

Contesting Community and Nation:
Caste, Discrimination and Reservation Politics in India

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Abstract

This dissertation traces debates about reservation policy in India. Reserved quotas in public institutions for communities stigmatized on the basis of caste comprise an enduring and comprehensive form of affirmative action. However, the policy provokes deep resentment among upper castes, manifested in virulent protests, judicial challenges and failed implementation. The purpose of this dissertation is to understand how meanings of caste, community and nation are shaped within and through debates about reservation and in turn, how the politics of reservation contribute to the formation of political subjectivities.

Drawing on a variety of sites, including the Constituent Assembly debates, the English press and government reports, I chart the development of a dominant discourse about reservations. I interrogate this discourse in relation to anti-caste perspectives on the issue, found in creative and activist writings and studies of Dalit activism. I argue that dominant discourses conflate the issue of caste discrimination with a series of terms that designate inequality more broadly, such as poverty and unemployment. This enables the portrayal of “lower caste” beneficiaries of reservation as inferior subjects that are unable to understand their “real interests”. Thus trivializing discrimination, the discourse naturalizes caste privilege and conceals the historical contestations over the meaning of the quota. In anti-caste discourse, advocacy of reservations is articulated to a critique of the domination of upper caste interests in Indian democracy and the hegemonic vision of the nation through which this domination is naturalized. Thus, power and representation are underscored as integral to assessments of reservation policy.

Attending to the affective registers of the debate, I demonstrate that statements about the quota are also statements about history, nationalism and political subjectivity. Reading dominant discourse through anti-caste analytics reveals that the anger against reservations as a threat to the nation is historically related to the antagonism of institutionalized nationalism towards Dalit politics. Through rights claims, Dalit activists contest dominant meanings of caste and in turn, the meanings of community and nation. This epistemological challenge illustrates the contingent relations of group rights and social transformation, as struggles against discrimination generate novel understandings of difference, commonality and personhood.

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Introduction

On 8 July 2012 the popular Sunday morning talk show *Satyamev Jayate (Truth Alone Prevails)* explored the issues of untouchability and caste-based discrimination in Indian society. As a guest on the program documentary filmmaker Stalin K. Padma informed host Aamir Khan that this was the first time these issues were being discussed on national television. “It took us 65 years to get here. Shame. However, Congratulations.” *Satyamev Jayate* aired its first episode on the subject of sex selective abortions and female feoticide on 6 May 2012. Over the following weeks it presented a range of problematic social issues, such as domestic abuse, child abuse, alcohol addiction and medical malpractice, with the intention of raising awareness and inspiring social change in society. The program’s ability to discuss difficult subject matter and attract a wide audience is attributed to its narration of social issues through a number of “affective tropes” that include cathartic revelations, shocking testimonies, interviews with experts and cutaways of shocked or tearful studio audiences.¹ In the 90 minute broadcast dedicated to untouchability, Professor Kaushal Pawar described the meager income that her family earned sweeping and removing waste from the homes of upper castes, and the segregation and exclusion she faced in her village as a child. She had experienced constant harassment and humiliation by fellow students and professors as a graduate student at Jawaharlal Nehru University, an institution reputed for its commitment to progressive politics. Several portions of Stalin K. Padma’s film *India Untouched* were included in the episode to show how caste discrimination affected children stigmatized as untouchable from a very young age.² A twelve year old interviewed in the film explained that he had dropped out of school because it was too humiliating to be made to sit separately from other students during meals. Other children Padma interviewed were

¹ Shohini Ghosh, “Dil Se Nahin Dimag se Dekho: Thoughts on Satyamev Jayate Episode 1”, *Kafila: Media, Politics, Dissent*, 9 May 2012, <http://kafila.org/2012/05/09/dil-se-nahin-dimaag-se-dekho-thoughts-on-satyamev-jayate-episode-1-shohini-ghosh/>.

² The entire film can be viewed online at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lgDGmYdhZvU>. For further information on the film see <http://stalink.wordpress.com/documentaries/india-untouched/>.

forced to sweep and clean toilets by their teachers. *India Untouched* demonstrated that caste discrimination was pervasive both in rural villages and, despite their assumed modernity, in urban cities. Further, that it affected the community practices of Hindus, Muslims, Christians and Sikhs. A large segment of the program was devoted to the work of activist Bezwada Wilson to end the occupation of manual scavenging. The episode concluded with one audience member claiming that he had decided he would not “differentiate” between people, and another wishing that the modernity of Indian cities would no longer be gauged by its malls or metro systems, but by the presence of caste. Both responses were received with resounding applause, as if to echo Stalin’s statement. “Shame. However, Congratulations.”

In his critical review of this episode S. Anand, a prominent writer and publisher on issues of caste, noted that during the 90 minute broadcast any mention of two significant issues had been scrupulously avoided.³ First, the work of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, who was not only the chief architect of the Indian Constitution and India’s first Law Minister, but the most significant leader of the struggle for rights, dignity and political power by Dalits, groups stigmatized as “untouchable” by Hinduism’s caste hierarchy. Secondly, there was no mention of the word Reservations. Enshrined in the Constitution, the policy of quota-based reservations is the principal form of affirmative action in India. This policy “reserves” a fixed percentage of seats in legislatures, public employment and educational institutions for stigmatized communities in order to address the historically entrenched discrimination that conditions their lives. Anand interrogated the politics that motivated these exclusions:

How did Kaushal Pawar get a BA, MA, PhD and land a job with Delhi University? What is it that facilitates access to hitherto-excluded spaces for Dalits?...The one weapon that helps them get an education? Get a job? Reservation. And who made this policy possible? Ambedkar.⁴

Upon contacting Bezwada Wilson about his interview on the program, Anand learned that he had discussed the work of Ambedkar. These portions of his interview had been

³ S. Anand, “Silence Eva Jayate,” *Outlook Magazine*, July 23 2012, <http://www.outlookindia.com/article.aspx?281646>.

⁴ Ibid.

edited out. With the exception of Wilson's discussion of how the legislation passed in 1993 to eliminate manual scavenging had been largely neglected, there was no mention of the existing legal and political measures that dealt with caste violence and discrimination, let alone their efficacy. Throughout the episode host Aamir Khan implored his audience to change the way they thought, to stop seeing people as "high" and "low" and to teach their children good values. His own emotive responses to the suffering his guests had endured due to their caste location – he was often moved to tears – suggested that sympathy was necessary for social change. By using images of suffering and painful personal testimony to shock and sadden the audience, the program highlighted the agency of non-Dalits in social change. Khan wanted his viewers to realize that the ugly reality of entrenched caste discrimination prevented India from becoming a strong nation.

What was it that made the issue of reservation policy so disruptive to this mobilization of sympathy that it could not even be mentioned? Why and how would it prevent the viewers – primarily middle class and upper caste – from identifying with the objective of ending caste discrimination in Indian society? While *Satyamev Jayate* may have been the first nationally televised discussion about caste discrimination, these exclusions indicate how it drew upon and was structured by particular ways of knowing, speaking about and relating to caste. The program reflected what D.R. Nagaraj describes as the fragmented response to the injustices of the caste system among liberal supporters. Nagaraj argues that although these supporters are moved by lofty philosophical talk against caste and touched by the spiritual beauty of the revolt, Dalit efforts to secure jobs and other material benefits in the name of justice and positive discrimination are met with horror, and seen as mean and ignoble faces of their struggles.⁵ Even Gandhi, credited with making the fight against untouchability a key priority in the anti-colonial nationalist

⁵ D.R. Nagaraj, *The Flaming Feet and Other Essays: The Dalit Movement in India*, ed. Prithvi Datta and Chandra Shobhi (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2010), 29-30. Nagaraj's description of the revolt against caste in terms of spiritual beauty refers to the perception among upper caste social reformers that the purification of Hindu religious practice would replace caste hierarchy with harmonious social relations. Gandhi's emphasis on atonement for the past sins of untouchability and compassion for the untouchable designated the upper caste self as the primary site of struggle. Gandhi's views on caste will be discussed in greater detail in the final section of this chapter.

movement, could respond deeply to the spiritual beauty of the revolt, but recoiled in utter embarrassment when confronted with its material demands.⁶ Hence, the deliberate exclusion of the topic of reservations on national television is related to a broader history in which certain ways of approaching the caste question are dismissed on the grounds that they provoke hostility among upper castes and prevent their ability to empathize with the pain of the “untouchable”.

This dissertation traces this history through an examination of debates about reservation policy in India. I trace the multiple discursive positions, forms of knowledge, and mobilizations of affect that shape and are shaped by debates about reservation over time. My reading of these debates will show that their content exceeds the immediate question of policy, marshalling passionate views on the legacies of colonialism, the foundations of nationhood, the politics of identity and structures of inequality. I am guided by two main questions: 1) how are the meanings of caste, community and nation shaped within and through debates about reservation? 2) how do the politics of reservation contribute to the formation of political subjectivities? Through a variety of sites including the Constituent Assembly of India, the mainstream English press, scholarly literature and government reports on caste, social and educational disadvantage and religious minorities, I chart how particular understandings of reservation policy, and the subjects it is intended to benefit, occupy a dominant position across different discursive spaces. I consider this in relation to Dalit and anti-caste perspectives on the issue found in creative literature, activist publications and studies of Dalit and anti-caste movements. Juxtaposing these different discursive positions and forms of knowledge brings into relief the conflicting political objectives and social imaginaries that circulate in debates about reservation, and in turn, contribute to their intractability.⁷

My dissertation highlights the ways in which Dalit and anti-caste writings pose a stark challenge to entrenched assumptions about caste, community and nation that

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ My method aims to understand the connections between different forms of speech and writing in order to demonstrate the pervasiveness of particular assumptions in different discursive arenas. I am interested in questioning the distinctions between formal political spheres, such as law or policy-making and spaces of the imagination, such as creative writing and opinion pieces in newspapers. My method attends to the circulation of affect and emotion across these sites.

underpin dominant discourses about and (largely) against reservation policy. In the former, the advocacy and analysis of reservations is rooted in the historical trajectory of Dalit struggles for rights as an autonomous, non-Hindu community and the experiential structure of caste discrimination. However, dominant discourses are marked by the persistent marginalization of Dalit political thought and activism. This enables reservation to be represented as an ineffective and divisive policy and its beneficiaries as dependent and parochial subjects. Through this enduring representation, reservation quotas and the political subjects who support them are framed as detrimental to the nation-state. My dissertation will argue that these discourses are constructed through a conflation of the historically specific question of caste-based discrimination with a series of terms that designate social inequality more broadly, such as poverty, illiteracy, unemployment and landlessness. These terms are deployed interchangeably as the “real problems” that reservations has failed to resolve. Thus trivializing the question of discrimination while claiming sympathy for the “masses” afflicted by these problems, dominant discourses constitute a site in which caste privilege is naturalized.

I will provide a brief outline of the contours of these discourses and their relation to Dalit and anti-caste thought below. The remainder of this introductory chapter is organized as follows. I will review the existing scholarship on reservation policy and identify the limitations that my project aims to address. I outline my approach, which attends to the affective and emotional registers of the debate. This approach contributes to understanding the ways in which claims about the quota are also always claims about history, nationalism and the kinds of political subjects that are produced by the quota. Next, I discuss the relevance of my project in relation to two areas of scholarship: inquiries into the multiple deployments of caste in the modern nation-state, especially its novel political functions, and epistemological questions about the production of caste as a modern category during British colonialism. While these areas of scholarship remain distinct, I argue that a productive engagement between them will contribute to understanding how colonial knowledge continues to uphold caste privilege in post-colonial India. Finally, I provide an overview of the transformations to caste relations during the colonial period and the various responses these engendered. The unresolved

contestations of this period continue to animate debates about reservation in post-partition India.

Reservation Policy and Anti-Reservation Discourse: Colonial Legacies and Post-Colonial Transformations

A policy of reservations was implemented during British colonial rule in response to demands from various communities that their educated members be given opportunities in the institutions of the colonial state.⁸ For the colonial state reservations were an instrument of governance and a tool of pacification.⁹ In the post-colonial nation-state, reservations were redefined towards the objective of creating a constitutional democracy committed to social, economic and political justice. The principle of representation of community interests as a basis for reservation was abandoned in favor of the problems of socio-economic inequality and discrimination. The post-colonial nation-state thus limited the communities eligible for guaranteed representation in legislatures, public sector employment and educational institutions to the Scheduled Castes (Dalits) and Scheduled Tribes.¹⁰ Together with the abolition of untouchability, Scheduled Caste reservation represented a dual mandate: national integration and the amelioration of social inequality. The framers of the Constitution expected that in time the principles of revolutionary social transformation as the foundation for the modern nation-state would result in the demise of the various forms of oppression related to untouchability. Hence, quotas were seen as a temporary provision. However, the Constitution also authorized the state to identify other “socially and educationally

⁸ Susie Tharu et al., “Reservations and the Return to Politics,” *SocialSciences.in*, August 3, 2011, <http://socialsciences.in/article/reservations-and-return-politics>.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ The term Scheduled Castes refers to the so-called “untouchable communities” historically subjected to economic exploitation and social segregation within the Caste Hindu social hierarchy. The term Scheduled Castes was coined by the British government in 1935 when these communities were listed in a schedule for the purposes of electoral representation. These communities were also referred to as Depressed Classes during colonial rule. These rights were also extended to indigenous communities, categorized as Scheduled Tribes. The focus on Scheduled Castes in this project is guided by the emphasis on this category of subjects in the Constituent Assembly debates as well as in ongoing debates about caste discrimination and social policy in India.

backward classes” and devise special measures to address their conditions, which may include reservations. Beginning in the 1960s, various state governments created social policies for this category of the population, referred to as Other Backward Classes (OBCs). A national level policy guaranteeing reservation for OBCs in government employment was implemented in 1993. Taken together, close to 70% of India’s population meets the criteria for one of the three categories under which quotas are reserved.¹¹ Reserved quotas for SCs, STs and OBCs are 15%, 7.5% and 27% respectively.

Since the 1990s demands have emerged to further expand the framework by creating a separate category for Muslims, to address the discrimination they face as a religious minority community.¹² My interest in this project developed in the context of debates about the possibility of reservation for Muslims, which had become more prominent after the release of the Sachar Committee Report on the Social, Educational and Economic Status of the Muslim Community in India in 2006. The Report presented damning evidence of widespread poverty and marginalization of the community. However, as a religious minority group, Muslims are not eligible for reservation - reservation on the basis of religion is unconstitutional. Moreover, numerous commentators oppose instituting a “Muslim quota” due to the fear that this would polarize society on religious grounds, leading to violent riots between Hindus and Muslims. As I studied these debates, it seemed to me that the issue of Muslim inequality had posed renewed challenges to a long-standing framework by raising questions about who the appropriate subject of reservations should be. I sought to understand why quotas were provided on the basis of caste but not religion. To address this question, it was

¹¹ Scheduled Castes constitute 16% of the national population, Scheduled Tribes constitute 8% and Other Backward Classes approximately 52%. The latter figure is unclear because the Indian census does not collect information on caste for the entire population.

¹² Significantly, working class and artisan Muslims have opposed such proposals on the grounds that caste based discrimination among Muslims would be concealed by a quota for Muslims as a singular category. Although there are Muslim and Christian groups engaged in exploitative and stigmatized occupations that result in their being subjected to practices of untouchability, they are excluded from the category Scheduled Caste and eligibility for the social policies associated with it. The issue of discrimination against Muslims and caste-based discrimination amongst Muslims is the focus of Chapter 4.

necessary to explore how a dominant understanding of reservation policy had taken shape historically. I was especially interested in how certain categories of subjects were seen as more suitable to reservation than others, based on specific notions of caste, community and nation.

The historical trajectory described in many accounts of the policy seemed to confirm my assumption that the acceptability of quotas as a means to redress discrimination differed based on the subject in question. These accounts held that the guarantee of reservation for Scheduled Castes as a means of compensation for the segregation, violence and exploitation to which they have been subjected is a key achievement of the Indian Constitution in pursuit of its mandate to achieve social, economic and political justice for all citizens. Also referred to as “compensatory discrimination”, “protective discrimination” and “preferential treatment”, reservations were perceived as necessary for re-defining the relationship between privileged and marginalized groups in Hindu society. Thus, the policy is described as having emanated from the collective sense of guilt among the colonized elite who were “confronted with critiques of their society as uncivilized, and vis-à-vis subaltern castes, unjust”.¹³ It represented a “collective expression of regret, a long overdue gesture of historical reconciliation, a form of loyalty and an attempt to take the moral sting out of the past”.¹⁴ Reservations for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes were considered to be a full and final settlement of historical debt, after which caste would cease to be a political issue.¹⁵ However, the temporal and demographic expansion of the policy to different categories of subjects, particularly Other Backward Classes (OBCs), has been marked by strikes, demonstrations, arson and violence. In tandem with these anti-reservation protests, national media outlets promptly mobilized alarmist discourses about declining national cohesion and the death of merit and efficiency in state institutions. The extension of reservation policy to these subjects has been described as a violation of the Constitution’s

¹³ Walter Fernandes, “Reservations as a Tool of Social Change,” in *Protective Discrimination: Ideology and Praxis*, ed. A.K. Lal (New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 2001), 19-32.

¹⁴ Bhiku Parekh, “A Case for Positive Discrimination,” in *Democracy, Difference and Social Justice*, ed. Gurpreet Mahajan (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 380-389.

¹⁵ Tharu et al., “Reservations and the Return to Politics.”

socio-political vision: “compensatory discrimination has become India’s new mantra for each and every caste clamoring for removal of backwardness. It has brought India to a state of compensatory backwardness.”¹⁶ Thus it appears that the limits to tolerance for reservation – the limits to the guilt of the privileged castes – are drawn on the basis of the subject in question. Participants in the debate identify which category of the population is truly deserving of this form of empathetic compensation and offer dire assessments about the kinds of political subjectivities that are forged by expanding the framework to include the undeserving.

As my survey of the literature expanded from scholarly texts to journalism, government reports and the Constituent Assembly debates, my initial assumptions began to shift. I noticed important commonalities across these different sites, which indicated a set of dominant discourses about reservation that persisted over time. These can be broadly organized in terms of concerns for national unity, the general ineffectiveness of the policy and the defense of individual merit. First, by offering benefits and preferential treatment on the basis of caste, reservations encourage attachments to pre-modern, divisive identities, thus compromising national integration. Secondly, since reserved quotas actually offer a very limited amount of employment they are an ineffective means to address the overwhelming socio-economic inequality of Indian society. Finally, caste-based reservations create opportunities for unqualified, inferior applicants in public institutions while punishing hardworking, meritorious (upper caste) individuals that are not eligible for the policy. Taken together, while reservations are hailed as an enlightened gesture of the anti-colonial nationalist movement, they are simultaneously criticized for producing the inadequate, parochial and dependent subjects that represent a soiling of that legacy. The continuity of these arguments across time suggests that the limits to tolerance for reservation policy are not staged at the question of the appropriate subject – the deserving and exceptional Scheduled Caste versus the myriad of other groups that disingenuously demand a quota be reserved for them. I argue that the continuity indicates how deeply rooted assumptions about the inferiority of subaltern caste groups underpin dominant discourses about reservation regardless of the subject in question.

¹⁶ Sachidananda, “Rethinking Scheduled Caste Reservation,” in *Protective Discrimination: Ideology and Practice*, 32-40.

To be sure, dominant discourses emphasize that caste is a horrific, vile institution that must be eradicated from the nation-state. Their point is that reservations policy is not only inadequate to this task, but may also serve to reverse the progress that has already been made. Existing progress towards the achievement of a caste-less society is attributed to the social reform efforts spearheaded by Gandhi, the secular values of the Constitution and the processes of modernization, development and urbanization that have loosened the grip of traditional religious authority on the population. Pressed into service of an anti-reservation discourse, this trajectory illustrates the relative insignificance of quotas to social change. Moreover, the contributions of Dalit and anti-caste activism are rarely acknowledged. Dalit, meaning “ground down” or “broken to pieces” in Marathi, is a term of politicized self-identification selected by communities designated in the Constitution as Scheduled Caste. Ambedkar first used the term in his journal *Bashishkrit Bharat* (Outcaste India) in 1928. Ambedkar described being Dalit as the experience of deprivation, marginalization and stigmatization.¹⁷ The term came into wider usage in the 1970s with the emergence of the militant Dalit Panther movement, which drew inspiration from the Black Panther Party in the US, and the flourishing of Dalit literature in the state of Maharashtra. As defined by Gangadhar Pantawane, the founder-editor of *Asmitdaarsh* (Mirror of Identity), the chief organ of Dalit literature:

To me, Dalit is not a caste. He is a man exploited by the social and economic traditions of this country. He does not believe in God, rebirth, soul, holy books teaching separatism, fate and heaven because they have made him a slave. He does believe in humanism. Dalit is a symbol of change and revolution.¹⁸

As a form of identification that rejects caste and the religious concepts through which it is sanctioned, Dalit is not simply a term that is interchangeable with “untouchable” or “Scheduled Caste”. However, the experience of being recognized as “untouchable” by Caste Hindu society and subject to discriminatory practices on this basis is a structuring aspect of Dalit identity. Scholarship on Dalit politics highlights the relationship between self-transformation and new ways of imagining community in the struggle for social

¹⁷ Anupama Rao, *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2010), 15.

¹⁸ Quoted in Eleanor Zelliot, *From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar Movement* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 1996), 268.

equality. Nagaraj defines the category Dalit as a state of consciousness that seeks to interrogate and challenge the stereotypes that Caste Hindu society employs to describe untouchable and near-untouchable communities.¹⁹ Attending to the politics of (re) naming self and community as an emancipatory practice, Rao argues that the term Dalit is at once analytic and prescriptive. That is, it defines the historical structures and practices that experientially mark someone as Dalit and identifies the Dalit as someone seeking to escape those structures.²⁰ A distinguishing feature of Dalit activism is the rejection of upper caste social reformism, which aims to integrate “untouchables” into Hindu society. Ambedkar was convinced that caste could not be eradicated without the repudiation of Hinduism. He regarded Hinduism as a religion of rules, commands and prohibitions that could not be reflected on or used to guide responsible action.²¹ Accordingly, the political orientation of Dalit activism has been towards a firmly autonomous movement that seeks to build alliances between socially and economically marginalized groups based upon non-religious conceptions of community and nation.²² The question of how to build a broad social base for the struggle against upper caste hegemony while remaining focused on the specific experiences of untouchability is an important aspect of Dalit political thought. In this project I use the terms “Dalit” and

¹⁹ Nagaraj, *The Flaming Feet*, 94.

²⁰ Rao, *The Caste Question*, 16.

²¹ B.R. Ambedkar, “Annihilation of Caste,” in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches Volume 1* (Bombay: Education Department Government of Maharashtra, 1979), 75.

²² My use of the term “autonomous” in relation to Dalit politics and activism follows from the work of scholars who have traced the formation of anti-caste movements in South Asia. The term registers the historical contestations between Gandhi and Ambedkar on the question of caste inequality. In particular, the latter’s insistence on an independent movement of the untouchables. The term “autonomous” is also used to describe the creation of a distinct Dalit counterpublic in the 1920s, due to their exclusion from the colonial public sphere. I use the term to indicate the historical antecedents of more contemporary expressions of Dalit activism, which includes the question of self-determination. This suggests that anti-caste thought and politics inspired by Ambedkar’s movement is not only an alternative means of achieving the same objective, that of caste equality. Rather, the movement challenges the politics of upper caste social reform and insists on both equality and independent selfhood. See Sharmila Rege, *Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women’s Testimonios* (New Delhi: Zubaan Books, 2005); Eva-Maria Hardtmann, *The Dalit Movement in India: Local Practices, Global Connections* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009).

“anti-caste” interchangeably in order to register the historical and ongoing struggles to build alliances between marginalized castes differentiated by region, language, religion, occupation, class and gender.²³

Attending to the ways in which reservations have been experienced, advocated and critiqued by its intended beneficiaries, my project illustrates that support for reservations is articulated to a critique of the domination of upper caste interests in Indian democracy and the hegemonic vision of the nation through which this domination is naturalized. The policy is represented as one aspect of a broader assertion of the rights to power and representation for Dalits. Therefore, an important political objective against which it is assessed is its potential to politicize marginalized communities and catalyze alliances between them. In this analysis the expansion of the reservation framework would not perpetuate the caste structure, “it would devour it from within”.²⁴ Studying the ways in which reservation policy is framed in Dalit political discourses shows that in the process of claiming rights and recognition activists contest the meaning of caste and in turn, the meanings of community and nation that underpin dominant discourses. Moreover, the stakes of the debate are not limited to upholding the principles of the policy itself. Rather, anti-caste activists confront both the explicitly offensive stereotypes of Scheduled Castes and OBCs and the subtle, implicit ways that caste privilege is defended in dominant public discourses. Engaging with these perspectives sheds light on the contingent effects of constitutional rights and their interaction with other aspects of social transformation. Specifically, I am interested in the intersection of quota politics, caste discrimination and Dalit activism in the production of political subjectivities.

²³ Since the colonial period Dalits have led broader anti-caste struggles in alliance with groups inferiorized as “lower caste” but not stigmatized as “untouchable”. Due to this difference in status important tensions have also marked these relations, making alliances untenable in particular times and places. See V. Geetha, “Durban: The Local Contexts of a Global Movement,” in *Against Stigma: Studies in Caste, Race and Justice since Durban*, ed. Balmurli Natrajan and Paul Greenough (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2009), 204-229; Gail Omvedt, “The Anti-Caste Movement and the Discourse of Power,” in *Caste and Democratic Politics in India*, ed. Ghanshyam Shah (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2004), 454-475.

²⁴ Gopal Guru, “Mahatma Jotirao Phule and Reservations,” (Surat: Centre for Social Studies, 1991) in Omvedt, “The Anti-Caste Movement”, 470.

Studying debates about reservation through Dalit political discourses provides an analytical vantage point from which dominant discourses can be critically interrogated. My dissertation demonstrates that dominant discourses about reservation are constructed through a conflation of the purpose of reservation, that is, the elimination of caste discrimination, with various conditions of inequality that result from discrimination. This conflation enables the argument that reservation policy has miserably failed to resolve the “real challenges” of national development: poverty, illiteracy and unemployment. The implication is that either caste discrimination is less real, less damaging to people’s lives, or that it would resolve itself if only there were sustained action on these latter issues. As such, ongoing efforts to defend and/or extend the existing reservation framework only serve to distract the most marginalized sections among the SCs, STs, and OBCs from recognizing their actual material interests and participating in a broad based project of national development. Each chapter of my dissertation highlights that while reservation quotas for different categories of the population are debated in their specificity over time, a prominent space always exists for arguments about the overall illegitimacy of the existing policy, its failure to resolve socio-economic inequality and the inadequate subjects it produces. In this way, dominant discourses deflect questions about the ongoing concentration of economic, political and symbolic power among upper castes. Hence, I argue that reservation debates constitute an integral site in which “upper caste” subjectivity is produced and naturalized in the figure of the secular, caste-less national citizen. The constitution of this subjectivity relies on representations of the beneficiaries of reservation, Dalits and other “lower castes”, as unqualified, underperforming and parochial subjects who pose a hindrance to national development goals. The very policies intended to eliminate caste discrimination become the object around which discourses about the inferiority of the “reserved category candidate” are mobilized in the service of upper caste privilege. My argument suggests that through particular ways of participating in these debates, discursive and corporeal claims to caste-less subjectivity are made.

Evaluating Reservations: Principles, Policy, Politics

A key concern in the existing scholarship on India’s reservation policy involves its reconcilability with the principles of liberalism. In his exhaustive study of the topic,

Marc Galanter describes India's policy of preferential treatment as predicated on an enlightened departure from liberal principles of formal equality.²⁵ In particular, it is a departure from the principles of merit, evenhandedness and indifference to ascriptive identities. Galanter argues that policies of preferential treatment embody an acute awareness of historically entrenched inequalities as characteristic of society and have been pursued with remarkable persistence and generosity since 1950.²⁶ As a test case for liberal theory, the Indian experience proves that conflicts between group identity and individual equality can be contained, that they do not inevitably produce divisive effects in society or compromise the building of a meritocratic society.²⁷

A second area of focus in the existing literature is the accuracy of existing criteria for identifying beneficiary groups. While reservations can be accommodated despite the prioritization of individual freedom and equality in liberal democracies, determining which subjects are genuinely in need of this accommodation has been a more difficult question to resolve. Most accounts of the policy begin from the premise that at the moment of Constitution making there was a widespread consensus about the need to provide reservations for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in legislatures, employment and education. This is distinguished from the lack of consensus among the political elite about the criteria that would accurately identify the Other Backward Classes or whether or not they require reserved quotas of any kind.²⁸ Whereas the stigma of untouchability makes the identification of Scheduled Castes seemingly self-evident, establishing the criteria for what constitutes social, educational and economic backwardness is open to interpretation. The first round of serious debates on the effects of caste in politics emerged in the late 1960s and were directly related to the establishment of the Backward Classes Commission in 1953, which was to determine the

²⁵ Marc Galanter, *Competing Equalities: Law and the Backward Classes in India* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), 1.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.; Partha Ghosh, "Positive Discrimination in India: Political Analysis," *Ethnic Studies Report* 15, no.2 (1997): 136-172; Laura Dudley Jenkins, *Identity and Identification in India: Defining the Disadvantaged* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2001); Rochana Bajpai, *Debating Difference: Minority Rights and Liberal Democracy in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011).

²⁸ Ghosh, "Positive Discrimination in India: A Political Analysis," 136.

criteria for social and educational backwardness.²⁹ That the most widespread and violent anti-reservation protests have occurred in the context of state efforts to devise a policy for OBCs also suggests that the principal problem is that of criteria. The debate engages the question of whether the criteria for eligibility should include caste at all, or whether economic status should be the primary criteria because it is a more accurate index of inequality.³⁰ The question of whether discrimination on the grounds of religious difference should be addressed by affirmative action has also been raised.³¹ In these accounts Scheduled Castes feature as part of the background historical context for contemporary debates about OBCs and Muslims. Since the stigma of untouchability results in an exceptional level of oppression, their experience is assumed to have little relevance for ongoing debates about whether quotas are an effective measure for addressing the socio-economic inequality of other social groups. The exceptionality of SC reservation is further related to the significance of the intent with which it was devised, even if the record of implementation has left much to be desired. The original intent is reflected upon as a unique expression of commitment to subjects that have experienced the worst forms of discrimination and oppression on the basis of caste. By contrast, reservation for OBCs and religious minorities are contentious aspects of the debate because they threaten to turn an exceptional, limited measure into a permanent feature of Indian politics.

A third aspect of the existing literature concerns issues of implementation and overall effects of the policy. This involves questions such as the extent to which quotas have been filled, the percentage of SCs in government service, their distribution across different levels of service, and rates of enrollment in higher education. The record of

²⁹ Ishita Bannerjee-Dube, "Introduction: Questions of Caste," in *Caste in History*, ed. Ishita Bannerjee-Dube (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010), xxvii.

³⁰ Galanter, *Competing Equalities*; P.C Chatterji, "Reservation: Theory and Practice," in *Region, Religion, Caste, Gender and Culture in Contemporary India*, ed. T.V. Satyamurthy (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), 293-313; V.A. Pai Panandiker, ed., *The Politics of Backwardness: Reservation Policy in India* (New Delhi: Konark Publishers, 1997); Zoya Hasan, *The Politics of Inclusion: Caste, Minorities and Affirmative Action* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009).

³¹ Jenkins, *Identity and Identification*; Hasan, *The Politics of Inclusion*. Jenkins and Hasan engage with the debate on whether reservation policy can address discrimination against Muslims.

implementation is marked by a continual shortfall in filling reserved vacancies and the concentration of SCs in the most low paying, low status categories of government service.³² However, there has also been a discernible improvement in literacy, educational enrollment and placement in government jobs resulting in a significant increase in the presence of SCs in public institutions. Reservations are also assessed in terms of the extent to which the general conditions of life have improved for Dalit communities, the majority of which are impoverished landless laborers in rural areas. Overall, reservations are portrayed as an extremely limited policy that has created a sizeable middle class of SCs but has been virtually meaningless for the majority of rural, landless laborers.³³ Such assessments raise questions about why this policy continues to be pursued and expanded: “In a country where poverty and deprivation are so widespread, it is a questionable proposition to think in terms of upliftment for particular social groups, that too by reservations alone”.³⁴ Thus it is argued that land reforms, educational facilities, libraries and other distributive measures with obvious material benefits would be of greater benefit. The attraction of reservations despite their limited effectiveness in addressing poverty is explained by their use as a populist measure that enable political parties to secure the votes of marginalized castes.³⁵ As a substitute for more substantive measures, the reservation framework is held responsible for the failure of the state to undertake the massive program of redistribution that would actually be required to tackle historically accumulated disadvantage.³⁶

³² Galanter, *Competing Equalities*; Ghosh, “Positive Discrimination in India: A Political Analysis,” 138-145; Hasan, *The Politics of Inclusion*, 41-78. The literature also notes the difficulty in obtaining information on implementation and thus making definitive conclusions about the policy’s effectiveness.

³³ Galanter, *Competing Equalities*, 551; Sachidananda, “Rethinking Scheduled Caste Reservation,” 35.

³⁴ Ghosh, “Positive Discrimination in India: A Political Analysis,” 161.

³⁵ Ibid.; P.C Chatterji, “Reservation: Theory and Practice”; Sunita Parikh, *The Politics of Preference: Democratic Institutions and Affirmative Action in the United States and India* (Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 1997); Bhiku Parekh, “Limits of the Indian Political Imagination,” in *Political Ideas in Modern India: Thematic Explorations*, ed. Vrajendra Raj Mehta and Thomas Pantham (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2006), 437-459.

³⁶ Bhiku Parekh, “Limits of the Indian Political Imagination”, 442.

My dissertation departs from the problematic of individual equality versus group recognition as well as the focus on policy evaluation. The Indian Constitution guaranteed the rights to protection of religio-cultural difference and representation for marginalized groups decades before liberalism's prioritization of the individual was challenged in North America and Europe. However, theoretical debates continue to be predominantly informed by the experiences of these latter contexts. In particular, by the political mobilizations that linked rights claims to forms of identity such as gender, sexuality and race. These claims underlined that liberal theories of justice failed to recognize how group difference structures relations of power and inequality.³⁷ Coinciding with the adoption of the policies and values of multiculturalism by nation-states such as Canada and the UK, liberal theorists also affirmed group differences as valuable in and of themselves, framing the right to culture as an expression of individual freedom.³⁸ Within such frameworks, the analysis and re-interpretation of liberalism's normative principles is directed towards justifications for minority rights given the established primacy of the individual in these contexts. Thus, as Jayal argues, a key concern arising in the framework of individual equality versus group difference is the potential for the entrenchment and hardening of minority identities, which is seen as threatening to national integration³⁹. In other words, the debates address minority rights in terms of their potential deviance and harmful impact on the social fabric. This overlooks the possibility for minority and historically stigmatized groups to challenge the exclusionary terms of nationhood and articulate inclusion differently. Further, it forecloses the question of how privileged identities, naturalized as "mainstream" or "unmarked", can be hardened in response to assertions of difference.

My interest is in delineating these dual processes in relation to the trajectory of reservation policy. For this kind of inquiry, the issue of justification is less important than understanding the power relations that structure the terrain of reservation debates. While

³⁷ Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

³⁸ Will Kymlicka, *Liberalism, Community and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

³⁹ Niraja Gopal Jayal, *Citizenship and its Discontents: An Indian History* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2013), 202.

the group differentiated framework of rights in the Indian Constitution recognizes the historical marginalization of certain social groups, it is not often acknowledged that public debates about group rights are characterized by the near complete absence of Dalits and other marginalized castes in the mainstream media. In an incisive critique of the academic-bureaucratic framework in which reservation debates unfold, Tharu et al argue that a focus on policy evaluation further reinforces these exclusions. As the question of the right policy measures is already assumed to be the shared ground on which to stage the debate, the actual beneficiaries of reservation are assumed to be “passively available for slotting into various objectively defined categories of deprivation and eligibility.”⁴⁰ The implications of this are seen in the lack of focused engagement with the issues of caste-based oppression and discrimination, which I argue is enabled through a conflation of the purpose of the policy in dominant discourses. The former issues are obfuscated through the presentation of a proliferating list of factors. Based on refinements and generalizations of the Indian discourse, Galanter identifies twelve different indicators that are used in assessing the policy, from more jobs, better housing and better treatment of SCs by government officials, to social integration and secularism.⁴¹ As such, my project interrogates how specific modes of assessment both enable the exclusion of Dalit perspectives and frame Dalit political claims as illegitimate, which then inform the ways in which claims of other groups are received. I pursue this objective by attending to the emotional and affective registers of the debate.

My dissertation illustrates how assessments of reservation are framed in affective and emotional terms, and thus, work to re-produce a social imaginary in which marginalized castes are portrayed as inferior subjects. My approach is informed by Elizabeth Povinelli’s analysis of liberal multiculturalism in Australia. Taking Australia as an example of the “liberal diaspora”, Povinelli examines how liberal discourses and identifications are elaborated in postcolonial worlds. Specifically, how the liberal aspiration for a society based on rational, mutual understanding informs assessments of indigenous claims to material compensation for colonial violence. Importantly, Povinelli argues that affective investments in this aspiration produce a social imaginary in which

⁴⁰ “Reservations and the Return to Politics.”

⁴¹ *Competing Equalities*, 81.

