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Source: *Asian Survey*, Vol. 40, No. 5, Modernizing Tradition in India (Sep. - Oct., 2000), pp. 756-766

Published by: [University of California Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3021175>

Accessed: 09/02/2014 08:18

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SANSKRITIZATION VS. ETHNICIZATION IN INDIA

Changing Identities and Caste Politics before Mandal

Christophe Jaffrelot

In the 1970s, the Janata Party-led state governments of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh in India launched new reservation policies for lower castes. The controversy surrounding these policies came to a fore when upper castes resisted the implementation of the Mandal Commission Report in 1990. While reservation policies played a role in the crystallization of the low caste movements in South and West India, their momentum was sustained by the ideology of “pre-Aryanism” or Buddhism in these regions. In the North, however, the state policies were more or less the starting point of the whole process. This article will discuss the crystallization of lower caste movements in India, arguing that the mobilization of the lower castes was delayed and did not imply any significant change in caste identities: the emancipatory and empowerment agenda in India materialized without any prior ethnicization.

Historical Background

The North-South divide is a locus classicus of Indian studies, partly based on cultural—and more especially linguistic—differences. It also derives from economic and social contrasts. First, the kind of land settlement that the British introduced in India was not the same in these two areas. While the *zamindari* (intermediary) system prevailed in North India, the *raiyatwari*

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Asian Survey, 40:5, pp. 756–766. ISSN: 0004–4687

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(cultivator) system was more systematically implemented in the South.¹ Second, these two regions always had a different caste profile. In the Hindi belt, the caste system is traditionally the closest to the *varna* model with its four orders (Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras) and its Untouchables. In the South, the twice-born are seldom “complete” because the warrior and merchant castes are often absent or poorly represented, as in Maharashtra and Bengal. Correlatively, the upper *varnas* are in larger numbers than in the North. According to the 1931 census, the last one asking about caste, upper castes represented from 13.6% (in Bihar) up to 24.2% (in Rajasthan) of the population. In the South, the proportion of the Brahmins and even of the twice-born is often low. In Andhra Pradesh, for instance, the Brahmins and the Kshatriyas represent respectively 3% and 1.2% of the population. In Maharashtra, a bridge state between the North and the South, the twice-born were only marginally a larger number with 3.9% Brahmins, 1% Kshatriyas, and 1.69% Vaishyas.

However, the factor of caste does not explain the North/South divide only for arithmetic reasons. In fact, the caste system underwent a more significant and early change out of the Hindi belt. The caste system has been analyzed by anthropologists as a sacralized social order based on the notion of ritual purity. In this view, its holistic character—to use the terminology of Louis Dumont²—implies that the dominant, Brahminical values are regarded by the whole society as providing universal references. Hence, the central role played by Sanskritization, a practice that M. N. Srinivas has defined as “the process in which a ‘low’ Hindu caste, or tribal or other group, changes its customs, ritual, ideology and way of life in the direction of a high, and frequently, ‘twice-born caste,’ that is the Brahmins, but also the Kshatriyas or even the Vaishyas.”³ Low castes may for instance adopt the most prestigious features of the Brahmins’ diet and therefore emulate vegetarianism.

The caste system underwent transformations because of the policies of the British Raj. Among them, the introduction of the census made the most direct impact because it listed castes with great detail. As a result, castes immediately organized themselves and even formed associations to take steps to

1. In North India, when the colonizer went to levy estate taxes, they often used intermediaries, mainly *zamindars*. Those intermediaries were allowed to levy taxes due by the peasants against payment of a tribute. They were recognized as landowners by the British in exchange for collecting taxes in the rural area. In the South, where the Moghul administration had not been as powerful, the British did not find such a dense network of *zamindars* (or the equivalent). The tendency then was to select individual farmers as land proprietors and direct taxpayers: hence the system *raiyyatwari*, from *raiyyat* (cultivator). The latter was more conducive to the formation of a relatively egalitarian peasantry than the *zamindari* system.

2. Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966).

