CPM.

<sup>10</sup>It is arguable that if Mrs. Gandhi had not been assassinated barely 3–4 months before the 1984 national elections, the lower caste upsurge would have shaken national politics in 1984 itself, instead of waiting till 1989. Her assassination changed the issues entirely in the 1984 elections.



How did the BSP break the dependence of the scheduled castes on the Congress? Kanchan Chandra, in her paper for the symposium, provides an answer by taking research down to the constituency level. The results from Hoshiarpur, Punjab, are reported here, supplemented also with research done at the constituency level in Uttar Pradesh.

Chandra argues that the BSP's success in replacing Congress is built upon two factors. First, affirmative action for the scheduled castes has led to the emergence of a middle class among them. The new middle class is made almost entirely of government officers and clerks. Despite experiencing upward mobility, these officers have continued to face social discrimination. Endured silently earlier, such discrimination has by now led to a firm resolve to fight for respect and dignity. Second, the scheduled castes within the Congress experienced what Chandra calls a "representational blockage." Most district committees of the Congress have been dominated by upper-caste politicians. Scheduled caste leaders were mere tokens and symbols in the party structure. Since the early 1990s, such meager rewards of clientelism have been considered largely insufficient by the newly mobile scheduled castes.

The new middle class eventually took over as local BSP leaders. Their strategy was to argue that *humiliation*, rather than economic *deprivation*, was the main problem of the scheduled castes, and that greater political representation, instead of material advantage, was the principal solution. The scheduled castes had to be horizontally mobilized, had to have a party of their own, and had to win assembly seats. Financed by the new middle class, the BSP took off in much of North India and developed a large group of cadres.

However, as the BSP has progressed further, new political realities have dawned. In no Indian state do the scheduled castes constitute even 30 percent of the population, nor are they geographically concentrated, nor for that matter do all scheduled castes vote for the BSP, though a large proportion does (Chandra, in this volume). As a consequence, the BSP cannot capture power at the state level, unless it incorporates other groups or develops alliances with other parties. The need for alliance making has led to a moderation in BSP's rhetoric. Still, such moderation is different from being a client in the Congress hierarchy, for the BSP now captures between 7 and 20 percent of the vote in Haryana, Punjab, MP, and UP (Election Commission 1996 and 1998) and thus, in a fragmented political space dominated by no single party, the BSP has the political muscle to strike bargains over legislative seats, appointments, policies, and material goods. In the past, benefits were not bargained for, but handed top-down by the Congress party and assumed to be sufficient.

Unlike the scheduled castes, the scheduled tribes are geographically concentrated. For example, in the state of Bihar, the site of Stuart Corbridge's research reported in this symposium, they live mostly in the South. Since 1981, Corbridge's fieldwork among Bihar tribals has repeatedly taken him from some of the state's urban centers, where most of the tribal government and public sector employees work, to three tribal villages, from where they come. Combining participant observation and statistical research, Corbridge is able systematically to compare the situation of tribals in government jobs with their rural backgrounds. He argues that both affirmative action and democracy have offered new opportunities to the tribes. They have made possible material advancement for many, and led to a new awareness of politics and power for the whole group.

One consequence of affirmative action is that the tiny middle class of the scheduled tribes has become considerably larger. And a result of democratic politics

is that a tribal-based political party has been heading a movement for a separate state in the Indian federation, where the tribal population would be in a majority. Though several prejudices and exclusions remain, Corbridge argues that the benefits of democracy and affirmative action have been quite considerable, and may even expand further if a new state with a scheduled-tribe majority is born in the coming years. The latter possibility can no longer be ruled out.

The OBCs, covered by Christophe Jaffrelot in this symposium, are different from the other two groups. As already noted, compared to the scheduled castes and tribes, the OBCs command much larger numbers: according to the Mandal Commission, Hindu OBCs constitute about 43.7 percent of India's total population. Being mostly *Sudras*, the OBCs have faced many social and economic disadvantages, but the fit between the two categories—OBC and *Sudra*—is not perfect.

If one goes by the all-India classification of castes, a national-level abstraction, the picture that emerges is unable to capture the many regional variations in dominance and power. Sociologists and social anthropologists construe the term *Sudra* to include, but the category of OBC on the whole excludes, the so-called “dominant castes”: the Jats, Reddys, Kammas, Patels, Marathas, and others. The notion of “dominant castes” was coined by M. N. Srinivas (1966) to specify those groups which, in a ritualistic or formal sense of the all-India caste/*varna* hierarchy, have been termed *Sudras*, but the ritualistic usage of the term is vacuous because these groups have historically been substantial landowners and rather powerful in their local or regional settings. In any realistic sense, the term *Sudra* can not be applied to them, nor are they typically included among the OBCs.