“certain violences appear incidental to a social system rather than generated by it.”⁴²

Departing from accounts of group recognition which unfold in conversation with an existing set of liberal principles, this approach focuses on the role of affect, feelings and sensibility – that which cannot be articulated in the parameters of rational discourse – to show the irresolvable tensions within settler colonial national institutions. This reveals how celebratory national narratives in which a history of racism and genocide is relegated to a shameful past continue to be inflected by the conditional – the recognition of subaltern claims is dependent on expectations that subaltern groups act and identify in certain ways.⁴³

Drawing from Povinelli, I highlight how anecdotes, axioms and assumptions naturalized as truth are used in the construction of arguments in dominant discourses about reservation. This reveals an enduring tension between, on the one hand, the recognition of reservation policy as evidence of the substantive commitment to justice for historically oppressed groups and on the other, its ongoing identification as a highly contentious, emotionally charged and unresolved issue. This paradoxical status indicates that in certain contexts the aim of public debate is “not to understand, let alone agree, but to sequester some inexpressible felt-thing from reflexive judgment.”⁴⁴ My contention is that this “inexpressible felt-thing” registers an entrenched resentment towards the existence of reservation policy, which is implicated in the re-production of caste privilege and prejudice.

I trace the operation of affect in debates about caste, minorities and reservation in three ways. First, how claims about and against reservation come to be articulated as claims in defense of the nation through the mobilization of particular emotions. As my reading of the Constituent Assembly debates in Chapter 1 shows, members described the inclusion of reservations in the Constitution as an unfortunate concession that violated their moral sense. For Assembly members to accept the provision, it had to be re-framed as a sign of the generosity of the (Hindu) “majority community”, a sign of their willingness to sacrifice their moral convictions to integrate politically inadequate “others”

⁴² *Cunning of Recognition*, 7.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 17

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 16

into the nation. This framing of reservation as an exercise in tolerance served to naturalize the caste privilege held by subjects that claimed to speak on behalf of the nation. As I discuss in Chapter 2, representations of the middle class Dalit subject function as a site in which the limits to the tolerance of upper castes is staged. At this limit, tolerance is transformed into justified resentment of a class of Dalits whose attachment to quotas hinders national progress. Among scholars and journalists, resentment is described as an inevitable consequence of admitting unqualified candidates into universities and government service; the presence of “quota candidates” compromises the quality and standards of these institutions. Indeed, the violent rage of upper caste students who protested against the Mandal Commission Report, which is the subject of Chapter 3, was justified in the media as a defense of the values of the anti-colonial nationalist movement.

Second, drawing upon Sara Ahmed’s work on the cultural politics of emotion, I consider how “emotionality is produced as a claim about a subject or a collective through relations of power.”⁴⁵ Ahmed notes that while emotion has been viewed as beneath the faculties of thought and reason, the hierarchy between emotion and reason also gets displaced onto a hierarchy between emotions; while some are elevated as signs of cultivation, others remain lower as signs of weakness, frustrating the formation of the competent self.⁴⁶ As I discuss in Chapter 1, members of the Constituent Assembly grounded their opposition to reservation in a sense of concern for the kinds of affective dispositions they would produce among the recipients. Specifically, quotas would produce feelings of difference from and mistrust of the Hindu majority among Scheduled Castes and Muslims, thereby preventing their emotional integration into the nation. Chapters 2 and 3 highlight the portrayal of SCs and OBCs as irrationally attached to quotas and thus to parochial identities. Similarly, Chapter 4 explores the production of an explanatory discourse that describes inequality among Muslims as the result of an emotional resistance to Indian citizenship. Thus constituting the community as an affective formation of fear and anxiety, the issue of discrimination is deflected and Muslim marginalization is framed as an “internal” problem. Against these infantilizing

⁴⁵ *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 4-5

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

claims, Dalit writers and activists have underscored the significance of affective work in their struggles to challenge power relations. As discussed in Chapter 2, Dalit literature foregrounds the collective experience of caste-based humiliation. Literature is conceived as a medium for transforming humiliation into collective anger, a defiant expression of political consciousness.

Finally, the historical contestations that have shaped post-colonial reservation policy come to be expressed in a condensed and visceral form through the repetition of certain affective tropes. By interrogating these tropes and connecting them to the histories they gesture to, I contribute to understanding the social imaginary that produces, and is produced by, the discursive terrain of reservation debates. I draw from Ahmed's proposal for a method of analysis that is attentive to "how metonymy and metaphor work to stick different figures together through past histories of association that often work through concealment and displacement."⁴⁷ I will show how meaning is attributed to reservation policy through its historical association with the colonial structure of political representation, which is identified as responsible for empowering the separatist politics of Muslims. Thus, post-colonial reservations are portrayed as an extension of colonial policies of divide and rule that led to the devastatingly violent partition of Pakistan and India. In this way, reservation policy signifies as a wound that refuses to heal, and implicates divisive "others" whose historical propensity to act on narrow self-interest continues to threaten the nation-state. Such arguments were pervasive in the Constituent Assembly Debates and continued to animate anti-reservation arguments during the Mandal Commission controversy in the early 1990s. These claims are historically associated to and re-produce a social imaginary in which anti-caste and minority politics signify as antithetical to anti-colonial nationalism. The anger generated against the quota as a threat to the nation-state conceals its historical relation to the portrayal of anti-caste politics as divisive and threatening to the national (Hindu) majority by the anti-colonial nationalist movement. As Chapters 3 and 4 illustrate, these mobilizations of memory have been countered in the historical writings of lower caste Hindus and Muslims. Their interventions reveal the historical contestations over the meaning of reservations, in particular as an expression of claims to power and representation. These meanings are de-

⁴⁷ Ibid., 12-13.

legitimized in dominant discourses through the association of group representation with the colonial state.

In their respective texts, Povinelli and Ahmed engage affect to illuminate the politics of race and multiculturalism in settler colonial nation-states. The relevance of their research for this project indicates the need to counter the treatment of race and caste as distinct analytical objects. Caste is often assumed to be a form of power that is exceptional to South Asia. It is described as a social category to differentiate it from the purportedly physical, biological basis of racial categories.⁴⁸ This neglects the significant historical connections between struggles against racism in the US and those against caste discrimination in India. These include the use of race/caste analogies to theorize oppression in both contexts, expressions of trans-border solidarity, and the drawing of inspiration for visions of social justice. Recent scholarship on these themes underscores the affective dimensions of trans-national solidarity in catalyzing resistance to a hierarchically ordered world system, and the nuanced understandings of the affective experience of social discrimination that emerge from comparative studies of race and caste.⁴⁹ My dissertation contributes to these debates through a different vantage point for comparative analysis. Namely, how national narratives premised on the transcendence of a shameful history of discrimination and violence are deployed to trivialize the experiences of marginalized social groups. In outlining a history of resentment towards reservation policy, I show that this mode of feeling is accommodated by and expressed through such narratives. Thus, mobilizations of affect act upon and re-produce social relations of caste and religion in post-colonial India. Notably, the resentment of quotas is linked to discourses that emphasize the relative insignificance of caste in contemporary society; caste is a historical relic that only survives in residual pockets. Similarly, anti-racist scholars in the US have observed that the successful attacks on race-based affirmative action programs are part of a discursive context marked by notions of

⁴⁸ For an important discussion of the influence of American anthropology and Indian sociology in maintaining these distinctions, see Kamala Visweswaran, *Un/Common Cultures: Racism and the Rearticulation of Cultural Difference* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010).

⁴⁹ Ibid.; Nico Slate, *Colored Cosmopolitanism: The Shared Struggle for Freedom in the United States and India* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).

colorblindness and a post-racial America, which announce the transcendence of a history of racial inequality.⁵⁰ In India and the US, it is precisely on the basis of a particular way of telling history that attacks on anti-discrimination policies are mounted, producing contemptuous figures who “play the race card”, hold onto a “victim mentality” and “fear hard work and open competition”. Strangely, these attacks can then be framed not as signs of ongoing casteism/racism, but as a confirmation of India and the US as tolerant and pluralistic societies. In this conjuncture, methods of analysis that attend to expressions of feeling, naturalized assumptions and “common sense” are an important intervention to disrupt dominant national narratives.

Notably, the dismantling of race-based affirmative action in the US, while premised on the arrival of a post-racial era, has coincided with intensified Islamophobia in the context of the War on Terror. The production of “Muslim” as a racialized category through techniques of surveillance and civilizational discourses is connected to the historical processes of colonialism in South Asia and the Middle East. However, the relationship between Islamophobia and the historical trajectory of anti-black racism requires further exploration. My research suggests that we can understand how relations of power are both clarified and challenged when differently “othered” social groups are discussed in relation to each other. In Chapter 1, I argue that the exclusion of Muslims from the reservation framework reveals the problematic grounds of Scheduled Caste inclusion. My engagement with Dalit and anti-caste critiques of dominant nationalism in subsequent chapters shows that challenges to caste-based power relations urge a re-thinking of the interrelations between caste and religion. In the Dalit activist literature reviewed in Chapter 3, the aggressive othering of Muslims by Hindu right wing parties was squarely identified as a desperate upper caste response to the political assertion of historically marginalized castes. As I discuss in Chapter 4, lower caste Muslim activism has generated alternative readings of the history of Indian Muslims and in turn, challenged the assumption that religion is the principal marker of difference in the nation-state. While the contemporary construction of Muslims as deviant and irreducibly

⁵⁰ Roopali Mukherjee, *The Racial Order of Things: Cultural Imaginaries in the Post-Soul Era* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); Kimberle Crenshaw, “Framing Affirmative Action,” *Michigan Law Review* 123 (2007): 123-134.

different in both India and the US is connected to longer histories of colonial domination, my dissertation suggests the need to explore the intersecting histories and experiences of differently unequal social groups.

Caste and Knowledge Production: Hierarchy, Difference, Inequality

Within and beyond India, Orientalist discourses continue to heavily influence popular understandings of caste as an essentially religious hierarchy and a marker of South Asian exceptionalism. This perception gained credibility with the publication of *Homo Hierarchicus* by French anthropologist Louis Dumont in 1970. Dumont's objective was to study the systematic properties of the ideology of the caste system. He argued that the organizing principle of caste was hierarchy. This was a difficult concept to grasp for scholars in modern egalitarian societies and even for much of the Indian intelligentsia brought up in the European tradition.⁵¹ Dumont defined hierarchy as the principle by which elements of a whole are ranked in relation to that whole. In India, hierarchy was purely a matter of religious values.⁵² It was linked with the opposition between the pure and impure. In order to understand how religious hierarchy structured power, it was necessary to link the principle of purity with the classical theory of the varnas. That is, the division of society into four unequal, stratified groups outlined in Hindu scriptures.⁵³ The Brahmin, ritually the purest in terms of both his profession and practices, stood at the apex of this system with each succeeding caste ranked in accordance with the degree of purity in relation to the Brahmin. Caste hierarchy required differential treatment of the varnas, the separation of the pure and the impure, and the subordination of power to status. Thus the secular power of kings was subordinate to the ritually pure status of the Brahmins. However, they were also united in their opposition to other "impure" castes constitutive of society. In submitting to priesthood, royalty shared

⁵¹ Louis Dumont, "Hierarchy: The Theory of the Varna." in *Caste and Democratic Politics*, 74.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ The four varnas are: Brahmin (priests), Kshatriya (warrior/political class), Vaishya (merchants) and Shudra (laborers). "Untouchables" are placed outside of this hierarchy due to their historical association with forms of labor considered defiling.

in it.⁵⁴ Dumont prioritized the scriptural categories of varna over those of jati, a much more complex order of hundreds of castes and sub-castes organized by hereditary occupation and endogamy. The varna model was preferred for its universal acceptance throughout India, which could facilitate the comparison between regions.⁵⁵ While allowing for regional variations in status rankings and discrepancies between ideology and observable practices, Dumont maintained the essential characteristic of the system was the subordination of power to status. Conceptualizing caste as stable and ideologically self-sustaining, he placed it at the center of Hindu social life.

Since the 1980s Dumont's totalizing conception of caste as religious hierarchy has been challenged by scholarship on caste politics in post-colonial India. This scholarship emphasizes the variability and fluidity of caste identities and their deployment in modern institutions to demonstrate that there is no consistent hierarchical caste ordering in Indian society. Searle-Chatterjee and Sharma propose that a post-Dumontian approach should treat caste as a system of action that is flexible and mutable – something which people “do” rather than something which they “are.”⁵⁶ Mitra's contribution to the same volume makes a case for an instrumentalist view of caste to replace Dumont's essentialist view. That is, caste as a resource that political actors use in order to negotiate their status, wealth and power.⁵⁷ Mitra argues that this view will enable us to see caste as a vehicle for communities to participate in the political process after 1947. Disconnected from its religious roots, the consciousness of caste has become purely formal, “a badge of politically convenient self-classification to be manipulated and waved when necessary.”⁵⁸ As the market economy, modern administration and expanded communication networks have eroded the traditional hierarchy premised on purity and pollution, ritual status and social status can be considered as separate issues. Stressing the variability of caste identification, Shah notes that the same person will identify differently in the context of marriage and kinship, in economic interactions and for political

⁵⁴ Dumont, “Hierarchy,” 82.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ “Introduction,” in *Contextualizing Caste: Post-Dumontian Approaches*, ed. Mary Searle-Chatterjee and Ursula Sharma (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1994), 9.

⁵⁷ Subatra K. Mitra, “Caste, Democracy and the Politics of Community Formation in India,” in *Contextualizing Caste*, 48-71.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 63; Parekh, “Limits of the Indian Political Imagination,” 443.

purposes.⁵⁹ Indeed, even the association of stigma with ritually impure identities appears to be eroding. For example, the mobilization of groups to be recognized as “backward classes” for the purposes of affirmative action suggests that economic considerations have gained priority over concerns about being perceived as “lower caste.”⁶⁰ In light of these socio-political processes the contemporary political landscape has been conceived as one of a plethora of assertive caste identities, each privileging an angular hierarchy of its own. According to Gupta, in his argument that all castes lined up neatly behind the Brahmin in complete ideological concordance, Dumont failed to see how each caste had deep pockets of ideological inheritance from which it could draw continuous symbolic energy for both political activism and economic competition.⁶¹ The most important refutation of Dumont’s argument about the essential supremacy of status that ensured Brahmin dominance is found in the powerful assertions of Dalits since the 1990s.⁶² Accordingly, scholarly inquiries have shifted from the question of how to conceptualize caste as an overarching system to the conditions and modes of its existence. This has contributed to understanding how the politicization of caste identities has influenced processes of democratization after 1947.⁶³

Studies of the multiple uses and deployments of caste in the modern nation-state emphasize its political functions in order to undermine the totalizing religious view. However, Dumont’s framework has been critiqued in a different way in scholarship concerned with caste, knowledge production and the colonial encounter. Whereas the

⁵⁹ Ghanshyam Shah, “Introduction,” in *Caste and Democratic Politics*, 5.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁶¹ Dipankar Gupta, “Introduction,” in *Caste in Question: Identity or Hierarchy?*, ed. Dipankar Gupta (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2005), xii.

⁶² Shah, *Caste and Democratic Politics*; Bannerjee-Dube, *Caste in History*; Rao, *The Caste Question*.

⁶³ On how Dalit and lower caste movements have impacted democratic politics, see Rajni Kothari “Rise of the Dalits and the Renewed Debate on Caste,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, June 25 1994, 1589-94; Sudha Pai, *Dalit Assertion and the Unfinished Democratic Revolution: The Bahujan Samaj Party in Uttar Pradesh* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2002); Christophe Jaffrelot, *India’s Silent Revolution: The Rise of the Lower Castes in North India* (London: Hurst and Company, 2003); Hugo Gorringer, *Untouchable Citizens: Dalit Movements and Democratization in Tamil Nadu* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2005); Eva-Maria Hardtmann, *The Dalit Movement in India: Local Practices, Global Connections* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009).

arguments reviewed above seek to correct the distortions produced by the assumption of ritualistic hierarchy as essential to caste, this scholarship examines how such distortions were produced during colonial rule and the specific purposes that they served. In his seminal work on these questions, Nicholas Dirks argues that caste as we now know it is not a survival of ancient India but a specifically colonial form of civil society.⁶⁴ That is, the configuration of caste as an encompassing social system that organized India's diverse forms of social identity and community occurred in the context of colonial rule. Moreover, this configuration of caste was dependent on the constitution of Hinduism as a systematic, confessional, all-embracing religious identity.⁶⁵ The production of caste as a modern category of identification and governance served a variety of the colonial state's economic and political interests. Under the authority of the British East India Company the collection of revenue was of primary interest in establishing the village as the basic unit of administration.⁶⁶ In turn, principles were needed for ordering that society without reference to political structures larger than the village. These were provided by Hindu law codes and caste prescriptions in consultation with native authorities on religious texts, namely the Brahmins. With the shift from Company to Crown rule after 1857, caste and religion became the basis upon which the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized was elaborated. On the one hand, the state maintained a policy of non-interference in matters of native religion and customary practices. On the other, colonial knowledge about Indian society as comprised of antagonistic caste and religious groups informed policies for the inclusion of natives in structures of governance. Bernard Cohn argues that alongside the development of anti-colonial nationalism in the late nineteenth century, colonial rule became explicitly premised on the theory that India was a land of groups (castes), races, languages, religions, communities and interests that would lead inevitably to a Hobbesian war of all against all if it were not for the strong but even-

⁶⁴ *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999).

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁶⁶ David Ludden, "Orientalist Empiricism: Transformations of Colonial Knowledge," in *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament: Perspectives on South Asia*, ed. Carole A. Breckenbridge and Peter Vander Veer (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 260.

handed rule of the British.⁶⁷ Although colonial administrators and ethnographers debated about the precise origins and nature of the caste system and what methods would accurately identify and rank different caste groups, there was an overarching sense that the existence of caste proved the impossibility of nationhood in India.⁶⁸

By and large inquiries into the ways in which caste mediates democratic processes, struggles for equality and the politics of difference in post-colonial India and epistemological concerns about the modern production of caste through the colonial archive are distinct trajectories of scholarship. Within the former, scholars have questioned the usefulness of the “colonial invention of caste thesis” for understanding contemporary socio-political transformations, pointing to some problematic implications. For example, that the emphasis on the colonial context minimizes the devastating experiences of caste violence ongoing in India, and denies the agency of Indians in their own history.⁶⁹ It has been argued that the focus on the colonial obsession with caste is implicitly protective of the present order and lacking sympathy with the struggles of subordinated communities.⁷⁰ Moreover, the theoretical position is uncomfortably close to contemporary Hindu rhetoric, which by appropriating the polemics of nationalism, argues that caste arose from the pernicious British policy of divide and rule.⁷¹ To be sure, these critiques are not claiming the irrelevance of colonialism in shaping the social relations of caste. The concern is that the prioritization of the critique of colonial power comes at the expense of other kinds of inquiries, and reduces caste to an effect of colonial governmentality.⁷²

Reservation policy provides a rich site for the exploration of the persistence of colonial categories of classification in the nation-state. Public debates continually return to the unresolved nature of the key concepts at stake. They ask, what is a caste? What is

⁶⁷ Bernard Cohn, “African Models and Indian Histories,” in *An Anthropologist Among the Historians and Other Essays* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987), 220.

⁶⁸ Ibid., Dirks, *Castes of Mind*, 211.

⁶⁹ Dilip Menon, *The Blindness of Insight: Essays on Caste in Modern India* (Pondicherry: Navayana, 2006), 5-6; Gupta, “Introduction, xii.”

⁷⁰ Oliver Mendelsohn and Marika Vicziany, *The Untouchables: Subordination, Poverty and the State in Modern India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

⁷¹ Menon, *The Blindness of Insight*, 6.

⁷² Banerjee-Dube, “Introduction,” xxxiv.

discrimination? Can these terms be rendered quantifiable and objective? Can a representative framework devised by the colonial state be repurposed towards more progressive objectives in the nation-state? In this way, the debates constitute a site in which the varied consequences of colonial rule are reflected upon. Going beyond the question of how colonial forms of knowledge persist in the nation-state, they show how colonial history itself is produced as an object of knowledge. However, Srirupa Roy argues that post-colonial theory has been limited by its lack of attention to the political and institutional dynamics of post-coloniality as a historically specific, contextual project of establishing a sovereign nation-state⁷³. This is seen in the post-colonial approach to caste, where the representation of caste as an all-encompassing religious hierarchy based on ritual purity and pollution has been connected to the nexus of colonial knowledge/power, however, the epistemological analysis has not been engaged to demonstrate how caste informs practices, subjectivities and relations of power in the context of nation-state formation. My dissertation illustrates that an engagement between studies of colonial knowledge/power and post-colonial caste politics contributes to understanding caste privilege. I extend the critique of Orientalist representations of caste as totalizing, essentialist and static to the question of how privilege and prejudice are reproduced and transformed in the nation-state. That is, how is upper-caste subjectivity reproduced in the absence of the ritual hierarchy previously assumed to be central to understanding the caste order? To address this question I attend to the secular forms of knowledge that are available to these subjects in the naturalization of historical privilege.

In contrast to the colonial pre-occupation with caste as essential to understanding and ruling Indian society, the relationship of the post-colonial elite to caste has been one of disavowal.⁷⁴ Therefore, production of knowledge about caste has focused on how it continues to produce structures of exclusion, violence and discrimination. This is an important disruption to the disavowal through which an unmarked upper caste middle class subjectivity is constituted. However, this focus also has the effect of limiting studies

⁷³ Srirupa Roy, *Beyond Belief: India and the Politics of Postcolonial Nationalism* (Chapel Hill: Duke University Press, 2007), 23.

⁷⁴ Vivek Dhareshwar, "Caste and the Secular Self," *Journal of Arts and Ideas* 25-26 (1993): 115-126; M.S.S. Pandian, "One Step Outside Modernity: Caste, Identity Politics and Public Sphere," *Economic and Political Weekly*, May 4 2002, 1735-1741.

of caste in modern India to studies of “lower castes”, thus foreclosing questions about how “caste also privileges and includes certain subject positions”.⁷⁵ Ramesh Bairy suggests that the starting point for such an inquiry is to recognize that for “upper castes” the only acceptable way of public presentation of the self was/is in terms of rendering one’s caste location as insignificant in one’s public deliberations and enactments, leading to the domestication and privatization of caste.⁷⁶ As such, caste prejudice and discrimination persist despite the general illegitimacy accorded to these practices through state strictures and by public disavowal of casteism in popular life.⁷⁷ My dissertation foregrounds how upper caste elites denounce caste based reservations as a damaging legacy of the colonial state and its forms of knowledge, and simultaneously, rely upon colonial discourses about caste society as static, pre-modern and antithetical to nationhood in order to represent themselves as unmarked caste-less citizens. Specifically, this colonial conceptualization of caste underpins the representation of Scheduled Castes and OBCs in dominant discourses about reservation. These subjects are variously represented as deeply invested in irrational caste rituals, upholding discriminatory practices of segregation and untouchability amongst themselves and the main perpetrators of caste violence in rural India. Taken together, “lower castes” are represented as the principal agents of contemporary casteism in the modern nation-state and thus, fundamentally incapable of self-transformation. By foregrounding the essential, antagonistic differences between different lower castes, the historical and ongoing struggles of Dalit and anti-caste movements to forge political consciousness among marginalized groups and articulate an expansive conception of community in non-caste, non-religious terms are rejected as an impossibility. These discourses buttress the claim that caste mobilization as expressed in quota politics is a distraction from the real issues of poverty and education, to which the unmarked subject is committed. Colonial

⁷⁵ Ramesh Bairy T.S., “Beyond Governmentality: Caste-ing the Brahmin,” *India Seminar 633 Caste Matters: A Symposium on Inequalities, Identities and Disintegrating Hierarchies*, May 2012, http://www.india-seminar.com/2012/633/633_ramesh_bairy_t_s.htm.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Balmurli Natrajan, “From Jati to Samaj,” *India Seminar 633 Caste Matters: A Symposium on Inequalities, Identities and Disintegrating Hierarchies*, May 2012, http://www.india-seminar.com/2012/633/633_balmurli_natrajan.htm.

discourses about the native as incarcerated to his place and confined to his mode of thought⁷⁸, combined with the idioms of national development - uplifting the poor, empowering the backward masses – are secular resources through which upper caste privilege is naturalized in the figure of the casteless citizen whose opposition to reservation is for the general welfare of the impoverished population. Consequently, questions about the caste based distribution of power, resources and privileges raised by Dalit activists are marginalized from public debate.

By bringing the post-colonial epistemological critique to bear on how “lower castes” are represented in dominant discourses which are decidedly secular in orientation, I contribute to understanding how the processes of nation-state formation generate distinct pressures on the meanings of caste and community, simultaneously working with and working over colonial forms of knowledge. In addition to illustrating the connections between colonialism and nationalism, this requires explicating the specific interests and anxieties that are maintained through unequal relations of knowledge production. The thrust of critical scholarship drawing from Edward Said’s *Orientalism* has been to interrogate the ways in which colonial epistemology upholds Western domination of non-Western bodies and spaces. As my study shows that dominant ways of knowing and speaking about caste in reservation debates persist in spite of the challenges posed by Dalit and anti-caste critique, it requires a different vantage point. For this, I draw from Lati Mani’s observation that the “West” as ideological and political presence articulates with such a density of indigenous institutions, discourses, histories and practices that its identity as Western is refracted and not always salient.⁷⁹ David Ludden’s problematic of the epistemological detachment of Orientalism from colonialism is instructive in this regard. In the essay “Orientalist Empiricism: Transformations of Colonial Knowledge”, Ludden defines Orientalist knowledge as

a venerable set of factualized statements about the Orient, which was established with authorized data and research techniques and which had become so widely

⁷⁸ Arjun Appadurai, “Putting Hierarchy in its Place,” *Cultural Anthropology* 3, no. 1 (1988): 37-50.

⁷⁹ Lata Mani, “Multiple Mediations: Feminist Scholarship in the Age of Multinational Reception,” *Inscriptions* 5 (1989), http://culturalstudies.ucsc.edu/PUBS/Inscriptions/vol_5/LataMani.html.

accepted as true, so saturated with excess plausibility that it determines the content of assumptions on which theory and inference can be built.⁸⁰

This definition suggests that the reproduction of Orientalist knowledge has also transformed its meanings and composition over time. Ludden reminds us that even the most instrumental knowledge produced to serve colonial rule was produced under the rubric of objective science, its methodologies authorized by scientific standards of the day. The development of methodologies was historically shaped by the political objective of the East India Company to loosen the grip of Brahmins, the most influential native informants, on legal and religious knowledge.⁸¹ Due to colonial skepticism about the objectivity of native informants, the key sources of empirically sound and useful knowledge were assumed to be texts and direct observation by colonial ethnographers. While the enduring representations of non-Western societies as primitive, stagnant and irrational are a significant consequence of colonial knowledge practices, Ludden points to another consequence, namely, the expanding scope of empiricism. Empiricism enabled Orientalist knowledge to serve diverse political purposes and receive new sustenance from many quarters.⁸² Thus, he argues that it is in nationalism that we find the vitality of Orientalism today. Nationalism has appropriated the positivist logic of Orientalism that assumes there is a true, authentic image of India and Indian tradition, which signify the unity, autonomy and permanence of Indian nationhood.⁸³ Like the colonial state, the government of India represents itself as an impartial protector of all people, standing above conflicts between communities and deploying science for modernization and development.

This intervention serves as an important reminder that while one aspect of the modern production of caste in colonial knowledge was its representation as a marker of stagnation and irrationality, another was the assumption that categories like caste could be understood objectively and systematically – in other words, independent of competing interpretations and divergent experiences. I show that this latter aspect of knowledge production has shaped debates about reservation in two ways. First, in the ongoing quest

⁸⁰ *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament*, 251.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 254.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 258.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 273.

for objective and reliable data about caste and the forms of disadvantage that it generates among different groups in Indian society. This is part of a broader concern to replace the subjective, politicized nature of caste with objective indicators of inequality in policy making. The desire for a primarily (if not solely) economic conceptualization of inequality is articulated as a means to increase the efficiency of the policy by ensuring those most in need will benefit, and to reduce the threat that divisive caste identities pose to national integration. Second, and somewhat paradoxically, the Orientalist assumption that caste is a fundamentally Hindu social institution justifies the non-recognition of Muslim and Christian Dalits as subject to untouchability, resulting in their exclusion from Scheduled Caste status. The validity of their experiences of caste discrimination in non-Hindu communities is subordinated in judicial rulings and popular discourse to the authority of Islamic and Christian religious texts which do not sanction caste. In both cases, the search for legitimate beneficiaries of reservation is conducted without reference to different interpretations of social justice, or to the ways in which Dalits understand caste. The procedure is over-determined by an epistemological structure in which particular kinds of statistical and textual knowledge – human development indicators and non-Hindu religious scriptures – are privileged in arriving at certain truths. In this way, scholars, politicians, judges and policy makers in post-colonial India continue the unfinished work of colonial ethnographers and administrators who sought to build a uniform system of classification for caste, even as they denounce the existence of caste categories as preventing identification with the nation. Indeed, the expression of anxiety about the damaging effects of reservations on the nation presupposes the essential permanence of the nation. In the following section I provide a historical overview of the efforts to define caste objectively during colonial rule and their relation to the growth of anti-caste politics in that context.

Caste, Colonialism and Anti-Caste Politics

Colonial knowledge practices in India reflected the deeply held belief among British officials that caste and religion were the sociological keys to understanding the

Indian people.⁸⁴ Of particular significance for the collection of information on caste and religion was the institution of the census, which was the most wide-ranging and detailed examination into native life and organized this information into discrete categories that could be utilized for governance. Census reports formalized the meaning of religion as a community comprising individuals bound to a stable definition. Colonial knowledge worked to fix practices that were often fluid between communities and overrule the indeterminate beliefs by which many people chose to live their lives.⁸⁵ It was through this transformation in the meaning of religious community that caste became a single term capable of expressing and organizing India's diverse forms of social identity and community. Caste was configured as an encompassing Indian social system in relation to the constitution of "Hinduism" as a systematic, all-embracing religious identity.⁸⁶ In this way, the complexity and dynamism of social relations was obscured in order to situate the colonized on an evaluative scale of civilizational progress that highlighted their fundamental inferiority to the West.⁸⁷ The resulting representation of native society as infinitely divided into antagonistic castes and religions legitimized the presence of the colonial administration as a neutral arbitrator of competing interests.

The Orientalist perception of caste as a marker of the fundamentally religious and group-based nature of Indian society upheld what Chatterjee has described as the "rule of colonial difference": the representation of the colonized as radically Other, which legitimized the infinite deferral of the possibility of self-governance.⁸⁸ There was

⁸⁴ Ronald Inden, "Orientalist Constructions of India," *Modern Asian Studies* 20, no.3 (1986): 401-446; Bernard Cohn, "The Census, Social Structure and Social Objectification in South Asia", in *An Anthropologist Among the Historians*, 224-255.

⁸⁵ Gauri Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity, Belief* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 157.

⁸⁶ Dirks, *Castes of Mind*, 7.

⁸⁷ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978); Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983); Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Anibal Quijano, "Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality," *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2-3 (2007): 168-178; Sanjay Seth, "Changing the Subject: Western Knowledge and the Question of Difference," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 49, no.3 (2007): 666-688.

⁸⁸ Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 16-18.

considerably less certainty about the specific meaning of caste as a category for classifying the population. Many census officials aimed to organize the extremely diverse social identities across India according to the four hierarchical categories of varna as defined in Hindu religious texts.⁸⁹ It was assumed that the thousands of communities defined by jati/hereditary occupation – status in the division of labor - could be classified in terms of their scriptural status. In their attempts to develop a uniform system of classification census officials relied almost entirely on upper caste religious leaders and scholars who reaffirmed the authority of sacred textual knowledge in determining the content of caste categories. The colonial and upper caste views thus aligned in their understanding of caste as an essentially religious institution defined by ritual practices and scriptural authority. The varna model was also accorded a scientific basis through the application of race theory. Using anthropometry, cranial measurements were used to classify castes and tribes based on race and prove the existence of racial difference between northern and southern Indians and between high castes and low castes.⁹⁰ Thus scientific evidence strengthened the belief in hierarchy according to varna and the immutability of caste. However, officials were often frustrated by the way statistical data revealed the importance of subcaste groupings, “producing a relentless proliferation of caste groups and impeding efforts to collapse titles into single groups”.⁹¹ Census officials questioned the categorization of “untouchables” as Hindus because as “outcastes” they remained outside of the four scriptural categories of varna hierarchy. The Commissioner of the 1911 Census suggested that untouchables be enumerated separately under the category “Depressed Classes”. In this way, shifts in colonial perceptions about caste over time also came into conflict with upper caste interests.

Census operations became a crucial factor in the increased conflict and contestation between caste groups in the first decades of the 20th century.⁹² Communities classified as the Shudras/laboring castes of the varna hierarchy challenged their

⁸⁹ Dirks, *Castes of Mind*, 202-207.

⁹⁰ Bannerjee-Dube, “Introduction”, xxxix.

⁹¹ Dirks, *Castes of Mind*, 207.

⁹² Cohn; “The Census”; Aloysius, *Nationalism without a Nation in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), 47; Dirks, *Castes of Mind*, 207; Menon, *The Blindness of Insight*, 19-20.

categorization according to colonial and upper caste perceptions. The institution of the census gave rise to thousands of petitions filed by such communities that claimed a higher social status within the caste hierarchy. This process led to the formation of numerous caste based associations and the production of historical knowledge in support of the petitions, thus politicizing caste identities in novel ways. Apart from the fact that groups felt it necessary to negotiate a higher ranking to avoid discrimination, caste-wise inventory of the population underlined the huge discrepancy between numbers and privilege as it made groups aware of their numerical strength.⁹³ For example, it was seen that “in Madras Presidency Brahmins comprising barely three percent of the population occupied more than 80 percent of administrative posts, while in the princely state of Mysore they monopolized all the jobs”.⁹⁴ Western and Southern India, where Brahmin representation far exceeded its numerical proportion, were the first regions to see the growth of non-Brahmin movements aiming to challenge this dominance. Colonial knowledge projects generated news sets of questions and political projects among the colonized that variously re-produced and challenged Orientalist representations of their societies. Due to the complicated process of adjudicating the claims of thousands of groups for higher status in the census the administration ceased collecting data on caste after 1931.

The politics of caste shaped and were shaped by, shifts in colonial governance, the development of nationalism and the rise of anti-caste movements and political thought. M.S.S. Pandian argues that the historical conditions of colonialism facilitated the emergence of two competing modes of talking about caste, which continue to shape the post-colonial public sphere.⁹⁵ In the first mode caste is spoken of by other means, while the second mode talks of caste explicitly and on its own terms. The former is achieved through a process of transcoding caste and caste relations into something else. Transcoding is an act of acknowledging and disavowing caste at once.⁹⁶ Pandian traces its development to the political-discursive arena of dominant anti-colonial nationalism, specifically, its designation of the domain of culture/spirituality as sovereign. What

⁹³ Bannerjee-Dube, “Introduction”, xli.

⁹⁴ Das, “Moments in a History of Reservations”, 3832.

⁹⁵ “One Step Outside Modernity”, 1735.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

becomes encoded as the national culture uncolonized by the West is the culture of Brahmins and upper castes. Thus, the very domain of sovereignty that nationalism carves out in the face of colonial domination is simultaneously a domain of enforcing domination over the subaltern social groups such as lower castes, women and marginal linguistic regions by the national elite.⁹⁷ Not only are the diverse cultures of these groups excluded from the category of the nation, the notion of caste inequality and discrimination becomes defined as a cultural matter and thus excluded from the public sphere. The second mode of speaking about caste, on its own terms as a system of exploitation and domination, emerged among Dalit and non-Brahmin communities. In response to the opportunities for education opened up by colonial rule a class of intellectuals formed among marginalized castes, most prominently, Jyotirao Phule (1827-1890) and Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891-1956). Phule inaugurated a new discourse and understanding of Indian history from the viewpoint of the Shudra and Ati-Shudra (Dalit) peasantry.⁹⁸ An analysis of the interdependence of caste and gender oppression in the maintenance of Brahminical rule grounded Phule's political thought and the activities of his radical organization the Satyashodak Samaj (Society of Truth Seekers), established in 1873. Rege describes the Satyashodak Samaj as a discursive arena in which members of the Shudra and Ati-Shudra castes formulated and circulated counter discourses on the importance of education, the situation of the peasantry and women, and their exploitation by moneylenders and Brahmins, thus facilitating the development of a distinct counter public in colonial Maharashtra.⁹⁹ As Pandian points out, the efforts of anti-caste leaders like Phule and Ambedkar can be read as an effort to unsettle the boundaries between the spiritual and the material, the very boundaries upon which dominant nationalism defined itself. It is important to stress that marginalized groups were not simply excluded or rendered invisible in the political discourse of

⁹⁷ Ibid., 1736. Pandian is engaging with Partha Chatterjee's argument that anti-colonial nationalism marks out the domain of culture and spirituality as a domain of sovereignty in colonial society. While Chatterjee recognizes the exclusionary implications of this formulation, Pandian argues that his focus on the opposition between nationalism and colonialism is at the expense of appreciating the contradictions within nationalism.

⁹⁸ Omvedt, "The Anti-Caste Movement", 457.

⁹⁹ Sharmila Rege, *Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women's Testimonios* (New Delhi: Zubaan Books, 2006), 39.

dominant upper caste nationalism. As the former challenged the claim of upper castes to represent the nation, they were actively delegitimized as collaborators with British imperialism. This mode of representing “lower caste” political subjectivity persists in post-colonial anti-reservation discourse which positions the beneficiaries of quotas as perpetuating colonial tactics of divide and rule.