3. M. N. Srinivas, *Social Change in Modern India* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 1995, 1966), p. 6.

see that their status was recorded in the way they thought was honorable to them. Caste associations were therefore created to pressure the colonial administration to improve their rank in the census. This process was especially prominent among the lower castes.

In turn, caste associations were secularized when the British started to classify castes for usage in colonial administration. These associations claimed new advantages from the state, principally in terms of reservations (quotas) in educational institutions and in the civil service. Caste associations—even though they often lack a resilient structure—therefore not only played the role of pressure groups, but also that of interest groups. Subsequently, they also became mutual aid structures. They also founded schools as well as hostels for the caste's children and created co-operative movements for instance. Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph have aptly underlined the modern character of these caste associations.⁴ They argued that caste associations behaved like a collective enterprise with economic, social, and political objectives, in a way, which brings to mind the modern image of lobbies.

In addition to the concessions they could get from the British, the most important social change that these associations have achieved concerns the unity of the caste groups. They have successfully incited the sub-castes to adopt the same name in the Census and to break the barriers of endogamy. It seems to me, however, that intermarriages are only one aspect of the ethnicization of caste. The subjective representation of the collective self plays a crucial role in this transformation. Caste is largely a mind-set and a belief system. Those who live in such a society have internalized a hierarchical pattern relying on the degree of ritual purity. Therefore the primary implication of ethnicization of caste consists in providing alternative nonhierarchical social *imaginaires*. This is a key issue so far as the emancipatory potential of the low caste movements is concerned since in their case, the ethnicization process provides an egalitarian alternative identity. Besides intermarriages, the ethnicization of the low castes, for efficiently questioning social hierarchies, therefore, must imply the invention of a separate, cultural identity and more especially a collective history. While such an ethnicization process endowed the lower castes and even the Untouchables of South and West India with egalitarian identities, such a mental emancipation did not occur to the same extent in the North. I hypothesize that this North/South-West contrast is largely due to the resilience of the ethos of Sanskritization in the Hindi belt.

4. See Lloyd I. Rudolph and Susanne Hoeber Rudolph, "The Political Role of India's Caste Associations" in *Social Change: The Colonial Situation*, ed. Immanuel Wallerstein (New York: J. Wiley, 1966).

The Ethnicization of Caste in West and South India

The ethnicization process that took place in West and South India was largely due to the impact of the European ideas, as propagated by the missionaries and the schools. Certainly, castes have always been perceived by the historian Susan Bayly as being “kingroups or descent units.”⁵ British orientalism gave purely racial connotations to caste and linguistic groups in the 19th century. Colonial ethnography equated the “Aryans” with the upper castes and the Dravidians with the lowest orders of the Indian society. This perception prepared the ground for the interpretation of castes in ethnic terms in West and South India. Caste leadership played an important part in this process. Jotirao Phule and B. R. Ambedkar are two of the most prominent lower caste leaders of their time.

Jotirao Phule (1827–90) was probably the first of the low caste ideologues in the late 19th century. Phule’s endeavor had a pioneering dimension since he was the first low caste leader who avoided the traps of Sanskritization by endowing the lower castes with an alternative value system. As early as 1853, he opened schools for Untouchables. He projected himself as the spokesman of the non-Brahmins at large and, indeed, kept targeting the Brahmins in vehement pamphlets where he presented them as rapacious moneylenders and corrupt priests.

Phule was also the first low caste organizer. In 1873, he founded the Satyashodak Samaj in order to strengthen the sentiment of unity among the low castes. He narrated so-called historical episodes bearing testimony of the traditional solidarity between the Mahars and Shudras and protested against the Brahmins’ stratagems for dividing the low castes. At least in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the Satyashodak idiom embraced rich peasants as well as agricultural tenants who belonged to very different castes including Untouchables.

Another social activist from Maharashtra, precisely from an Untouchable caste, Bhim Rao Ambedkar (1891–1956) gave a larger dimension to the theory of Phule, whom he regarded as one of his mentors. Ambedkar is known as the first Dalit leader and for his work as chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Indian Constitution. He was a thinker as much as a political leader. In fact, his political activities were based on a sociological analysis of the caste system that he developed early as a student in the U.S. He argued that the system was based on a peculiar kind of hierarchy and domination. First, the lower castes emulate the Brahmins because they believe in the same value system and therefore admit that the Brahmins are superior to the others.