Jaffrelot argues that the rise of the Janata party to national power in 1977 was a turning point for the OBCs. Since then, the share of upper-caste legislators in North Indian assemblies and national parliament has, by and large, been declining and that of the OBCs going up, the state of Rajasthan being the only exception. In the first Lok Sabha (1952–57), Jaffrelot calculates, 64 percent of North Indian Members of Parliament (MPs) were from the upper castes and only 4.5 percent from the OBCs; by 1996, the former proportion had declined to 30.5 percent and the latter risen to 24.8 percent.

Jaffrelot also shows how the contradictions within the sprawling *Sudra* category have produced two different kinds of plebeian politics in North India. For political mobilization, an urban versus rural ideology was proposed by the redoubtable Charan Singh, and an upper versus lower caste construction by Ram Manohar Lohia. Charan Singh's was a sectoral worldview. It subsumed the lower castes in a larger political category of the rural sector, in which the lower castes were a clear majority. His main demands were economic: higher crop and lower input prices in agriculture, and greater public investment in the countryside.<sup>11</sup> In contrast, since both cities and villages have lower castes, Lohia's ideology cut through the urban-rural sectors as well as Hindu society. Affirmative action for the lower castes was Lohia's principal thrust and a social restructuring of state institutions—especially the bureaucracy and police—his primary objective (Lohia 1964).

After several ups and downs, the biggest votaries of sectoral politics have been defeated in electoral politics. Nonparty politics is now their principal arena of functioning, and caste has trumped sector in plebeian politics. If demands for higher agricultural prices are expressed today, it is the *lower-caste* parties that primarily do so, not *rural* parties.

<sup>11</sup>For further details, see Varshney (1995).

Checking the further rise of OBCs, however, are two countervailing forces: Hindu nationalism and the disunity within the OBCs. With an ideological stress on Hindu unity rather than caste distinctions, the Hindu nationalists seek to co-opt OBCs in the larger “Hindu family”; and new distinctions are also getting institutionalized between the *upper OBCs*, such as the Yadavas, and the *lower OBCs*, such as the Telis and Lodhas. These differences have already undermined the OBC cohesion evident at the time of the Mandal agitation of the early 1990s.

It is not yet clear, says Jaffrelot, whether the lower OBCs will rise further, or only the upper OBCs will. But, at any rate, a reestablishment of upper caste dominance, he suggests, is now rather unlikely in North Indian politics. Political power in North India has moved downward. Even Hindu nationalists, the biggest proponents of Hindu unity, are increasingly caught between giving a greater share of internal power to the OBCs and emphasizing Hindu unity over caste considerations. The latter tendency, traditionally unquestioned in Hindu nationalist politics, is being challenged. Fighting it is a new ideological posture—“social engineering”—proposed by some party ideologues, who would rather give OBCs more power and visibility in the BJP. “Social engineering” is not another expression of vertical clientelism organized under upper caste leadership, but an attempt to build Hindu unity by incorporating lower castes more equally.

## The New Plebeian Upsurge and Democracy

Has the rise of lower castes in the North, now added to their southern empowerment, changed Indian democracy? The collective judgment above, as well as the view of several others, is that India’s democracy has become more inclusive and participatory (Sheth 1996; Nandy 1996; Varshney 1998; Weiner 1997; Yadav 1996a and b, 1999). A relative professional consensus is building around Yadav’s characterization that India is going through a “second democratic upsurge.” The first upsurge, for him, was the beginning of the end of Congress dominance in the mid-1960s. In a century-long perspective, however, it is perhaps fair to say that this is the fourth democratic upsurge in India. The rise of mass politics in the 1920s under Gandhi’s leadership was the first, and the universalization of franchise after independence the second.

Such judgments, of course, have not remained uncontested. Even those who agree that power has decisively moved down the caste hierarchy are unsure about what it means for the country’s democratic health or longevity. India’s English-language press has, on the whole, bemoaned the rise of the new plebeian politicians, holding them often responsible for the decline of political standards. The anxious chorus of everyday criticism has acquired standard refrains: how the language of politics has become more coarse and the style more rough, compared to the sophistication of political dialogue and conduct under Nehru; how men of “dubious provenance” have taken over electoral politics; and how the governmental stability of a previous era has given way to unstable and unruly coalitions, in which mutual differences quickly turn into unseemly bickering and intemperate outbursts. Though rarely openly stated, the subtext of English-language commentary appears to be that a democracy moving downwards may well be a poorer and shakier democracy.