In the early 20th century the colonial government established representative structures to facilitate the partial inclusion of natives in politics. In line with the view of Indian society as comprised of distinct antagonistic communities, a system of separate electorates was devised. This system allocated seats in legislatures for the representation of community interests, thus naturalizing the categories of majority and minority based on religion. During negotiations for these political reforms Muslim elites voiced concern over the loss of their former preeminence due to British colonialism. This sense of community decline was compounded by official statistics that revealed the greater representation of (upper caste) Hindus in modern education and employment. Hence it was argued that the interests of Muslims as a historically and politically significant minority must be safeguarded in the legislatures through reserved seats and the principle of weightage. This principle ensured a percentage of seats greater than their proportion of the population, signifying that the importance of the community was in excess of their demographic status as minority. The acceptance of these demands in 1909 categorized Muslims as a politically significant minority and in turn, “normalized Hindus as a distinctive religious community and numerical majority liable to dwarf any electoral grouping”.¹⁰⁰ In the politics of number and representation unleashed by this governance structure, the status of “untouchable” communities gained political significance. It is in this context that the notion of Hindus as a numerical majority became dependent on the religious categorization of “untouchable” communities. As census reports revealed that the latter comprised a significant portion of India’s population, upper caste Hindus began to assert that they belonged to the Hindu community.¹⁰¹ This claim was buttressed by the adoption of social reform programs aimed at changing Hindu religious practices that sanctioned the social segregation and ritual untouchability of Depressed Classes. In 1917

¹⁰⁰ Rao, *The Caste Question*, 132.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 21; Galanter, *Competing Equalities*, 26.

the Indian National Congress reversed its earlier stance that social reform be excluded from the political agenda and passed a resolution calling upon the people to remove “all disabilities imposed by custom upon the Depressed Classes, the disabilities being of a most vexatious and oppressive character.”¹⁰² Public recognition of the discriminatory practices of caste Hinduism was motivated by instrumental interests in maintaining a numerical Hindu majority in a context of increasing politicization of the categories Hindu and Muslim.

Social reform programs were also informed by the epistemological shifts related to the colonial encounter. Bernard Cohn has argued that it became imperative for the Western educated colonized elite to develop a knowledge of their own past, the form of which was couched in Western historical terms but the intent of which was to provide a counter rationale to the pressures of Western cultural imperialism.¹⁰³ These projects of historical reconstruction emerged in relation to processes of objectification: the ability of intellectuals to stand back and see their culture as a distinct entity, where previously culture was embedded in a whole matrix of custom, ritual and textual transmission. The political imperative of developing historical knowledge under the conditions of colonialism is then linked to questions of reform, whereby aspects of tradition can be selected, polished and reformulated for conscious ends.¹⁰⁴ Reformist and nationalist articulations of the caste problem underlined the ills of untouchability while upholding the division of labor based on the varna order as a division based on differential qualities and skills.¹⁰⁵ Social reform related to untouchability was underpinned by historical arguments about caste in the golden age of Hinduism: prior to Muslim and British conquest, caste had been a harmonious and complementary system of hereditary occupations and it was necessary to restore it to its original religious and cultural form.¹⁰⁶ The reform of abhorrent practices and attitudes towards untouchables was thus linked to the development of a Hindu nation and/or social unity. The uplift of untouchables to

¹⁰² Thomas Pantham, “Against Untouchability: The Discourses of Gandhi and Ambedkar,” in *Humiliation: Claims and Contexts*, ed. Gopal Guru (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009), 182.

¹⁰³ Cohn, *The Census*, 228.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ Rege, *Writing Caste/Writing Gender*, 26.

¹⁰⁶ Dirks, *Castes of Mind*, 14.

higher Hindu standards of diet and hygiene and the amelioration of caste hatred under Brahmin leadership would unify the community in the nationalist struggle.¹⁰⁷

This historical narrative and conceptualization of caste was countered in anti-caste movements and political thought. Beginning with Phule, anti-caste activists framed caste hierarchy as a form of exclusion and inequality rather than religious order. By the 1920s, their struggle for rights had translated caste into terms such as “public exclusion” and “segregation,” described by Rao as secularized terms with expanded political range.¹⁰⁸ Phule’s critique of the caste system countered the nationalist theory of a golden age by historicizing caste as an exploitative division of labor imposed on the indigenous inhabitants of South Asia, the Shudras (laboring castes) and Atishudras (untouchables) by the conquest of Aryan invaders from central Asia, whose descendents were the Brahmins.¹⁰⁹ The Brahmins imposed their religion and its institution of caste as an instrument of social control: “in order to fulfill their plan that those people should remain perpetually in slavery...the Brahmins set up the fiction of caste divisions, and made up several books on it for their own selfish ends”.¹¹⁰ A key aspect of Phule’s thought was the critique and rejection of Brahminical ideology. He critiqued the consolidation of upper caste interests due to the dominance of Brahmins in the colonial bureaucracy and the colonial state’s exploitation of the peasantry through the appropriation of land and imposition of taxes. He emphasized the need for Shudras and Atishudras to forge alliances and acquire modern, scientific knowledge as a basis for the formation of a common front against Brahmin domination. As Omvedt notes, this was in contrast to upper caste efforts to acquire scientific knowledge while maintaining “traditional values” under colonial rule, as education for Phule was a weapon to change values and initiate cultural revolution.¹¹¹ Establishing a common historical identity among distinct caste groups as indigenous, non-Aryan and resistant to Brahmin conquests over time, Phule asserted the right to self-representation of the bahunjan samaj (majority community) of the

¹⁰⁷ Rege, *Writing Caste/Writing Gender*, 26; Galanter, *Competing Equalities*, 28.

¹⁰⁸ Rao, *The Caste Question*, 14.

¹⁰⁹ Rosalind O’Hanlon, “Phule and the Inversion of Brahmin Myths,” in *Caste in History*, 172.

¹¹⁰ Phule, *Slavery*, 1873, in *Ibid.*, 173.

¹¹¹ Gail Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution: Dr. Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1994), 99.

downtrodden and toiling castes, and revalued them as key political actors against alien interlopers.¹¹²

The thematic of original inhabitation prominently figured in various anti-caste movements during the colonial period. In the 1920s numerous Adi (Original) movements that explicitly rejected the identification of untouchables with Hinduism were active in Northern and Southern regions.¹¹³ Nearly all regionally diverse Dalit movements had both an economic and a social thrust: they tried to acquire land for Dalits and freedom from caste specific imposed labor, fought for education and tried to generate internal social reform, such as marriage between subcastes.¹¹⁴ The autonomous anti-caste position crystallized in opposition to upper caste social reformers under the leadership of Ambedkar. Like Phule, Ambedkar's critique of Brahminical domination emphasized the immoral sanction of inequality in Hindu texts and the re-invention of the Brahmin subject under the conditions of colonial modernity. Countering nationalist and reformist claims about the value of divinely ordained duties according to varna, he argued that most Brahmins no longer followed the occupation of their ancestors and continually broke caste rules on railways journeys and foreign travels. However, they refused to denounce caste hierarchy or the sanctity of the Shastras. The Brahmin "breaks caste at one step and proceeds to observe it at the next without raising any questions."¹¹⁵ The selective negotiation of caste was meant to enable advancement within colonial institutions. However, Brahmins continued to depend on the existence of "lower castes" against which superiority could be asserted.

Ambedkar's political thought also departed from previous anti-caste leaders. Ambedkar did not claim higher status for untouchables, as such claims implied an acceptance of upper caste superiority, or that they were pre-Aryan inhabitants. He argued

¹¹² Rao, *The Caste Question*, 48.

¹¹³ For the relation of Adi movements to traditions of Dalit resistance see Hardtmann, *The Dalit Movement*, 45-87. For a significant account of the movement in Punjab see Mark Jurgensmeyer, *Religious Rebels in the Punjab: The Social Vision of Untouchables* (New Delhi: Ajanta Publications, 1988).

¹¹⁴ Omvedt, "The Anti-Caste Movement", 460.

¹¹⁵ Ambedkar, "Annihilation of Caste", 75.

that the status of untouchables was social, not racial, and therefore subject to change.¹¹⁶ Ambedkar defined the caste system as at once a division of labor and a division of laborers. Laborers were unnaturally separated into rigid compartments through a graded hierarchy. As caste hierarchy was foundational to Hinduism, Hindu society was merely a collection of castes. Caste was a mechanism for withholding sociality, and caste society characterized by a lack of associated living: “That is the reason why Hindus cannot be said to form a society or nation.”¹¹⁷ In their refusal to work towards the abolition of the caste system, upper caste nationalists demonstrated their inability to exercise political power in a democratic nation-state. Ambedkar argued that, “democracy is not merely a form of government. It is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience...it is essentially an attitude of respect and reverence towards fellowmen.”¹¹⁸ Democratic social transformation was impossible within the framework of Hinduism, howsoever the upper castes attempted to undertake social reforms from within. As the annihilation of caste was the only path to an egalitarian society, its continued existence in any form implied the political and moral illegitimacy of the nation. Confronted with Ambedkar’s unflinching critique of the undemocratic character of dominant nationalism, upper castes portrayed him as an ally of the British who upheld the colonial view of Indians as unable to constitute a nation.

Ambedkar “reconceived Dalit activism in terms of democratic thought and action, and positioned Dalit disenfranchisement as a complex, experiential structure of oppression, exploitation and dehumanization”.¹¹⁹ Caste degradation had to be challenged through a struggle for civil rights and the articulation of an alternative political identity. Ambedkar’s ideal for the Depressed Classes was to “raise their educational standards so that they may know their conditions, have aspirations to rise to the level of the highest Hindu and be in a position to use political power as a means to that end.”¹²⁰ Therefore, he advocated a separatist policy accentuating caste distinctions as an initial stage in creating

¹¹⁶ Zelliott, “Gandhi and Ambedkar: A Study in Leadership,” in *From Untouchable to Dalit*, 156.

¹¹⁷ Ambedkar, “Annihilation of Caste”, 50.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹¹⁹ Rao, *The Caste Question*, 15.

¹²⁰ Zelliott, “Gandhi and Ambedkar,” 158.

a society in which identities would be unimportant.¹²¹ This position was strengthened through the organization of campaigns for equal access to public spaces and resources through direct nonviolent actions, which were not supported by Gandhi and the Congress. In December 1927 public action for equal access to public water sources drew 10,000 people to the town of Mahad. Here Ambedkar publicly burned the Manusmriti, the book of Hindu law prescribing violent maintenance of caste segregation and gender inequality. In subsequent actions for equal access to temples, Dalit activists equated temples with other enclosed public spaces, such as schools and hostels. Rao argues that this challenged the nationalist framing of the temple as an exceptional structure and clarified the basis of their claim as the legal principle of equal access.¹²² The entanglement of the secular and the religious in civil rights struggles demonstrates Ambedkar's commitment to social transformation through multiple registers, thereby unsettling the boundaries between material and spiritual domains. These campaigns constituted the basis of what was to emerge in the 1930s as a distinct Ambedkarite counterpublic. Rege describes these counterpublics as adopting a dual strategy. That is, of separate modes of publicity, independent institutions, media and organizations, alongside the articulation of claims through a rights discourse for access to unmarked public spaces.¹²³ These alternative discursive arenas developed alongside and against the dominance of institutionalized nationalism represented by the Indian National Congress.

Gandhi “inherited the Congress position and personalized it by emphasizing the caste Hindu's obligation to the untouchables as the major tenet of his teaching”.¹²⁴ In his first strong public statement on untouchability Gandhi claimed “Swaraj is as unattainable without the removal of the sin of untouchability as it is without Hindu-Muslim unity.”¹²⁵ As Gandhi aimed to bring together divergent interests into a unified opposition to the British, it was necessary to pursue social reform without upsetting the social fabric of Indian society. Gandhi perceived untouchability as a primarily religious and spiritual problem internal to the Hindu community, and described it as a “sinful excrement” that

¹²¹ Ibid., 159.

¹²² Rao, *The Caste Question*, 89.

¹²³ *Writing Caste/Writing Gender*, 51.

¹²⁴ Eleanor Zelliot, “Gandhi and Ambedkar,” 153

¹²⁵ Ibid.

could only be removed through the atonement, self-purification and penance of the caste Hindu.¹²⁶ He referred to untouchables as “Harijans”, or Children of God and asked that Hindus accept them within their community in the way they did the Shudras. That is, he firmly believed in varnashadharma, the divinely ordained division of society into four varnas/categories according to duty. Gandhi argued that “the callings of a Brahmin and a scavenger are equal, and their due performance carries equal merit before God”.¹²⁷ While the treatment of untouchables as polluting was reprehensible, they should remain in the occupations to which their ancestors had been assigned. In this socio-political vision the need for a change of heart among upper castes towards untouchables was prioritized, while autonomous leadership and direct political action of the latter was discouraged.¹²⁸ Ambedkar opposed Gandhi’s patronizing position that social reforms must take place through upper caste leadership and maintain Hindu unity:

Let me ask those who would change hearts – how much change do you want to achieve? If every Hindu, then untouchables will wait forever...No untouchable believes that his humanity will be recognized after independence just because caste Hindus argue that they can only live up to their humanity then.¹²⁹

From this perspective the struggle against caste hierarchy was not a means to something else – whether Hindu unity or nationalist solidarity. Rather, it was to achieve dignity and self-respect for marginalized caste communities, for which alterations to upper caste behavior and the social practices of untouchability were insufficient.

The respective approaches of Gandhi and Ambedkar to the problem of untouchability have been described in terms of a difference in definition and a difference in objective. Gandhi’s definition of untouchability as a spiritual-religious problem enabled his prioritization of the objective of self-rule in colonial India. The problem required voluntary private action, which would “enable uplifted untouchables and repentant Hindus to join together in a purified and redeemed Hinduism”.¹³⁰ Ambedkar’s

¹²⁶ Ibid.; Galanter, *Competing Equalities*, 29.

¹²⁷ M.K. Gandhi, “A Vindication of Caste”, in Ambedkar, “Annihilation of Caste”, Appendix 1.

¹²⁸ Dirks, *Castes of Mind*, 235; Rao, *The Caste Question*, 93.

¹²⁹ Quoted in Rao, *The Caste Question*, 52.

¹³⁰ Galanter, *Competing Equalities*, 26

expansive definition of untouchability as a political, social and economic structure meant that the objective of social justice had to precede political independence. Gandhi's religious approach is thus contrasted with the secular orientation of Ambedkar, seen in the emphasis on civil rights, political action and government intervention.¹³¹ In a recent essay Gopal Guru has introduced the category of experience to interrogate these differences in a way that moves beyond the terms of religious versus secular.¹³² Guru describes Ambedkar's experience of untouchability as an ontological wound and the epistemological source for the production of specific categories of thought: self-respect, humiliation, rights and power. In contrast, Gandhi's engagement with caste and untouchability represents an attempt to identify with and speak for the experience of the "other". His distinct modes of thought and the categories he deploys, such as seva (service), trusteeship and care, must be situated in relation to this historical-experiential problematic. This problem of experience is linked to Gandhi's definition of the movement to eradicate untouchability as one of self-purification and spiritual cleansing. According to Nagaraj, this resulted in the glorification of the upper caste reformer in confrontation with the Hindu orthodoxy.¹³³ To encourage reform, untouchables had to be transformed from objects of disgust and revulsion to objects of pity and sympathy. In this way, Gandhi not only prioritized self-rule/political independence over social justice. Rather, he prioritized the ability to empathize with the untouchable over the lived experience of untouchability. Thus, the project of spiritual-affective transformation, tied to the claim that untouchables undoubtedly "belong" to the Hindu community, is not simply aimed at uplifting subjects oppressed by caste hierarchy. Importantly, this project is also aimed at establishing the authority to speak for these subjects.

These conflicting positions were dramatically staged during the Round Table Conferences held in London between 1930 and 1932. The conferences were held to ascertain Indian opinion on political reforms for a revised imperial constitution, what came to be the Government of India Act, 1935. For the first time untouchables were

¹³¹ Ibid.; Zelliott, "Gandhi and Ambedkar"; Pantham, "Against Untouchability"

¹³² "Experience, Space and Justice", in Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai, *The Cracked Mirror: An Indian Debate on Experience and Theory* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012), 71-107.

¹³³ Nagaraj, *The Flaming Feet*, 36.

represented separately in political negotiations with the colonial state. Before his departure to London Ambedkar told a meeting of the Depressed Classes League, that while he agreed with the Congress that no country was good enough to rule over another, it is equally true that no class is good enough to rule over another class.¹³⁴ His submission to the Minorities Committee of the Round Table Conferences proposed a scheme of political safeguards for Depressed Classes that included the right to elect their own representatives by adult suffrage and by separate electorates for the first ten years, adequate representation in the services and in the cabinet, protection from discrimination through the guarantee of civil rights and means of redress in the case of prejudicial treatment. Ambedkar argued that the Depressed Classes constituted a political minority due to their subjection to material exploitation and civic exclusion.¹³⁵ In this way, he challenged the colonial conceptualization of minority as a category designating essential religious difference. In Rao's analysis, Ambedkar asserted the primacy of the political to oppose preexisting organic definitions of community, which by assimilating Dalits to the category Hindu delegitimized their need for separate representation.¹³⁶ If Hindus, Muslims and Depressed Classes were seen as three distinct groups, this disturbed the idea that only "fixed permanent communities" existed as political categories¹³⁷. Political safeguards had to be provided before the colonial state transferred its power because Hindu majority rule would be the rule of the orthodox. Moreover, the economic exploitation to which Depressed Classes were subjected could not be resolved without tackling the specific conditions of social discrimination that structured their lives:

it is not enough to say of their economic condition that they are poverty stricken or that they are a class of landless laborers, although both these statements are true. It has to be noted that the poverty of the Depressed Classes is due largely to

¹³⁴ Zelliott, "Gandhi and Ambedkar", 165.

¹³⁵ Anupama Rao, "Ambedkar and the Politics of Minority: A Reading," in *From the Colonial to the Postcolonial: India and Pakistan in Transition*, ed. Dipesh Chakrabarty, Rochana Majumdar and Andrew Sartori (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007), 137-158.

¹³⁶ Rao, *The Caste Question*, 133.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 137.

the social prejudices in consequence of which many an occupation for earning a living is closed to them.¹³⁸

As the representative of the Congress at the Round Table Conference, Gandhi maintained that distinct community interests could only be recognized and protected on the basis of religious difference. While the Congress had accepted special treatment of the “Hindu-Muslim-Sikh” tangle, it would not extend this doctrine in any shape or form.¹³⁹ He argued that whereas religious difference was an essential and permanent feature of group identity, untouchability was a difference that had to be transcended through social reform and unification of the Hindu community. Ambedkar’s insistence on safeguards for the distinct interests of untouchables was thus conflated with the notion of protecting and perpetuating the practices of untouchability. The assertion of political subjectivity was not only disruptive to the affective constitution of a reformed Hindu community, but the political subject was necessarily inadequate and inferior. In Gandhi’s analysis, one of the damaging effects of untouchability was the inability of the Depressed Classes to understand what their interests were or how to protect them. Gandhi suggested that it was because the bitter experiences of untouchability had “warped” Ambedkar’s judgment and saturated his person with such fear and suspicion that he insisted on separate political safeguards for the Depressed Classes.¹⁴⁰ Therefore Ambedkar was incapable of adequately representing their interests and nor could he claim the legitimacy to do so.

In their settlement on the issue of group representation in August 1932, the British accepted Ambedkar’s demand for separate political representation. Referred to as the “Communal Award”, the settlement gave Depressed Classes a double vote: the first as part of a joint electorate with a portion of constituencies reserved for DC candidates and the second as part of a separate electorate in which only DCs could vote. Gandhi described the settlement as an “injection of poison that is calculated to destroy Hinduism

¹³⁸ B.R. Ambedkar, “A Scheme of Political Safeguards for the Protection of the Depressed Classes in the Future Constitution of a Self-Governing India,” in B.R. Ambedkar, *What Gandhi and the Congress Have Done to the Untouchables* (Bombay: Thacker and Company, 1945), 49.

¹³⁹ Quoted in *Ibid.*, 57.

¹⁴⁰ Gandhi’s Response to the Minorities Pact, Round Table Conferences London. In *Ibid.*, 68-69.

and do no good whatsoever to the Depressed Classes.”¹⁴¹ He announced his decision to go on a perpetual fast until death or until the British withdrew their scheme of separate electorates for Depressed Classes. Gandhi explained:

What I am against is their (Depressed Classes) statutory separation even in a limited form, from the Hindu fold... if your decision stands...you arrest the marvelous growth of the work of Hindu reformers, who have dedicated themselves to the uplift of their suppressed brethren in every walk of life.¹⁴²

Gandhi equated the autonomous anti-caste politics of Ambedkar with the loss of any incentive among upper castes to atone for their practice of untouchability. The conditions of violence and exclusion of DCs that Ambedkar sought to foreground as a basis for minority status were thus displaced by the suffering of Gandhi for the untouchable, the Hindu community and the nation. Significantly, “Gandhi’s fast staked his life on the question of tackling untouchability in a particular way and to resist other modes of tackling the same question.”¹⁴³ While the process of upper caste atonement was elevated above any other mode of social transformation it was also the most fragile. It was by insisting on the significant momentum of this process that Gandhi could state, “I claim myself in my own person to represent the vast mass of untouchables...let the whole world know today there is a body of Hindu reformers who are pledged to remove this blot of untouchability.”¹⁴⁴ The fast placed Ambedkar under immense pressure to re-negotiate the terms of political representation due to fear of the massive retribution upon DCs in the eventuality of Gandhi’s death.¹⁴⁵ He accepted the alternative settlement known as the Poona Pact, which eliminated separate electorates for DCs and increased the number of reserved seats as part of a joint Hindu electorate. In this way, the community was re-subordinated to the logic of enumeration that made possible the notion of a Hindu majority. According to Galanter, the political effect was to dramatize the issue of untouchability while preventing arrangements that would foster an independent

¹⁴¹ Letter of M.K. Gandhi to J. Ramsay MacDonald, 9 September 1932. In *Ibid*, 87.

¹⁴² *Ibid*.

¹⁴³ Nagaraj, *The Flaming Feet*, 47.

¹⁴⁴ Gandhi’s Response to the Minorities Pact, Round Table Conferences London, in *What Gandhi and the Congress*, 68.

¹⁴⁵ Nagaraj, *The Flaming Feet*, 35.

movement sufficiently strong to belie the Congress claim to represent all of India.¹⁴⁶ However, the technologies of colonial governance were but one means through which anti-caste politics could realize a break from the caste Hindu order. At a meeting of the Depressed Classes in October 1935 Ambedkar declared, “it is an unfortunate fact that I have been born a Hindu...but I can promise you this. I will not die a Hindu.”¹⁴⁷ Ambedkar ultimately fulfilled this promise in his public conversion to Buddhism along with half a million others on 14 October 1956.

After 1932 both Gandhi and Ambedkar strengthened their distinct methods of dealing with untouchability. Gandhi’s fast was memorialized in the book *The Epic Fast* by Pyarelal Nayyar. Nayyar described the fast’s tremendous significance in awakening the collective conscience of the nation:

the entire Indian nation with its three hundred millions of people...was thrown into one long, unbroken convulsion of anguish, terror, grief and despair. When it emerged from the spasm...The age old citadel of untouchability had been leveled to the ground, and strong, eager hands were busily at work clearing away the debris of the crumbled edifice.¹⁴⁸

Gandhi’s strength and resilience amidst this atmosphere of upheaval was a testament to his conviction that the machinery of law would not bring the untouchables’ salvation. This could only come if the caste Hindus felt ashamed and did penance for their practices. As a public rite of self-purification, Gandhi’s fast sought to consolidate the guilt it had released in the hearts of upper castes, and reduced untouchables to the status of passive spectators.¹⁴⁹ Accordingly, the new anti-untouchability organization formed by Gandhi in September 1932, the Harijan Sevak Sangh (Servants of Untouchables Society), was quickly closed to untouchable leadership. The decision was defended on the grounds that it was an organization for penitents, for the expiation of the guilt of the caste Hindus. The aim of the Sangh was limited to the “constructive work” of social, economic and educational uplift of the Harijans, which was expected to go a long way towards

¹⁴⁶ Galanter, *Competing Equalities*, 32-33.

¹⁴⁷ Quoted in Rao, *The Caste Question*, 99.

¹⁴⁸ *The Epic Fast* (Ahmedabad: Karnatak Printing Press, 1932), 3.

¹⁴⁹ Nagaraj, *The Flaming Feet*, 67-68.

combating untouchability. Social reforms such as inter-dining, inter-marriages and the objective of abolishing caste were explicitly outside of the scope of the organization.

Ambedkar outlined the historical development of the Congress outlook towards untouchability and how this culminated in its position at the Round Table Conferences in *What Gandhi and the Congress Have Done to the Untouchables*. The text is an account of how “Mr. Gandhi and the Congress opposed, inch by inch up to the very last moment, every one of their (the Depressed Classes) demands for political safeguards.”¹⁵⁰

Ambedkar argued that the increase in the number of overall seats provided by the Poona Pact could never be deemed as compensation for the loss of separate electorates and the double vote. These would have been political weapons beyond reckoning, as they placed the Untouchables in a position to influence the results of general elections.¹⁵¹ Under the Communal Award the caste Hindus would have been dependent on the votes of Untouchables and thus unable to neglect their interests. Under the joint electorate system caste Hindus outnumbered Depressed Classes in reserved constituencies by a ratio of ten to one. Thus, the Poona Pact transferred the right of the latter to select their own representatives to the former. The destructive implications of the Pact for the independent struggle were evident from the very first elections held under the Government of India Act, 1935. Undertaking a detailed discussion of the 1937 elections to the Provincial Assemblies, Ambedkar argued that the Congress had mobilized their considerable financial resources to nominate candidates from the Depressed Classes who pledged to the Congress program in reserved constituencies, successfully gaining 51% of these seats.¹⁵² However, Depressed Class members of the Congress were deprived of any share in the cabinet and subjected to rigorous party discipline that prevented them from raising issues and introducing legislation that was not approved by the executive. The Congress followed a system of selection that laid down different qualifications for different classes of candidates. In particular, Depressed Classes with few qualifications were preferred over those more qualified. This secured for the Party the support of a “docile unintelligent crowd of non-Brahmins and Untouchables who by their intellectual

¹⁵⁰ Ambedkar, *What Gandhi and the Congress*, ii.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid*, 94-95.

¹⁵² *Ibid*.

attainments... would be content to follow the lead of Caste Hindus for no other consideration except that of having been raised to the status of members of the Legislatures.”¹⁵³ Ambedkar argued that the objective of forming a docile constituency among the untouchables was being simultaneously pursued through Gandhi’s Harijan Sevak Sangh: “The Sangh is intolerant of any movement on the part of the untouchables which is independent and opposed to the Hindus”. The Sangh’s program of constructive work for the uplift of untouchables was ultimately a plan to “kill them by kindness.”¹⁵⁴ This direct and concise dismantling of the affective politics of upper caste reform registers that to become the object of pity and uplift is the death of an assertive political subject.

Anti-caste and Dalit political discourse continually returns to the consequences of the Poona Pact of 1932 for the struggle of untouchables to assert autonomy from Caste Hindu society and attain political power. Nagaraj describes this crucial historical moment in terms of the metaphorical origins of the Dalit movement. As such, entire parameters of the Dalit movement are an attempt to build the cultural politics of disidentification vis-à-vis Gandhian models of reasoning and feeling.¹⁵⁵ The renewed upsurge of anti-caste struggles in the 1970s marked by the founding of the Dalit Panthers in 1972 explicitly rejected the co-opted political leadership beholden to the Congress. Since then the theme of internal degeneration of the movement and the subjectivity of Dalit political elites have been critical points of reflection for activists. On 24th September 1982, the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Poona Pact, the highly influential political leader Kanshi Ram released his manifesto for Dalit liberation, entitled *The Chamcha Age: An Era of the Stooges*. He argued that the Poona Pact reduced the Depressed Classes to nominal representatives of their community, as “no untouchable who did not agree to be a nominee of the Caste Hindus, and be a Chamcha (stooge) in their hands, could be elected in a joint electorate in which the untouchable voter was outvoted in a ratio of five to one.”¹⁵⁶ The Poona Pact had inaugurated the era of the stooges and political power was

¹⁵³ Ibid., 101.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 145.

¹⁵⁵ *The Flaming Feet*, 69.

¹⁵⁶ Kanshi Ram, *The Chamcha Age: An Era of the Stooges* (New Delhi: Kanshi Ram, 1982), 1.

the “master key” for the creation of a new era of Dalit emancipation. The Chamcha Age sought to familiarize the Dalit-Shoshit-Samaj (Society of the Oppressed) with the significance of the encounter between Ambedkar and Gandhi in 1932 and underscored the need to continue this historical struggle for political power. The return to 1932 in anti-caste discourse undermines the representation of the reservation framework enshrined in the Indian Constitution as a settlement of historical debt and a marker of upper caste tolerance and benevolence. Rather, the policy is located within a longer trajectory of duplicity, betrayal and imposition. In this historicization, reservations did not emerge from the progressive ideals of the anti-colonial nationalist leadership. The policy was a negotiated outcome of the tensions between the Congress led nationalist movement and the anti-caste movement led by Ambedkar in the context of colonial rule. Omvedt argues that since this time, Dalit and anti-caste movements have been seen as diversionary both from the perspective of economic class struggle and the national struggle against imperialism because of their willingness to treat the Indian elite, not foreign powers, as the ‘main enemy.’¹⁵⁷ Over the course of these historical contentions the representation of Dalit demands for political representation and economic opportunities as instrumental and short sighted were critically shaped. When evaluated in relation to this historical perspective, descriptions of reservation policy in terms of national disintegration and caste wars are not simply rhetorical embellishment. Such claims betray deep investments in a particular understanding of the nation-state in which Hindus constitute the demographic and moral majority.

Chapter Breakdown

In Chapter 1, I trace the affective and legal discourses about caste, minority rights and reservation in the Constituent Assembly Debates. The provisions for caste based reservation and rights for religious minorities are hailed as a significant achievement in the literature on Indian Constitutionalism. However, my reading of the debates illustrates that there was considerable resentment about the inclusion of these rights in the Constituent Assembly. A dominant argument in the Assembly was that reservation was a divisive colonial policy that produced agonistic feelings of difference among Scheduled Castes and Muslims. Its continuation would prevent the development of trust, goodwill

¹⁵⁷ Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution*, 14.

and love between majority and minority groups. Assembly members thus framed their acceptance of reservation and minority rights as a gesture of generosity of the Hindu majority towards irrational and inferior subjects. The acceptance of reservation for SCs was being temporarily tolerated due to the socio-economic backwardness of the community and with the expectation that this would achieve their assimilation into the Hindu community. Thus, the use of reservation to advance different, autonomous interests would not be tolerated. This discourse delegitimized the meaning of reservation as the right to representation and portrayed those who claimed this right as divisive subjects who breached the limits of upper caste tolerance.

In Chapter 2, I examine how a novel political subjectivity became central to the evaluation of post-colonial reservations policy, namely, that of the educated middle class Dalit. I explore the representation of this subject in three narratives about class mobility, discrimination and untouchability, drawing attention to the contrast between liberal modernist accounts and those emerging from the creative literature connected to the Dalit Panther movement. I locate these texts within the trajectory of reservation politics prior to 1991, that is, prior to the national crisis over the extension of reservations to Other Backward Castes in central government services. Prior to 1991 anti-reservation practices had taken a variety of forms, including violent protests, the formation of explicitly anti-reservation worker's organizations, failed implementation and harassment of Dalits. The discrimination and humiliation faced by professional Dalits in institutions from which they had been historically excluded revealed that the violence of the caste system was firmly entrenched in structures of modernity and urbanization. Critical awareness of upper caste perceptions about lower castes, in particular their expectations that the latter be docile, compliant and grateful for the former's benevolence, was linked to articulations of militant, confrontational Dalit subjectivity. The politicization of Dalits in the 1970s involved an explicit rejection of their constitution as objects of upper caste pity and guilt, and asserted the rights to power and self-representation. Against this context, critical reflection on Dalit middle class subjectivity in creative literature represented class mobility as an isolating, ambivalent and painful process. Dalit literary activism thus refused the representation of the middle class Dalit subject as a marker of the nation's

progress towards a modern casteless society. That is, as a subject that enables the conversion of upper caste guilt into national pride.

In Chapter 3, I turn to the fierce public debate in 1990-1991 over the implementation of the Mandal Commission Report (1980), which recommended reserved employment for OBCs in central government services. The contents of the Report called attention to the glaring dominance of upper castes within public institutions and raised the question of the caste privileges of the “secular elite”. Reviewing the anti-Mandal discourse in the national English language media, I highlight the historical and cultural resources that were used to produce alternate explanations for this dominance that rendered caste privilege irrelevant. Ranging from narratives about caste under Mughal and British (i.e. non-Hindu) rule to affirmations of the principles of merit and efficiency, anti-reservation discourses reconciled the elite claim to be beyond caste in the secular-public sphere with blatantly casteist stereotypes about Dalits, OBCs and “reserved category” students and workers. Drawing upon a static, colonial understanding of caste groups as infinitely and irreducibly divided, it was claimed that OBC reservations would result in national disintegration, “caste wars” and a second partition of the nation. In contrast, support for reservations among Dalit activists was articulated to an expansive, non-essentialist notion of community based on the concept of “Bahujan” (majority). Alliances between SCs, OBCs and religious minorities were envisioned in terms of a “majority of the oppressed”, thus challenging the concept of a “Hindu majority” as fabrication of a privileged minority. Attending to the alternative meanings of community, caste and nation in anti-caste, pro-reservation discourses underscores the inability of upper castes to come to terms with the autonomous politicization of subaltern castes. Opposition to the Mandal Commission extended beyond the defense of employment opportunities. This opposition betrayed investments in a vision of the nation in which the Caste Hindu is the normative citizen-subject and inspirational ideal for the masses.

In Chapter 4, I attend to the debate on reservation for Muslims, which revolves around two different but entangled sets of questions. First, about whether Muslims in India face discriminatory treatment as a distinct religious minority community and whether this treatment requires redress through affirmative action quotas. Second, about the extent to which caste based discrimination and specifically untouchability structures

internal inequalities among Muslims. Reviewing the production of knowledge about Muslims in post-partition India, I highlight the prevalence of discourses of fear, suspicion and nostalgia that constitute the community as an affective formation that borders on the pathological. In this way, the solution to the “Muslim problem” in India has been defined in terms of the community’s willingness to transcend emotions that prevent national integration and modernization. I then examine the development of organizations representing the interests of lower caste, or Pasmanda Muslims, which emerged in the context of political mobilizations around the Mandal Commission in the 1990s. In contrast to modernization, Pasmanda activists call for the democratization of their community and reject the authority of historically privileged, upper caste Muslim elites to represent their interests under the rubric of minority rights. Pasmanda discourse illustrates how Dalit and anti-caste politics pose an epistemological challenge to established categories of majority and minority in terms of religious identity. While government commissions and the judiciary have acknowledged the existence of caste discrimination in non-Hindu communities, they refuse to extend the provisions for Scheduled Castes to Muslims subjected to untouchability. As such, they maintain the overarching assumption that religion is the principle marker of difference and sacred text the principle site of religious meaning.

Chapter One. Feeling Difference, Differentiating Feelings: Caste and Minority Rights in the Constituent Assembly Debates

On 4th November, 1948, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar introduced the Draft Constitution for consideration to the Constituent Assembly of India. The Draft Constitution had been circulated eight months prior to this motion. Therefore, members of the Drafting Committee were aware of the reactions to its provisions, in particular the criticisms against it. In his address to the assembly, Ambedkar identified and engaged with the following points of critique as most commonly raised against the document: 1) its lack of originality, especially its re-production of large sections of the Government of India Act, 1935, 2) its failure to represent the ancient (Hindu) polity of India which could be expressed through village panchayats (councils) and 3) the extent of political safeguards for minorities. Ambedkar's defense of the Draft Constitution against these critiques underscored the pervasive forms of inequality that structured Indian society and within which it would be necessary to cultivate a "constitutional morality": "democracy is only a top-soil on an Indian soil, which is essentially undemocratic."¹⁵⁸ On the issue of village panchayats, he challenged in stark terms the fascination of the colonized elite with village society as a site of authentic nationalism. Ambedkar attributed the love of the "intellectual Indian" for the village to its colonial representation as a self-preserving and self-sufficient unit that had survived wars and revolutions. However, he argued that mere survival had no value. These romanticized representations ignored the relations of power and violence through which village units were organized:

I am therefore surprised that those who condemn provincialism and communalism should come forward as champions of the village. What is the village but a sink of localism, a den of ignorance, narrow-mindedness and communalism? I am glad that the Draft Constitution has discarded the village and adopted the individual as its unit.¹⁵⁹

The dominant discourse about communalism in the Assembly defined the term primarily as the minority ideology of the Muslim League against the secularism of the Congress.

¹⁵⁸ *Constituent Assembly Debates (Proceedings)*, 12 vols., 9 December 1946- 24 January 1950 (hereafter *CAD*), vol. 7, 4 November 1948, 38-39.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 39.

Members endlessly invoked the communalism of minorities as that evil which had been nurtured by the British and resulted in the partition of their “motherland”. To give further rights to the Muslim minority in the Constitution would perpetuate communalism and separatist politics. In contrast, Ambedkar’s deployment of this term served as a commentary on the hypocrisy of Caste Hindus in their approach to the question of religious community. For Ambedkar, communalism could not be isolated to the specific political agendas and mindsets of minority communities. He argued that the minorities had in fact loyally accepted the rule of the majority “which is basically a communal majority and not a political majority.”¹⁶⁰ Thus highlighting the dominance of Caste Hindus within the Congress, he challenged the claim of the party to be representative of all groups in Indian society. Romanticized representations of the village obscured the ways in which the particular interests of (upper caste) Hindu communities were maintained through land relations, social segregation and untouchability within and across village units.

For days following this speech, assembly members responded in anger and resentment to Ambedkar’s characterization of village society and his neglect of the political and spiritual traditions of the Indian people. These traditions were coterminous with Gandhi and the Congress Party: “In the whole Draft Constitution we see no trace of Congress outlook, no trace of Gandhian social and political outlook.”¹⁶¹ That the Draft Constitution failed to incorporate ideas originating from the authentic nation came to be articulated as an affront to Gandhi’s philosophy and further, a failure to capture the affective aspirations of the freedom struggle. Ambedkar had failed to identify with “those who had been fighting for the freedom of this country for 30 long years... he had been attacking the whole system and the programme of Gandhi and the Congress all his life time.”¹⁶² The Drafting Committee was described as incapable of understanding the spirit of the freedom struggle with their hearts. The Draft Constitution neglected the “turmoiled birth of our nation after years of travail and tribulation. That is why the tone of Dr. Ambedkar’s speech yesterday with regard to our poorest, the lowliest and the lost was

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Arun Chandra Guha, *CAD*, vol. 7, 6 November 1948, 259.