5. Susan Bayly, *The New Cambridge History of India*, vol. 4 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 10.

Ambedkar identified the mechanisms of Sanskritization and understood their role in maintaining the lower castes in a subservient position. Second, for Ambedkar no other society has such “an official gradation laid down, fixed and permanent, with an ascending scale of reverence and a descending scale of contempt”⁶ that prevents the lower castes from uniting themselves against the élite domination.

Ambedkar was the first low caste politician to offer such an elaborate condemnation of the caste system. Moreover, he deplored the division among the lower castes, especially the Dalits. He lamented that the latter formed “a disunited body . . . infested with the caste system in which they believe as much as does the caste Hindu. This caste system among the Untouchables has given rise to mutual rivalry and jealousy and it has made common action impossible.”⁷ Ambedkar, on the basis of his sociological analysis endeavored to ethnicize the identity of the Untouchables for enabling them to get united around a separate, specific identity.

While his aim and Phule’s were similar, Ambedkar adopted a different viewpoint since he rejected the racial theory underlying the origins of the caste system. According to this account, the Untouchables descended from a group of indigenous people subjugated by the Aryan invaders. In his book, *The Untouchable: Who Were They and Why They Became Untouchables*, Ambedkar explained that each and every society is subjected to invasions by tribes appearing to be more powerful than the local ones. Suffering from a process of dislocation, the latter give birth to new groups that Ambedkar called the “Broken Men” (Dalits in Marathi). Ambedkar argued that after the conquering tribes became sedentary, they used the services of the Broken Men against the still unsettled tribes to guard the villages. Therefore, they established themselves at the periphery of clusters of habitations, also because the villagers did not want them as neighbors. These Broken Men became the first and most fervent adepts of Buddha and they remained so even though most of the other converts returned to the mainstream of Hinduism.

Ambedkar tried to endow the Untouchables with a Buddhist identity, a separate and prestigious culture. Eventually, he even converted to Buddhism and invited his castemates to do the same in large numbers. They were bound to acquire in this way a strong ideological basis for questioning their subordinate rank in the caste system, all the more so as Buddhism offered them an egalitarian doctrine.

6. B. R. Ambedkar, “Who Were the Shudras? How They Came to Be the Fourth Varna in the Indu-Aryan Society” in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches*, vol. 7 (Bombay: Government of Maharashtra, 1990), p. 26.

7. *Ibid.*, “Held at Bay” in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches*, vol. 5 (Bombay: Government of Maharashtra, 1989), p. 266.

Hence, Maharashtra gave to India her first Shudra leader with Phule and her first Untouchable leader with Ambedkar. While the former insisted on the common pre-Aryan identity of the *bahujan samaj* (Untouchable movement), the latter, rejecting the racial theory, tried to endow the Dalit with a Buddhist identity. A similar pattern developed in the South where the Dravidian movement was even more solidly established on the ground of ethnicity.

From Non-Brahminism to Dravidianism

In South India (particularly in the Madras presidency), the non-Brahmin movement was instrumental in engineering forms of caste fusion and succeeded in endowing the lower castes with an ethnic identity that relied on two grounds: they were not only presented as the original inhabitants of India, as Phule had already argued, but also as former Buddhists based on Ambedkar's interpretation. By the turn of the 20th century, an equation had crystallized between the non-Brahmins and the Dravidians, defined as the original inhabitants of India.

One of the most influential proponents of the Dravidian ideology was M. C. Rajah (1883–1947), a Pariah who became secretary of the Adi-Dravida Mahajan Sabha in 1916 and later presided over the All India Depressed Classes Association. As a nominated member of the Madras Legislative Council since 1920, Rajah moved in 1922 that a resolution recommending that the terms "Panchama" and "Parya" be deleted from the government records and the terms Adi-Dravida and Adi-Andhra substituted instead.