Such anxiety is genuinely felt and should not be lightly dismissed. It is not simply a swan song of an anglicized, globally linked, upper-caste elite, dominating the

powerful English-language press but finding its political decline frustrating. We do, however, need to put the anxiety in perspective.

A large number of political theorists today, not simply the so-called communitarians, lament the decline of moral values, or “civic virtue,” in *all* liberal democracies. No currently functioning democracy in the world seems to have institutions or mechanisms in place to ensure a durable moral or civic enhancement of the political life. Democratic politicians, say these theorists, are increasingly turning politics into a marketplace, paying attention merely to the utilitarian calculus of routine politics: winning elections regardless of what it takes to do so; making promises to citizens that cannot be fulfilled; “misbehaving” while in office but seeking cover of legal principles and technical formalities. If the quality of goals pursued in politics becomes immaterial, these political theorists contend, even procedurally correct democratic politics can only weaken the moral and civic fiber of nations. Democracies today are ceasing to be “civic republics”; they are becoming “procedural republics” (Sandel 1996; Taylor 1998).

Lest it should be believed that such lament is confined only to the insulated ivory towers of universities, consider some of the popular discourse, reflected in the press. “How low can they go?,” moaned North America’s leading business newspaper in its editorial, reporting on campaigns in the U.S. for the November 1998 elections and highlighting the corrupt electoral practices still followed in some parts of the country:

(V)oter fraud is slowly undermining the legitimacy of more and more elections. . . . Since almost all states don’t require a photo ID, it is fairly easy to vote in the name of dead people, vote if you are an illegal alien, falsify an absentee ballot or vote more than once.

. . . Two years ago, groups using federal funds registered hundreds of non-citizens in Orange County, California. The House Oversight Committee . . . came up with the name of 1499 voters who should be removed from the rolls, but election officials claim it is too late to purge them for today’s election. This month, the Los Angeles County registrar identified 16,000 phony registrations submitted by two groups aligned with the Democratic Party.

*(The Wall Street Journal, 3 November 1998)*

Unvirtuous politics, in other words, is not specific to Indian democracy. A decline in morality and a debasement of political practices and language are indeed significant problems for any society, as they have been for India. But unless they entirely invalidate citizen preferences, they do not amount to a negation of democracy. Fortunately, the latter is not the conclusion of India’s English-language press. It is a call for correction, which we may all share, not an argument that democracy in India has become meaningless.

### Democratic Authoritarianism?

A second challenge to the view that India’s democracy is becoming more participatory is rather more radical in conception and thrust. Simply put, its principal claim is that India’s democracy is a sham. In Jalal (1995), we have the most detailed statement of this view, though softer versions can also be found in Bonner (1994), Brass (1990), Lele (1990), Shah (1990), and Vanaik (1990).

According to this view, changes at the level of elections and elected institutions are of little consequence so long as the social and economic inequalities of civil society

remain unaltered, and the non-elected state institutions, especially the bureaucracy and police, continue to act in an authoritarian manner vis-à-vis the citizens, much as they used to when the British ruled. For democracy to function in a *real*, not *formal*, sense, there has to be greater prior equality among its citizens. A deeply unequal society cannot check the authoritarian functioning of the state structures and therefore cannot have a polity that is “really” democratic.

“Democratic authoritarianism,” Jalal argues, is the best way to describe India’s polity, and there are no fundamental differences between India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, except at the level of political superstructure. All have profound socioeconomic inequalities and all have inherited insensitive, colonial state structures in which the nonelected institutions easily trump the elected powers-that-be:

The simple dichotomy between democracy in India and military authoritarianism in Pakistan and Bangladesh collapses as soon as one delves below the surface phenomena of political processes. . . . (P)ost-colonial India and Pakistan exhibit alternate forms of authoritarianism. The nurturing of the parliamentary form of government through the meticulous observance of the ritual of elections in India enabled a partnership between the political leadership and the non-elected institutions of the state to preside over a democratic authoritarianism.

(Jalal 1995, 249–50)

Thus, even when meticulously observed, elections are basically a “ritual.” At best, they combine “formal democracy and covert authoritarianism” (99). If societies are unequal, the poor will inevitably be manipulated by the political elite:

Unless capable of extending their voting rights beyond the confines of the institutionalized electoral arenas to an effective struggle against social and economic exploitation, legal citizens are more likely to be handmaids of powerful political manipulators than autonomous agents deriving concrete rewards from democratic processes.