¹⁶² T. Prakashan, *CAD*, vol. 7, 6 November 1948, 260.

what it was.”¹⁶³ Members rejected the suggestion that they had been influenced by colonial knowledge. They spoke of the deep affections they had developed for village communities through their engagement with the nationalist movement: “Sir, I may say that it is not owing to Metcalfe but...to a far greater man...our master and father of the nation, that this love of ours for the villages has grown.”¹⁶⁴ In these responses Ambedkar’s comments on the village were explained as a result of his disengagement from the (Congress) nationalist movement. His critique of the village unit was read as contempt for the village people, imagined as uniformly poor, lowly and lost. This contempt was a reflection of his urban location and Western education (not his anti-caste position), factors in a more general malaise among elites whose position vis-à-vis colonial education resulted in their rejection of traditional sources of knowledge found in India’s villages. It was “our leader, Mahatma Gandhi, who advised the intelligentsia to go back to the villages...as far as knowledge of nature and wisdom gathered from Shastras and Puranas are concerned...there is more wisdom and knowledge in the villages than in our modern cities.”¹⁶⁵ Ambedkar’s interlocutors in the Assembly had overcome this alienated condition through an embrace of Gandhian philosophy that linked love for the village and Hindu culture with national integration. Their task as educated political representatives was to bring “light and knowledge” to villages so they could become “the most potent forces for holding the country together and for its progress towards the ideal of Ram Rajya.”¹⁶⁶

These contestations over the meaning of the village in the emergent nation – imagined variously as a site of communalism, as the authentic source of nationalist sentiment and as a space to illuminate with modern knowledge – are indicative of the contending and contradictory political projects circulating in the debates of the Constituent Assembly. As participants in this key process of nation-state formation, members saw themselves as doing much more than producing a legal document. Rather, they were responsible for drafting a framework for the further cultivation of nationalist

¹⁶³ H.V. Kamath, *CAD*, vol. 7, 5 November 1948, 246.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.* The reference is to Charles Metcalfe, former Governor General of India, who described village communities as “little republics”.

¹⁶⁵ Sarangdhar Das, *CAD*, vol. 7, 6 November 1948, 278.

¹⁶⁶ Shibbanlal Saksena, *CAD*, vol. 7, 6 November 1948, 275.

feeling, for enshrining collective memory and for deciphering which forms of social life should be valued. As an unwavering critic of the upper caste leadership of the Congress and the entrenched caste inequality of Indian society, Ambedkar was deemed incapable of producing this framework. This was captured in the argument that “the real soul of India is not represented by this Constitution... (it) cannot give a true picture of what many people would like India to be”.¹⁶⁷ The national future envisioned by the people of India could not be realized through legal frameworks and institutional arrangements alone. Assembly members countered Ambedkar’s argument that the Congress was not a political majority by claiming legitimacy as “representatives of the will, emotions and ambitions of the people... though our representation is not based on numbers.”¹⁶⁸ The debates thus reflect Povinelli’s argument that the state struggle for hegemony depends on representing and working through liberal practices and intentions on two different registers: 1) a principled, universalizing language of law, citizenship and rights and 2) a language of love and shame, of traumatic and reparative memory and haunted dreams.¹⁶⁹ In this chapter I am interested in how these affective and legal registers of liberal constitutionalism shape, and are shaped by, the forms of (mis) recognition extended to Scheduled Castes and religious minorities, particularly Muslims.

Tracing discourses about caste, minorities and reservation in the Constituent Assembly Debates, I interrogate how the status of Scheduled Castes and Muslims in the nation-state was conceived and the objectives to which this status was linked. I will focus primarily on one aspect of group rights, namely, the reservation of seats in legislatures. In the existing literature on Indian Constitutionalism reservations for Scheduled Castes are assumed to be an outcome of the collective commitment to the elimination of caste based inequality. The Indian Constitution is considered an expression of commitment to the revolutionary social transformation of a highly unequal society stratified on the basis of

¹⁶⁷ Pandit Thakur Das Bhargava, *CAD*, vol. 7, 6 November 1948, 276.

¹⁶⁸ Pandit Balkrishna Sharma, *CAD*, vol. 7, 5 November 1948, 248.

¹⁶⁹ Elizabeth Povinelli, *The Cunning of Recognition: Indigenous Alterities and the Making of Australian Multiculturalism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), 29.

caste, class, gender and religion.¹⁷⁰ One of its most unique features is the recognition of caste inequality, represented by the legal abolition of untouchability and the entrenchment of reservation as a key modality of affirmative action.¹⁷¹ Thus, a concern for liberal justice is “nowhere more evident than in constitutional provisions for affirmative action programs.”¹⁷² Provisions enabling the reform of Hinduism further demonstrate the resolve to transform religiously sanctioned hierarchy.¹⁷³ Similarly, studies of India’s reservation policies generally adhere to the premise that their inclusion in the Constitution was the result of a widespread consensus about justice for SCs in the Constituent Assembly.¹⁷⁴ The consensus, it is held, was based on the recognition that the

¹⁷⁰ Granville Austin, *The Indian Constitution: Cornerstone of a Nation* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999); Gary Jeffrey Jacobsohn, *The Wheel of Law: India’s Secularism in Comparative Constitutional Context* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); Zoya Hasan, E. Sridharan and R. Sudharshan, ed., *India’s Living Constitution: Ideas, Practices and Controversies* (London: Anthem Press, 2005); Rajeev Bhargava, “Introduction: Outline of a Political Theory of the Indian Constitution,” in *Politics and Ethics of the Indian Constitution*, ed. Rajeev Bhargava (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008), 1-43; Zoya Hasan, *The Politics of Inclusion: Castes, Minorities and Affirmative Action* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press); Christine Keating, *Decolonizing Democracy: Transforming the Social Contract in India* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011).

¹⁷¹ The Constitution guaranteed reservation for both Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. However, the colonial origins of the policy and its future implications were not discussed with specific reference to the latter in the debates I review in this chapter. The lack of attention to Scheduled Tribes (Adivasis) is related to their distinct set of demands, which centralized the importance of land and regional autonomy. Jaipal Singh, the president of the Adivasi Mahasabha and the chief proponent of these rights in the Constituent Assembly, took a more overtly compromising position vis-à-vis Nehru and the Congress in comparison to Ambedkar. However, “the aim of thwarting adivasi assertion was institutionalized in the very map of the republic”. Sheshank Kela, *A Rogue and Peasant Slave: Adivasi Resistance, 1800-2000* (New Delhi: Navayana, 2012), 298. Also see Nandini Sundar, *Subalterns and Sovereigns: An Anthropological History of Bastar, 1854-1996* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996).

¹⁷² Rajeev Bhargava, “Introduction,” 23.

¹⁷³ Rajeev Bhargava, “India’s Secular Constitution,” in *India’s Living Constitution*, 104-130.

¹⁷⁴ Marc Galanter, *Competing Equalities: Law and the Backward Classes in India* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984); V.A. Pai Panandiker, ed., *The Politics of Backwardness: Reservation Policy in India* (New Delhi: Konark Publishers, 1997); Partha Ghosh, “Positive Discrimination in India: Political Analysis,” *Ethnic Studies Report* 15, no.2 (1997): 136-172; Hasan, *The Politics of Inclusion*, 18-41.

form of historical oppression experienced by SCs would not enable them to avail of opportunities for education, employment and political participation.

This is contrasted with the exclusion of Muslims from the reservation framework. While the right to political representation was initially extended to Muslims, it was eliminated in the final stages of Constitution making. The principal argument supporting this decision was that the political recognition of religious difference was incompatible with the establishment of a secular nation-state. In the context of the mass displacement and violence of partition that was “the material condition for statehood in South Asia”¹⁷⁵, it was impossible for members of the Muslim League to press for separate political representation in the Assembly. Instead, the status of Muslims as a religious minority would be protected through the Constitutional declaration of secularism as well as provisions for rights to religious freedom, the right to protect their language, script and culture and the right to administer their own educational institutions.

Such accounts of the seamless incorporation of reservation policy into the Constitution dovetail with portrayals of Constitution-making as a rational, deliberative and representative process. The atmosphere of the Constituent Assembly has been described as one of trust in the leadership and compromise among the members.¹⁷⁶ Thus, the Constitution is held to stand as a testament to the extraordinary vision of its framers, “who disagreed hardly at all about the ends they sought and only slightly about the means for achieving them”.¹⁷⁷ By attending to the affective registers through which discourses about caste, minorities and rights were shaped, this chapter departs from the assumption that the differentiated framework of group rights was primarily the outcome of a principled commitment to liberal justice. While the literature describes these rights as an achievement, my reading of the debates in the Assembly reveals considerable anxiety about their harmful implications for the future nation. A common refrain of Assembly members was that at best, legal provisions were temporary measures with limited effectiveness when compared to the cultivation of genuine feelings of love, trust and goodwill between the majority and various minority groups. At worst, these provisions

¹⁷⁵ Amir Mufti, *Enlightenment in the Colony: The Jewish Question and the Crisis of Postcolonial Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

¹⁷⁶ Austin, *The Indian Constitution*, xix.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

exacerbated difference and worked against the cultivation of these affective bonds. Their inclusion in the Constitution was an unfortunate reminder that caste and religious differences had not been transcended.

My reading of the Constituent Assembly debates shows that this specific understanding of group rights as obstructive to emotional integration was deployed to prioritize a particular vision of the nation-state and its majority community and in turn, marginalize alternative visions. The existence of reservation was seen as a continuation of the divisive policies of the colonial state. These policies were held responsible for the false perception among minorities that they required protection from the majority. Opposition was thus articulated in terms of the kinds of affective dispositions that the colonial system of representation had created among Scheduled Castes and Muslims. That is, separate representation produced agonistic feelings of difference among these subjects, leading them to mistrust the majority and in turn, preventing the emotional integration of the nation. In the debates of the Assembly reservations were continually referred to as a “concession”, an unfortunate means of national integration and a “necessary evil” – a technology ultimately irreconcilable to the collective (upper caste) national conscience. Although Assembly members did not mount a sustained campaign to eliminate political representation for Scheduled Castes over the course of the debates, they continually expressed ambivalence and resentment about its inclusion in the Constitution. I will argue that Assembly members sought to deal with this anxiety in two ways. First, by re-framing group rights in general and reservations in particular as a gesture of generosity and compromise of the Hindu majority towards marginalized (Scheduled Caste) and minority (Muslim) groups. Members that spoke for and with the majority framed their acceptance of reservations as an exercise in tolerance of the irrational demands of inferior subjects, thus naturalizing Caste Hindu interests as the national interest. As a display of generosity these concessions would allay their unfounded fears about Hindus and the Congress, fears that the colonial powers had nurtured. Second, members placed temporal and conceptual restrictions on the meaning of reservation. They insisted that the policy was only being accepted as a temporary measure for Scheduled Castes due to the socio-economic disadvantages of these communities. However, the use of reservations to advance different, autonomous

interests would not be tolerated. The elimination of political safeguards for Muslims served as a key process through which these temporal and conceptual restrictions were articulated.

My analysis highlights the relationship between the exclusion of Muslims from the reservation framework and the problematic grounds of Scheduled Caste inclusion. As discussed in the previous chapter, Ambedkar asserted the right to separate political representation for Scheduled Castes as a distinct minority community. By insisting that reservations were only being temporarily accepted to redress the socio-economic backwardness of SCs, Assembly members delegitimized the meaning of reservation as the right to representation. Eliminating these rights for Muslims was not meant to suggest that SCs were the only appropriate subjects of political rights. Rather, this exclusion was held to inaugurate a broader trajectory in which all forms of reservation would be dispensed with and replaced by relations of trust and goodwill between communities. In the conceptual narrowing of reservations as a means to address socio-economic backwardness only, SCs were represented as intellectually and politically inadequate subjects. They had been manipulated (by Ambedkar, the Muslims and the British) into perceiving their interests and identity as separate from the majority community. Attending to the representation of Scheduled Castes in dominant discourses illustrates the contradictory mobilizations of the concept of untouchability in the Constituent Assembly. As the principal reason for the historical oppression and structural disadvantages of these communities, untouchability required Assembly members to accept the inclusion of (temporary) reservation in the Constitution. On the other hand, these same disadvantages – poverty, illiteracy and economic exploitation – meant that the SCs were vulnerable to manipulation and incapable of understanding their “real interests”. Thus, debates about caste, minority and reservation were as much about undermining Ambedkar’s vision of a separate identity and political power for Scheduled Castes as they were about concern for uplifting the “backward”.

This chapter is organized into three sections. In section one, I begin by outlining the context of the negotiations for the transfer of power between the British colonial administration, the Congress Party and the Muslim League that led to the formation of the Constituent Assembly. Next, I examine debates about untouchability and religious

conversion that emerged in the Interim Report on Fundamental Rights. Discussed in April 1947, this report is representative of attempts by the Assembly to establish the parameters through which caste discrimination would be recognized by the state. I will illustrate how discourses of protection and vulnerability were mobilized to prevent Scheduled Caste rejection of Hinduism through religious conversion. In section two, I attend to the ways that the concepts of minority, reservation and community were defined during the debate on the first Report on Minority Rights, in August 1947. The first Report on Minority Rights extended political reservation to both Muslims and Scheduled Castes. Reviewing efforts by SCs and Muslims in the Assembly to link the purpose of reservation with the representation of different, autonomous interests, it will be seen that for most assembly members, such attempts suggested that the generosity of the majority was being taken advantage of. In section 3, I turn to the revised Report on Minority Rights, discussed in May 1949. This report eliminated all political safeguards for religious minorities. This resolution came to be hailed as part of a broader trajectory in which safeguards for all communities would eventually be eliminated and replaced with affective bonds of trust, goodwill and love among national citizens.

Framing the Scheduled Caste Subject: Untouchability, Religion and Rights

During the Round Table Conferences held in London between 1930 and 1932 that led to the Government of India Act, 1935, Ambedkar was forced to concede his demand for separate political representation for Depressed Classes/Scheduled Castes due to the immense pressure generated by Gandhi's fast unto death against it. The resulting settlement known as the Poona Pact eliminated separate political representation for SCs, subordinating them to the logic of enumeration that made possible the notion of a Hindu majority. However, the articulation of a separate political identity continued to be a significant aspect of anti-caste politics. After 1942, the Scheduled Caste Federation repeatedly included in its resolutions the demand for separate representation and recognition as a separate community.¹⁷⁸ In statements made by various Viceroys, the

¹⁷⁸ Ramnarayan S. Rawat, "Partition Politics and Acchut Identity: A Study of the Scheduled Caste Federation and Dalit Politics in UP, 1946-1948," in *Partitions of*

colonial authorities concurred that the Scheduled Castes were a separate community whose consent was necessary in the transfer of power.¹⁷⁹ The colonial authorities had already stated that power would not be transferred to “any system of government whose authority is directly denied by large and powerful elements in India’s national life.”¹⁸⁰ This was in recognition of the concerns of the Muslim League, which stressed the inseparability of constitutional issues from those of community representation. Mohammad Ali Jinnah argued that a constituent assembly formed without recognition of the demand for Muslim autonomy would simply mean a “second and larger edition of the Congress” and was out of the question.¹⁸¹ Thus, minority representation was the key point of contention in the formulation of a Constitution. However, the Cabinet Mission established in 1946 to initiate the Constitutional process and mediate between different groups did not include the Scheduled Caste Federation, nor did its settlement provide any specific safeguards for SCs.¹⁸² The arrangements for elections to the Constituent Assembly from the provincial assemblies recognized only three communities: 1) General, 2) Muslim and 3) Sikh. Moreover, elections were held by limited franchise subject to property, tax and educational qualifications. Only 28.5% of the adult population could vote in the provincial assembly elections of 1946.¹⁸³ This further restricted the minimal scope for participation of subaltern castes in the negotiated transfer of power.

Due to the breakdown of negotiations between the Congress and the Muslim League on community representation, the latter boycotted the first session of the Constituent Assembly held in December 1946. Gandhi and representatives from the Princely states were also absent. “As the preparations for the transfer of power began, the

Memory: The Afterlife of the Division of India, ed. Suvir Kaul (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 115.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ Statement of Lithgow, 8 August, 1940. In Shabnum Tejani, *Indian Secularism: An Intellectual History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 239.

¹⁸¹ Muhammad Ali Jinnah on the Constituent Assembly, reply to Mahatma Gandhi, 14 December 1939. In Ibid., 238.

¹⁸² The Cabinet Mission Plan proposed an Indian state in which the powers of the central government would be limited to foreign affairs, communications and defence. Provinces would be grouped into three regions (majority Muslim, majority Hindu and roughly equal populations of both communities). Each group would devise their own provincial constitutions and then draft the national constitution.

¹⁸³ Austin, *The Indian Constitution*, 10.

new nation appeared at the very moment of its birth as a threatened entity”.¹⁸⁴ Under the terms of the Cabinet Mission Plan, this restricted the Assembly to the preliminary work of adopting an objectives resolution and electing committees to begin drafting fundamental rights and a federal system. Reports were prepared on Constitutional articles that were debated, amended and adopted by the Assembly. The Scheduled Caste Federation rejected the Cabinet Mission settlement and organized civil disobedience throughout India to protest against the British and the Congress. They demanded separate electorates and a blueprint on the position of SCs in independent India.¹⁸⁵ In meetings and demonstrations speakers warned of the undemocratic character of the caste-Hindus and their party, the Congress, citing the Poona Pact as a prime example.¹⁸⁶ Another significant development in this context was the building of an alliance between the SCF and the Muslim League. Ambedkar was elected to the Bengal Legislative Assembly as an independent candidate supported by the Muslim League. According to Nigam, this alliance indicated that at least to the two biggest minorities, the threat of upper caste Hindu rule being instituted in the name of swaraj was now as real as ever.¹⁸⁷ Emphasizing the similarity of their struggles against the Congress further legitimized the SCF’s claim to minority status. The Congress sought to undermine this alliance in order to isolate the Muslim League as anti-national and solely responsible for pushing the nation towards partition. Rawat describes the response of the Party to Scheduled Caste politicization as ranging from disrupting SCF meetings, urging SCs to join the Congress and promising religious reform. SCs were warned about the nefarious designs of Ambedkar and Jinnah, characterized as agents of imperialism and feudalism respectively, and as urban leaders lacking a mass base among the people.¹⁸⁸ Refusing to acknowledge the political agenda of the SCF, the Congress viewed the alliance as a manipulation of SCs by Muslims to fulfill their own communal aims.

¹⁸⁴ Aditya Nigam, “A Text Without Author: Reading the Constituent Assembly as Event,” in *Politics and Ethics*, 122.

¹⁸⁵ Rawat, “Partition Politics and Achhut Identity”, 119.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ Nigam, “A Text without Author”, 125.

¹⁸⁸ Rawat, “Partition Politics and Achhut Identity”, 125-126.

After the announcement of the partition of India and Pakistan in June 1947, the members of the Muslim League that joined the Constituent Assembly of India were greatly weakened in numbers and lacked strong leadership. The partition resulted in the increase of Congress Party representation from 69% to 82% in the Constituent Assembly.¹⁸⁹ As the horrific violence of partition unfolded, Muslims and the Muslim League were increasingly singled out as divisive and anti-national forces in the Constituent Assembly. Thus in the second phase of the proceedings, between November 1948 and January 1950, the issue of minority rights was intensely debated. Many members argued that if the Constitutional provisions were too generous, they would perpetuate divisive politics. The very possibility of security and cohesion in the nation was seen to hinge on an adequate resolution to the “Muslim question”. Provisions for group rights were evaluated not only in relation to formal principles of justice and equality as the basis for nationhood. Rather, they were debated through historical memories that linked certain kinds of political arrangements with the amplification of difference. The role of the separate electorate in producing particular kinds of dispositions and affective relationships between different groups was continually elaborated in the Constituent Assembly. Moreover, members remained haunted by the possibility of the collective exit of Scheduled Castes from the Hindu community. In this context of Caste Hindu, Congress dominance and grave concern for national unity, Ambedkar’s aim to secure a strong framework for minority rights confronted a membership that was hostile to his political vision.

The proceedings of the Constituent Assembly suggest that the legal abolition of untouchability was expected to dissolve any grounds for a distinct Scheduled Caste identity. Therefore, additional entitlements such as political representation were evaluated against concerns that caste based identities should not be perpetuated through a differentiated framework of rights. It was recognized that provisional measures were required to enable Scheduled Castes and Muslims to transition into an abstract national citizenship, a subject position they could not presently occupy due to differing historical

¹⁸⁹ Austin, *The Indian Constitution*, 14.

factors. However, the Constitution would be revisited after ten years and it was expected that all political safeguards would be eliminated at that time.¹⁹⁰

The abolition of untouchability was integral to the process of transcendence of caste and religious difference. The form of recognition extended by the nation-state was underpinned by expectations that the Scheduled Caste subject would be replaced by a Hindu national subject over time, and thus, cease to exist. The clause for the abolition of untouchability then operates on two registers: 1) the removal of a fundamental condition of inequality in Indian society and 2) the removal of the difference that separates “untouchables” from the larger Hindu community. However, the term “untouchability” itself remained undefined. There was considerable divergence among Assembly members about how, if at all, it should be defined, as well the extent to which it should anchor the discourse of rights in the Constitution.¹⁹¹

The Interim Report on Fundamental Rights was intended to be provisional in character, as it was expected that suggestions would arise for additional rights and alterations over time. While the Drafting Committee would be responsible for formally drafting the clauses at a later stage, the purpose of discussing the Interim Report was to accept the general principles of each of the clauses.¹⁹² At the onset of the debate on the Interim Report on Fundamental Rights, many members pointed out that without a definition of untouchability, it would be difficult for state institutions to implement anti-discrimination laws. Srijut Rohini Kumar Choudhary noted the vague definition in the document and proposed that it could be defined as “any act committed in exercise of discrimination on, grounds of religion, caste, or lawful vocation of life mentioned in Clause 4.”¹⁹³ Other members expressed concern that the approach to untouchability was disconnected from the larger issue of caste, which was inadequate because the former

¹⁹⁰ There is often a conflation of political and education/employment reservations in ongoing anti-reservation discourses, which claim that all reservations should have been eliminated in 10 years. These proceedings indicate that the 10 year limit pertains only to the former. I thank Sanjay Ingole for bringing this to my attention.

¹⁹¹ See *CAD*, vol. 3 Part 2, 29-30 April, 1947.

¹⁹² Sardar Patel, *CAD* vol. 3, 29 April, 1947, 399-400.

¹⁹³ *CAD*, vol. 3, 29 April, 1947, 413. Clause 4 stated: “The state shall make no discrimination against any citizen on grounds of religion, race, caste or sex” (See Appendix, 441).

was merely a symptom of the root cause: “unless we can do away with the caste system altogether there is no use tinkering with the problem of untouchability superficially”.¹⁹⁴ Amendments to include a definition into the abolition of untouchability clause were withdrawn on the basis that the legislature and judiciary were to define the content of and prescribe the punishment for the practice. However, attempts to define rights of equality with more explicit reference to the same continued in these debates. For example, the non-discrimination clause specifically listed access to restaurants, hotels, wells, tanks, roads and places of public resort maintained wholly or in part by public funds.¹⁹⁵ The clause thus recognized the socio-spatial negotiation of caste bodies that structured everyday life. Some assembly members sought to extend this further by including schools, hostels and, significantly, temples and places of worship into the non-discrimination clause. However, concern was also raised about the extent to which the Constitution should bear the imprints of caste and community. K.M. Munshi opposed these amendments on the grounds that untouchability was dealt with in a separate clause. There was no need to extend the scope of the definition of untouchability by bringing it into a more general non-discrimination clause.¹⁹⁶ P.S. Deshmukh argued that, “in drafting such a long clause we are throwing a long shadow of untouchability over the whole Constitution of India.”¹⁹⁷ This position ultimately prevailed as all amendments to expand the language on caste discrimination were rejected in the Assembly. These debates reflect the tension between the abstract equality of citizenship guaranteed by liberal rights frameworks and the specific, concrete forms of inequality to be addressed in any given context. Deshmukh’s argument suggests that explicitly referencing the latter would chain the nation to a shameful past. Shifting the responsibility of giving meaning to “untouchability” to the judiciary ensured that the Constitution would not be read as a permanent testament to the violence and hierarchy of Indian society. By refusing to abolish “caste” or “caste distinction” more broadly, the various ways in which the upper caste subject was constituted escaped scrutiny. As Gopal Guru argues, the framing of

¹⁹⁴ Ibid. Also see, Promatha Ranjan Thakur, 403, Dr. S.C. Banerjee, 413, Mr. Dharendra Nath Datta, 414.

¹⁹⁵ *CAD*, vol. 3, 29 April, 1947, 427.

¹⁹⁶ *CAD*, vol. 3, 29 April, 1947, 414.

¹⁹⁷ *CAD*, vol. 3, 29 April, 1947, 428.

untouchability in Constitutional provisions insulates the source of untouchability – the upper caste with the ability to inflict insult - and captures only the sites of untouchability.¹⁹⁸ Thus, “upper caste” identity is rendered unproblematic while the untouchable becomes an object of classification and regulation.

That the classification and regulation of the untouchable was considered necessary for the realization of a particular vision of the nation was demonstrated by a lengthy debate in this session over a proposed clause on religious conversion brought about by “coercion or undue influence”. This clause was representative of the anxieties of Caste Hindus about their status as a majority community, which was threatened by Scheduled Caste conversion to Islam, Buddhism and Christianity.¹⁹⁹ In the proposed clause the state would protect the rights of vulnerable citizens, especially minors, from the encroachments of “other” (i.e. non-Hindu) communities. The form of protection was non-recognition – the conversion brought about by coercion or undue influence would not be recognized by law. If the centrality of untouchability is an integral aspect of the constitution of Dalits as vulnerable citizen-subjects²⁰⁰, the attempt to regulate religious conversion reveals how vulnerability is also extended to represent Dalits as politically and intellectually inadequate subjects. Assembly members made a distinction between a rational, knowledgeable basis upon which some individuals convert to a different religion, and those that result from the devious intentions of minority communities taking advantage of the differences and disputes within the majority community. The main point of contention in this session was an amendment that the clause should include an age of consent, below which the conversion of children would not be recognized. Supporters of

¹⁹⁸ Gopal Guru, “Constitutional Justice: Positional and Cultural,” in *Politics and Ethics*, 230-248.

¹⁹⁹ On the role of conversion in anti-caste politics, see Gauri Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity, Belief* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998); Eva-Maria Hardtmann, *The Dalit Movement in India: Local Practices, Global Connections* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009).

²⁰⁰ Anupama Rao, *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2010).

the clause argued that the state must protect the rights of children whose parents had converted to a different religion.²⁰¹

Although this was framed as a clause with general applicability, the debate around it makes clear the specific subject imagined by its supporters:

you know well, Sir, that the victims of these religious conversions are ordinarily from the depressed classes. The preachers of other religions approach these classes of people, take advantage of their ignorance, extend all sorts of temptations and ultimately convert them.²⁰²

Therefore, the children of Scheduled Caste parents who had opted out of Hinduism required state protection, as their conversion would be “coercion and undue influence under all circumstances.”²⁰³ The juxtaposition of the innocence of children with the representation of Scheduled Caste conversion due to ignorance suggests that assembly members sought to extend the scope of state protection of vulnerable subjects in such a way that posited an intellectual vulnerability of the Scheduled Caste subject. The nation imagined here was not concerned with the emancipation of stigmatized marginal subjects, but with the protection of the innocent poor tempted by money. In this way, the historically specific vulnerability to violence and exclusion arising out of caste stigma is circumvented by an appeal to the concept of backwardness – conversion is due to poverty and illiteracy and thus lacks any real moral conviction. Moreover, religious conversion is of no use to Scheduled Castes because their backwardness is ultimately economic, and requires state intervention. These debates gesture to a paradox in the concepts of backwardness and untouchability. Although these concepts legitimized certain rights for SCs they could also be pressed into service of upper caste benevolence and protection – these subjects required protection from themselves.

²⁰¹ This debate should also be considered in terms of how a Hindu majority is being produced in post-partition India through the claiming/rejection of children. For example, the government’s policy towards abducted Hindu women reflected a preoccupation with forced conversion. Resettlement in India required that children with Muslim fathers be left in Pakistan. See Ritu Menon, “Reproducing the Legitimate Community: Secularity, Sexuality and the State in Post-Partition India,” in *Appropriating Gender: Women’s Activism and Politicized Religion in South Asia*, ed. Patricia Jeffrey and Amrita Basu (New York: Routledge, 1998), 15-32.

²⁰² P.R. Thakur, *CAD*, vol. 3, 1 May, 1947, 495.

²⁰³ Purshottam Das Tandon, *CAD*, vol. 3, 1 May, 1947, 497.

These debates also contain a commentary on minority communities as motivated by the desire to divide and weaken the Hindu majority: “people of other faiths have exploited our differences in order to increase their own numbers. The consequence is that...such castes as Bhangis and Chamars are converted, and with them their children also go into the fold of the new religion.”²⁰⁴ The proposed clause imagined SCs and their children as the victims in need of state protection and religious minorities as the perpetrators of forced conversion. In other words, the debate was framed in terms of the right to convert others rather than the individual right to select one’s religion. Many assembly members took this opportunity to remind the minorities of the already demonstrated generosity of the majority community in granting extensive rights to freedom of religion. They should be grateful for this generosity and concede to the regulation of proselytizing activity implied in this clause. The proposed clause on conversion then sought to regulate Scheduled Caste and minority communities simultaneously. Vulnerability renders the former an object to be claimed. As will be seen in the following sections, this concern about the ability of different communities to “claim” SCs came to animate the definition of the term minority itself. Rendered inconceivable in such discourses were alternative political possibilities for SC subjects in which symbolic and cultural struggles, including those enacted through religious conversion, posed a challenge to power relations. This was not only a question of futurity, but rather, was a way of marginalizing the anti-caste struggles that took place during the colonial period from the historical narrative of nationalism. The dominant discourses of caste and community assumed that Caste Hindu social reform was sufficient to enable national integration. This integration was tied to the consolidation of an undifferentiated Hindu majority.

Framing the Scheduled Caste Subject: Reservation, Minority, Community

The document that has been produced by the Advisory Committee, I consider to be the Magna Carta for the welfare of Harijans of this land. Sir...it was due to the third man residing in this country that brought out several minority communities. I do admit that, but Sir, it was given to Mahatma Gandhi as a great Avatar to find the disabilities of a section of the Hindus, namely, depressed classes known by various names, to come to

²⁰⁴ Algu Rai Shastri, CAD, vol. 3, 1 May, 1947, 501-502.

their rescue and to take that great epoch-making fast which evoked all the Caste Hindus in the whole realm of India to think what is ‘Untouchables’, what is ‘Depressed Classes’, what is ‘Scheduled Castes’ and what should be done for them... The very inclusion of Dr. Ambedkar in the present Dominion Cabinet is a change of heart of the Caste Hindus that the Harijans are not any more to be neglected.²⁰⁵

The Advisory Committee on Fundamental Rights, Minorities, Tribal and Excluded Areas presented the first Report on Minority Rights in late August 1947.²⁰⁶ The discourses in the Constituent Assembly about the Report suggest that members saw themselves as participating in a process of (re) making history. This process crucially involved correcting the mistakes of the past vis-à-vis minority representation as a basis for national unity. In this context the emergence of the nation-state from colonial subjugation required a profound break with history. Mehta describes this break as an opposition to “universal” history that posits India as unfit for nationhood.²⁰⁷ The colonial characterization of Indian society as comprised of antagonistic caste and religious communities had been translated into an extensive system of communal representation and separate electorates by the British administration. In this system, the latter legitimized its presence in the subcontinent as a neutral arbitrator of the interests of conflicting communities. The consideration of this report thus involved much discussion about what the concept of “minority” had implied in the colonial context and the alterations it would require in the emergent nation-state to prevent the divisive politics that had culminated in partition. Determining the political status of subjects classified as minority was thus a significant aspect of a more general process in the making of modern

²⁰⁵ V.I. Muniswami Pillai, *CAD*, vol. 5, 27 August, 1947, 202.

²⁰⁶ The minorities sub-committee was chaired by Dr. H.C. Mookherjee (Bengal: Christian) and comprised 26 members. It solicited views on the scope of political, economic, religious and cultural safeguards for minorities until July 1947. The proposals for minority safeguards were thereafter forwarded to Sardar Patel, head of the Advisory Committee.

²⁰⁷ Uday Mehta, “Indian Constitutionalism: The Articulation of a Political Vision,” in *The Colonial and the Postcolonial: Indian and Pakistan in Transition*, ed. Dipesh Chakrabarty, Rochona Majumdar and Andrew Sartori (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007), 13-31. Mehta argues that the constitutional moment is revolutionary and rupturing. It ruptures the particular relationship with time and with history as an expression of that relationship.

nationalism: the forgetting of certain pasts in order to posit a collective future.²⁰⁸ As such, these debates about minority rights constitute a dense site of meaning in which determining the status of minority as political subject unfolds in tandem with the production of a particular understanding of the legacies of colonialism in India.

In his submission of the report before the House Sardar Patel, Chairman of the Advisory Committee, described a document produced in a climate “free of ill-feeling or hitch” and requested the House deal with the report in a similar spirit of friendship: “let us hope that we will leave the legacy of bitterness behind and forget the past and begin with a clean slate.”²⁰⁹ To determine the rights of minorities in such a manner would be a testament to the magnanimity of assembly members according to Patel, due to the devastating consequences of the partition unfolding in the same moment. Rights were being debated for those subjects identified as the cause of partition. The Report proposed a system of joint electorates with guaranteed representation for communities in proportion to their population for a period of ten years. It also contained a number of provisions aimed at enhancing the representation of minority communities in government and the civil services.²¹⁰ The most noted and welcomed departure from colonial policy in the Report was the elimination of separate electorates and the principle of weightage, which guaranteed representation for Muslims in excess of their demographic share. This was anticipated within the questionnaire circulated by the Minorities Sub-Committee in preparation for the Report, which included the question “How is it proposed that the safeguards should be eliminated, in what time and under what circumstances?”²¹¹ Separate electorates were a key characteristic of the colonial state’s framework for including Indians in structures of governance. Based on the assumption that the primary unit of Indian society was the community (and not the individual), representatives were elected solely by members of their particular community. This system ensured political representation to distinct groups in provincial legislatures. Separate electorates for

²⁰⁸ Aditya Nigam, *The Insurrection of Little Selves: The Crisis of Secular-Nationalism in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006); Srirupa Roy, *Beyond Belief: India and the Politics of Postcolonial Nationalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

²⁰⁹ CAD, vol. 5, 27 August 1947, 198.

²¹⁰ Rochana Bajpai, *Debating Difference: Minority Rights and Liberal Democracy in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011), 51.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, 50.

Muslims had been instituted in 1909, however, were also extended to other religious communities, Anglo-Indians and important socio-economic groups – landholders, trade associations and universities - over time.

Throughout the proceedings of the Constituent Assembly members identified separate electorates for Muslims as the principal cause of partition. Members thus participated in the production of a particular narrative of partition with a distinct causality: the provision of separate electorates and weightage during colonialism constituted Muslims as a political minority. This created separatist sentiments among the community, culminating in the violent territorial partition of India and Pakistan. As such, the Report articulated minority rights to the re-making of political subjects through a process of forgetting colonial arrangements. In this way, it departed from the assumed trajectory of liberalism in which the excluded “other” is extended recognition as a form of inclusion. In this trajectory, liberal democracies are assumed to extend equal individual rights to all citizens regardless of their religious and racial affiliations, thus incorporating difference through the guarantee that difference shall not be grounds for discrimination. Here, the Muslim is constituted as “other” and “minority” through a specific reading of the colonial legacy of group rights. In this reading Muslims used their political rights to advance separatist, anti-national interests. As such the “minority question” was not seen as one of incorporating the excluded, but of re-negotiating the terms of inclusion in line with the objective of national unity. The expansion of a liberal framework of rights was thus simultaneous to the curtailment of group rights. In this process, the Muslim as minority emerged as a subject in need of urgent regulation, the first step of which was to eliminate the “excessive” privileges extended by the colonizer.

Importantly, the first Report on Minority Rights deemed the abolition of separate electorates as largely sufficient to the task of ensuring that the modalities of minority rights would be consistent with the objective of national unity. As mentioned above, the Report recommended political reservation of seats for religious minorities and Scheduled Castes on a joint electorate for ten years. Discourses about these provisions registered the assumption that temporary reservation would cultivate trust between different communities. The Hindu majority would demonstrate their generosity towards minorities by accepting this concession. The latter would, in turn, demonstrate their loyalty to the

nation-state. Speaking in appreciation of the Report, F.R. Anthony described how the generous display by the majority had allayed the fears of injustice among minorities: “you have helped to harness completely the loyalty of the minorities to the task of nation-building which face us.”²¹² Identifying himself as a “representative of the majority”, Govind Pant claimed that all provisions would be guided by “genuine feelings of regard” for the minorities, and all decisions “actuated by understanding and sympathy”. This would have a transformative effect on the minorities themselves: “I want them to have a position in which their voice may cease to be discordant and shrill but may become powerful.”²¹³

In discussion of the transition from separate electorates to temporary reservation there were two key ways in which the concept of minority was articulated. The first was the view that the very term was a fabrication of British policy intended to perpetuate colonial subjugation under the premise of minority protection. The British were responsible for the creation of a lack of trust between communities, and in particular the minority fear of the majority. Dr. Deshmukh claimed,

there is no more monstrous a word in the history of Indian politics than the word minority...this was a creation of British policy, but it succeeded so well that it is, in my view, essentially the work of the Satan of minority that our beloved country united for over a century has been divided into more parts than one. That this minority should at long last have been shorn of its terrors is an achievement worthy of note.²¹⁴

This understanding of minority illustrates that in the collective purging of the past in the formation of the nation, not all citizens are required to undergo the same type of public cleansing, the same type of psychic and historical reformation.²¹⁵ As long as Muslims continued to benefit from identification with the fabricated concept of “minority” they would remain a terrorizing presence in the nation-state. It was expected that without the privileges of excess representation, Muslims would have to forge a relation of trust with the majority. Their pursuit of any additional rights henceforth would be taken as an

²¹² CAD, vol. 5, 27 August, 1947, 203.