This identity-building process was led one step further by Ramaswami Naicker, alias Periyar, a religious mendicant of the Self-Respect Movement. The movement argued that the Dravidian-Buddhists had been traditionally ill-treated by the Aryan-Hindus because they opposed caste hierarchy. In 1944, Periyar also founded a political party, the Dravidar Kazhagam (DK). Through its mouthpiece, *Viduthalai*, Periyar advocated the coming together of the Christians, Muslims, and low-caste Hindus (particularly the Untouchables and Shudras). Such a rapprochement eventually took place, since Nadars and Adi Dravidas (Untouchables) formed the backbone of the Self-Respect Movement and the DK.

This ethnicization process was fostered by the British policy of compensatory discrimination based on the reservation of seats in the bureaucracy and in the assemblies. The very decision to grant such and such statutory representation to such and such group in these assemblies contributed to the crystallization of new social categories that resented their non- (or their under-) representation. In Madras, British officials explicitly fostered the non-Brahmin movement to counterbalance the growing influence of the Brahmin-dominated Congress. The non-Brahmins asked for more seats in the Madras

assembly because they were “different.” During the 1920 election campaign, their leaders requested “all non-Brahmins in this presidency to immediately organize, combine and carry on an active propaganda so as to ensure the return to the reformed Council of as many non-Brahmins as possible.”⁸ This tactic yielded dividends since the Justice Party won the elections. In their plea to the British, the non-Brahmins also emphasized their marginality in the state services and the “disabilities” from which they were suffering. This discourse fitted well, too, with the British approach since the government also regarded political representation as a means for compensatory discrimination.

The case of the non-Brahmin movement of South India exemplified the way positive discrimination helped forge a coalition, defined negatively (as non-Brahmins), of a wide array of castes. This process—which resulted from state engineering—went hand-in-hand with the invention of a Dravidian identity of the lower castes. Both processes mutually reinforced each other. The Dravidian identity gave the lower castes a cultural umbrella under which they can coalesce for defending their common interests vis-à-vis the state.

In South and West India, caste associations marked the first stage of a much larger ethnicization process. They have not only promoted caste fusion, their discourse on autochthony and the Buddhist origins of the lower castes endowed them with a prestigious identity. In North India, none of these processes reached their logical conclusion, even though the British policies of positive discrimination had created the same context as in the South and in the West.

What Low Caste Movement in the Hindi Belt?

In North India, while caste associations took shape at an early date, they did not prepare the ground for a resilient ethnicization process but operated within the logic of Sanskritization. These shortcomings are well illustrated by three cases chosen among the Shudras and the Untouchables, respectively the Yadavs and the Chamars.

The Yadav Movement: Ahirs as Kshatriyas

The “Yadav” label covers a great number of castes. The common function of all these castes was to take care of cattle as herdsmen, cowherds, and milk sellers. In practice, however, the Yadavs have been spending most of their time tilling the land. While they are spread over several regions, they are more specially concentrated in the Ganges Plain where they represent about

8. *Justice*, March 29, 1920, in Indian Office Library and Records, shelf no. L/P&J/9/14, GOI, New Delhi.

10% of the population. They form one of the largest castes in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh with respectively 11% and 8.7% of the population.

The Yadavs reportedly descend from immigrants from Central Asia, the Abhiras, who established kingdoms in North India. From the 1930s onward, intermarriage-based fusion was made easier when North Indian Yadavs started to migrate from their villages to towns. But this ethnicization process remained largely unachieved because the Yadav movement remained imbued with the ethos of Sanskritization.

The Yadavs lent themselves to such Sanskritization because they had a special relation to the Hindu religion, owing to their association with the Arya Samaj. The Arya Samaj is an association too often regarded as purely Punjabi and confined to the urban middle class. The Arya Samaj did not hesitate to mobilize lower caste people against the Brahmins, but not against the caste system. In fact, they followed the path of Sanskritization. Their campaigns were especially successful in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar.