(48)

In its theoretical anchorage, we should note, this kind of reasoning is not new. Commonly associated with Marx, Lenin, Gramsci, Mosca, and Pareto, it has a long lineage lasting over a century. The arguments of Gramsci and Mosca are the most elaborate.<sup>12</sup> Gramsci (1971) reasoned that so long as the economically powerful had control over the cultural means of a society—its newspapers, its education, its arts—they could establish a hegemony over the subaltern classes and essentially obfuscate the subaltern about their own interests. And Mosca (1939) argued that in democracies, given their many inequalities, domination of a small elite was inevitable.

For our discussion about caste and democracy, there are two levels at which the claim about the emptiness of Indian democracy compels attention: theoretical and empirical. The key theoretical issue is: Should we consider socioeconomic equality a precondition for democracy? And since a change in the social base of parties—to reflect a closer correspondence between party politics and India’s caste structure—and a change in the composition of state institutions through affirmative action—to make the state respond better to the needs of the deprived—are the two principal aims of lower caste politicians, the key empirical questions are: Is the rise of lower-caste parties only formal, not real? And is affirmative action illusory?

<sup>12</sup>For a detailed treatment, see Dahl 1989, ch. 19

## Is Socioeconomic Equality a Precondition for Democracy?

A theoretically defensible notion of democracy is not possible based on the example of South Asia, a region in which only two countries—India and Sri Lanka—have had the institutions of democracy, formal or real, in place for any substantial length of time. Any reasonable sense of theory means that we should cast our net wider, especially if the larger universe is where most of the actually existing democracies have historically existed. Either South Asian materials can be interpreted in the framework of a larger, more historically embedded, democratic theory, or their empirical specificities can be used to modify the broader insights of democratic theory (Varshney 1998). In and of themselves, South Asian instances of democracy cannot make democratic theory.

In the leading texts of democratic theory (Dahl 1998, 1989, 1981, 1971), the two basic criteria of democracy have been: contestation and participation. The first principle, in effect, asks how freely does the political opposition contest the rulers, and the second inquires how many groups participate in politics and determine who the rulers should be. The first principle is about liberalization; the second about inclusiveness (Dahl 1971, ch. 1).

Contestation and participation do not require socioeconomic equality; they may affect, or be affected by, inequality. Democratic theorists expect that if socially or economically unequal citizens are politically equalized and if the deprived constitute a majority of the electorate, their political preferences would, sooner or later, be reflected in who the rulers are and what public policies they adopt. By giving everyone equal vote irrespective of prior resource-endowments, universal franchise creates the potential mechanisms for undermining vertical dependence. In Europe, labor parties pushing for workers' interests emerged in politics, once franchise was extended to the working class.

Another well-known theoretical point is germane to a discussion of inequalities and democracy. If inequality, despite democratic institutions, comes in the way of a free expression of political preferences, such inequality makes a polity *less* democratic, but it does not make it *undemocratic*. So long as contestation and participation are available, democracy is a *continuous* variable (expressed as “more or less”), not a *dichotomous* variable (expressed as “yes or no”). Variations in degree and dichotomies should be clearly distinguished. In the classic formulation of Robert Dahl, the United States was less of a “polyarchy” (Dahl’s preferred term for an actually existing democracy) before the civil rights revolution of the mid-1960s, though it can in future be even more democratic if inequalities at the level of civil society come down further (Dahl 1971, 29). Similarly, by allowing a great deal of contestation but restricting participation according to gender and class, England in the nineteenth century was less democratic than it is today, but it was democratic nonetheless, certainly by nineteenth-century standards. *Given contestation and participation, greater equality certainly makes a polity more democratic, but greater equality, in and of itself, does not constitute democracy.* There is no democracy without elections.

The claims above are empirical, not normative. They are not a defense of inequalities, nor do they imply that having universal franchise is better than having equality. Relative economic equality, for example, may well be a value in itself, and we may wish to defend it as such. But we should note that economic equality and

democracy are distinct categories. Societies with high levels of economic equality may well be quite authoritarian: South Korea and Taiwan until the late 1980s, China under Mao, and Singapore today come to mind. And societies with considerable economic inequality may have vibrant democracies: India and the U.S. are both believed to have a Gini Coefficient of 0.4–0.45, as opposed to a more equal Gini Coefficient of 0.2–0.25 for the pre-1985, authoritarian South Korea and Taiwan.<sup>13</sup> Precisely because economic equality and democracy are analytically distinct, some people may quite legitimately be democrats but not believers in economic equality; others may believe in democracy as well as economic equality; and still others may be democrats but indifferent to the question of economic equality. A similar argument can also be made about social inequalities.