²¹³ CAD, vol. 5, 27 August, 1947, 222.

²¹⁴ CAD, vol. 5, 27 August, 1947, 201.

²¹⁵ Povinelli, *Cunning of Recognition*, 29-30.

expression of mistrust: “it is only the heart that is wanted on behalf of the minorities to adjust themselves...the phrase minorities should be wiped out from history... (I hope that) within ten years, these minorities will come and say ‘we are happy’, ‘we do not want anything.’”²¹⁶ In such discourses political safeguards indicated a lack of affective bond between majority and minority communities. The temporary reservation – a political expression of “apartness” from the nation - was being conceded by the majority as a gesture of goodwill with the expectation that such a bond might be forged in the future. However, framing this gesture in terms of benevolence and generosity also enabled the majority to demand certain performances from minority groups: of gratefulness for their rights and acceptance of a perpetually subordinate position. The forms of rights and representation for minorities were evaluated through an uneven distribution of guilt, fear and trust to produce and define relationships between communities and the nation-state.

This understanding of “minority” as a fabrication marked with a ten year expiry date was linked to the second way in which the concept was articulated: the minority figure as one who unjustly hinders the progress of those truly deserving of state recognition and representation. The righting of historical wrongs embodied in the provisions for religious minorities was linked to the clearing of the political and conceptual space needed to identify those in most need of socio-economic uplift. Deshmukh made this connection in his argument that only when minorities are content with a fair share of power and reasonable proportion in government services could national leaders “pay some attention to the oppressed and neglected rural population...it is self-evident that if anybody enjoys more than he deserves, he must of necessity deprive someone else of his legitimate share.”²¹⁷ The illegitimate claims of a community “pampered” under colonialism were thus linked to territorial partition and socio-economic inequality, eliding any discussion of caste privilege in these processes.

If shearing the minority of its terrors – the separate electorate – constituted one aspect of clearing the space for the “real oppressed”, another was to distinguish the category of Scheduled Caste from the concept of minority. The main amendment to the

²¹⁶ R.K. Sidhwa, *CAD*, vol. 5, 27 August, 1947, 208-209.

²¹⁷ P.S. Deshmukh, *CAD*, vol. 5, 27 August, 1947, 201-202.

clause on political reservation concerned the definition of the Scheduled Caste as a section of the Hindu community. K.M. Munshi explained to the assembly that the term minority had been incorrectly and mischievously extended to the SCs in preparation of the Government of India Act, 1935. He clarified that “they are not minorities in the strict meaning of the term...the Harijans are part and parcel of the Hindu community, and the safeguards given to them are to protect their rights *only till they are completely absorbed into the Hindu community.*”²¹⁸ It was argued that since untouchability had been abolished in the fundamental rights, the artificial barrier between one section of the Hindu community and the other had been removed. To define SCs as a minority would prevent their complete absorption into the Hindu fold. The regulation of the term Scheduled Caste through the category Hindu imagined the former in two ways: 1) as a temporary subject that would one day become indistinguishable from the larger Hindu community and 2) as an object that was in danger of being falsely *claimed* by different religious communities. Thus in his defense of this amendment Saksena reminded the assembly that “Mr. Jinnah often tried to include the Scheduled Castes in the minorities...they are not a minority, they have always formed a part of us.”²¹⁹ Concerns with the maintenance of a Hindu majority were at work here in a way similar to the discussion of “forced conversions”. In both cases caste was treated as a pressure point sought out by deviant minority communities to divide a Hindu majority community, thus denying the political agency of Scheduled Castes.

In this amendment the scope for self-definition of Scheduled Caste subjects and the possibilities this might hold for problematizing the notion that “community” must mean “religious community” were foreclosed. While Saksena explicitly identified Jinnah as responsible for falsely naming SCs as minorities, support for the amendment was implicitly aimed at undermining Ambedkar’s political vision. It is instructive to contrast the arguments above with the conceptualization of minority in the Scheduled Caste Federation’s memorandum to the Assembly, drafted by Ambedkar. In this document Scheduled Castes are defined as a minority for the purposes of electoral representation. In

²¹⁸ *CAD*, vol. 5, 27 August, 1947, 227. Emphasis mine.

²¹⁹ *CAD*, vol. 5, 27 August, 1947, 228. It is notable that Ambedkar’s insistence that the Scheduled Castes are a non-Hindu minority is unmentioned here.

the discourses above, minority is defined through traits of essential difference. Munshi argued that SCs could not be considered a minority on racial, linguistic or religious grounds. By contrast Ambedkar argued that separation in religion is not a good or efficient test in determining what constitutes a minority. The real test is social discrimination. Moreover, the only basis on which SCs can be distinguished from the term minority is that their social, economic and educational condition is so much worse than other groups that “any protection given to the citizens and to the minorities will not be adequate to the Scheduled Castes.”²²⁰ The protections for SCs envisioned in this text do not culminate in the absorption of the former into Hinduism. Rather they must ensure protection from Hinduism as manifested in caste sociality.

The distinction of the Scheduled Caste category from the concept of minority was thus an important step in developing a constitutional framework for rights to equality and rights to religious difference in line with a particular Caste Hindu political vision. However, the result of the amendment that defined SCs as Hindu was that the same type of political safeguard was extended to two different kinds of political subjects – their historical relationship to colonialism and the nationalist movement was different. The historical and political differences between SCs and Muslims were elaborated at length in the final year of the debates in order to justify the elimination of reservation for the latter. However, this stage of the proceedings of the Constituent Assembly reveals considerable ambivalence about the purpose of reservation because it had not yet been disconnected from the term “minority”. There was lack of consensus about the purpose of reservation, not the appropriate subject of it. Scheduled Caste reservation is not explicitly articulated to the concept of backwardness or socio-economic disadvantage here, as it is in subsequent stages. Since reservations for SCs and Muslims were expected to expire in 10 years, both groups were expected in some sense to “merge” with the majority-nation. Thus the argument that protection for the former will last only until they are absorbed into the Hindu community does to some extent recognize that they had autonomous interests that needed to be represented prior to such absorption. It is this recognition that

²²⁰ B.R. Ambedkar, “Preface” and “Explanatory Notes – Electorates”, in *States and Minorities: What are Their Rights and How to Secure them in the Constitution of Free India*, 1947.

caused disagreements about the objectives and implications of reservation. Specifically, would reservation facilitate national integration or ensure representation of difference? Were these goals mutually exclusive? Did reservation represent the right to equally participate in national affairs or the right to (temporary) difference in the nation-state?

These questions were raised with intensity over a clause ruling out minimum polling in reserved constituencies. As framed in the Minority Report: “There shall be no stipulation that a minority candidate standing for election for a reserved seat shall poll a minimum number of votes of his own community before he is declared elected.”²²¹ This eliminated the provisions of the Poona Pact, in which primary elections were held separately by SCs to select the candidates that would contest a reserved seat in general elections. Patel explained that minimum polling was separate electorates in disguised form. The purpose of the clause was to ensure that any right resembling separate electorates did not persist. This clause provoked disagreement from both Scheduled Caste and Muslim members of the Assembly. For these members minimum polling in reserved constituencies would be an important safeguard against a tokenistic representative structure. S. Nagappa, a close associate of Ambedkar, explained why minimum polling was necessary for SC political representatives:

when the Harijans and agriculturalists are at loggerheads and when we go appeal to these Harijans they say ‘get out man, you are the henchmen and show-boys of caste Hindus. You have sold our community and you have come here on their behalf to cut our throats. We don’t accept you as our representative.’²²²

To ensure a minimum basis of support from the Scheduled Castes in a reserved constituency would allow candidates to “face the people of our community and tell them...we are not show boys.”²²³ Similarly, Bahadur argued on behalf of the Muslim League that this provision would protect the democratic rights of citizens to have their views and opinions represented in the legislatures. Reservation without minimum polling would be an imposition upon citizens of a minority community since the candidate could be virtually elected by another community. Bahadur challenged the notion that the term

²²¹ *CAD*, vol. 5, 28 August, 1947, 259.

²²² *CAD*, vol. 5, 28 August, 1947, 259-260.

²²³ *Ibid.*

“minority” was a colonial fabrication: “it is too late in the day to contend that there are no minorities and that there are no special interests of minorities to be safeguarded.”²²⁴

Nagappa, Bahadur and others seeking to amend this clause thus articulated a specific understanding of the purpose of political reservation as the right to representation. Reservation was a means to ensure that distinct interests of different communities would be represented. The primary responsibility of a politician from a reserved constituency should be to the community in whose name the seat has been reserved.

The Assembly dismissed these amendments as anti-national. The majority of responses to the amendments illustrate how the object of separate electorates stuck to a myriad of other demands made by Muslim and Scheduled Caste members, thereby creating a chain of associations in which all become read as a divisive sign of “mistrust” of the majority.²²⁵ Dakhayani Valayuden dismissed Nagappa’s concerns about how SC politicians were perceived by their community as an inability to adequately participate in politics. She challenged the latter’s argument that SC communities mistrusted politicians elected by Caste Hindu votes. These arguments were simply a reflection of Nagappa’s own insecurity and inadequacy:

...if anybody thinks that he is unfit to speak for the community when he comes on the vote of the people in general, the best way to do service to the community is to...not take part in any political activities whatsoever...if we analyze the demand...it is nothing but unadulterated separate electorates.²²⁶

This response indicates that although the separate electorate often operated as a shorthand for the discourse of Muslim disloyalty, it could be successfully deployed to de-legitimize expressions of autonomy of Scheduled Castes as well. However, in the case of the latter the shorthand of separate electorate was articulated not to disloyalty but to political inadequacy stemming from their educationally and economically backward conditions. It was argued that such an amendment would be particularly harmful to SCs because their candidates were especially susceptible to bribery:

²²⁴ CAD, vol. 5, 28 August, 1947, 262. Also see Karimuddin, pg. 265.

²²⁵ On discourse, affect and signification see Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

²²⁶ Velayudan, CAD, vol. 5, 28 August, 1947, 263.

as long as the scheduled castes, or harijans, or by whatever name they may be called, are economic slaves of other people, there is no meaning demanding either separate electorates or joint electorates (cheers)... Personally, I am not in favor of any kind of reservation in any place whatsoever (hear, hear). Unfortunately, we had to accept all these things because the British imperialism had left some marks on us and we are always feeling afraid of one another.²²⁷

Ambivalence about the political implications of reservation was based on an infantilizing representation of Scheduled Caste political subjectivity. In this discourse the socio-economic location of SCs cast doubt on their representative character in any electoral system. Their identity then becomes reduced to the fact of economic exploitation – their self-perception or what anyone else chooses to call them is insignificant. In this way, members carved out a space in which an opposition to reservation for any community could be articulated. Underlying the seeming acceptance of political safeguards lay the sentiment that at best reservations were being tolerated as a necessary evil. Framing reservation as an exercise in tolerance of inferior subjects thus naturalized caste privilege in the position of the nationalist subject.

The categorical rejection of these amendments illustrates how tolerance of reservation for Scheduled Castes and Muslims became linked with a particular vision of the national project. To use these reservations for other kinds of projects or towards alternative understandings of community breached the limits of tolerance. The meaning assigned to reservation in this political vision was linked to the need to marginalize other projects, in particular the project of autonomy of Scheduled Castes articulated by Ambedkar through the concept of minority.²²⁸ For example, it was argued that the amendment exposed the real interests of Dr. Ambedkar, who “from the time of the second round table conference till the minority sub-committee...continued the demand for separate electorate” and spread the message to Harijans that they were not within the

²²⁷ Ibid., 264.

²²⁸ For analysis of Ambedkar’s politics and the concept of minority see Dirks, *Castes of Mind* and Rao, *The Caste Question*. In recent decades Dalit politics has shifted from concept of minority to that of “bahujan”, a specifically non-Hindu conception of indigenous majority. This shift will be taken up in subsequent chapters.

fold of Hindu religion.²²⁹ It was due to this false ideology that Ambedkar and Nagappa had put forth this amendment: “if they think they can better their lot by standing apart from other communities, they are in the wrong.”²³⁰ The parameters of reservation had to be carefully regulated and defined in line with the objective of national unity, which was seen as synonymous with trust in the “Hindu majority”. Moreover, the majority community of this nation had to remain a fixed, stable object. The arguments against minimum polling in reserved constituencies were then not abstract or theoretical claims about the inherent divisiveness of particularistic community attachments. Indeed, they were driven by fears that reservation could provide a means for SCs to dis-identify with the Hindu community. The expression of these fears re-activated existing archives of public memory, prejudice and sensibility.²³¹ The point was underscored by bringing Ambedkar’s political project in line with that of Jinnah’s: “if this is accepted either for Harijans or for our Muslim brothers, then it would mean the fulfillment of what my friend Mr. Jinnah has always said: ‘Muslims of India and Muslims of Pakistan’ – which means the preparation for Pakistan within India.”²³² Ambedkar was seen as another figure in the history of imperialism whose interest was in dividing the Hindu community and by implication India. Any demands that posed a challenge to the dominant nationalist vision were read as the persistence of religious and communal elements despite the generosity of the majority. As argued by Nigam, it was only by denying any agency to other subordinate social groups and communities that nationalism could represent other assertions of selfhood as creations of “divide and rule” policies.²³³ The political inclusion of minorities in the Constitution thus relates to the need for their regulation until such assertions are discarded. Reservations as concessions to such elements was seen as an unfortunate means to facilitate national integration: “we have agreed to the reservation of seats just for...the next ten years to allow those who cannot think of themselves as Indians to adjust themselves.”²³⁴ Claims to the right to representation were a distraction

²²⁹ Mr. H.J. Khandekar, *CAD*, vol. 5, 28 August, 1947, 266.

²³⁰ Velayudan, *CAD*, vol. 5, 28 August, 1947, 263.

²³¹ Povinelli, *The Cunning of Recognition*, 170.

²³² Velayudan, *CAD*, vol. 5, 28 August, 1947, 263.

²³³ Nigam, “A Text without Author,” 127.

²³⁴ Renuka Ray, *CAD*, vol. 5, 28 August, 1947, 268.

from the “real problems of ignorance and ill health, hunger and want.”²³⁵ Rejecting these claims was then a form of identification with the real subjects of inequality, the masses presumably unmarked by caste and religious distinctions.

This lengthy debate concluded with an address by Sardar Patel. In his intervention Patel embodied a national citizen whose generosity and tolerance had been pushed far beyond its “reasonable” limits by the irrational demands of SCs and Muslims. Bahadur’s amendment was taken as evidence that the Muslim League had failed to see the “reasonableness” of the Congress and to adjust to the changed conditions of post-partition India. “Therefore, I regret to say that if I lose the affection of the younger brother (Muslims), I am prepared to lose it because the method he wants to adopt would bring about his death. I would rather lose his affection and keep him alive.”²³⁶ The very audacity of the demand signaled to Patel that the reservation on the basis of population within a joint electorate system should be eliminated, as the Muslim League was unable to understand its altered meaning. In his familial representation of the nation, the terms majority and minority were not simply reflections of demographic imbalance between different groups. Majority and minority were conceived in terms of a naturalized hierarchical differentiation in which only some possessed the capacity to act and think for the general interests of the nation. As the “elder brother”, Patel had conceded temporary reservation even though it was already perceived as over-generosity to the minorities. But it was equally his duty to prevent the “young” from acting in ways harmful to themselves and to the family unit. He presented Muslims with two choices. Forgetting the privileges of the colonial era or migration to Pakistan: “Forget the past...you have got a separate state, and remember, you are the ones who were responsible for it, not those who remain in Pakistan.”²³⁷ Scheduled Castes were similarly instructed to forget “what Dr. Ambedkar and his group had done... you have very nearly escaped partition of the country on your lines”. Separate representation was held responsible for the inability of SCs to know what is good for them and in turn, to see the sincere commitment of Caste Hindus:

²³⁵ Ibid.

²³⁶ *CAD*, vol. 5, 28 August, 1947, 270.

²³⁷ Ibid.

You have seen the result of separate electorates in Bombay, that when the greatest benefactor (Gandhi) of your community came to stay in bhangi quarters it was your people who tried to stone his quarters...It was again the result of this poison and therefore I resist this only because I feel that the vast majority of Hindus wish you well. Without them where will you be? ²³⁸

In his remarks directed at Muslims and SCs respectively, Patel instructed both groups to forget the past even as he reminded them of their historical record of “separatist” politics. Due to Ambedkar’s separatist politics, Scheduled Castes misrecognized Gandhi and his intentions to liberate them from untouchability. The rejection of Gandhi’s “love” is here a rejection of Hindu love, the community to which SCs “naturally” belong. The rejection of caste Hindu benevolence by Scheduled Castes is seen as a result of their ignorance and the “inferiority complex” of their representatives²³⁹ rather than political critique. The political position articulated by Ambedkar was thus reduced to the persistence of the irrational emotions of fear and mistrust. Given the overwhelming opposition to the minimum polling provision in the Assembly, Patel’s speech was certainly unnecessary to ensure that the amendment would not be passed. His decision to intervene appears to be aimed at a broader purpose, of clarifying the relations of power between different communities in tandem with the enshrining of certain readings of the past. He emphasized that group rights in the nation-state would be dependent on an acceptance of these power relations. In Patel’s reading Muslims and SCs had been misguided by the colonizers and their own representatives into perceiving their interests as distinct from the national interest. As the familial authority of the nation, Patel demonstrated that a family must be held together as much through love as through the imposition of discipline. Hierarchy between groups was thus reestablished as the minority subject was being incorporated into the nation through a framework to secure rights to difference and non-discrimination.

²³⁸ Ibid.

²³⁹ Ibid., 272

Revisiting Minority Rights: Secularism, Backwardness, Caste

There are two kinds of minorities, as you all know in India. There is one kind of minority which...of the fact that they can take care of themselves in any part of the world, generally inspires terror in the minds of other minorities and even in the minds of the majority. There is another kind of minority, which inspires pity in our minds who constantly remind us of the folly we had committed in the past, for which, they have lots of reasons to complain.²⁴⁰

In August 1947 the assembly approved the decision to defer all discussion of reservation in the provinces of West Bengal and East Punjab due to uncertainties about the impact partition would have on these provinces. When the revised Report on Minority Rights was introduced in May 1949, Sardar Patel explained that as the effects of the vast migration across newly constituted borders had become more clear, a shift occurred in the attitudes of the minorities. This enabled important changes to be made to the report as a whole, not only for the provinces of Bengal and Punjab. In a significant revision to the previous report all political safeguards for minority communities were eliminated, retaining the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes as the sole recipients of reservation. In addition, the category Scheduled Caste was revised to include converts to Sikhism. Although there were always “doubts” about the consequences of political reservation for minorities, Patel argued that they had been initially accepted in order to allay the fears of these communities. What enabled the revision was that they had realized “after great reflection the evil effects of such reservation on minorities themselves, and the reservation should be dropped.”²⁴¹ The decision to include Scheduled Caste Sikhs in the reservation framework had been made in recognition of “Sikh sentiment”. In particular, the sentiments of Sikh representatives who feared that without SC status, marginalized caste groups would convert back to Hinduism and thus weaken the community in demographic terms. The members of the committee had “always felt a sort of responsibility for the susceptibilities of the Sikh community which has suffered vastly by the partition of the Punjab.”²⁴² Patel clarified that this was a “concession” to SC Sikhs and thus the primary objective was still to drop as rapidly as possible all classifications

²⁴⁰ Rohini Kumar Chaudhary, *CAD*, vol. 8, 26 May, 1949, 327.

²⁴¹ *CAD*, vol. 8, 25 May, 1949, 270.

²⁴² *Ibid.*

and differences and bring all to a level of equality.²⁴³ As such, the decision did not flow from the recognition of caste-based discrimination across religious communities. It was not intended to facilitate the claims of other groups to protection from caste-based discrimination. Patel's narration of these changes registered a sense of relief – the Committee had finally reached a sound resolution to the minority question. The new framework was articulated in terms of political arrangements that would best secure the transcendence of community difference and the establishment of a state based purely on nationalist principles.

The ongoing processes of inclusion and exclusion that structure the terrain of inequality in post-partition India are widely debated in relation to these important decisions of the Constituent Assembly.²⁴⁴ As Tejani argues, the question of how the disenfranchised castes were categorized would ultimately determine what place “community” would have in the future nation.²⁴⁵ By accepting caste as a basis for reservation members also sought to restrict its meaning to the removal of socio-economic disadvantage, rather than representation of distinct community interests. The debate on the revised Minority Rights Report illustrates how the elimination of political safeguards for minorities facilitated this shift in meaning. However, disadvantage and backwardness are not neutral categories. The ambiguity of these terms enables them to function, simultaneously, as a means to justify and oppose caste-based reservation. In this section I extricate from the debates how the Scheduled Caste subject became the grounds upon which the status of religious minorities was debated.

The proposed changes to minority rights received overwhelming support due to their perceived significance in the establishment of a genuinely secular state. The meaning of secularism being developed by assembly members rested on a specific

²⁴³ Ibid., 272. Patel argued that such concessions should be granted until the Sikhs themselves realize “that it is wrong”.

²⁴⁴ The release of long suppressed evidence of extreme marginalization of Muslims from political representation and formal sector employment (public and private) has led to a revisiting of these decisions in academic writing, media and campaigns for Muslim reservation (employment and education). Activism around the recognition of caste discrimination across religious communities continues to be frustrated by readings of the Constitution/Constitutional Order 1950 that define untouchability as a specifically Hindu practice. This is the subject of Chapter 4.

²⁴⁵ Tejani, *Indian Secularism*, 250.

relationship between the state and religious minorities: “if our idea is to have a secular state it follows inevitably that we cannot afford to recognize minorities based upon religion.”²⁴⁶ This relationship was conceived of as a novel and necessary departure from colonial relations of rule, identified as the main agent in generating mistrust between communities that culminated in partition. Although Muslims were giving up the right to political reservation they would be gaining in its place a much better guarantee of community security – the goodwill of the Hindu majority. Eliminating political safeguards would contribute to the elimination of affective distance between communities. This was endorsed by some Muslim representatives in the Assembly, who expected that unreserved joint electorates would facilitate cooperation between religious communities in service of the national interest. Nazirrudin Ahmad advised, “the safety of Muslims lies in intelligently playing their part and mixing themselves with the Hindus in public affairs.”²⁴⁷ Safeguards only kept alive the “spirit of separatism and communalism”, and thus it was “necessary that the Muslims living in this country should throw themselves upon the goodwill of the majority community, should give up separatist tendencies and throw their full weight into building up a truly secular state.”²⁴⁸ Members sought to replace divisive communalism with a future of inter-communal cooperation as expressed through electoral arrangements. Begum Aziz Rasul envisioned that this would result in a more meaningful futurity in which Hindus would actively campaign amongst their co-religionists to return Muslims to the legislatures. Reservations were an artificial barrier preventing the organic development of such relations. In this way, the articulation of secularism ran together with a specific imagining of the separatist Muslim political subject in need of reform.

The responses of other Muslim assembly members to these changes can be categorized according to the purpose of reservation assumed– representation of difference or backwardness. Notable in the different sets of responses is the shifting ground of comparison with Scheduled Caste reservation. As the arguments reviewed above suggest, reservation for Muslims generally meant reservation as representation of difference.

²⁴⁶ Dr. H.C. Mookherjee, *CAD*, vol. 8, 25 May, 1949, 298.

²⁴⁷ *CAD*, vol. 8, 25 May, 1949, 297.

²⁴⁸ Begum Aziz Rasul, *CAD*, vol. 8, 25 May, 1949 300-301.

Opposition to their elimination also operated on this assumption. Therefore it was necessary that religion be recognized as the fundamental marker of difference in the subcontinent, as race was in other parts of the world: “the difference in religion creates a difference in life and in outlook on matters and things connected with life. Man here in this country is measured in terms of his religion.”²⁴⁹ The extension of the right to difference (ie reservation) to SCs but not to Muslims could not be justified. The SCs had also become a minority community on account of a difference in religious beliefs.²⁵⁰ On the other hand, if they were part of the Hindu community as members of the Assembly claimed, there was no basis for reservation. It would be hypocrisy to retain safeguards for SCs if, according to the majority community, they formed part of that community and were of the same culture, religion and race. Z.H. Lari argued:

if the electorate is aware of the necessity of having representation of every portion of that (Hindu) community then you cannot say that reservation is necessary (for Scheduled Castes). The reservation shows that you are not feeling strong on the point...the Muslims will say ‘you have not got that confidence in regard to the Scheduled Castes who have always been part of you. What about the Muslims who are still regarded in certain places with suspicion?’²⁵¹

Nagappa responded to this line of questioning by qualifying that the SC constituted a different type of minority: “we are not a religious minority. We are an economic, political and social minority.”²⁵² However, the correction of the Muslim political subject through the process of constitution making was part of a broader trajectory of transcendence of community-based difference that included SCs. Thus it was envisioned that “in time, even the Harijans will...rise to the occasion and give up this right to reservation...At that time service, merit and ability alone will win votes and all the relics of our past will have been buried deep.”²⁵³ This kind of statement raises questions about how the historical and moral basis of Scheduled Caste reservation was understood in the debates. If SC

²⁴⁹ Muhammad Ismail Sahib, *CAD*, vol. 8, 25 May, 1949, 278.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁵¹ Z.H. Lari, *CAD*, vol. 8, 25 May, 1949, 288.

²⁵² S. Nagappa, *CAD*, vol. 8, 25 May, 1949, 292.

²⁵³ Shibban Lal Saksena, *CAD*, vol. 8, 26 May, 1949, 320. This statement reflects ongoing assumptions about “reserved seat candidates” as by implication devoid of merit and ability.

reservations were qualitatively distinct from those for religious minorities, why does elimination of the latter function as a template for the former?

This question can be addressed with reference to Nehru's intervention in this debate. Nehru's address exemplifies the meaning of reservation in the nationalist imaginary – as undesirable but tolerated - regardless of the historical and moral claims of the community in question. At the outset, Nehru acknowledged that there was no lack of support for the changes to minority rights. However, he wanted to speak about them due to a desire to associate with such a historic turn in the nation's destiny. Affirming his support for the proposed revisions, Nehru rehearsed the developments of the Constituent Assembly in its efforts to expel separatist elements from the national body inaugurated by the abolition of the separate electorate. However,

...reluctantly we agreed to carry on with some measure of reservation...because in our heart of hearts we were not sure about ourselves nor about our own people as to how they would function when all these reservations were removed...but always there was this doubt in our minds, namely, whether we had not shown weakness in dealing with a thing that was wrong.²⁵⁴

The address unfolds as the inner dialogue of the nationalist self, uncertain about how different communities will relate to one another in the absence of colonial mediation. Departing from the dominant discourse of Muslim separatism, Nehru identified all subjects as tainted with some form of separatist tendencies. Part of becoming a nation was learning not to surrender to those tendencies. For minorities in particular, it was learning not to make demands that signify desire to keep apart from and mistrust the majority. The transformation of majority-minority relations here is part of a process of replacing past ideas and suspicions with a rational, cosmopolitan worldview. From this perspective the proposal did not go far enough. Nehru stated his preference to see all remaining reservations eliminated. That Scheduled Caste reservation remained was an unfortunate but necessary departure from this trajectory from communalism to cosmopolitanism. Why then should this provision for SCs remain? In this address a clear connection between SC reservation and backwardness was established and indeed insisted upon:

²⁵⁴ *CAD*, vol. 8, 26 May, 1949, 330.

I try to look upon the problem not in the sense of religious minority, but rather in the sense of helping backward groups in the country. I do not look at it from the religious point of view or the caste point of view, but from the point of view that a backward group ought to be helped and I am glad that this reservation will also be limited to ten years.²⁵⁵

This statement indicates how the grudging acceptance of reservation for Scheduled Castes involved non-recognition of the historical specificity of caste discrimination and caste privilege on the part of the nationalist self. Making available an understanding of SC reservation that is devoid of caste analysis facilitates the shift in meaning that renders the former a vehicle for social mobility but not for political representation or the expression of autonomous interests disruptive of hegemonic nationalist politics.

Nehru's address marks a shift in the ways in which the figure of the SC is evoked as a means to come to terms with the elimination of political reservation for religious minorities. As reviewed above many Muslim League members objected to the Minority Report on the basis that Muslims were more different from Hindus than SCs. It is instructive to note how the grounds of comparison shift when the criteria of backwardness is mobilized to resolve this line of objection. Betraying the entrenched assumptions about caste that Muslim assembly members shared with their Caste Hindu counterparts, the need to give up safeguards came to be expressed in terms of the essential weakness and inadequacy of the Scheduled Caste subject. With the principle of difference removed from the definition, reservations "imply a kind of inferiority... a kind of protection that always has a crippling effect upon the object protected."²⁵⁶ Unlike difference, backwardness cannot be articulated as something that SCs and Muslims have in common from the perspective of Muslim elites in the Assembly. Thus, following Nehru's address Tajamal Hussain warned Muslims that if they did not forego these safeguards they would be treated as alien and their position would be reduced to that of the Scheduled Caste. Clarifying this argument Hussain pressed on:

²⁵⁵ Ibid., 331.

²⁵⁶ Nazirrudin Ahmed, *CAD*, vol. 8, 25 May, 1949, 296.

You are not poor. Like the Scheduled Castes, you are not weak, you are not uneducated, you are not uncultured; you can always support yourself. You have produced brilliant men. So do not ask for protection or safeguard.²⁵⁷

The premise of Scheduled Caste reservation on the basis of backwardness is here isolated from any reference to untouchability and caste-based discrimination. While Nehru's conceptual distinction seeks to de-link caste from backwardness, the social imaginary within which the latter concept is embedded is pervaded by assumptions about caste, class and ability. This indicates the difficulties of "secularizing" the category of caste and the varied implications of doing so.²⁵⁸

As the Scheduled Caste came to function as the object upon which the status of Muslims was debated, members were able to articulate their continued uncertainty about reservation for the former. Excluding Muslims from reservation did not mean that SCs were the only rightful subjects of such a policy. In their arguments one can detect the anxiety of Caste Hindus that the criteria of backwardness could not be completely sealed off from that of difference. If at certain points Caste Hindus anticipated that the alleviation of backwardness would facilitate the absorption of SCs into the Hindu community, at other times they saw reservation as a divisive form of recognition that would prevent this process. To accept reservation on the basis of backwardness could not be a simple adjustment in definition. Ambedkar's movement continued to emphasize difference from Hindu society, not as an essential trait but as a political claim. Despite the exclusion of religious minorities from reservation, the consensus around caste remained unstable: "I have no hesitation in saying that had we removed even this provision from the constitution it would have been for the better...It has been done because they (SCs) are not capable of lifting themselves."²⁵⁹ Mahavir Tyagi took this opportunity to remind the house of Ambedkar's attempt to have SCs represented as a non-Hindu minority during the 1932 Round Table Conference in London. Reminding the Assembly of the fast unto death undertaken by Gandhi in opposition to this, he questioned how something that had once been so contentious was now being accepted

²⁵⁷ *CAD*, vol. 8, 26 May, 1949, 334.

²⁵⁸ By "secularize" I refer to attempts to conceive caste solely in economic terms.

²⁵⁹ L.S. Bhatkar, *CAD*, vol. 8, 26 May, 1949, 339.

and extended. In this reading of the Round Table Conference, it was not possible to even acknowledge Ambedkar's political agenda vis-à-vis transformation of caste hierarchies. In this address we see how the principle of representation and the principle of backwardness continually collide with each other. Tyagi questioned the continuation of SC reservation because after the Round Table Conferences, "the intention was that it (SC reservation on joint electorate) should last only for twenty years. After that period they were expected to become absolutely one with the Hindus... why are we now giving it a further lease of ten years?"²⁶⁰ The concern here was not with the removal of backwardness – whether defined as caste stigma or economic status – but with the perpetuation of a political identity that threatened the notion of a Hindu community.

Tyagi went on to remind the assembly that Scheduled Caste is a fictional term, encompassing "some castes who are depressed, some who are poor, some who are untouchables and some who are down-trodden". Hence the reservation could not be justified by the principle of community difference – the category did not signify a community, it is too diverse – or from the principle of backwardness – not all castes listed in the Schedule were poor. The latter point was emphasized with reference to Ambedkar's own accomplishments:

How is Dr. Ambedkar a Scheduled Caste? Is he illiterate? Is he ill-educated? Is he untouchable? Is he lacking in anything? He is the finest of the fine intellectuals in India and still he is in the Scheduled Castes. Because he is in the list and because he is a genius, he will perpetually be member and also a Minister... Moreover, Sir, he has lately married a Brahmin wife. He is a Brahmin by profession and also because his in-laws are Brahmins... There are thousands of Brahmins and Kshatriyas who are worse off than these friends belonging to Scheduled Castes. So by the name of Scheduled Caste, persons are living a cheerful life, and a selected few of these castes get benefit.²⁶¹

These arguments illustrate how the shift from difference to backwardness in justifications for reservation did not entail a straightforward acceptance of the caste criteria among Assembly members. Tyagi referred to Ambedkar's specific education and class position

²⁶⁰ *CAD*, vol. 8, 26 May, 1949, 344.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*

to highlight how his “cheerful life” had come at expense of the plight of thousands of “worse off” upper castes. The educated SC is identified here as the subject responsible for abusing caste privilege to exclude the uneducated masses from political participation. Thus it was suggested that in place of SCs, “landless laborers, the cobblers or persons...who do not get enough to live should be given reservation”. The categories of landless or poor were not seen as having a caste dimension. Scheduled Caste reservation should be eliminated because it would not fulfill its stated purpose, namely, to ameliorate conditions of backwardness. It would fail to do so because, as Ambedkar’s experience demonstrates, not all SCs are “backward”. At the same time, Ambedkar’s experience calls into question his caste location - by education, occupation and marriage he is a “Brahmin”.

This speech raises a number of questions that continue to circulate in debates about reservation policy. At what point and through what means does a Scheduled Caste cease to be a Scheduled Caste? What are the features of this novel subject position? If such a subject continues to insist on “difference” from the Caste Hindu citizen, what is this difference an effect of? In Tyagi’s speech, educational attainment and class location imply the absence of caste stigma. These attainments are not considered in the context of pervasive discriminatory practices in caste society. Rather, they are taken as evidence of the lack of discrimination. Such discourses stage the limits of Caste Hindu guilt and moral obligation through the figure of the educated, middle class SC. Further, they call into question the legitimacy of this subject as representative of SC communities: by getting an education and access to political institutions, one ceases to be an “untouchable” and thus ceases to be representative of Scheduled Castes in general. From this perspective the educated SC who continues to identify with his or her caste community is seen as claiming a false victimhood. However, as seen in various passages above, economically marginalized SCS are also considered incapable of adequately participating in politics, due to the fact of their economic marginalization. This framing obscures the relationship between discrimination and inequality through a strictly economic understanding of backwardness. Moreover, it implies that the interests of SCs must be represented and protected by Caste Hindus.

Conclusion

Compensatory discrimination embodies the brave hopes of India reborn that animated the freedom movement and was crystallized in the Constitution.²⁶²

The provisions made in the Constitution for safeguarding the position of the Scheduled Castes were not to my satisfaction. However, I accepted them for what they were worth, hoping the Government will show some determination to make them effective.²⁶³

Did India's policies of reservation for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes emerge out of the momentous force of intention among nationalist leaders to create a casteless society? How does this crystallized intention relate to the post-colonial politics of caste marked by resistance to and under enforcement of reservation policies, siphoning of funds allocated for SC and ST communities, ongoing discrimination across secular and religious spaces and increasing violence against SCs? Is this discrepancy a familiar one of good intentions and ineffective implementation? The optimism expressed by scholars such as Marc Galanter suggest that participants in the nationalist movement and the Constituent Assembly shared a common understanding of the severity of caste based oppression and a determination to eliminate it from Indian society. In the analysis presented above I have attempted to demonstrate that the intentions vis-à-vis caste, minority and community circulating in the Assembly and which culminated in the Constitution of India were not homogenous or harmonious. Rather, there were conflicting understandings of these terms as they circulated in different political-affective imaginaries. Discourses in the Assembly indicated acute ambivalence and uncertainty about the purpose reservation would serve in the nation-state, especially its effect on relations between the majority and minority groups. The political positions of the latter, particularly on the question of representation, were reduced to the persistence of irrational emotions that had been nurtured by the colonial state and its divisive policies of divide and rule. Thus, reservations were re-framed as a temporary measure intended to address the socio-economic backwardness of SCs. In this process, their acceptance was portrayed as an act of generosity of the majority community, a gesture of compromise to allay the irrational fears of inferior subjects. As such, the use of reservations to advance

²⁶² Galanter, *Competing Equalities*, 562.

²⁶³ B.R. Ambedkar, "Resignation Speech to the Cabinet", October 10, 1951.

interests that were different from those of the majority necessarily constituted an act of bad faith. Such attempts showed that the generosity of the majority was being taken advantage of. My argument implies that in order to account for the uneven results of reservation policy since 1950 and the extent of resentment it continues to generate, assumptions about the enlightened, progressive intentions of the Constituent Assembly must be challenged. The sentiment expressed in contemporary debates that reservations are abhorrent and merely being tolerated was pervasive in the Assembly.