The "Aryanization" of the Yadavs. The propensity of the Yadavs toward Sanskritization is evident from their attempt at "Aryanizing" their history. The first history of the Yadavs was written by Kithal Krishna Khedekar in the late 19th century. This work was finalized by his son, R. V. Khedekar, and published in 1959 under the title *The Divine Heritage of the Yadavs*. The book situates the origins of the Yadavs in the Abhiras and then the ruling dynasties mentioned as Yadavs in the Mahabharata and the Puranas. Most of these caste histories try to demonstrate that Abhiras were of Aryan origin and that Rewari is the last representative of the Abhira kingdoms.

This narrative certainly aimed at giving the Yadavs an ethnic identity, but this ethnicization process was embedded in the Sanskritization logic. In contrast to the lower caste leaders of Maharashtra and South India—who tried to invent a *bahujan* or a Dravidian identity that presented the Shudras and Untouchables as the original inhabitants of the country *against* the Aryans—the Yadavs claim that they *are* Aryans in order to enhance their status *within* caste society. Thus, the Yadavs, largely because of the influence of the Arya Samaj, remained imbued with the ethos of Sanskritization. It prevented them from developing an emancipatory identity like in the West or in the South. The same kind of reasoning can be made about the Untouchables' movement.

The Untouchables of North India were also exposed to the influence of the Arya Samaj at the turn of the 20th century. This is evident from the Jatav movement in Uttar Pradesh. Jatavs are Chamars, Untouchable leather workers, who claim descent from the Yadu race, which, allegedly, entitled them to be known as Kshatriyas like the Yadavs, and once again the Arya Samaj missions were responsible for propagating these views. They were especially successful through their schools among the sons of Agra Chamars who had

become rich thanks to the leather trade. They were drawn by the teachings of Swami Manikchand Jataveer (1897–1956). He was one of the founders of the Jatav Mahasabha in 1917. He was a teacher in an Arya Samaj-run school of Agra. Together with Sunderlal Sagar (1886–1952) and Swami Prabhutanand Vyas (1877–1950), they all preached moral reform, vegetarianism, teetotalism, and temperance for achieving a cleaner status. That was also the first inclination of Swami Achhutanand (1879–1933), who was to become a major Untouchable leader of the United Provinces in the 1920s–30s.

Swami Achutanand worked with the Arya Samaj, from 1905 until 1912, but then he revolted against the Arya Samaj and adopted a new name, Swami Achutanand (deriving from *Achut*, Untouchable). He spelled out his Adi-Hindu philosophy for the first time in 1917 in a collection of poems and couplets. According to him, the Untouchables were the first inhabitants of India and the rightful owners of this land. The Aryans came from outside, as refugees who, by resorting to tactics and strategies, captured power and subordinated the autochthonous people. Swami Achutanand maintained that the Adi-Hindus had their roots in the Indus Valley civilization. The Adi-Hindu philosophy was well designed for promoting the unity of the Shudras, the Untouchables, and the Tribals since it endowed those three groups with a common—cultural and ethnic—background.

However, Swami Achutanand's attitude toward the caste system remained ambivalent. Instead of trying to eradicate them, Swami Achutanand recognized castes among the Untouchables. More importantly, his egalitarian discourse was largely framed in a religious mould drawing its inspiration from the *bhakti* (devotion) tradition. Basically, Swami Achutanand discovered social equality in religion. Swami Achutanand, therefore, represented an old tradition. Besides Sanskritization, low caste groups have indeed explored avenues for upward mobility through the *bhakti* movements and the sectarian model. Hindu gurus have recurrently questioned the caste system on behalf of the fundamental equality of individuals before god. Their disciples who were initiated into monastic orders forgot about their caste to form new fraternities. Far from establishing a separate identity that would situate the Untouchables out of the caste system, the Adi Hindu movement used their so-called original identity as a means for promoting their status *within* the system. And correlatively, the *bhakti* resurgence did not imply a radical questioning of their belonging to Hinduism. They questioned Brahminism by adhering to a virtually subversive religious cult but it had the same modus operandi as the Hindu sects of the *bhakti*—whose egalitarian impact has always been otherworldly.