In light of the theoretical discussion above, let us now turn to India. Has Indian democracy become more inclusive or not? And hasn't greater inclusion reduced socioeconomic inequalities? In case inequalities have come down as a consequence of the political process, it will, in the theoretical terms proposed above, make India *more* democratic, even though an inability to reduce inequalities more will not make India's polity *undemocratic*.

### Are the OBCs an Elite Category?

If “the so-called other backward castes (OBCs) are in many regions the better off farmers and peasant proprietors who benefited from the *Zamindari* (absentee landlordism) abolition in the fifties” (Jalal 1995, 205), their rise would indeed not constitute a significant change in the patterns of “social and economic exploitation.” An old set of “exploiters” would simply be replaced by a class only slightly less rich and privileged. Are the OBCs an elite group in the latter sense of the term?

To call the OBCs “better off farmers and peasant proprietors” is a serious conceptual and empirical error, for it conflates OBCs with “dominant castes.” Most OBCs are *not* dominant castes. The latter term, as already stated, represents those groups which in the national-level abstraction of a *varna*/caste hierarchy have been termed *Sudras*, but for a whole variety of regional or local reasons, this term makes no sense for them. Their power and status has far exceeded anything that the term *Sudra* implies (Srinivas 1966). The all-India hierarchy was simply irrelevant for groups of substantial landowners such as the Jats, Patels, Kammas, Reddys, Nairs, and Marathas. They have been much too powerful and rich, even if they are not Brahmins, Kshatriyas, or Vaishyas, the customary upper three Hindu *varnas*/castes. Many of these castes did indeed benefit from the abolition of *Zamindari*, if the *Zamindari* system prevailed in their areas.<sup>14</sup>

The dominant castes and OBCs have some intersections—for example, the Okkaligas and Lingayats in Karnataka count as both—but the two are not overlapping sets (Figure 2). *By and large, the category of OBCs is equal to the Sudras minus the dominant*

<sup>13</sup>Measuring income distribution in a society, the Gini Coefficient ranges between 0 and 1. The closer a country is to 1, the more unequal it is, and the closer to 0, the more equal. Given similar Gini Coefficients, countries with higher per capita incomes (USA) would have far less poverty than those with lower per capita incomes (India).

<sup>14</sup>This, however, would not be true of the *Ryotwari* areas, where the Marathas, Reddys, Kammas, and Patels have been dominant for a very long time.

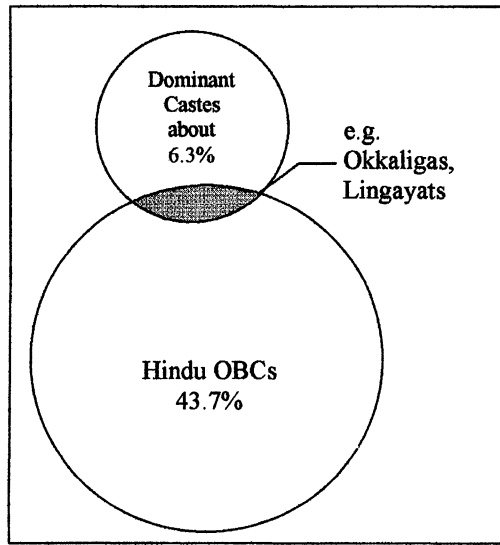


Figure 2. OBCs and Dominant Castes.

*castes*. The dominant castes in northern and western India—the Jats and Patels, for example—have in fact opposed the extension of reservations to the OBCs.

Can the argument about the relative elitism of the OBC category be extended to any OBCs at all? The upper OBCs, such as the Yadavas, are indeed peasant proprietors and also beneficiaries of *Zamindari* abolition. Much like the Patels in Gujarat at the beginning of the twentieth century, the Yadavas have achieved sufficient upward mobility since the green revolution, and have used their numbers to considerable effect in a democracy. One can indeed say that they are fast becoming a dominant caste, and will in all probability be viewed as such in the coming decades. But the *lower* OBCs, such as the Lodha, Pal, Mali, Teli and Maurya, are not as privileged.

This bifurcation of the OBC category raises an important question: what proportion of the OBCs can be called economically deprived? Though landholding data for castes has not been collected for decades and therefore precise estimates cannot be given, simple calculations—combining the separate caste and landholding statistics in an empirically defensible way—can show that a majority of the lower OBCs are most likely to be marginal farmers (owning less than 2.5 acres of land) or small farmers (less than 5 acres).