The understanding of minority rights and reservations as a barrier to emotional integration served to prioritize a particular vision of the nation-state and the national majority in the Constituent Assembly. In this way, alternative political visions were marginalized. While Ambedkar did oversee the framing of the Constitution, many significant aspects of his political vision remained unrealized. These included “an impassioned belief in separate electorates for SCs, the nationalization of land and its redistribution as cooperative, collective farms and multi-member constituencies and cumulative voting within the framework of parliamentary democracy.”²⁶⁴ In the years following the completion of the Assembly’s work, Ambedkar lost two elections in reserved constituencies of Maharashtra to relatively unknown Congress candidates. That reserved constituencies are those in which SC communities rarely exceed 20-30 percent of the population facilitated Congress strategies of mobilizing non-SC voters around their own compliant and accommodating SC candidates.²⁶⁵ The restriction of minority rights to rights to religious freedom and the discursive connections between the terms Muslim, separatism and Pakistan also marginalized alternate political possibilities. Both Abdul Kalam Azad in the Congress and Mohahmmmed Ali Jinnah in the Muslim League sought a basis other than minority for the participation of Muslims in the life of modern India.²⁶⁶ Jinnah and the Muslim League opposed the reduction of Muslim politics to religious

²⁶⁴ K.C. Das, *Indian Dalits: Voices, Visions and Politics* (Delhi: Global Vision Publishing House, 2005), 72; S. Anand, “Resurrecting the Radical Ambedkar,” *India Seminar 609: Republic of Ideas*, September 2009,

http://www.india-seminar.com/2009/601/601_s_anand.htm.

²⁶⁵ Galanter, *Competing Equalities*, 47; Christophe Jaffrelot, *India’s Silent Revolution: The Rise of the Lower Castes in North India* (London: Hurst and Company, 2003), 113.

²⁶⁶ On Azad see Mufti, *Enlightenment in the Colony*, 129-177. On Jinnah see Faisal Devji, “The Minority as Political Form” in *From the Colonial to the Postcolonial*, 85-96.

concerns. According to Jinnah, “a Hindu Raj would... be established not by making Hindus more religious, since the presence or absence of religiosity among a political majority was irrelevant to its power”, but rather, by confining Muslims to the “demographically and constitutionally powerless, degraded and impossible position of a religious minority.”²⁶⁷ The resistance of Azad and Jinnah to Muslim politics as minority politics also represented a specific social location and imaginary of the North Indian elite, as illustrated by the shifting grounds of comparison with Scheduled Castes in the minority rights debate. Indeed, both members of the Muslim League and the Congress in the Assembly seemed unable to conceive of Muslim political subjectivity outside of the figure of the North Indian Ashraf (nobility) – there was virtually no reference to socio-economic inequality and Muslims.²⁶⁸ The elimination of political safeguards for Muslims in the assembly was part of a broader process of disempowerment of this pre-British elite, which included the redistribution of feudal lands and decay of Urdu language and culture in North India.

Ambedkar resigned from his position as Law Minister in Nehru’s cabinet in 1951 after the thwarting of the Hindu Code Bill, which was intended to provide a civil code in place of the body of Hindu personal law. He considered the bill to be the greatest social reform measure ever undertaken by the legislature in India. In his resignation speech Ambedkar described his experience of continued marginalization from Committees in which his education and experience could have been effectively utilized and the personalized, non-transparent character of decision making in the government. He also observed the general disregard within the government for actualizing the Constitutional commitments to address discrimination against Scheduled Castes. He had reached his limits upon the burial of the Hindu Code Bill because “to leave inequality between class and class, and between sex and sex which is the soul of Hindu society untouched and to go on passing legislation relating to economic problems is to make a farce of our Constitution and build a palace on a dung heap.”²⁶⁹

²⁶⁷ Devji, “The Minority as Political Form,” 88.

²⁶⁸ The question of caste and Muslim communities will be the focus of Chapter 4.

²⁶⁹ “Resignation Speech to the Cabinet.” October 10, 1951. Accessed from, <http://ambedkarism.wordpress.com/2011/03/10/dr-ambedkar’s-resignation-speech/>

Backwardness and untouchability – the key concepts around which a political trajectory for SCs in the nation-state came to be organized – were left deliberately undefined by the Constituent Assembly. The discourses about Scheduled Caste subjects indicate, however, that most members privileged the economic and educational dimensions of the caste problematic over that of social discrimination. They assumed that social discrimination had already been substantially eliminated due to Gandhi’s message of love for the Harijans. However, their continuing educational and economic backwardness made them politically and intellectually inadequate subjects. If the Muslim minority urgently required regulation due to the perceived historical propensity for separatist politics, Scheduled Castes figured as objects to be manipulated by missionaries and falsely claimed by those who aimed to divide the Hindu community. Their economic backwardness made them incapable of understanding their real interests.

This understanding of backwardness aligns with the political vision of secular nationalism that came to dominate the post-colonial nation-state. This vision is based on the agency of the enlightened elite in delivering the inert and backward masses from darkness to light.²⁷⁰ In this vision community and caste identities are expected to inevitably dissolve through the spread of modern, scientific education and a scientific temper.²⁷¹ Secular-nationalism enables the elite to draw upon discourses of modernity, science and development to constitute themselves as having transcended the particularities of caste and community. As such post-colonial debates about caste have been animated less by the question of how to eliminate caste inequality than by the concern to eliminate caste as a criteria for measuring inequality. The acceptability of an undefined backwardness for the purpose of social policy making thus reflects a political vision in which abstract social uplift becomes the grounds of national unity. Uday Mehta argues that in this vision of Indian Constitutionalism history comes to be translated in the language of politics. In other words, history gets translated into a medium where it is available for political modification. In this way, the challenge of caste injustice becomes analogous to that of building industry or large dams.²⁷² Further, this vision is underpinned

²⁷⁰ Nigam, *The Insurrection of Little Selves*, 3.

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*; Roy, *Beyond Belief*, 114.

²⁷² Mehta, “Indian Constitutionalism”, 26.

by a particular affective relation of pity to the object of social uplift. Mehta argues that relations of compassion operate through a commitment to co-suffering. By contrast, pity maintains distance and can thus conceive of its object as an abstraction or type, such as the poverty stricken or the disadvantaged castes.²⁷³ In this relation, uplift of the objects of pity is required to assuage the “bad feelings” of the privileged. This capacity to be affected by the poor, to feel sorrow and unease for their conditions stands as a testament to the good intentions of the latter and of their ability to work in the service of national development. This forecloses questions of caste, power and the uneven distribution of privilege in society. Indeed the generation of this affective response depends on the existence of stark disparity, of social locations from which objects of pity can be constituted in the first place.

Positing a relation of pity between Scheduled Caste and Caste Hindu constitutes the grounds for national unity in this vision because it conceals the ongoing relations of social, economic and epistemic violence through which these subject positions are co-produced. Rendering Scheduled Caste bodies as an abstracted object of social uplift implies that the agential subject of social transformation is elsewhere. The object is dependent on the agential subject. Thus Sardar Patel’s “appeal” to Scheduled Castes that “the majority of Hindus wish you well. Without them where will you be?” From this perspective, imagining a future for Scheduled Castes outside Hinduism amounts to imagining Scheduled Castes outside the nation. Political safeguards are only a temporary replacement for affective bonds of goodwill. In the next chapter, I examine the ways in which discourses of pity merge with the politics of resentment to continually constitute the difference of caste in the post-colonial nation-state. As theorized from the perspective of Dalit activists, this difference is constituted through novel experiences of caste sociality that reservations have produced.

²⁷³ Ibid., 27.

Chapter Two. Representing Reservations: Caste, Class and Untouchability in Narratives of Social Mobility

In the previous chapter it was seen that members of the Constituent Assembly sought to regulate the purpose of reservation through temporal and conceptual restrictions. The policy was accepted as a temporary measure to ameliorate backwardness and in turn facilitate the absorption of SCs into the Hindu community. However, the use of political reservations to express different, autonomous interests would not be tolerated. In their attempts to evacuate from reservation the principle of representation of difference, Assembly members marginalized social discrimination and untouchability in their understanding of backwardness. Contrary to expectations in the Constituent Assembly, reservations were not eliminated ten years after the Constitutional Order, 1950. Scheduled Castes did not become indistinguishable from the Hindu community. Nor have practices of untouchability been eradicated across the diverse regions of India. In short, caste did not disappear from the body politic. Whereas it was believed that reservation as a temporary measure would dissolve caste-based difference, the seemingly indefinite continuation of the policy has shifted this perception to one in which reservations are held responsible for the persistence of caste identities in the nation-state. In this dominant discursive position, caste is understood as a pre-modern archaic identity that was reinvigorated by the colonial state's policies of divide and rule. As long as caste remains a category of social policy, the colonial legacy will continue and national integration will be compromised. This implies that due to the advantages of reserved quotas, attachment to parochial caste identity is more prevalent among the "lower castes".

This position fails to recognize how the meanings of caste, community and nation have been contested within Dalit movements. This process is linked to shifts in the political consciousness of SCs, and subsequent changes to the ways in which they negotiate Caste Hindu society, thus producing different kinds of encounters between Dalits and upper caste subjects.²⁷⁴ Across different genres of anti-caste literature it is seen

²⁷⁴ I use the administrative category Scheduled Caste and the politicized term Dalit (meaning "the oppressed" or "ground down") interchangeably because 1) the latter did not come into wide usage until the 1970s, 2) there is disagreement among stigmatized communities about the use of the term "Dalit" and many continue to identify as "Scheduled Caste", and 3) I would like to keep in tension the category through which

that identification as Dalit signifies a rejection of caste categories as well as the concept of a Hindu majority. The mass conversion to Buddhism among Dalit communities after Ambedkar's death exemplified that affirmative action did not diminish the importance of identity formation outside the Caste Hindu order. Patterns of violence against Dalits in post-colonial India reveal that efforts to secure new rights and assert new forms of social presence provoke upper caste retaliation.²⁷⁵ Hence, anti-caste discourses attend to the reproduction of caste identities through multiple forms of violence and discrimination. In these discourses reservations are a necessary but insufficient condition for social transformation. From this perspective, caste cannot be reduced to a pre-modern belief system or an instrument of colonial domination. The processes of post-colonial transformation generate their own distinct pressures on the meanings of caste and community, simultaneously working with and working over colonial forms of knowledge and power.

In this chapter I examine how representations of Scheduled Caste subjectivity shape and are shaped by the politics of reservation. During the controversy over the implementation of the Mandal Commission Report on Backward Classes in 1991, which is the focus of Chapter 3, opponents of extending reservation to new social groups claimed that SCs were the only subjects deserving of guaranteed representation in state institutions. They emphasized that they were against the demographic extension of the policy, not the policy itself. However, this chapter will illustrate that anti-reservation actions had taken a variety of forms prior to 1991, ranging from violent protests, the formation of explicitly anti-reservation worker's organizations, failed implementation and harassment of Dalits. I further highlight three key developments after 1950: 1) the formation of a Dalit middle class, 2) the intensification of atrocities against Dalits and 3) the increased militancy of Dalit activism. Tracing these socio-political developments vis-à-vis caste and reservation politics prior to 1991, I argue that a novel political subjectivity became central to evaluating the impact of reservation policy in India, namely, the middle

subjects are recognized by the state and mainstream society with categories of militancy and self-identification.

²⁷⁵ D.R. Nagaraj, "Violence on Dalits and the Disappearance of the Village," in *The Flaming Feet and Other Essays: The Dalit Movement in India*, ed. Prithvi Datta and Chandra Shobhi (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2010), 125-126.

class, educated Dalit. This subject position is inconceivable without the constitutional guarantee of reservations that is Ambedkar's legacy, thus indicating the deeply entrenched nature of caste discrimination. However, the association with reservation policy also stigmatizes Dalits as inferior subjects who require the assistance of the quota to access education and employment.

I explore the representation of this subject in three narratives about caste, untouchability and class mobility: 1) "Scheduled Caste, Unscheduled Change" in Shashi Tharoor's *India: From Midnight to Millennium*, 2) "Promotion" by Arjun Dangle and 3) "The Story of My Sanskrit" by Kumud Pawde. Dangle's short story and Pawde's autobiographical work are taken from the edited volume *Poisoned Bread: Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature*. Attending to the divergent representations across these texts, I consider the significance of the middle class Dalit subject in contending political projects. In Tharoor's liberal modernist account of national progress, this subject signifies the successful movement of India towards a modern casteless society. However, the existence of the middle class Dalit and his privileged children also prove that the reservation policy has outlived its purpose. By linking state benefits to caste identity, its continued existence threatens to reverse national progress. In contrast, the selections from *Poisoned Bread* show that far from enabling the transcendence of caste, reservations have facilitated novel encounters between upper caste and Scheduled Caste subjects that reveal the pervasiveness and adaptability of discriminatory practices. Class mobility among the latter is represented as a process marked by isolation and humiliation, thus revealing the limits of individual success in the absence of collective community mobilization.

If evaluated as a measure to address economic backwardness, the emergence of a Dalit middle class suggests the (qualified) success of constitutionally mandated reservations. On the other hand, an oft-heard critique of affirmative action policies within and beyond India is that the upward mobility of a handful of individuals does not contribute to greater equality and social justice in society. Both of these assessments foreclose the question of how Dalits navigate shifts in class, caste and spatial locations, and what contingent political possibilities emerge from these shifts. Gyanendra Pandey's essay "Can There be a Subaltern Middle Class? Notes on African American and Dalit

History” provides a useful entry point into this line of inquiry.²⁷⁶ Pandey’s interest is in the particular political and psychological challenges that come with the emergence of an “ex-slave” or “ex-untouchable” middle class. He asks what the history of these struggles can tell us about the conditions necessary for the consolidation of particular groups as middle class, modern and unmarked. The article thus interrogates the normative aspects of the category “middle class” and the idea of “middle-classness” which go beyond designation of economic status. Historically the middle class has been affiliated with the principles of meritocracy, equality and individualism. Having neither the benefit of aristocratic wealth nor the afflictions of inherited poverty, middle classes have been portrayed as the makers of their own destiny through self-improvement, education, moral reform and individual effort.²⁷⁷ Those who do not attain this class location are simply not determined or talented enough. Notions of middle class respectability are built around a group of individuals who supposedly pursue their private interests in well designated public and private spaces, leaving the task of organizing society to “experts”, themselves ordinary middle class individuals in another capacity.²⁷⁸

Pandey argues that a major difference between the European and North American middle classes of the nineteenth century and the colonized middle classes in Asia and Africa in the twentieth century is the widespread participation of the latter in anti-colonial nationalist movements. Formed under the imperial gaze, the colonized middle classes spoke not only for themselves, but also for their people who had been marked as “backward” and whom they must represent and lead into the modern.²⁷⁹ However, this markedly political orientation was temporary. With the naturalization of nation and nation-state, the colonized middle classes assumed unmarked citizenship. They became the mainstream of modern, national development.²⁸⁰ Class mobility among the internally colonized – Blacks in the United States and Dalits in India – took place at a later stage, in altered historical and political conditions. Experiences such as racial profiling, protests against affirmative action and segregation in housing markets continually mark these

²⁷⁶ *Public Culture* 21, no. 2 (2009): 321-342.

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 323.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 328.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

subjects as different from the normative middle class citizen. Their historical, cultural and familial connections to rural and working class communities also generate distinct political commitments that prevent assimilation into an undifferentiated class identity. Thus, the anonymity of unmarked modern subjectivity is unavailable to the subaltern middle classes. Pandey notes that wider society often calls on Dalit writers and intellectuals to “remember what ‘we’ have done for you”, while members of their community urge them not to forget where they came from, to stay close to the community’s experience and foreground it wherever possible.²⁸¹ This has resulted in a history of struggle in which Dalits are confronted with the choice between inhabiting an insistently political identity linked to caste and a seemingly non-political location of class privilege.²⁸² Pandey highlights the feelings of guilt, anxiety and betrayal that mediate the individual choices of Dalits as they negotiate the contradictions of their caste-class location. These affective responses indicate the inherently political nature of the subaltern middle class, denied the luxury of apolitical private individualism because their success is always related to the broader status of their community.

Dalit activists and writers have widely chosen creative literature and autobiography as sites for reflection on and theorization of these experiences. The subtle, visceral aspects of power relations captured in literature provides insight into how class mobility intersects with discrimination and community obligations in the production of political subjectivities. For example, in the introduction to his memoir, Arvind Malagatti considers his identity as a Dalit in terms of his appearance as an urban professional in crisp, white clothes. The class privilege signified by white clothing alienates him from his village community. He is seen as a “big man” and friends and neighbors are no longer at ease with him. However, his caste identity is an unspeakable difference amongst the “white-clad” in urban academic settings:

If I were to go to my old friends as a white-clad gentlemen, they would not accept me as they did before. And with my white-clad friends, if I were to talk about my

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 334.

²⁸² *Ibid.*

Mali-ness, they would stare at me, bewildered. This contradiction mocks me.

Whenever I am gripped by such thoughts, I chuckle instantly despite the pain.²⁸³

In Malagatti's text the "choice" between a politicized Dalit identity and a non-political class location is rarely a matter of individual preference. The anonymity of unmarked modern subjectivity is unavailable to him even as the authenticity of his experience as Dalit is called into question, both by other Dalits and by upper-caste, white clad society. The difficulty of speaking about caste among the latter without provoking skepticism and discomfort suggests that Dalits are expected to minimize their "Dalit-ness" in public spaces. In these encounters the burden of transcending caste identity is disproportionately transferred to Dalit bodies, while upper caste privilege is naturalized as unmarked subjectivity. Malagatti does not attempt to reconcile or transcend the contradictions of his class-caste location. Rather, contradiction and pain constitute the space from which his political interventions are made. Thus he points to a different kind of political choice made by Dalits, namely, to "live with dignity and pride before the eyes of those who mock them. Therefore, I flash a victorious smile whenever questions about my existence are raised in seminars and workshops". This suggests the political potential of disrupting and de-naturalizing spaces of caste privilege.²⁸⁴ Dalit middle-classness can then serve as a location from which new critiques of casteism in Indian society are generated.

My analysis will show how representations of the middle class Dalit constitute a site for the re-production of upper-caste subjectivity, which informs the articulation of anti-caste subjectivities. In the writings of elite, seemingly unmarked national citizens, the middle class Dalit is the object through which the terms and limits of upper caste guilt are staged. Guilt is subsequently transformed into justified resentment of a policy that creates "reverse discrimination" towards upper castes. The politicization of Dalits in the 1970s involved an explicit rejection of their constitution as objects of upper caste pity and guilt, and asserted the rights to power and self-representation. Forms of political protest and literature that emerged in this context showed how these affective responses sustained caste based power relations. At the same time, the discrimination and

²⁸³ *Government Brahmana*, trans. Dharani Devi Malagatti, Janet Vucinich and N. Subramanya (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2007), 2.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

humiliation faced by professional Dalits in institutions from which they had been historically excluded revealed that the violence of the caste system was firmly entrenched in structures of modernity and urbanization. Critical awareness of upper caste perceptions about lower castes, in particular their expectations that the latter be docile, compliant and grateful for the former's benevolence, was linked to articulations of militant, confrontational Dalit subjectivity.

The chapter is organized into the following sections. First, I outline the developmental project institutionalized by the post-colonial nation-state. In this project it was assumed that the transcendence of caste identity was an inevitable consequence of modern national development. I highlight how this assumption structured the production of knowledge about caste in academic scholarship and in Shashi Tharoor's chapter "Scheduled Caste, Unscheduled Change". The next section reviews early assessments of reservations in order to chart the ways in which the policy was implemented, perceived, opposed and strategized around. I then consider two prominent forms of Dalit politicization emerging in this context: the Dalit Panther movement and Dalit literature. It will be seen that limited class mobility took place against heightened economic insecurity, landlessness, and the re-constitution of caste discrimination in the modern-secular spaces of the nation-state. Re-visiting these decades in which Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes were the only communities eligible for reservation reveals links between upper caste resistance to the policy and Dalit political assertion. The policy of reservation was seen as fueling this assertion as it emboldened Dalits to reject the upper caste terms of national integration. In this context middle class subjectivity became a critical point of reflection among Panther and literary activists. I attend to their analysis of the fragmentation of Dalit communities along class lines through a reading of Dangle's and Pawde's contributions in *Poisoned Bread*.

Modernization, Development and the Nehruvian Nation-State

One of the principal arguments of the anti-colonial nationalist movement was that colonial rule obstructed the modern economic development of Indian society. It was only through a sovereign nation-state that such development could be meaningfully carried out. The traumatic experiences of the India-Pakistan partition further strengthened the

emphasis on economic development as a basis for national unity capable of cutting across community differences. Expressing a commitment to science and secularism, the Nehruvian state would be an agent of modernization for structures and sentiments. As Partha Chatterjee argues, economic development connected the legal-political sovereignty of the state with the sovereignty of the people - state power would be exercised for the wellbeing of the people.²⁸⁵ Chatterjee theorizes the politics of national development through Gramsci's concept of the passive revolution. The objective of a passive revolution is to contain class conflict within manageable dimensions and to control and manipulate dispersed power relations in society to further accumulation. In the passive revolution the state as mobilizer and manager of national resources had to plan development in a way that avoided the unnecessary rigors of social conflict, such as agrarian political mobilizations and land reform.²⁸⁶ Accordingly, the new nation-state barely altered the basic structures and institutions of colonial rule, nor did it mount a full-scale assault on all pre-capitalist dominant classes. State elites explained development and modernization to national audiences in terms of bold ambitions, but also stressed the necessarily partial and gradual nature of these processes.²⁸⁷

The modernizing and developmental vision of the Indian nation-state rested on the sharp differentiation of society from polity and of elite from the masses.²⁸⁸ The modalities of development reflected the image of a rational state and national elite that stood above the parochial interests of civil society. Chatterjee argues that the constitution of the planning commission exemplified the perceived need for a body of experts removed from the "squabbles and conflicts of politics" to determine the material allocation of productive resources within the nation.²⁸⁹ According to Roy, discourses about the backward masses and the need for science to remove backwardness provided a

²⁸⁵ Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 204.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 213.

²⁸⁷ Srirupa Roy, *Beyond Belief: India and the Politics of Postcolonial Nationalism* (Durham, Duke University Press: 2007), 112.

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.*; Dilip Menon, *The Blindness of Insight: Essays on Caste in Modern India* (Pondicherry: Navayana, 2006); Susie Tharu et al., "Reservations and the Return to Politics," *SocialSciences.in*, August 3, 2011, <http://socialsciences.in/article/reservations-and-return-politics>.

²⁸⁹ Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments*, 202.

means of staging national consent to and acceptance of the state's decisions and actions. Thus, the developmental state held the lack of science to be the primary national problem and the "need for science" as the most urgent and palpable.²⁹⁰ Science here signified both as production of expertise and the widespread diffusion of a "scientific temperment" among the people. Correspondingly, science as a modality of improvement was targeted at two significant challenges: 1) the lack of basic essentials of life and 2) the persistence of narrow mindedness and resistance to change. Particularly in rural India, statist discourse translated all expressions of popular discontent and social unrest into one of these overarching problems.²⁹¹ The idea that India was predominantly rural, poor, illiterate and locked into pre-modern social hierarchies justified the upper caste takeover of the institutions of capitalism, science and technology. The scientific expert was envisioned as different from the rest of the Indian population - in Nehru's words, one who was dispassionate, objective and without the propensity to "froth and foam."²⁹² The need to produce trained and qualified individuals was thus balanced with the imperative of exclusivity.²⁹³ The latter was linked to the assumption that the quality of scientists could only be maintained by limiting the number of research institutes. Nehru stated "I am all for democracy but normally democracy means mediocrity too."²⁹⁴ Thus the newly emerging centres of modern development created a system of collaborative mechanisms with the privileged castes – as ideal scientists and ideal planners - which allowed subaltern castes only a marginal role.²⁹⁵

The Nehruvian elite claimed a pan-Indian identity which seemed to be place-less, caste-less and class-less; an elite that spoke the language of secularism, technology, modernization and economic development.²⁹⁶ Reservations were implemented in a

²⁹⁰ Roy, *Beyond Belief*, 114-115.

²⁹¹ Ibid.

²⁹² Ibid., 125.

²⁹³ Ibid., 119.

²⁹⁴ Ibid.

²⁹⁵ Nagaraj, *The Flaming Feet*, 159. Nagaraj argues that Ambedkar and other Dalit leaders failed to perceive these collaborative relations due to deep investments in the emancipatory potential of modernity for transformations in caste relations.

²⁹⁶ Satish Deshpande, "Hegemonic Spatial Strategies: The Nation Space and Hindu Communalism in Twentieth Century India," *Community, Gender and Violence*:

context where mentioning one's caste was considered a retrograde, un-modern practice. In the assumed differentiation of modern elites from backward masses, religious and caste-based conflicts were perceived as 1) remnants of pre-modern, unscientific belief or 2) the products of false consciousness masking objective economic realities.²⁹⁷ That is, these identity-based conflicts were generated among the backward masses and not the modern secular middle class. In Bannerjee-Dube's analysis, the confinement of caste to the domain of religion and ritual allowed planners to share Nehru's belief that the project of nation building – the spread of education, democratic rights and developmental measures – would gradually erode the structures of caste.²⁹⁸ Caste and community got marked as what lay outside of, was other than, middle class and became excessively identified with “lower” or “backward” caste. Thus the subject position of the unmarked, caste-less citizen was imagined from the perspective of Brahminical superiority. Tellingly, Nehru described the ideal scientist as one who cared little for individual gains and devoted himself to what “we in India consider the Brahminic spirit of service”.²⁹⁹ This statement indicates the concentration of structural and symbolic power among a privileged minority.

The relations of power enabling this particular formation of unmarked secular citizenship also organized the production of knowledge about caste. It is perhaps unsurprising then, that two of the most influential scholars of caste, G.S. Ghurye and M.N. Srinavas, both argued strongly against the policy of reservation. For example, Srinavas expressed his sympathy for the Brahmins of Mysore and their distress about caste quotas for appointments in the administration and in scientific and technological courses. He could not help being sensitive to

the steady deterioration in efficiency and the fouling of interpersonal relations in academic circles and the administration – both results of a policy of caste quotas...conflicts between castes and castes prevented concentration on the all-

Subaltern Studies 11, ed. Partha Chatterjee and Pradeep Jeganathan (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 167-212.

²⁹⁷ Gyanendra Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006), 11-13.

²⁹⁸ Ishita Banerjee-Dube, *Caste in History* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010), xxvii.

²⁹⁹ In Roy, *Beyond Belief*, 121.

important task of developing the economic resources of the state for the benefit of all sections of the population.³⁰⁰

The reference to deterioration and fouling of spaces by Dalit presence registers how notions of lower caste bodies as polluting persisted in secular elite discourse. Significantly, Srinavas' theory of Sanskritization is one of the most influential interpretations of social mobility among subaltern communities. It was intimately tied to the rhetoric of "modernization" and "development" of the newly independent state of India.³⁰¹ Sanskritization refers to processes whereby a caste group with "low" ritual status changes its customs, rituals and way of life in the direction of a "high" or twice born caste.³⁰² It involves claims for upward social mobility through status emulation with Brahmanical codes of conduct setting the standard. Srinavas observed that this process accelerated during British colonialism but did not theorize the connections between colonial relations of rule and contestations over caste status.³⁰³ Rather, he argued that Sanskritization unfolded across variations in time and space: "the process is a traditional medium of expression for change within the caste system and directs change in such a way that all-India values are asserted and the homogeneity of the entire Hindu society increases."³⁰⁴ In the previous chapter, it was seen that the integration of subaltern castes was considered necessary for the consolidation of a Hindu community. This is reflected in Srinavas' framework, as the community is defined in relation to Brahminical values, which are presented as "all-India" values. As Pandian notes, the teleological scheme in

³⁰⁰ *Social Change in Modern India*, 152-153. Cited in M.S.S. Pandian, "One Step Outside Modernity: Caste, Identity Politics and Public Sphere," *Economic and Political Weekly*, May 4 2002, 1738.

³⁰¹ Banerjee-Dube, *Caste in History*, xxii.

³⁰² For example, in changing to a vegetarian diet, abstaining from alcohol and enforcing gender norms associated with upper castes – ban on widow remarriage, restriction of women's labor outside the home.

³⁰³ Bernard Cohn and Nicholas Dirks have discussed the petitions for changes in caste status in the census during colonialism in relation to the material benefits of employment and scholarships distributed on a caste basis. A key reason for the abandonment of caste as a census category in 1931 was due to the large amount of petitions for change in caste status.

³⁰⁴ M.N. Srinavas, "A Note on Sanskritization and Westernization," *The Far Eastern Quarterly* 15, no. 4 (1956): 494.

Srinavas' work moved from lower caste practices, to sanskritization to westernization.³⁰⁵ The theory thus assumes harmonious social transformations among castes through ritual adaptation and neglects the question of the material violence involved in the maintenance of caste: "Sanskritization embodied the hope of independent India that in every way the subordinated castes would become more like those above them and that would be the end of the problem."³⁰⁶ For the secular elite, social mobility was unimaginable outside of the cultural politics of Brahminical superiority.

A similar concern with the consolidation of a Hindu community and the position of subaltern castes is reflected in G.S. Ghurye's essay "A Casteless Society or a Plural Society", published in the 5th edition of his seminal text *Caste and Race in India*.³⁰⁷ The thesis of the essay is that the state's inability to eliminate reservations is contributing to the entrenchment of caste politics in India and thus defeating the objective of achieving a casteless society.³⁰⁸ The essay proposes that population groups should be gradually disqualified from quotas. It argues that the Constitution has created ambiguity about the category "backward class", which frustrate attempts to phase out the policy. Alongside and animating this legalistic mode of critique, however, are the passionate articulations of the modern nationalist distressed by the heightened visibility of caste in public spaces. Ghurye argues that the problem of caste in independent India arises mainly out of caste patriotism, which inhibits the development of national consciousness. The spread of journals, trusts and associations by different caste communities in the post-independence period is identified as evidence of the growth of caste sentiment and solidarity. Moreover, the Congress Party is held responsible for encouraging such trends. Ghurye supports this claim with reference to Nehru's attendance at a Scheduled Caste legislator's convention. He finds this a particularly distressing moment as Nehru had otherwise shown himself to be a staunch critic of caste patriotism. Recalling this moment Ghurye states:

I should point out that it was worse than a one-caste conference. It was a conference of a group of castes, which, though inter se socially opposed to one another and insistent on social segregation inter se, had come together to secure a

³⁰⁵ Pandian, "One Step Outside Modernity," 1738.

³⁰⁶ Menon, *The Blindness of Insight*, 6.

³⁰⁷ (Mumbai: Popular Prakashan, 2008). Originally published in 1965.

³⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 406.

larger size of the national cake by reservation, which may be leisurely divided and distributed amongst themselves.³⁰⁹

In this passage Scheduled Castes are identified as the principle agents responsible for perpetuating caste identity and thus preventing national unity. The SC legislators organizing across divisions of their sub-castes are read as greedy and disingenuous. They mask their own discriminatory practices for the sake of reservation. The investments in Brahmanic superiority are betrayed in this inability to see SCs apart from their sub-caste. By arguing that their actual interests are derived from sub-caste identity, Ghurye essentializes these identities. All signs of political organizing are seen as an assault on Hinduisim: “the enterprise of turning a caste into a total community and of atomizing the Hindu society is... a vigorous growth of the post-independence era.”³¹⁰ It is not conceivable for the author that these collaborations could be an attempt to overcome the graded hierarchy of caste by identifying common struggles among different SC communities, or that such processes might create more expansive forms of identity.

D.R. Nagaraj describes the caste system as a mosaic of different contestations of descriptions of dignity, religiosity, and entitlements; total consensus on all issues has never existed in theory or practice. However, “the brahminical view is a statement of the monolithic unity of all the three realms: lower castes have no dignity, their religiosity is a sham, and their right to entitlements is next to nothing.”³¹¹ The texts of Ghurye and Srinavas reflect such a unity. In Sanskritization theory a dignified existence can only be grasped at through emulation of a higher caste. The subaltern’s actions are motivated by a desire for and thus belief in ritual status. Insofar as reservations create “investments in backwardness”, they are disruptive of the organic processes of Sanskritization. By linking state resources to a lower caste identity, the policy discourages the status emulation of upper castes. In Ghurye’s essay SC political organizing indicates the extent of greed for entitlements. Assigning primacy to the sub-caste identity of SC subjects in interpreting their political motivations, Ghurye retains the power of naming and classification for the Brahminical subject. A telling indication of how such views extend across scholarly and

³⁰⁹ Ibid., 431.

³¹⁰ Ibid., 444.

³¹¹ Nagaraj, *The Flaming Feet*, 187.

anecdotal registers is the emergence of the term “Government Brahmin” to refer to SCs in the post-colonial reservations system. The insult is an expression of caste Hindu resentment that characterizes the SC as an undeserving recipient of state resources and an artificially constructed respectability that the subject does not inherently possess. It also exposes the inability of the modern middle classes to think beyond caste. The next section will examine the limits of the secular subjects tolerance for reservation through a reading of Shashi Tharoor’s account of the nation-state’s assault on caste.

Caste and the Politics of Guilt in “Scheduled Caste, Unscheduled Change”

The central challenge of India as we enter the 21st century is the challenge of accommodating the aspirations of different groups in the national dream...the battle for India’s soul will thus be between two Hinduisms, the secularist Indianism of the nationalist movement and the particularist fanaticism of the Ayodhya mob.³¹²

Published in 1997, *India: From Midnight to Millennium* commemorates the 50th year of independence through affirmation of an irreducibly plural vision of Indian society. It is written primarily for a Western audience unfamiliar with India’s overwhelming diversity as well as its relevance for key global debates on democracy, globalization and religious fundamentalisms. As the passage above suggests, however, the commitment to a secular, pluralist national vision also represents a political intervention specific to the political conditions of 1990s India. Tharoor devotes much space to lamenting how the exclusionary politics of Hindu right wing parties has gained ground at the expense of the India of tolerance and accommodation in which he had grown up. Narrating his visit in 1992 after the destruction of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, he observes how “educated people uttered thoughts that once they would not have considered respectable to formulate, let alone express.”³¹³ The significance of the Masjid affair is linked to the other key episode emblematic of the political upheavals of the 1990s, the Mandal Commission controversy over the extension of reservation to “Other Backward Classes” in central government employment, which is the subject of

³¹² Shashi Tharoor, *India: From Midnight to Millenium* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1997), 77.

³¹³ *Ibid.*, 53.

Chapter 3. Both are implicated in a divisive politics that threaten identification with India. From Tharoor's liberal perspective right wing upper caste Hindus and marginalized caste groups converge as threats to a united nation-state. The difference in power and political objectives between the two groups is irrelevant for him. This analysis depends on a specific understanding of caste as a transitory aberration bearing no relevance to the secular nation-state or to the category "Hindu". Indeed, Tharoor's plural vision relies on the notion of India as essentially Hindu:

The sad irony is that India's coexistence was paradoxically made possible by the fact that the overwhelming majority of Indians are Hindus...As a Hindu, I claim adherence to a religion without an established church or priestly papacy, a religion whose rituals and customs I am free to reject...I belong to the only major religion in the world that does not claim to be the only true religion.³¹⁴

No other religion and thus religious community, is capable of such tolerance. This passage echoes the arguments made in the Constituent Assembly about the benevolence and goodwill of the majority community as the best guarantee for the protection of minorities in the nation-state. Secular nationalists distinguish themselves from Hindutva politics based on their tolerance for minorities, especially Muslims. However, Tharoor shares with the right wing politics he rejects the belief that the basis of the nation is a stable Hindu majority community. Both ignore the alternative spiritual-political trajectories of Dalit communities. The implications of this for the text's approach to the caste question are illustrated in the chapter "Scheduled Caste, Unscheduled Change".

The chapter is distinguished from others in the book by Tharoor's decision to tell a story about social transformation vis-à-vis caste almost entirely from his own personal experiences. The chapter situates affirmative action within a narrative of national integration from the perspective of an (upper caste) urban middle class subject. The narrative unfolds as a series of pedagogical encounters that are formative to his knowledge of caste relations. All of these moments take place during annual visits to his ancestral village in Kerala - caste does not exist in the modern cosmopolitan city of Bombay. The rural landscape is completely alien, causing disorientation and discomfort for the urban subject. This is felt in the absence of electric lights, ceiling fans, cars and

³¹⁴ Ibid., 54-55.

other amenities of urban life. More importantly, Tharoor is disoriented by the pervasive relations of power that structure social life, rendering oppressive the intimacy and familiarity of the village. In this context an eight-year old English speaking Bombayite encounters Charlis. Charlis is a quiet Dalit boy who the other children insult and exclude from their social activities. Tharoor senses that the treatment of Charlis has something to do with the “complicated hierarchies that everyone seemed to take for granted...but since he was neither female nor particularly young, I couldn’t fit him into what I already knew of Kerala village life.”³¹⁵ Although he is repeatedly instructed to avoid Charlis, the young Tharoor is unsettled by this form of exclusion he cannot name, expressing a child’s sense of pre-political justice. Considering this retrospectively, he assumes that his discomfort with the treatment of Charlis was likely due to an urban, “Bombayite” sense of fairness.

The rural here represents a space of pre-modern hierarchy where rules are understood and unquestioningly obeyed. As the narrative progresses the increasing presence of the state begins to reorganize life in the village. The modern development of Kerala parallels the incremental inclusion of Charlis into upper caste spaces. The arrival of schools, medical clinics and electricity signal the transformation of rural life. Amidst these changes Tharoor notices that Charlis now plays football with his cousins, but is still unable to enter their home. The restriction is temporary however. With the appearance of tube lights, plastic mugs and flush toilets marking the passing of time, “one year, one day, quite naturally, Charlis stepped into the house with the other kids after a game.”³¹⁶ However, “he can’t sit at our table or be fed on our plates...even the servants would not wash a plate off which an Untouchable had eaten.”³¹⁷ To circumvent this segregation of meals, he and his widowed aunt - who is also constrained by religious tradition and hence sympathetic - feed Charlis on a disposable banana leaf near the back door. In this way, the urban secular (upper caste) subject can simultaneously assuage his guilt and maintain Brahminical norms of segregation in his home. Indeed, throughout these moments in which the reader is shown the many exclusions endured by Charlis the urban subject never explicitly challenges the practice of untouchability within his family. He notes that

³¹⁵ Ibid., 81.