The movement also suffered from the weaknesses of its structures. By 1924, local Adi Hindu Sabhas had been set up in only four cities of U.P. (Kanpur, Lucknow, Benares, and Allahabad). The Adi-Hindu movement re-

mained chiefly confined to Agra and Kanpur. Out of the 23 Dalit leaders of the United Provinces, almost half of them were from these two cities (eight from Agra and two from Kanpur). In addition to these limitations, the movement also failed to unite the Untouchables in terms of communality or otherwise. Its leaders tried to organize inter-dining ceremonies but did not meet very enthusiastic responses.

The Adi-Hindu movement eventually failed to endow the Untouchables with a separate identity. Its *bhakti*-like inspiration and recognition of castes prevented the Chamars, its main supporters, from emancipating themselves from the Sanskritization ethos. The Jatav movement could therefore rely on the same kind of ethnic ground as the Dalit movement in Maharashtra or the Dravidian movement in Tamil Nadu. According to Owen Lynch, for the Jatavs, “political participation” became a “functional alternative” to Sanskritization, in the sense that they tried to achieve social mobility through access to power.⁹ This empowerment process was fostered by the British policies of positive discrimination and gradual democratization since they both incited the caste to assert itself as a collective body. However, such a change was confined to the Jatavs of Agra. Except for the president of the Scheduled Castes Federation of the United Provinces, Piarelal Kureel (1916–84), who was a Kureel from Unnao District, most of the supporters of Ambedkar were Jatavs from Agra.

Conclusion

This article about the changing identity of the low castes before Independence in India suggests that the low caste movements can be regrouped in three categories: the reform movements operating within the caste system and relying on the mechanisms of Sanskritization; those which draw their inspiration from the Hindu sect of the *bhakti* and do not attack the caste system, either; and finally those which are based on an ethnic ideology with a strong egalitarian overtone.

The rise of egalitarian movements, stemming from the ethnicization of caste was more prevalent in the South and in the West. In these two mega-regions the ethnicization of caste did not rely only on caste fusion. This process, fostered by caste associations, prepared the ground for a more radical transformation based on new *imaginaires*. In Maharashtra, Phule invented a pre-Aryan pedigree for the Shudras while Ambedkar endowed the Untouchables with a Buddhist identity. In Tamil Nadu, the Dravidian identity of the non-Brahmin movement borrowed from both sources of inspiration. This ethnicization process provided the lower castes with an alternative,

9. Owen Lynch, *The Politics of Untouchability* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), p. 7.

egalitarian sub-culture. In contrast, in pre-independence India, the Yadav movement can be classified in the first group of the typology presented here and the Adi-Hindu movement in the second one. None of them really challenged the caste system. Obviously, it is not just by chance that both of them have a North Indian origin because in this area Sanskritization continued to exert a strong influence and contributed decisively to the divisions of the lower castes according to the mechanisms of “graded inequality,” to use the words of Ambedkar.

In contrast to the situation prevailing in the South and West India, the mobilization of the lower castes stopped with caste associations. They could not establish their claim on ethnic grounds, which prevented them from shaping large coalitions like the Dravidian non-Brahmin groupings. In fact, they started to move toward the formation of larger fronts only when the state extended its compensatory discrimination policy to what became known as the “Other Backward Classes.” The OBCs, then, became, a relevant unit and low castes started to rally around this administrative category in order to defend their quotas in the bureaucracy from the state.¹⁰

In this article I have discussed the crystallization of lower caste movements in India. The article argued that the mobilization of the lower castes was delayed and did not imply any significant change in caste identities. Instead, the emancipatory and empowerment agenda materialized without any prior ethnicization. Nevertheless, although contemporary reservation policies may have played a role in the crystallization of the low caste movements in South and West India, I have argued that this process was sustained by the ideology of “pre-Aryanism” or Buddhism. In contrast, in North India, state policies were more or less the starting point of the whole process.

10. For more details, see Christophe Jaffrelot, “The Rise of the Other Backward Classes in the Hindi Belt,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 59:1 (February 2000), pp. 86–108.