In 1993–94, about 36 percent of India was below the poverty line (Ravallion and Datt 1996; The World Bank 1997). There would virtually be no OBCs in this group if we assumed that (a) all scheduled castes (16 percent of India's population), all scheduled tribes (8 percent), and all Muslims (12 percent) were below the poverty line; and that (b) all upper caste households were above it. Both assumptions, we know, are wrong. First, as Chandra and Corbridge show in this symposium, both the scheduled castes and tribes now have a middle class. Moreover, there is a substantial Muslim middle class in India: especially in southern and western India from where migration to Pakistan was minuscule, but also in northern India where a Muslim middle class has reappeared after the late 1960s.

Let us suppose for the sake of argument that of the 36 percent population below the poverty line, nearly 30 percent (of the total) comes from the scheduled castes,



tribes, Muslims and a tiny number also from the upper castes. With this more reasonable supposition, about 5–6 percent of the population falling below the poverty line would consist of the OBCs.

Since the poverty line is primarily nutritional in the developing world—meaning that below the line one could not even buy enough food to get a basic minimum of calories (The World Bank 1997, 3)—another 15–20 percent of the country's population, widely believed to be only slightly above the poverty line, would also be quite poor. The OBCs thus would constitute at least 20–25 percent of the population that is below, or just above, the poverty line. That, in turn, would make up 50–55 percent of Hindu OBCs (constituting, as they do, 43 percent of Indian population).

We also know that marginal farmers, having less than 2.5 acres of land, constitute about 50 percent of all landed households in India (Visaria and Sanyal 1977).<sup>15</sup> Thus, putting the caste and landholding data together, we can safely infer that marginal farmers constitute an overwhelming proportion of OBC households. Even after the green revolution, the level of productivity in Indian agriculture has not reached such a level that we can justifiably call these latter classes “peasant proprietors or better off farmers.”<sup>16</sup> In agrarian political economy, the terms “peasant proprietors” and “better off farmers” do not indicate debilitating economic disadvantage, but rather considerable advantage. These are terms that cannot be applied to marginal and small farmers.

In short, to say that peasant proprietors or better-off farmers benefited from *Zamindari* abolition is correct; but to conclude that peasant proprietors and better-off farmers are by and large the OBCs is a nonsequitur. Most lower OBCs are not only socially subaltern but also economically so, and only slightly better in both respects than the scheduled castes. That is why, as Jaffrelot argues, a key question increasingly is: can the lower OBCs be incorporated with the scheduled castes in a BSP-led coalition, as opposed to parties led by the upper OBCs?

### Is Affirmative Action Illusory?

Theoretically speaking, it is possible that affirmative action leads to the co-optation of a tiny lower caste and scheduled caste elite into the existing vertical structure, without any widely dispersed welfare-gains for their castes. After all, India's affirmative action concerns only government jobs, not the private sector. In 1992, of the nearly 300 million people in the work-force, only 20 million were in the public sector. One can therefore say that affirmative action in the public sector will directly benefit only a small proportion of the deprived, and one can, in principle, suggest that “access to education, government employment and state patronage based on reservations may in fact have hampered rather than strengthened the autonomy of the more privileged and talented members of the scheduled castes and tribes” (Jalal 1995, 209–10; also Gokhale 1990, and Sachchidananda 1990).

Is there evidence that this theoretical possibility holds up empirically? This question can, in turn, be broken down into two parts: (a) affirmative action for the

<sup>15</sup>These proportions have not significantly changed in the last two decades—at any rate, not towards larger holdings which, if true, would have changed the conclusions of this paragraph.

<sup>16</sup>Only in Punjab is it possible to generate a surplus on a 2–3 acre farm today (Chaddha 1986).

OBCs (in addition to the scheduled castes), which has taken the form of quotas in much of South India since the 1920s; and (b) affirmative action for the *scheduled castes*, implemented all over India since 1950, to which the OBCs have been added outside the South only after 1990. Clearly, it is far too early to evaluate the impact of affirmative action for the OBCs beyond southern India. For the scheduled castes, however, our empirical judgments can be national in scope.

In southern Indian states, *over and above the scheduled caste quota*, close to 50 percent of the state government jobs have been reserved for OBCs in the state of Karnataka since the 1960s; in Tamil Nadu, the OBC quota was 25 percent to begin with, and was increased to over 50 percent later; in Kerala, the OBC quota has been 40 percent; and in Andhra Pradesh, 25 percent. What has been the impact of such large-scale reservations? Have the nonelected state institutions changed?