³¹⁶ Ibid., 90.

³¹⁷ Ibid., 91.

his parents changed their surname in rejection of the caste system, but does not question why they are unmoved by these ongoing practices. It is the nation-state, manifested in modern infrastructure and commodities, that is the primary agent of social reform. In this way the narrative expresses the frustration of a modern liberal subject with pre-modern irrationalities but also stresses the patience required from this subject for incremental changes in society.

The suitability of this liberal-reformist approach to caste sociality for the rural Indian context is supported by the representation of Charlis, the only Dalit subject of the narrative. He exists in isolation from Dalit social spaces, communities and importantly, the growing political movements of the 60s and 70s claiming dignity for Dalits and rejecting the Hindu social order. The prominent anti-caste intellectual traditions of Southern and Western India are absent from his educational experience. Rather, Charlis quotes from the imperial canon of Shakespeare and Kipling about the timeless bonds of humanity that exist beyond markers of difference. In this he is seen as innocently inferior: “But who cares, Charlis? He’s (Kipling) just an imperialist old fart. What does anything he ever wrote have to do with any of us today, in independent India?”³¹⁸ Throughout the narrative Charlis waits with patience and docility for integration into the national mainstream. Through quiet dedication and “thanks to India’s extraordinary affirmative action programs” he is admitted to Trivandrum University and recruited as an officer in the Indian Administrative Service. In this way, Charlis embodies the vision of progress articulated by the upper-caste elite: the removal of caste stigma through the route of access to modern institutions of the university and government office. This process enables his acceptance in upper caste hearts and homes. This moment is captured in Charlis’s last appearance in the narrative. As an IAS officer, Charlis is requested by Tharoor’s family to help protect their land amidst Kerala’s program of land redistribution. Upon helping them regain some of their land Charlis is finally invited to dine at their home. The author remembers this moment with pride and satisfaction, which signifies the transformation of the untouchable body:

...Charlis steps down, in his off-white safari suit and open toed sandals, and walks to our front door...we greet him there, usher him into the house, but

³¹⁸ Ibid., 94.

Balettan stops us outside. For a minute all the old fears come flooding back into my mind and Charlis's, but it is only for a minute, because Balettan is shouting out to the servant, "Can't you see the Collector-Saare is waiting? Hurry up!" I catch Charlis's eye; he smiles. The servant pulls a bucketful of water out of the well to wash Charlis's feet.³¹⁹

If the body is a vehicle for the naturalization of power, the transformation of Charlis in this passage indicates the transfer of authority from the pre-modern caste system to the modern nation-state. The removal of caste stigma from the Dalit body involves association with those markers of modernity so desirable that upper castes can no longer practice untouchability. IAS officer Charlis is integrated into the re-constituted rural space as seamlessly as roads and electricity. However, the respect Charlis receives is simultaneous to the assertion of control over the family servant.

The chapter concludes by placing these personal experiences in a broader context: "This is a story about change, democratic change, the kind that India has sought to promote for fifty years since independence."³²⁰ For the benefit of the reader for whom caste is probably as foreign a concept as it was for the young Tharoor himself, a brief introduction is given to its scriptural basis and corresponding division of labor. The key shift accelerating the transformation of this centuries old system is the nationalist movement: "...it is *easy* to see why Gandhi and the more enlightened of India's nationalists, anxious to unite the country against the foreign colonizer, campaigned passionately against the caste system."³²¹ Dalit struggles have no place in this trajectory. It is modernity and particularly the anonymity of urban life that renders caste practices unsustainable.

...it is hardly possible to know the caste of the straphanger rubbing shoulders with you on the bus or jostling past you on the street, or for that matter of the cook who

³¹⁹ Ibid., 102-103.

³²⁰ Ibid., 103.

³²¹ Ibid., 104, emphasis mine. This passage suggests the obviousness about caste inequality in the nationalist movement. It erases the struggles over the way in which the caste question should be resolved, as well as Nehru's view that this was a nominal issue.

made the meal you ate in an anonymous restaurant...the stigma of caste is disappearing more rapidly in Indian cities than that of race in the United States.³²² Inability to confirm caste equates to inability to practice untouchability. Accordingly, a descriptive list of caste atrocities is presented by the author and swiftly dismissed as lingering vestiges of pre-modern attitudes in rural India. Rape, lynchings and burning bodies are “not cause for despair” about the prospects of social change.

After celebrating “independent India’s determination to compensate for millennia of injustice to its social underclasses”³²³, Tharoor’s confidence in this mode of social change begins to subside, giving way to fears that affirmative action is extending beyond its justified limits. While the progress of Charlis represents the nation’s enlightened constitutional commitments to justice, the temporal and demographic extension of this commitment has increased “caste consciousness and casteism throughout Indian society.”³²⁴ The politics of guilt and pity have morphed into upper caste resentment of middle class Dalits. This class unjustifiably continues to retain their caste identities in order to get ahead. Inevitably then, “Caste Hindus have increasingly come to resent the offspring of cabinet ministers, for instance, benefitting from reservations and lower entry thresholds into university and government that were designed to compensate for disadvantages these scions of privilege have never personally experienced.”³²⁵ Further, with the implementation of the Mandal Commission, “lower middle castes” have contaminated the electoral system by mobilizing voters through identity politics. It is numerical strength rather than any meaningful political platform that accounts for their electoral success. The upper caste elites who long ago rejected their caste identities now confront a reality in which “caste is suddenly all important again. You can’t go forward unless you are a backward.”³²⁶ The limits of upper caste guilt are staged in this moment of intensified assertion of subaltern castes, subjects that were expected to disappear in the secular liberal vision of social transformation. The imagined middle class Dalit subject marks the parameters of upper caste guilt because class mobility implies the absence of

³²² Ibid., 105.

³²³ Ibid., 107.

³²⁴ Ibid., 110.

³²⁵ Ibid., 109.

³²⁶ Ibid., 110.

discrimination. “In other words, if you think Charlis has made it, wait till you see his son.”³²⁷

Assessing Reservations in the Context of Nehruvian Developmentalism

In “Scheduled Castes, Unscheduled Change” Tharoor explains the extraordinary nature of reservation policy through the case of political representation: “...it means that a caste Hindu (or for that matter, a Muslim or a Christian) from a reserved constituency cannot seek to represent his own neighbors in parliament, because only Scheduled Caste candidates are eligible to contest the seat.”³²⁸ This image of the earnest caste Hindu deprived of the opportunity to represent his neighbors exemplifies how the secular subject’s pride in the constitutional commitment to an egalitarian society can be reconciled with the sense that reservation does injustice to the upper caste subject. It assumes that the SC politician represents the interests of his/her particular community, whereas the Caste Hindu seeks to represent the general interest of the constituency. The latter sees all as neighbors not as castes.

A closer look at the trajectory of political reservations complicates this understanding of caste relations and forms of exclusion in reserved constituencies. In most reserved constituencies SCs constitute a minority, rarely exceeding 20-30 percent of the population. This significantly compromises the ability of SC communities to elect independent and assertive candidates because caste Hindu votes ultimately determine election results. Moreover, 75 percent of SCs reside in non-reserved constituencies³²⁹. SC politicians also lack the group and individual economic resources with which to fight elections. In the 50s and 60s such barriers to harnessing reservations towards autonomous Dalit politics were further compounded by the well-honed Congress strategy of co-opting SC leaders and mobilizing caste Hindu votes to secure their election. The Congress strategy sought to contain Ambedkarite anti-caste politics through the promotion of SC candidates that subscribed to a Gandhian framework of social reform. The success of this strategy was seen in the defeat of Ambedkar himself against relatively unknown

³²⁷ Ibid., 111.

³²⁸ Ibid., 107.

³²⁹ Marc Galanter, “Compensatory Discrimination in Political Representation,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 14, no. 7-8, February 1979, 438-9.

Congress candidates in 1952 and 1954. “The Congress had been able to prove that even political nonentities could humble the mighty leader.”³³⁰

The political possibilities of reserved constituencies were also shaped by the shift in conditions from colonial rule to nation-state formation. During colonial rule claiming minority status for SCs was necessary in order to gain separate representation in governance structures. The potential gains of claiming minority status were curtailed after the transfer of power due to the hegemony of the Congress Party and the particular delimitation of reserved constituencies. The political realities of independent India required coalition and alliance politics.³³¹ This lesson was illustrated by the Scheduled Caste Federation’s lack of success in the first general election of 1952. The realization that SCs would be unable to gain political power without alliances with other social groups led to the formation of the Republican Party of India in 1957. The RPI sought a deliberate dilution of Dalit identity in order to “engage itself in organizing the down trodden masses of India particularly the Buddhists, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and other Backward Classes.”³³² The RPI took pains to establish itself as a non-communal party dedicated to the cause of social and economic equality, avoiding specific references to untouchability except in relation to broader notions of inequality in Indian society.³³³ This re-orientation towards coalition politics managed to yield initial results in Maharashtra and subsequently Uttar Pradesh (UP).³³⁴ The party’s election manifesto of 1962 focused heavily on economic issues including land nationalization and collective farming, control of the distribution and prices of food grains, implementation of the 1948 Minimum Wage Act and increase in recruitment of SCs and STs in government

³³⁰ S. Anand, “Despite Parliamentary Democracy,” *Himal South Asian*, August 2008, <http://www.himalmag.com/component/content/article/838-despite-parliamentary-democracy.html>.

³³¹ Jayashree Gokhale, *From Concessions to Confrontation: The Politics of an Indian Untouchable Community* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1993), 217.

³³² In Christophe Jaffrelot, *India’s Silent Revolution: The Rise of the Lower Castes in North India* (London: Hurst and Company, 2003), 107.

³³³ Gokhale, *From Concessions to Confrontation*, 217.

³³⁴ Jaffrelot, *India’s Silent Revolution*, 107-110. In the 1957 elections the RPI won 4 Lok Sabha seats in the province of Bombay (of which 2 were from reserved constituencies) and 15 assembly seats. The party expanded beyond Maharashtra in 1962, winning most of its seats in Uttar Pradesh.

services.³³⁵ However, significant disagreements existed among Dalit communities as to the implications of marginalizing caste specific issues, particularly untouchability, in favor of a class basis of organization. Tensions around caste and class were exacerbated by the heterogeneity of Dalit sub-castes, rural-urban divisions and generational conflict. Thus, Rao argues that initial struggles of this movement were over who had the authority to represent the Dalit as political subject.³³⁶ These tensions manifested in electoral politics and by 1974 the RPI had split into four factions. This further enabled Congress strategies of cooption of militant Dalit leaders.

Assessments of SC politicians in parliament often relate performance to the issue of Congress cooption. For example, in his thorough study of reservation policy Marc Galanter notes the widespread belief that reserved seat legislators are less articulate, less assertive, and less independent than their Caste Hindu counterparts.³³⁷ In the first two decades after independence, SCs in legislatures did not forcefully articulate the cause of their communities since they were not accountable to them: there was not even one constituency with a majority of SC voters.³³⁸ Assumptions about the meekness of SC politicians contributed to an understanding of political reservations as resulting in the creation of a de-politicized, privileged elite isolated from Dalit communities and only interested in preserving their own quotas. However, Barbara Joshi reminds us that in this line of argumentation, any positive developments in the status of untouchables since independence are regarded as the result of basic changes in Indian society and/or the efforts of reform-minded leaders from the dominant castes.³³⁹ Alternate studies have shown that support for redistributive policies such as ceilings on rural land and urban property and cooperative farming were considerably higher and more consistent among SC Congress MPs than those of Caste Hindu background.³⁴⁰ Also given the early onset of opposition to reservation policies and attempts to eliminate them completely and/or

³³⁵ Jaffrelot, *India's Silent Revolution*, 110.

³³⁶ Rao, *The Caste Question*, 185.

³³⁷ Galanter, *Competing Equalities*, 51.

³³⁸ Jaffrelot, *India's Silent Revolution*, 113.

³³⁹ "‘Ex-Untouchable’: Problems, Progress and Policies in Indian Social Change,” *Pacific Affairs* 53, no. 2 (Summer 1980): 213.

³⁴⁰ Stanley Kochanek, "The Relation between Social Background and Attitudes of Indian Legislators," *Journal of Commonwealth Political Studies* 6, (1968): 34-53. In *Ibid.*, 216.

disqualify millions of sub-castes from the Schedule, the former's role has often been that of defending and improving existing provisions. Thus the relationship between strategies of cooption and necessarily meek and ineffective political elites should be complicated with consideration of the structural constraints of participation in electoral politics, a broader context of caste inequalities and the regional, political and linguistic differences between SCs themselves.

The terrain of reservations in education and employment further illustrates the uneven and contradictory impact of reservations in the production of a Dalit middle class. The record of implementation shows that there has been no sincere effort by the elite or political parties to respect the Constitutional provisions. Significant variation exists among government agencies in time of implementation, ranging from 7 to 23 years.³⁴¹ Numerous agencies are exempt from implementation on the premise that expertise and national security outweigh issues of equity in their cases. Exemptions are permitted for positions in the ministries of Defense, Law, Finance, the Planning Commission and in the Prime Ministerial and Presidential offices. The Reserve Bank of India rejected the policy as early as 1954 and it took 13 years for the government to persuade the institution to adopt it.³⁴² At the same time a large number of reserved seats were (and continue to be) left unfilled on the premise that a suitably qualified candidate could not be recruited. Galanter argues that because there is a lack of thoughtful awareness of the intentions and purpose of reserving government posts, arguments about unavailability of candidates are accepted as a matter of course.³⁴³ The general trend of SC employment also reveals their concentration in the lowest categories of government service. In some cases this recruitment corresponds to rather than subverts the relation between caste and occupation. For example, sweepers employed by the administration in category 4 come mostly from the caste group historically assigned to this occupation.³⁴⁴

Despite this dismal record of promoting equity in government service through reservation, the very existence of the policies breed widespread resentment among Caste Hindu workers that is disproportionate to its actual impact. Resentment towards SCs

³⁴¹ Devadutt, "The Saga of Reservations," *Alpajan Quarterly* 4 (2006): 5.

³⁴² *Ibid.*

³⁴³ *Competing Equalities*, 97.

³⁴⁴ Joshi, "Ex-Untouchables", 200-201.

entering spaces historically seen as Caste Hindu domains took institutional form well before the spectacular protests against the Mandal Commission. For example, in the formation of the following organizations: Himachal Pradesh Anti-Reservation Employees Union (1979), All India Non Scheduled Caste Welfare Association (Punjab, 1980) and All-India Non-Reserved Employees Association (1980).³⁴⁵ As such, the very policies expected to eliminate caste discrimination through occupational de-segregation became the object around which upper-castes organized to protect their interests in the modern-secular spaces of government and public sector offices. This undermines the notion of the secular, caste-less middle class of the Nehruvian nation-state. In particular its self-representation as a meritorious, hardworking class in contrast to undeserving Scheduled Caste bodies bloated on government resources.

Studies on the impact of reservation in education conducted in the 1970s lent support to such expressions of caste Hindu resentment. For example a study by Chitnis states that the purpose of education for SCs is 1) to enable occupational and economic mobility, and 2) to equip them for a social structure in which status is determined not by ascription but by individual achievement and worth.³⁴⁶ That this pedagogical necessity is assigned specifically to SCs assumes that other subjects reach higher education solely on the basis of individual merit, thus dismissing the issue of caste-class privilege. It is the SC and not the middle class Brahmin or Kshatriya that must unlearn ascription based privilege. This study with particular reference to Maharashtra and Bombay city observes high drop out rates of SC students and their concentration in inferior colleges of the state. The data is interpreted to argue that reservations admit unqualified students who then perform poorly in these institutions. Chitnis argues that enrolment in higher education serves merely to draw SCs out of their segregation and offer possibilities for integration. However, “unless SC students can stand on their own merit and face competition with others...they are in danger of becoming isolates who cannot merge with the mainstream

³⁴⁵ Devadutt, “Saga of Reservations,” 7.

³⁴⁶ Suma Chitnis, “Education for Equality: Case of Scheduled Castes in Higher Education,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, August 1972, 1675-1682. For other studies published in the 1970s see Sunanda Patwardhan, *Change Among India's Harijans: Maharashtra- A Case Study* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 1973) and Kusum Premi, “Educational Opportunities for the Scheduled Castes: Role of Protective Discrimination in Equalization,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, November 9 1974, 1902-1910.

of life in the circle”.³⁴⁷ In such entrenched interpretations, reserved seat candidates drop out or perform poorly because they are unqualified, inferior subjects whose entry is premised on Caste Hindu guilt. There is no place in this interpretation for the structural barriers that students from these communities continue to face after enrolment or the discriminatory practices within educational institutions. Moreover, echoing Srinavas’ comments on reservation, the presence of inferior subjects stands to lower the standards of educational institutions themselves. The presence of the subject of reservations poses a threat to the academic integrity of educational institutions. Thus resentment towards them is explained as an inevitable consequence of the policy’s recruitment of “sub-standard” students in a context of limited facilities.

It is against this pattern of political cooption, systemic resistance to implementation and caste Hindu resentment of reservation that the fragmentation of SC communities through class mobility and rural-urban migration has taken place. One dominant representation marks the middle class SC subject as inarticulate, meek and unqualified – a subject inferior to and dependent on the unmarked (caste Hindu) subject’s tolerance of his/her presence in spaces where he/she does not truly belong. A second trend in representation concerns the alienation of elite SCs from their communities through higher education and economic mobility. In this frame it is the middle class SC monopolizing the quota system that is held responsible for the fact that the majority of SC communities continue to live in conditions of poverty. Unaccounted for in these representations is the increasing militancy of Dalit political assertion and anti-caste critique, which reject normative middle class values and the affective politics of upper caste pity. These politicizations are also linked to the fragmentation of SC communities through class mobility and rural-urban migration. They are further related to a broader context of intensified caste violence, economic insecurity and the re-constitution of caste prejudice in modern urban spaces. The following section will illustrate how these conditions contributed to critical engagements with the question of Dalit middle classness in the Dalit Panther movement and Dalit literature.

³⁴⁷ Chitnis, “Education for Equality,” 1680.

“Their Traditional Pity is no Better Than the Pimp on Falkland Road”:³⁴⁸

Reservation and Anti-Caste Politics

Opponents of caste-based reservation often argue that economic criteria should be made the only basis for quota based affirmative action. This argument relies on images of middle class Dalits who protect themselves from open competition by falsely accusing Caste Hindus of discrimination. Class mobility functions as evidence of the absence of discrimination and subjective de-politicization: “if you think Charlis had made it, wait til you see his son”. However, Dalits came to access education and employment in precarious conditions. The post-colonial context did see a significant increase in the number of Dalits in these facilities. This process unfolded simultaneously with increasing landlessness among and violence against Dalit communities. According to Murugkar, while the promise of equality had created high expectations for better treatment, expectations grew more rapidly than changes in living conditions.³⁴⁹ In the Milind College of Arts, Maharashtra the majority of SC students came from rural families. 73 percent of these families belonged to the category of landless workers and 52 percent of parents had taken loans from village moneylenders at exorbitant rates to finance their children’s education.³⁵⁰ In the 1970s Maharashtra was marked by inflation, contraction of the job market and rural distress. Severe famines occurred in 1972-1973. Students belonging to rural families discontinued their studies to seek work as manual laborers in scarcity centres, where they confronted caste discrimination in access to public resources. These experiences contributed to the radical politicization of SC youth as economic insecurity and untouchability confronted empty promises of progress and social advancement.³⁵¹ From this perspective, class mobility facilitated by reservation was far from a linear, uninterrupted process that de-linked educated SCs from rural communities.

The anti-caste politics emerging in this context responded to the ineffectiveness of the political leadership of the RPI and the Left. Although the RPI had participated in land

³⁴⁸ Namdeo Dhasal, “Their Eternal Pity,” *An Anthology of Dalit Literature*, ed. Mulk Raj Anand and Eleanor Zelliot (New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 1992), 52. Poem written in 1975.

³⁴⁹ Lata Murugkar, *Dalit Panther Movement in Maharashtra* (Mumbai: Popular Prakashan, 1991), 10.

³⁵⁰ Gokhale, *From Concession to Confrontation*, 244.

³⁵¹ *Ibid.*; Murugkar, *Dalit Panther Movement*, 10.

struggles in earlier decades, by the 1970s it was characterized by stagnation, factionalism and disinterest in rural issues.³⁵² The RPI focused its energies on the extension of reservation to SCs who had converted to Buddhism. The traditional Indian Left did not provide a meaningful alternative as it rarely spoke of untouchability or critiqued Hindu society. Omvedt argues that for young Dalit activists, economic and cultural exploitation were interwoven from the beginning.³⁵³ The apathy of political parties was especially striking given the widespread atrocities committed against Dalits. After UP, Maharashtra had the second highest number of registered complaints about caste violence.³⁵⁴ Targets of violence included recent converts to Buddhism, increasingly assertive landless laborers and those who had challenged village authorities about caste relations. In this context existing collectives of Dalit writers and poets located primarily in Bombay began to organize a militant politics. Arjun Dangle, one of the founders of the Dalit Panthers, recalls:

We were painfully aware of the ineffectiveness of the RPI factions despite the growing social injustice and atrocities. The left parties were inherently aloof from social questions...we young dalit writers had realized that writing angry poems would not be enough to combat these injustices.³⁵⁵

The Panthers argued that no single ruling or opposition party had any definite program to solve or even ameliorate the miserable conditions of the Dalits. Warnings were issued in 1972 to the Maharashtra government that if steps were not taken to curb atrocities they would take the law into their own hands and commence an armed revolt. Semi-educated lower middle class and working class youth were organized by Panther activists initially in the chawls of central Bombay and subsequently in other major cities such as Aurangabad, Poona and Nasik.³⁵⁶ A key target of Panther politics was the established

³⁵² Gokhale, *From Concessions to Confrontation*, 248.

³⁵³ Gail Omvedt, *Dalit Visions: The Anti-Caste Movement and the Construction of an Indian Identity* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 1995), 77.

³⁵⁴ Murugkar, *Dalit Panther Movement*, 8-9. Atrocities increased from an average of 177 per month in 1971, to 199 per month in 1972, to 231 per month in the first 8 months of 1973.

³⁵⁵ Gokhale, *From Concessions to Confrontation*, 267.

³⁵⁶ Ramesh Chandan and Sangh Mitra, *Dalit Identity in the New Millenium 3: Phases of Dalit Revolt* (New Delhi: Commonwealth, 2003), 166; Rao, *The Caste Question*, 189.

elite of the RPI, deemed incapable of advancing Dalit struggles. Panthers declared the separation of all ties from the party and claimed to represent the masses that the RPI had abandoned in their subordination to the Congress Party and single point agenda of reservations. The scathing critiques and violent confrontations between Panther activists and RPI members indicate the significance of political subject formation for Dalit politics. Panther writings explored the internal degeneration of the RPI and rejected its political elite. However, it has been noted that prominent Panther organizers were also beneficiaries of the reservation system and shared middle class locations with the RPI.³⁵⁷ While their ability to represent the interests of rural and working class Dalits was thus called into question, the movement opened up middle class identity to different political possibilities.

The Panther Manifesto stated: “we do not want a place in Brahman alley. We want the rule of the whole land. We are not looking at persons but at a system.”³⁵⁸ The militant political organizing and literature of the movement rejected tokenistic forms of accommodation, claiming political power and the right to self-representation. Their assertive presence in middle and working class neighborhoods as well as universities and offices confronted the perceptions of privileged castes that reservations was a concession they had afforded to a vulnerable and backward group. The Panthers exploded the myth of the Dalit subject as mute and passive.³⁵⁹ Thus cultural and symbolic politics deliberately antagonistic to Caste Hindu values constituted a significant mode of Panther politics. Dalits identified themselves as modern and proletarian and saw their enemy – Hinduism – as feudal backwardness.³⁶⁰ However, the demands for power also enhanced the visibility of Dalit bodies as targets of violence. A prominent struggle representative of these connections between cultural politics and violence was the Namantar (re-naming) agitation in the Marathwada region. This region contained a large rural, landless population of Dalits as well as highly politicized and militant professors and students of Marathwada University. The agitation concerned the re-naming of Marathwada

³⁵⁷ Gokhale, *From Concessions to Confrontation*, 265; Omvedt, *The Anti-Caste Movement*, 73.

³⁵⁸ In Omvedt, *The Anti-Caste Movement*, 73.

³⁵⁹ Chandan and Mitra, *Dalit Identity*, 171.

³⁶⁰ Omvedt, *The Anti-Caste Movement*, 77.

University to Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Marathwada University. Supporters of re-naming sought to commemorate Ambedkar's efforts to make higher education available to Dalits and demanded symbolic representation within the institution: "The Milind campus in Aurangabad is now an educational and cultural centre thanks to the efforts of Babasaheb Ambedkar. We now want to convert it into a power centre."³⁶¹ Upper caste opposition to this resulted in ongoing violence in the region between 1977-1978 and the murder and displacement of thousands of Dalits. In Murugkar's study of the agitation, it is noted that the protracted violence and its disproportionate effect on rural Dalits also raised questions about the extent to which students could act in the interest of Dalit communities. That the struggle was not about economic issues delegitimized it as having nothing to do with basic problems of rural Dalits. For the agitators, however "the struggle was not for bread and butter but it was for equality, civic rights and human treatment."³⁶²

Significantly, Rao situates the namantar agitation as a struggle over the social mobility of Dalits and their right to self-representation in the post-colonial order.³⁶³ It is telling that the opposition to re-naming the university swiftly developed into an anti-reservation protest. The opposition demanded the abolition of reservation in education and employment on caste basis and the use of economic criteria for affirmative action. Murugkar describes how the urgency of the demands was expressed in the language of cultural takeover. Organizers claimed that after the re-naming degrees from Marathwada would contain photos of Ambedkar and Buddhist prayers would be introduced in the college.³⁶⁴ The extent of violence provoked by the agitation thus reflected ongoing resentment among caste Hindus over the militant visibility of Dalits and the system of reservations that enabled their access to the university. The cultural politics of re-naming threatened the idea of reservation as an upper caste concession, thus revealing how any consensus on reservation among the privileged was linked to this specific meaning. Rao notes that as "Dalits came to be stereotyped as militant, injured people with an insatiable appetite for government recognition, any effort to establish identity for self and

³⁶¹ Rao, *The Caste Question*, 209.

³⁶² Murugkar, *Dalit Panther Movement*, 175.

³⁶³ Rao, *The Caste Question*, 209.

³⁶⁴ Murugkar, *Dalit Panther Movement*, 180.

community became a potentially incendiary demand.”³⁶⁵ The extent of violence in rural areas was also connected to these perceptions; politicized Dalits and symbols of economic accumulation and social mobility were distinctly targeted in the villages. Many of the Caste Hindu students in Aurangabad belonged to rich and middle peasant families, hence the issue of reservations and land relations were entangled for them.³⁶⁶ The violence of Marathwada was not an isolated incident; it preceded the spread of anti-reservation violence in Gujarat and Bihar in the 1980s. Reservation served to focus corporeal and discursive violence around the Dalit subject, uniting localized forms of resistance to changes in caste relations. The riots also exposed the inability of both the state and the Panthers to provide protection to rural Dalit communities. At the same time, the linking of re-naming with reservation in Marathwada and subsequent anti-reservation riots in Gujarat focused Panther activities around reservation – the same issue they had accused the RPI of exclusively focusing on.

The formation of the Dalit Panthers and the Dalit literary movement are historically interlinked. In the late 1960s Milind College in Aurangabad emerged as a central site for the movement. M.N. Wankhade, the principal of the College, had travelled to the USA for higher education. There he had been inspired by “the mordancy of Black literature, its feelings of revolt, the shocking experiences reflected in it and the forms in which it manifested itself”.³⁶⁷ In 1967 Wankhade presided over the conference of the Maharashtra Bauddha Sahitya Parishad (Maharashtra Buddhist Literary Society). Reviewing the Hindu epics the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, the literature of the saints and modern Marathi literature he argued that Dalit literature had no place in it.³⁶⁸ Dalit literature was explicitly conceived as a forum for the revolt against caste inequality and the promotion of social change. It would be constitutive of a rebellion against the suppression and humiliation suffered by the Dalits, in past and present, in the framework

³⁶⁵ Rao, *The Caste Question*, 188.

³⁶⁶ Gokhale, *From Concessions to Confrontation*, 289.

³⁶⁷ Arjun Dangle, “Introduction: Dalit Literature Past, Present and Future,” in *Poisoned Bread: Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature*, ed. Arjun Dangle (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2009), xxxiii.

³⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

of the varna system.³⁶⁹ Battle lines drawn into the streets, offices and universities of the post-colonial nation-state thus extended into the realm of cultural production. This was probably the first time in India that creative writers became politically active and led a movement.³⁷⁰ Writers such as Namdeo Dhasal, Arjun Dangle and J.V. Pawar were central figures in the establishment of the Dalit Panthers.

Debates about the historical antecedents of contemporary Dalit writing often focus on the figure of the 14th century saint-poet Chokha Mela, the only recorded voice of the untouchable Mahars before the 19th century.³⁷¹ Chokha Mela was part of the Maharsashtrian Bhakti (devotional religion) movement. As with other Bhakti movements in India, it was anti-orthodox, inclusive of women and shudras and based on the experience of God rather than on traditional piety and formal ritual.³⁷² Although aspects of Chokha Mela's poetry include protest against caste hierarchy, there is an overall acceptance of divinely ordained social distinctions in his work. Thus he is rendered a tragic figure reflective of a system of inequality so deeply entrenched that even the compassionate saint-poets remained bound to it.³⁷³ The most significant historical figure for Dalit writers is Dr. Ambedkar, whose political vision and intellectual framework is recognized as the crucial condition that made a new political subjectivity possible. "Ambedkar's struggle against untouchability and socio-economic inequality liberated Dalits from mental slavery and abject wretchedness, thus giving them a new self-respect".³⁷⁴ Dalit writing is the literary manifestation of this social awareness as seen in its unequivocal rejection of caste Hindu society and Brahminical supremacy. These are explored in a myriad of guises, from the orthodox priest to the patronizing reformer, as well as in the forms of degrading labor, poverty and sexual violence experienced by Dalits. The memorialization of Ambedkar as an inspirational and enabling force for an entire community is a prominent feature of Dalit poetry. The Maharashtra Baudha

³⁶⁹ Sharatchandra Muktibodh, "What is Dalit Literature?," in *Poisoned Bread*, 270.

³⁷⁰ Dangle, "Introduction", xli.

³⁷¹ Eleanor Zelliot, "Dalit: New Cultural Context for an Old Marathi Word," *Contributions to Asian Studies* 11 (1978): 77-97; Gokhale, *From Concessions to Confrontation*, 302-303.

³⁷² Zelliot, "Dalit: New Cultural Context", 79.

³⁷³ *Ibid.*, 80; Gokhale, *From Concessions to Confrontation*, 302.

³⁷⁴ Dangle, "Introduction," xxiii.

Sahitya Parishad's literary conference in 1969 was held in Mahad, the place of Ambedkar's agitation for the right of Dalits to draw water from Chavadar Lake and his public burning of the Manusmriti.³⁷⁵ Mahad is remembered for its galvanization of a movement and for the bitter resistance of upper castes³⁷⁶. Ambedkar's name is also invoked in poems addressed to a collective subject that must mobilize and continue his struggle. Other poems dedicated to Ambedkar unfold as a conversation and a means to reflect on his struggles in light of the violence and inequality surrounding the poet: "this is the proclamation of bread/this is the Parliament's brothel/this country we call Mother/sleeps with the God of wealth/and time is becoming more Orthodox".³⁷⁷

Interestingly, Rao distinguishes between the literature that developed alongside the Dalit Panther movement and earlier works written by participants in Ambedkar's movement. The latter's work was so closely tied to the movement that Ambedkar was made the protagonist of narratives of a heroic struggle for self-respect and social recognition.³⁷⁸ In contrast the new generation of writers foregrounded the brutality of Dalit life-worlds across rural and urban spaces. These accounts "addressed the violence of the Dalit intimate, remarked on regnant cultural practices and depicted the culture of desperation and self-degradation to which Dalits' low status had given rise".³⁷⁹ Baburao Bagal's collection of short stories entitled *Jevha Mi Jaat Chorli Hoti* (When I had Concealed My Caste), released in 1963, marked a turning point in the development of a distinctive literary form. Along with Namdeo Dhasal's book of poetry *Golpitha* (1973) and Daya Pawar's autobiography *Baluta* (1963), Bagul is associated with stark depictions of suffering through the use of an unflinching and violent language. In the story after which Bagul's collection is named, the character refuses to identify his caste to his upper caste landlord. When his caste location is revealed, he is nearly beaten to death. In the conclusion he identifies Manu, the Hindu lawmaker, as the perpetrator of the assault. Thus the individual violated body and localized forms of discrimination are rendered in

³⁷⁵ Ibid., xxxvii.

³⁷⁶ See Hira Bansode, "O Great Man," in *An Anthology of Dalit Literature*, 32.

³⁷⁷ Namdeo Dhasal, "Ambedkar: 79," in Ibid., 54-55.

³⁷⁸ Rao, *The Caste Question*, 196.

³⁷⁹ Ibid.

structural and historical terms. In the character's naming of Manu the possibility for a militant political consciousness is seen.

Dalit literature portrays structures of caste, class and gendered oppression as complex and intertwined. Depictions of family life and relationships between parents and children feature as a prominent site for interrogating the contradictions and complicities in which stigmatized communities are located. In Bagul's story "Mother", a widowed Dalit woman is continually subject to sexual humiliation, harassment and attempted rape within the untouchable quarter of the urban slum. These violations, often enacted while her son is present, occur with such regularity that self-protection becomes an unremarkable part of routine life. Her young son is subjected to untouchability through the language of sexual violence – he cannot be touched because his mother is stigmatized as sexually promiscuous. However, the complex violence of caste structures their understanding of each other, as the son burns with shame and views his mother's sexuality as responsible for his humiliation. Similarly, his mother sees in his contempt the brutality of those who surround her. In numerous narratives children bear witness to the violence and humiliation of their parents and are themselves stigmatized in schools and streets. Their centrality in Dalit literature also suggests a generational and political shift. Depictions of village life are marked with the tension between the dependent location of Mahars in the village economy, their exchange of labor for a share in the harvest (baluta), and the further violence that comes with rejecting this location. Daya Pawar remembers that the Mahar community he saw as a child did not have the character of beggary. Their share in the harvest was a right and collected with pride. However, the smallest of perceived transgressions or disrespect was met with the denial of the harvest, an assertion of upper caste power. In Bandhumadhav's short story "Poisoned Bread", a family is deprived of food due to the young boy's challenges to the landlord, causing his grandfather to beg for molding bread that even the livestock would not go near. Poisoned by consuming it, the grandfather finally rejects the baluta on his deathbed. He implores his grandson to "never depend on the age-old bread associated with our caste...this poisonous bread will finally kill the very humanness of man..."³⁸⁰ His death is then

³⁸⁰ In *Poisoned Bread*, 174.

rendered as the wound that inflames the collective, replacing sorrow with fury and disgust.

Namdeo Dhasal's poems are most associated with the deployment of brutal imagery and vivid depictions of embodied and symbolic violence. In his translation of *Golpitha* Vijay Tendulkar describes Dhasal's poetry thus:

In the calculations of the white collar workers, "no man's land" begins at the border of their world, and it is here that the world of Namdeo Dhasal's poetry of Bombay's Golpitha begins. This is the world of days of nights; of empty or half-full stomachs; of the pain of death; of tomorrow's worries; of men's bodies in which shame and sensitivity have been burned out; of overflowing gutters; of a sick young body; knees curled to belly against the cold of death... Mercy-grace-peace do not touch Golpitha. Dhasal says, here all seasons are pitiless, here all seasons have a contrary heart.³⁸¹

The use of the language of the slum, much of which is barely recognizable to upper castes, refuses the reader transparent access to Dalit existence. Moreover, it assaults the sensibilities of middle class respectability, rejecting the aesthetics that reduce Dalits to objects of distant pity. Golpitha deliberately destroyed every fond notion of poetry nurtured by upper caste writers.³⁸²

The mother is a prominent figure in Dhasal's renderings of caste and gender oppression. She is an anchor amidst dire poverty, a target of violence and imprisoned by gendered notions of sacrifice and respectability.

Can you tell me the purpose, the reasons for your suffering? All your life you were sucked dry and even now you bow before the system... Mother, your woman's life story lives in a house in my heart. It makes me see you clearly. That's why I don't kill you, don't rip out your innards. Because – just as I have been stripped bare, so have you. I want to rip out his innards.³⁸³

³⁸¹ Cited in Zelliott, "Dalit: New Cultural Context," 85.

³⁸² Shanta Gokhale, "Inextinguishable Fires: Looking Back on Half a Century of Marathi Dalit Writing," *The Caravan: A Journal of Politics and Culture*, 1 August 2013, <http://www.caravanmagazine.in/books/inextinguishable-fires?page=0,1>.

³⁸³ "So that my Mother may be Convinced", in *An Anthology of Dalit Literature*, 63.

Dhasal's complex poetry scathes with the pain of working through how caste penetrates the most intimate relations. The revolutionary poet is enraged by his mother's complicity in her own oppression and yet emancipation can only be a collective project. Exhausted and deteriorating bodies are products of caste violence and new ways of life require violent destruction of the caste order. Dhasal's poem "Man You Should Explode" reads as a breathless stream of graphic and nauseating acts of intoxication, enslavement, abuse, illicit sex and cruelty, which bleeds into the destruction of roads, monuments, knowledge and temples.