No detailed breakdown of state bureaucracies, according to caste, is available for South India, but there is no mystery left about the results. It is widely known that many Brahmins simply migrated out of South India as the OBC quotas were instituted. Once access to government jobs, their traditional stronghold, was substantially reduced, some Brahmins went into the private sector, becoming businessmen for the first time, but a large number migrated to Delhi, Bombay, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Indeed, so large was the flight and so capable were the Brahmins of getting jobs anywhere that their migration to, and rise in, Bombay led to a serious anti-southern movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Katzenstein 1979). By now, bureaucracies of southern states have become remarkably, though not entirely, non-Brahmin.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, though systematic empirical studies have not been undertaken, it is also widely recognized that the South is governed better than North Indian states like Bihar and UP. Large-scale affirmative action in bureaucratic recruitment does not appear to have undermined governance in the South.

Let us now turn to the impact of reservations for the scheduled castes. Kanshi Ram, the leading scheduled caste politician of India today and the leader of BSP, argues that affirmative action has “now done enough for the scheduled castes,” noting that in the state of UP, of the 500 officers in the elite Indian Administrative Service, 137 are from the scheduled castes (Mendelsohn and Vicziany 1998, 224). However, affirmative action, Kanshi Ram adds, is “useful for a cripple but a positive handicap for someone who wants to run on his own two feet”; instead, he says, the scheduled castes should focus on winning power through elections, for “the capture of political power will automatically transform the composition of the bureaucratic elite” (224).

Compared to the theoretical possibility of affirmative action leading to co-optation, notice how different the claim of India’s leading scheduled caste politician is. Affirmative action, in his judgment, is already quite considerable, though it is at the same time an inadequate tool for empowerment. In a new sign of political confidence, affirmative action, he says, is for the disabled, whereas it is time now to play the game of democratic politics more equally. Finally, his politics are premised upon the assumption that nonelected institutions do not trump the elected institutions; rather, capturing elected institutions will transform the bureaucracy and police much more fundamentally. It is the elected institutions of India that set the

<sup>17</sup>And the faculties of Science and Engineering in many American universities, as well as American software companies, have a lot of South Indian Brahmins!

tone for the nonelected state institutions of bureaucracy and police, not the other way round.<sup>18</sup>

After all is said and done, the most telling evidence of the impact of affirmative action on the scheduled castes may well be *indirect*, not direct. Affirmative action, as Chandra and Corbridge argue, has produced a new counterelite, which has started leading political mobilization. Chandra shows that scheduled caste government officers, beneficiaries of affirmative action, financed the BSP and were its early leaders. Rather than leading to a vertical co-optation, affirmative action, by producing a scheduled caste elite, appears indirectly to have facilitated horizontal mobilization. A hampering of autonomy follows directly from vertical client-patron links, not from horizontal mobilization.

### Deeper, but Unfinished<sup>19</sup>

None of the above should be construed to mean that India can not be made still more democratic. There is no doubt that many battles for social dignity and equality for the lower castes still lie ahead, even in South India (Bouton 1985); and so do struggles for women and minorities. The continuing hostility between the upper OBCs and scheduled castes in several parts of India is another example of an unfinished social transformation. However, the papers here, as well as earlier studies (Frankel 1990; Omvedt 1993), show that democracy has already energized India's plebeian orders. They have challenged the traditional forms of clientelistic politics and started fighting for greater power.

Whether or not *economic* inequalities have gone down, *social* inequalities certainly have, even for the scheduled castes (Mendelsohn and Vicziany 1998). This is a serious achievement. If in South India it was not possible for Ezhavas to walk on public streets, if it was impossible for Nadar women to cover their breasts when walking in front of higher caste Hindus, if scheduled castes in much of India could not traditionally have access to schools, public transport, and public wells, then the emergence of the notion of basic dignity among, and for, the lower castes in the public sphere must be taken extremely seriously, even though economic inequalities may not have lessened to the same degree. There is no uniquely acceptable reason to suppose that economic inequalities must be given primacy over social inequalities. The battle for social dignity is being increasingly won in the public sphere.

By all accounts, India's democracy has made such social victories possible. In India, unlike many other democracies in the world, *the incidence of voting is higher among the poor than among the rich, among the less educated than among the graduates, in the villages than in the cities* (Yadav 1996a and b, 1999). The deprived seem to have greater faith in India's elections than the advantaged. Unless we assume short-sightedness, the subaltern seem to think that the electoral mechanisms of democracy can be used to fight socioeconomic disadvantages.

<sup>18</sup>Jalal (1995) argues the opposite. During the colonial period, the nonelected institutions were indeed more powerful than the institutions based on limited elections. The reason simply was that the former institutions were British-dominated, whereas the latter saw many elected Indians at the top. Universal-franchise democracy has reversed the colonial relationship between the elected and the nonelected institutions in India.

<sup>19</sup>This section has been inspired by discussions of American democracy and its achievements. Indeed, it comes very close to the last paragraph of a great book on American politics: "Critics say that America is a lie because its reality falls so short of its ideals. They are wrong. America is not a lie; it is a disappointment. But it can be a disappointment only because it is also a hope" (Huntington 1981, 262).

It should also be noted that many scholars who accept these claims have nonetheless been quite critical of some other aspects of Indian polity. But we should specify how their criticisms are different from the claim that India's democracy is a sham. The three most common criticisms are:

(1) That a serious crisis of ungovernability has arisen due to increasing political participation and the inability of the state to respond adequately to the rising groups and demands (Kohli 1991).

(2) That India's political elite has focused far too much on narrow identities on the one hand and purely economic goals on the other, but far too little on using public policy to expand social opportunities for the deprived (Dreze and Sen 1995). (By "social," I might add, Dreze and Sen primarily mean education and health, not everyday dignity and ritual status, the sense in which the term has been used in this essay. Though the social performance of Indian democracy is undoubtedly poor at the level of education and health, its social performance at the level of everyday dignity and respect, as argued here, has been rather substantial.)

(3) That there is nothing unnatural about the politicians making use of identities in democratic politics, but that does not explain why India's politicians have paid such inadequate attention to issues of public policy in general, *both* concerning education and health on the one hand and incomes on the other (Bhagwati 1993; Weiner 1991, 1986). Nothing in India's democracy precluded a switch from *dirigisme* to a market-orientation, as was demonstrated in 1991, nor does democracy rule out a greater effort at universal primary education and public health, as Sri Lanka and some Indian states show. Failures of public policy have less to do with democracy per se, more with the *ideology* and mind-set of India's political and bureaucratic elite (Bhagwati 1993; Sachs, Varshney and Bajpai 1999; Weiner 1986). Quite different ideologies have been, and can be, pursued in a democracy.

Moreover, sensible welfare-enhancing public policies do not always have to wait for popular pressures to build up; they can emerge with an ideological change from above.<sup>20</sup> Though the subaltern, through the electoral process, have not so far pressed India's decision-makers for better incomes, education and health, only for everyday dignity and respect, such a lack of pressure on the former objectives did not dictate relative inaction, or lack of boldness, on the part of the government. India's greatest failure is one of imagination and awareness on the part of the political and bureaucratic elite.

Notice the implications of the third critique. It accepts that elections have a real, not simply formal and ritualistic, value and yet it claims that *if popular demands were different or if the state responses were*, the results of India's democracy would be so much more impressive. The admittedly unremarkable functioning of the Indian state in enhancing economic, educational, and health opportunities for its masses is viewed not as a negation of democracy, but a problem analytically separable and one attributable to elite ideologies. For a balanced record, such failures must be contrasted with the success of India's democracy, reflected in rising participation and inclusiveness on the one hand and victories at the level of social dignity and respect on the other. By privileging numbers and giving freedom to organize, democracy

<sup>20</sup>The shift in India's agricultural policy in the mid-1960s is an example (Varshney 1995); so is affirmative action enshrined in India's constitution. Both came into force without a popular movement in favor of either.

has become the biggest enemy of the hierarchies and degradations of India's caste system.

## Conclusion

Instead of arguing that only relative equality can produce a democracy, a much more empirically grounded claim would be that democracy can help reduce inequalities, at least social if not economic. Understanding how this happened in South India in the 1950s and 1960s is increasingly a necessity for a deeper understanding of contemporary North India. Not only have social humiliations gone down significantly in the South, but there is a consensus that South India is on the whole less unequal today than the Hindi-speaking North (as well as better governed).

It is clear that the rise of lower castes to power between the 1950s and 1960s has had a great deal to do with the transformation of South India since then. Whether the North will replicate the South is still an open question; the proportion of the upper castes, for one, has always been substantially higher in the North, and lower caste movements in the South, for another, did not have to contend with Hindu nationalism. However, should the northern outcomes even approximate southern outcomes in the coming years, as would seem likely, both votaries of the liberating potential of democracy and those of reducing inequalities will have much to cheer about. India is, indeed, still far from becoming a democracy from below, but democratic power is increasingly moving downward. Democracy is no longer a gift from above.

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