Man, one should tear off all the pages of all the sacred books in the world/And give them to people for wiping shit off their arses when done...Man, you should drink human blood, spit roast human flesh, melt human flesh and drink it...Wage class wars, caste wars, communal wars, party wars, crusades, world wars...³⁸⁴

The incitement to revulsion, violence and murderous rage are brought to a pitch, a moment of ultimate destruction, after which notions of black and white, Brahmin, vaishya and shudra can cease to exist.

Rao identifies the significance of the language of Dalit literature not only as a form of social realism or a more "authentic" representation of Dalit life; it implicates the caste Hindu and constitutes an ethical challenge.³⁸⁵ The notions of upper caste empathy and social reform are targets of derision. Portrayals of upper caste bodies and spaces underscore their attachment to the scriptures through which they are exalted, their investments in their own sense of superiority and self-understanding as repositories of national culture and tradition. Dalit suffering is consumed as a spectacle in homes adorned with photos of Lord Ganesha.³⁸⁶ Upper castes are intellectually incapable of understanding Dalit revolt:

³⁸⁴ In *Golpitha*, 1972, trans. Dilip Chitre. Accessed from <http://roundtableindia.co.in/lit-blogs/?tag=namdeo-dhasal>.

³⁸⁵ Rao, *The Caste Question*, 197.

³⁸⁶ See Vilas Rashinkar, "No Entry for the New Sun" and Prakashchandra Karandikar, "Amen", in *Poisoned Bread*, 29, 57.

“I cursed another good hot curse/The university buildings shuddered and sank
waist-deep/All at once, scholars began doing research/into what makes people
angry.”³⁸⁷

Such poems foreground the language of rage as collective assertion aimed at the destruction of upper caste ego. The claim to language and self-representation is connected to the emergence of a militant political subject.

Finally, a significant characteristic of Dalit literature is a critical self-reflexivity around and mediations on emerging class divisions in Dalit communities. Class mobility is represented not as a celebratory individual achievement, but as a process producing notions of false superiority and security amongst white collar Dalits. As noted by Gokhale, the sympathetic treatment of rural and working class Dalits contrasts sharply with the contempt the literature evinces for the middle class and political elite that pursue personal wealth at the expense of community struggle.³⁸⁸ The ferocity of the critique is related to the factionalism and opportunism displayed by the elites of the Republican Party of India, which informed the militancy of the Panthers. In “Ambedkar: 1979”, Dhasal describes the political leaders that spoke in Ambedkar’s name: “Your followers act like false gurus/They use a loin cloth for a tie and babble/Their heritage is mother-fucking... These impotent Arjuns of countless generations – all they can do is pop some Virgin’s cherry”.³⁸⁹ The RPI’s alignment with the Congress Party is represented as an alignment with the disempowering politics of Gandhi and Hindu scriptures through the language of sexual dysfunction and emasculation. These critiques were also aimed more broadly at those who sought security in trying to speak and live like the Brahmins, thus upholding their social and moral universe. The “white collar Dalit” is represented in literature as an isolated subject whose material comforts are a thin guise for his ultimate powerlessness in a casteist social order: “When there is fire everywhere, how can you be safe in your own house?”³⁹⁰ Middle class apolitical anonymity is a betrayal of the labor

³⁸⁷ Keshav Meshram, “One Day I Cursed that Motherfucker God,” in *An Anthology of Dalit Literature*, 117.

³⁸⁸ Gokhale, *From Concessions to Confrontation*, 325.

³⁸⁹ In *An Anthology of Dalit Literature*, 54.

³⁹⁰ Unknown source. In Das, *Indian Dalits*, 109.

of those relations and communities that have made the subject's social mobility possible. The conception of reservation as a means of individual advancement is thus critiqued:

The educated Dalit is really of two minds. In order to enter the higher class he wants to turn his back on his own society; his relatives and even at times his parents. He is ashamed of them. To assure his own security, he is prepared to kick aside and sever all relations with those who made possible his education. In becoming white collar, he has created his own mental turmoil...he has totally forgotten that reservations are only one aspect of a total revolution.³⁹¹

As this passage suggests, betrayal of the community and personal "mental turmoil" are interlinked aspects of class fragmentation. The point is not that class privilege makes one an inauthentic Dalit subject. Indeed many of the writers occupy the class location that they critique. Rather, the literature raises the question of how politicized consciousness can forge different kinds of relations and engagements across class locations. Tied to this mode of self-reflexivity is an implicit critique of secular nationalist discourses that posit education as a solution to backwardness and pre-modern beliefs. The experiences of Dalits in educational institutions reveal how caste prejudice thrives among the educated classes. Emerging through the modern institutions of the nation-state, the Dalit is an ambivalent subject at once co-opted by a casteist society and exposed to different forms of caste discrimination. To explore these themes further, I turn to Dangle's and Pawde's narratives in the volume *Poisoned Bread*.

Untouchability and Urban Space in Arjun Dangle's "Promotion"

"Promotion" works through similar themes as Tharoor's "Scheduled Castes, Unscheduled Change" discussed above: the anonymity of urban life, class mobility and generational change among Dalit communities. The reader is taken into those secular spaces of work and travel which Tharoor claims force upper castes to shake hands with, lunch with and take orders from, lower castes. National integration is enabled by the inability to confirm caste and in turn the inability to practice untouchability. "Promotion" presents a very different understanding of these spaces of interaction as well as of the personal and political choices available to middle class Dalits. The narrative illustrates

³⁹¹ Interview with Kardak and Pagare. In Gokhale, *From Concessions to Confrontation*, 248-249.

Sarukkai's insightful argument that the experience of untouchability produces caution towards touching in general: "in a casteist society, the very act of touching becomes problematical because every act of touching becomes reflective".³⁹² "Promotion" registers the dynamic aspects of untouchability through its central character Waghmare, an officer in the Indian Railways who has recently been promoted through reservation. A series of exchanges in the office introduce the officer as unsuccessfully struggling to maintain authority and respect among his employees. The story opens with an argument between Waghmare and a junior officer, Godbole (a Brahmin surname), rudely refusing to complete an assignment that falls under his purview. He takes up the work himself, having learned from experience that "no action would be taken against Godbole. The entire department knew that Godbole was Joshi Saheb's emissary and carried his tribute every month – to appease the powers that be".³⁹³ Next, Waghmare calls for his assistant several times with no response. Later another employee firmly announces her plans to take leave despite there being a staff shortage. The isolation and timidity of Waghmare in the office enables one to consider the complex ways in which caste stigma manifests across Dalit bodies, defying simple notions of the relation between occupation and untouchability. It is the possibility of humiliation that grips Waghmare's body with anxiety throughout the day, as if he is under constant surveillance.

If Waghmare represents the "mental turmoil" of the middle class Dalit the narrative also points to other possibilities through the character of Awale Saheb, another Dalit employee who the former "always remembered... whenever he was tormented by problems concerning his caste. Awale lent him firm support but also distressed him further."³⁹⁴ The two discuss the situation with Godbole, particularly the latter's resentment about Waghmare's promotion. Awale encourages him to be assertive and refuse to take on the extra work of others:

³⁹² Sundar Sarukkai, "Phenomenology of Untouchability," *Economic and Political Weekly*, September 12 2009, 44.

³⁹³ Arjun Dangle, "Promotion," in *Poisoned Bread*, 191.

³⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 192-193.

You're a timid bugger...remember, no one has obliged you by promoting you in the reserved category...these other people have enjoyed the privilege of being in the 100% reserved category for centuries. Doesn't that mean anything to you?³⁹⁵

Waghmare refuses to engage in a discussion about the meaning of reservation. He accepts the resentment that his presence in a position of authority produces in others and adjusts accordingly to protect himself from the explicit articulation of this resentment. His decision to accept the power relations in the office is a thoughtful one – any confrontation holds the risk of being identified by his caste. The exchange between the two officers thus illustrates the divergent possibilities of occupying spaces from which Dalits have been historically excluded. Awale insists on respect and collective engagement. He urges Waghmare to attend meetings of the Backward Class Workers' Association, but without success. The officer is certain that “there was no point in tagging behind Awale. He would only make matters worse and people would humiliate him. Waghmare reminded himself that he was an officer now and had to maintain a certain standard.”³⁹⁶ Class status is performed through disassociation with political engagement in general and from others of his caste in particular.

Despite this seemingly firm conviction the possibility of humiliation intensifies throughout the day, informing Waghmare's negotiation of urban space. He takes a later train home to avoid old friends who continue to travel second class. This preference for the comfort of first class is contrasted to Awale's preference for connections with others. Despite having a first class pass the latter continues to travel second class with their friends. “Not only that, he had noisy discussions with them in the train.”³⁹⁷ Awale's assertive presence in public space reminds Waghmare of an old friend who used to greet him loudly with “Jai Bheem!” in the office.³⁹⁸ Such vocalizations of Dalit presence make him shudder: “Whenever Gaekwad thundered thus, Waghmare got the feeling of being closely watched by those around.”³⁹⁹ Yet even in the first class compartment there is no respite from this sense of surveillance. He is panicked by the comment of a fellow

³⁹⁵ Ibid., 192.

³⁹⁶ Ibid., 193.

³⁹⁷ Ibid., 194.

³⁹⁸ This greeting is a mark of respect to the leadership of Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar.

³⁹⁹ Dangle, “Promotion”, 194.

passenger that he seems to have “reserved” the window seat on a permanent basis. “He wondered whether this fellow commuter knew that he belonged to a scheduled caste...once again he felt he ought to change his surname.”⁴⁰⁰ In this moment the inability to confirm caste in urban space does not eliminate untouchability, but gives it an unpredictable quality such that anonymous encounters hold the possibility of violation. Anonymity is a historically produced condition that requires the disciplining of particular bodies to minimize presence in public space. In this way the transcendence of caste through class identification disproportionately places the burden of transcendence on the Dalit subject. However, Waghmare carries this burden not in the service of achieving a national ideal but through knowledge of pervasive casteism and the need for self-protection.

This burden follows Waghmare to his middle class home in the Railway Officer’s Quarters, where he is offended by the presence of his wife’s “dirty, shabbily dressed” relatives. Through this exchange Dangle expresses a key critique of the middle class Dalit subject whose social mobility is acquired through rejection of community. The prioritization of acceptance in a casteist society indicates the subject’s alienation from community. In the space of patriarchal domesticity Waghmare is able to displace the burden of transcending caste onto his wife. “Next you’ll have the entire slum visiting you – what will our neighbors say?”⁴⁰¹ This is the only moment of the narrative where Waghmare articulates authoritatively, without internal struggle: “Don’t talk too much. Learn to maintain your status. After all, you’re an officer’s wife.”⁴⁰² However, Dangle refuses to his character the security of class privileges or patriarchal authority. The poignant conclusion to this narrative highlights the futility of Waghmare’s constant attempts to shed any indication of his caste. This is communicated in an exchange between Waghmare and his 5 year-old son who, bearing bruises on his leg, comes to rest his head in his father’s lap.

“How did you get hurt, Pappu?”

“D’you know that Pramod, who has a super Ganpati? His Grandma pushed me.”

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid., 194.

⁴⁰¹ Ibid., 195.

⁴⁰² Ibid., 195.

“Why? Did you beat him?”

“No. We were playing and I drank from his water pot.”

Waghmare’s mind is filled with the image of Godbole. His newly sprung wings of promotion fall off and a mere mortal named Pandurang Satwa Waghmare crashes helplessly into the abyss below.⁴⁰³

The image of Waghmare’s son being pushed to the ground in an enactment of ritual segregation suggests the stubborn attachment of stigma to Dalit bodies across time and space. The visceral level on which Waghmare is haunted by this stigma in public space is as much a manifestation of casteist society as his son’s bruises. In different but connected ways their bodies bear the burden of facilitating “pure”, “unoffending” spaces of caste sociality. The efforts to distance himself and his family from politically expressive and working class Dalits does not render them less vulnerable to casteist violence. Indeed, his son’s injury conjures the image of Godbole, whose behavior Waghmare earlier justified as a natural resentment at not having been promoted. In this way their experiences of injury become blurred – the grandmother’s violent enactment of ritual segregation in her own home operates through the Dalit body as both physical injury and, as Waghmare “looses his wings”, subjective disintegration. Finally, the narrative rejects the idea of the middle class home as space of private, apolitical domesticity. As Gopal Guru points out, in the urban context the inability to confirm caste increases the importance of ritual purity in the home: the domestic sphere provides an opportunity for the resolution of upper caste anxiety.⁴⁰⁴ Having avoided the pollution of their water pots, anxiety is transferred to the home of the middle class Dalit. The distinction between public secularism and private religiosity, rural intimacy and urban anonymity and occupation and stigma, cannot be maintained from the perspective of Dalit embodiment.

The Government Brahmin in Kumud Pawde’s “The Story of My Sanskrit”

In her autobiography Kumud Pawde writes with an acute sense of the effects her presence has on others. Extracted from her larger Marathi text *Antasphot*, “The Story of My Sanskrit” describes how an educated Dalit becomes an object of fascination and

⁴⁰³ Ibid.,196.

⁴⁰⁴ Gopal Guru, “Archaeology of Untouchability,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, September 12 2009, 55.

attraction. As a scholar and teacher of a language which those of her caste have historically been excluded from learning she speaks of the attraction based on acceptance that comes from her community. Her achievement is a victory for those whom “religion has considered to be vermin.”⁴⁰⁵ Simultaneously, Pawde is an object of attraction based on devastating rejection by privileged castes that view her achievement as transgression. Describing this rejection, Pawde writes of the contradictions between the words of praise and the tonal inflections, gazes and bodily comportments that communicate insult:

the sensation is that of walking on soft, velvety carpet – but being burnt by the hot embers hidden in someone’s breast, and feeling the scorching pain in one’s soul...the one who’s speaking thinks the listener can’t understand – for surely a low caste person hasn’t the ability to comprehend. But some people intend to be understood, so that I’ll be crushed by the words.⁴⁰⁶

The narrative thus renders an incisive critique of the “caste-less urban middle class” through attention to the affective and corporeal production of this subjectivity. The meaning articulated through tone and gestures generate in Pawde a constant awareness of her caste. There are those gestures and inflections that express resentment of the reservations that have led to the contamination of sacred knowledge by Dalit presence: “...After all, they’re the government’s favorite sons-in-law! We have to accept it all.”⁴⁰⁷ Others express disbelief at a contradictory subject, whose education and mannerisms defy their essentialist understandings of caste. People constantly assume that she is Brahmin. Simultaneously, Pawde has come to signify for this class the progress of the nation. She recounts an event where she is asked to introduce distinguished scholars of the Vedas, with the following speech:

Whereas our traditional books have forbidden the study of Sanskrit by women and Shudras, a woman from those very Shudras, from the lowest among them, will today, in Sanskrit, introduce these scholars. This is the beginning of a progressive way of thinking in independent India.⁴⁰⁸

⁴⁰⁵ Kumud Pawde, “The Story of My Sanskrit,” in *Poisoned Bread*, 111.

⁴⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 111.

⁴⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 111.

⁴⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 113.

Pawde describes this moment as one of drowning in feelings of inferiority and anxiety. In those modern spaces and amongst the modern citizens for whom speaking of caste is regressive traditionalism, it is Padwe alone who must identify through caste. She stands on the stage as an object of the nation's enlightened secular principles. However, reflected in the eyes of the audience is a mixture of frustration, fury, hostility and disgust. "Some gazes ask me, 'why did you need to make the introductions in this manner? To humiliate us?'"⁴⁰⁹ The embarrassment of the upper caste subject at being implicated in this history of exclusion identifies the educated Dalit as source of discomfort. Upper-caste embarrassment displaces the pervasive humiliation within Dalit life-worlds, even as Pawde is humiliated by this encounter. Moreover, the subject is cut off from the histories of struggle and revolt of Dalit communities. In assumptions about the state as agent of reform the Dalit can remain an object of revulsion. Thus, Pawde's narrative presents modern state institutions as spaces in which it is impossible to forget her caste.

The author attributes her ability to sense the ways in which she is perceived by caste Hindus to the experience of growing up in a ghetto encircled by caste Hindu houses. Through this experience she developed an extreme familiarity with the display of disgust and "...it was this disgust that inclined me towards Sanskrit."⁴¹⁰ Pawde's reflection on being treated as an object of disgust provides insight into the affective politics of caste. In her work on the performativity of disgust, Sara Ahmed argues that disgust involves a relationship of touch and proximity between surfaces of bodies and objects – the object must get close enough to make us feel disgusted. Thus, the production of disgust is related to transgression: "Borders need to be threatened in order to be maintained, or even to appear as borders."⁴¹¹ The affective constitution of the border hierarchizes spaces and bodies. This theorization of disgust as enacted in moments of transgression is a useful interpretive frame with which to think through Pawde's emphasis on the sense of disgust. She recalls in her childhood how "so-called educated, civilized mothers"⁴¹² from higher castes would warn their daughters to stay away from her, not to touch her. In another

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid., 113.

⁴¹⁰ Ibid., 113.

⁴¹¹ Sara Ahmed, "The Performativity of Disgust," in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 87.

⁴¹² Pawde, "The Story of My Sanskrit", 114.

episode, absorbed by the Vedic chanting at the site of a Brahmin thread ceremony, she is chased away by a woman whose “nose was wrinkled in disgust, like a shriveled fig.”⁴¹³ In both cases upper caste disgust is performed to subvert the potential transgression of caste hierarchy. Similarly, Pawde’s encounters in the modern university indicate how tone, gaze and bodily comportment re-produce borders by recognizing her caste as a contaminating presence. The subject position “upper caste” requires the object of disgust for its own re-production. However, the narrative also shows the contingent effects of this performativity in shaping Dalit politics of self-respect: “So, even at this young age this emotion of disgust taught me to think. It inspired me to be introspective. At an age which was meant to be for skipping and playing, these thoughts would rouse me to fury”⁴¹⁴.

Pawde’s narration of teacher-student relations as caste encounters offers a complex picture of caste Hindu subjectivity in the post-colonial nation-state. In this it shares with Dangle’s “Promotion” a sense of how spaces representative of the nation’s modern progress do not eliminate caste discrimination, but give it an unpredictable quality. As anonymous encounters hold the possibility of violation, there is a heightened reflexivity about caste embodiment. For example, Pawde describes as “an ordeal” her first meal at the home of her Brahmin Sanskrit teacher Gokhale Guruji with his wife and children:

I became nervous. Fear crept over my mind. Suppose this lady were to find out my caste? Along with sips of water, I swallowed the lumps in my throat as well as mouthfuls of poha...my only worry was when and how I could escape from there.⁴¹⁵

But the family is always respectful and warm despite their orthodox appearance. It is her first encounter with a Brahmin that does not end in humiliation. She compares this teacher with the head of her Postgraduate department, a scholar of national repute. He opposed her learning Sanskrit, taking “malicious delight” in expressing this to her: “This man had been exposed to modernity; Gokhale Guruji was orthodox. Yet one had been

⁴¹³ Ibid., 115.

⁴¹⁴ Ibid., 114.

⁴¹⁵ Ibid., 117.

shriveled by tradition, the other enriched by it, like a tree weighed down by fruit.”⁴¹⁶ This comparison indicates the pervasiveness and adaptability of discriminatory practices in the modern university. The dichotomy of tradition and modernity does not explain Pawde’s different experiences as a Sanskrit student. The narrative registers an ambivalence towards these experiences marked by humiliation and exclusion as well as struggle and learning.

“The Story of My Sanskrit” is also a story of the uneven, ineffectual implementation of reservation in university hiring. Significantly, it is in this context of non-implementation that the Dalit is excessively identified with the reservation policy. Pawde’s expectations upon graduating with distinction reflect a belief in equitable access to employment: “A high-paid job would come to me on a platter from the government. For I must have been the first woman from a scheduled caste to pass with distinction in Sanskrit.”⁴¹⁷ These beliefs soon prove to be naïve. Through multiple interviews Pawde’s sense of achievement confronts caste Hindu perceptions of the Dalit as undeserving beneficiary of state resources. She describes the laughter and taunts that began as soon as she left the interview room: “So now even these people are to teach Sanskrit? Government Brahmins aren’t they?”⁴¹⁸ Pawde’s years of unemployment are a reminder that anti-reservation sentiments are expressed in a context where the policy itself has been continuously subject to subversion. Two months after her inter-caste marriage, she is given a lectureship in a government college. It is a change in caste status, not its transcendence that finally enables Pawde’s social mobility. Her own struggles and achievements are tainted due to this realization:

I hear that a woman’s surname changes to match her husband’s – and so does her caste. That’s why I say that the credit of being a professor of Sanskrit is that of the presumed higher caste status of Mrs. Kumud Pawde. The caste of her maiden status remains deprived.⁴¹⁹

⁴¹⁶ Ibid., 120.

⁴¹⁷ Ibid., 120.

⁴¹⁸ Ibid., 120.

⁴¹⁹ Ibid., 122.

Conclusion

It has been argued that the relation of caste to the modern secular citizen is that of disavowal.⁴²⁰ In the nation-state's framework of secular modernization, caste is a source of shame and embarrassment that will be eliminated by not referring to it. A significant consequence of this has been the excess identification of caste with "lower" castes. The disavowal through which the normative citizen is constituted thus relies on certain bodies to carry the burden of caste. The narratives by Dangle and Pawde attend to the multiple ways in which this burden is transferred to Dalit bodies in the production of the modern spaces and subjects of the post-colonial nation-state. In Rao's important description, "elements in the modern habitus of caste include the small insult, the sudden withdrawal of friendship and intimacy, and the surprised discovery of caste identity or caste identified practices".⁴²¹ Relating these practices to the politics of reservation suggests the co-production of caste subjectivities in the moment of encounter. These practices do the work of maintaining caste privilege by displacing the feelings of embarrassment, shame and anxiety onto the Dalit body as "government Brahmin", an undeserving recipient of state resources.

Many accounts of the Constitutional commitment to compensating historically oppressed communities describe reservation as an acknowledgement of society's past wrongdoing. Regret and shame thus become a mode of recognition of injustice, but also a form of nation building.⁴²² The citizen can take pride in the nation's progressive Constitution because of its commitment to justice. Yet the acute awareness of caste generated in Dalit subjects in the anonymous spaces of the modern nation-state indicates that only certain subjects can participate in the recognition of shame as a form of nation building. The ideal image of the nation, "which is based on the image of some and not others, is sustained through the conversion of shame to pride."⁴²³ In "Scheduled Caste, Unscheduled Change" a discussion of untouchability in rural life represents a passing phase to the nation-state's realization of modernity. Alternative experiences of the nation-

⁴²⁰ Vivek Dhareshwar, "Caste and the Secular Self," *Journal of Arts and Ideas* 25-26 (1993): 115-126.

⁴²¹ Rao, *The Caste Question*, 265.

⁴²² Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 102.

⁴²³ *Ibid.*, 113

state from the perspective of Dalit embodiment have no place in such narratives because the abolition of untouchability and reservations dissolve any grounds for a distinct political vision. Tharoor's narrative thus produces an affective understanding of reservation as a temporally limited form of obligation premised on (upper caste) national guilt. However, the performance of guilt simultaneously defines the terms and limits of that guilt: the children of middle class Dalits - "scions of privilege" - and the "lower middle castes" that the Mandal Commission seeks to incorporate into the reservation framework. The middle class Dalit subject marks the limits of guilt by signifying national inclusion through social mobility and as undeserving beneficiary of state resources. Moreover, he/she initiates the process of sorting of subjects for whom reservations were intended from those undeserving of them based on how guilty they make upper caste subjects feel.

The anti-caste assertions of the 1970s represents a deep rejection of the affective politics of guilt and its constitution of the Scheduled Caste subject as an object of pity. In different ways, Panther militancy and literary expression re-signified reservation from a mechanism of inclusion towards one aspect of a claim to power and self-representation. Through Dalit activism questions of entitlement translated themselves into a different language via politico-psychological formulations: "it was better to rebel and shriek in rage than be the passive object of pity...the most important strategy of the Dalit movement is a coupling of the cultural theory of despair with the politics of hope."⁴²⁴ The intensified violence against Dalits alongside this shift in anti-caste politicization can on one level be read as a confrontation between these contending socio-political imaginaries. The successive riots of central Bombay in the 1970s, the namantar agitation and anti-reservation violence of the 1980s expose the brutality with which the limits to caste Hindu guilt are staged. The discussion of Dalit literature has tried to show how Dalit middle class subjectivity came to serve as an important point of reflection in this context. Literary texts refuse the representation of this subject as a marker of the nation's progress towards secular modernity. By representing individual class mobility in a casteist society as an ambivalent, painful and isolating process, middle class locations become a site from which a critique of the nation-state can be articulated. Thus co-optation and de-

⁴²⁴ Nagaraj, *The Flaming Feet*, 100-105.

politicization are not inevitable consequences of reservations. The themes of social humiliation in Dalit experience and the moral emptiness of the Hindu middle class in literature are harnessed towards a re-thinking of political assertion and the meaning of community.

In the debates on the implementation of the Mandal Commission, discussed in the following chapter, the Scheduled Caste came to be represented as the only subject for whom reservation was justified. Such discourses suggest that the limits of tolerance for reservation are staged at the distinction between Scheduled Caste and OBC. Both economically and in terms of social discrimination, the former genuinely deserves reservation. However, in this chapter I have shown that these limits are better understood as being staged in moments of assertive politicization of subaltern castes. This clarifies how the spectacular, sustained opposition to the Mandal Commission registered the protection of upper caste privilege. The privilege being protected is not only that of employment, but of protecting spaces of employment from “lower caste” presence.

Chapter Three. Waging Caste Wars: Imagining Community and Nation in the Mandal Commission Debate

As events unfolded during the fortnight it became clear that what Singh was trying to reap was a harvest of shame. He had been reduced...to a vote hungry power broker shamelessly using the two elements that have ever bloodied and divided this nation – religion and caste.⁴²⁵

The bloody caste war launched by the upper castes (15%) in the press, platforms and roads has finally convinced the SC/ST/BCs (65%) sufferers that they are not part of this ‘Hindu nation.’⁴²⁶

To persist in interpreting caste politics as vote bank politics and the reservation issue as effective/ineffective social policy is to miss the radical dislocation of the social in India.⁴²⁷

The first two chapters focused on debates about and representations of reservations for Scheduled Castes. In this chapter, I look at conflicts over the extension of the policy to another category of the population, the Other Backward Classes (OBCs). As discussed in the introduction, Ambedkar argued that the particular forms of exclusion Dalits faced as a result of untouchability distinguished them from other social groups. On this basis, he demanded separate political representation in negotiations with the colonial state. The separate categorization of untouchables as Scheduled Caste in the Government of India Act, 1935, created a residual category of other backward groups whose disadvantage had to be redressed through state interventions. While usage of the term “backward classes” can be traced back to 1870, it had shifted rapidly in meaning over the

⁴²⁵ Inderjit Badhwar, *India Today*. Quoted in Nicholas Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 286.

⁴²⁶ V.T. Rajashekhar, “Hindu Unity Means What? Why this Unity and Against Whom?,” *Dalit Voice*, January 16-31, 1991.

⁴²⁷ Vivek Dhareshwar, “Caste and the Secular Self,” *Journal of Arts and Ideas* 25-26 (1993): 115-126.

course of colonial rule, never acquiring a fixed definition at the national level.⁴²⁸ Its continued existence in post-colonial India was ensured by the Objectives Resolution moved by Nehru in the Constituent Assembly, which resolved to provide adequate safeguards for “minorities, backward and tribal areas, and depressed and other backward classes.”⁴²⁹ Like untouchability, the term Other Backward Classes was left undefined in the Constitution. However, untouchability also operated as an organizing principle for the category Scheduled Castes. Untouchability was the basis on which diverse communities could be affiliated to an overarching category for administrative purposes. It was also the crucial experience that linked groups separated by language, region and occupation in regional and national anti-caste movements. As much as upper caste elites sought to foreground economic backwardness at the expense of social discrimination in their diagnosis of the problem of Scheduled Castes, the criteria of untouchability meant that they could never fully dismiss the question of caste. However, in the case of Other Backward Classes, the state created an administrative category which it then had to fill.⁴³⁰ The fluid and shifting term “backward”, used to describe a range of subjects and socio-economic conditions, had to be forced into some form of a stable definition for policy purposes. The task of determining appropriate criteria for the category OBC required an assessment of how, if at all, caste discrimination affected social groups that were not subjected to practices of untouchability. In this way, it was perceived as an opportunity to demonstrate the minimal relevance of caste as a structure of inequality.

The Mandal Commission on Backward Classes was the second attempt by the state to determine the criteria for the category OBC and devise a national social policy for Backward Class groups. It was formed in 1979 by the Janata Dal government in accordance with Article 340 of the Constitution. This article empowers the president to appoint a commission to investigate the conditions of the “socially and educationally backward classes”, and suggest measures for the improvement of their condition. Nehru

⁴²⁸ Marc Galanter, “The Other Backward Classes: A Process of Designation,” in *Competing Equalities: Law and the Backward Classes in India* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), 154-159; Christophe Jaffrelot, *India’s Silent Revolution: The Rise of the Lower Castes in North India* (London: Hurst and Company, 2003), 214.

⁴²⁹ Constituent Assembly Debates, vol. 1, 59, in Jaffrelot, *India’s Silent Revolution*, 215.

⁴³⁰ Jaffrelot, *India’s Silent Revolution*, 215.

had rejected the findings and recommendations of the first Commission on Backward Classes (the Kaka Kalelkar Commission, 1955) because it used caste criteria. Nehru argued:

...the Commission had to find objective tests and criteria by which such classifications were to be made; they had to find indisputable yardsticks by which social and educational backwardness could be measured. The report...has not been unanimous on this point; in fact, it reveals considerable divergence.⁴³¹

The insistence on determining objective and scientific criteria to measure disadvantage reflected the desire among post-colonial elites to eliminate caste as a category of classification. The elite associated the production of knowledge about caste with the divide and rule policies of British imperialism. Moreover, despite the best efforts of British officials and ethnographers, caste was still not a uniform system of reference across India.⁴³² The sheer diversity of caste practices, groupings, names and internal differentiations within and across individual states strengthened opposition to the use of caste categories, as this was not only harmful to national unity but also bureaucratically unmanageable. In Home Minister Govind Pant's view, the Report's establishment of a list of 2,399 castes that qualified as backward only served to remind Indians that their country was backward.⁴³³ Following the rejection of the Kaka Kalelkar Commission Report the development of a national policy for Other Backward Classes was abandoned and it was advised that states appoint their own commissions to devise criteria -preferably economic - and welfare measures for this category of the population. Since 1960 economic criteria was imposed from above on various state level programs and on the Mandal Commission itself.⁴³⁴

⁴³¹ Quoted in Dirks, *Castes of Mind*, 283. Members of the Commission themselves were divided on the Report they had produced. Five out of eleven Commission members dissociated themselves from the report, including Kaka Kalelkar, who drafted a 23 page covering letter rejecting the use of caste criteria in favor of economic criteria.

⁴³² Ibid.

⁴³³ Memorandum on the Report of the Backward Classes Commission. In Jaffrelot, *India's Silent Revolution*, 227.

⁴³⁴ Marc Galanter, 1978. In Gail Omvedt, "Twice-Born Riot Against Democracy," September 1990, posted on Roundtable India on 27 March, 2012, http://roundtableindia.co.in/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=4878:twice-born-riot-against-democracy&catid=118:thought&Itemid=131.

According to Jaffrelot, an important outcome of the rejection of the Kalelkar Commission report was the formation of lower caste movements in North India in the 1960s.⁴³⁵ The mobilization of these movements was largely focused on the issue of reservation quotas for OBCs. This differed from the experience of the Southern states where the non-Brahmin movement had struggled and achieved reservation for backward classes during the colonial period. Due to this legacy there was greater social acceptance of affirmative action policies and backward caste led power sharing arrangements in the region. This enabled the further increase of reservation in all Southern states on the recommendation of state level Backward Classes Commissions during the 1960s, notably, without provoking significant anti-reservation opposition.⁴³⁶ Similar attempts had met with strong upper caste opposition in Northern states such as U.P. and Bihar. However, the processes of capitalist development that unfolded through land reforms and green revolution policies in this region led to the formation of an economically mobile class of landowning OBCs interested in attaining greater political power.⁴³⁷ These shifting contours of caste relations meant that it would have been impossible for the post-colonial state to indefinitely ignore mobilizations around the OBC category at the national level.⁴³⁸ As discussed in the previous chapter, the trajectory of reservation policies prior to the Mandal controversy was marked by non-implementation of Scheduled Caste reservation, novel forms of caste discrimination in offices and universities and violent anti-reservation protests. The politicization of backward caste communities thus occurred in a context of growing anti-reservation sentiment among

⁴³⁵ Jaffrelot, *India's Silent Revolution*, 234. Jaffrelot argues that these movements represent the emancipation of lower castes in North India from the logic of Sanskritization. In contrast to practices of Sanskritization, the demand for reservation was perceived as a secular goal of lower castes.

⁴³⁶ *Mandal Commission Report of the Backward Classes Commission, 1980* (Delhi: Akalank Publications, 1990), 36-41. Commentaries on the contrast between North and South reservation politics include Jaffrelot, *India's Silent Revolution*, 144-237; Hasan, *The Politics of Inclusion*, 80-86.

⁴³⁷ Javeed Alam, "Is Caste Appeal Casteism? Oppressed Castes in Politics," in *Community and Identities: Contemporary Discourses on Culture and Politics in India*, ed. Surinder Jodhka (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2002), 97-111; Jaffrelot, *India's Silent Revolution*.

⁴³⁸ Hasan, *The Politics of Inclusion*, 84.

caste Hindus, for both SC/STs and OBCs. The intense opposition to the implementation of the Mandal Commission Report expressed in widespread protests, strikes and violence across the Northern states in 1990-91 was thus an extension of intensifying anti-reservation sentiment rather than a departure from a prior understanding of the need for SC/ST reservation quotas.

In this chapter I examine the discourses and practices of anti-reservation and pro-reservation positions on the Mandal Commission. Through my reading of these positions I will engage with and complicate some key interpretations of the debate found in the existing literature. At the outset it is necessary to foreground one interpretation in particular that informs the questions asked in this chapter: that the Mandal controversy represents the return of the repressed histories of caste in India.⁴³⁹ The ways in which Caste Hindu elites responded to the issue of OBC reservation illustrates that while they had repressed and disavowed caste identity, they remained attached to and nourished by its privileges. Dhareshwar argues, “until V.P. Singh decided to implement the Mandal Commission Report, caste had no place in the narrative milieu of the secular self”.⁴⁴⁰ The argument about caste as the return of the repressed is related to the spectacular forms of protest undertaken by subjects designated as urban, secular and middle class: vandalism, arson, the staged performance of caste identified manual labor, and – endlessly noted for its significance – the self-immolation undertaken by numerous college students. Rajeev Goswami was the first student to stage this form of protest. Although his intention had been to stage a mock self-immolation for press coverage, his colleagues’ lack of attention resulted in near fatal injuries. Over 159 cases of self-immolation occurred in the month following Goswami’s attempt. Thus, Dirks argues “...in the burning of Rajeev Goswami’s body, caste leaked simultaneously out of the traditional worlds of the subaltern and the village and into the middle-class enclaves of new India.”⁴⁴¹ The Mandal Commission Report called attention to the glaring dominance of upper castes within state

⁴³⁹ Vivek Dhareshwar, “Caste and the Secular Self”; Dirks, *Castes of Mind*; Dilip Menon, *The Blindness of Insight: Essays on Caste in Modern India* (Pondicherry: Navayana, 2006). Menon argues that religious communalism and specifically anti-Muslim violence in India signifies the return of the repressed histories of caste.

⁴⁴⁰ Dhareshwar, “Caste and the Secular Self”, 115.

⁴⁴¹ Dirks, *Castes of Mind*, 275.

institutions and in turn challenged the naturalized caste privileges of the “secular” elite. As I will discuss in this chapter, this made it necessary for those opposed to reservations to produce alternative explanations that justified the concentration of upper castes in state institutions.

The interpretation of caste as the return of the repressed in the Mandal debate raises the following questions: If the relationship of the secular elite to caste has been one of repression and disavowal, what kind of historical, cultural and intellectual resources did these subjects draw upon as they participated in one of post-colonial India’s most contentious debates about caste? Why did they perceive in the implementation of the Mandal Commission Report the onset of chaos, violence, caste wars and national disintegration? This chapter addresses these questions by examining how meanings about community, nation and caste were mobilized in anti-reservation discourses. These meanings will be contrasted with those found in pro-reservation arguments. Notably, opponents of the Mandal recommendations consistently claimed the subject position of unmarked national citizen in the debate. They claimed that their interests were synonymous with the interests of the nation-state. Ranging from narratives about caste under Mughal and British (i.e. non-Hindu) rule to affirmations of the principles of merit and efficiency, anti-reservation discourses reconciled the elite claim to be beyond caste in the secular-public sphere with blatantly casteist stereotypes about Dalits, OBCs and “reserved category” students and workers. Hence, I argue that critics of Mandal relied on particular framings of SCs and OBCs as inferior subjects in the production of themselves as modern and caste-less citizens acting in defense of the nation. The claim that OBC reservations would result in national disintegration and caste wars was underpinned by a static, colonial understanding of caste groups as infinitely and irreducibly divided. In this way, the possibility of political alliances between SCs and OBCs was rejected. In contrast, support for reservations among Dalit activists was articulated to an expansive, non-essentialist notion of community based on the concept of “Bahujan” (majority). Alliances between SCs, OBCs and religious minorities were envisioned in terms of a “majority of the oppressed”, thus challenging the concept of a “Hindu majority” as fabrication of a privileged minority. The vehement protests against Mandal underscored the need to forge these solidarities. Attending to the alternative meanings of community,

caste and nation in anti-caste, pro-reservation discourses makes evident that the autonomous politicization of subaltern castes had no place in the socio-political imaginary of the elite. Opponents of the Mandal Commission were not only defending their privileged access to secure employment, but a vision of the nation in which the Caste Hindu is the normative citizen-subject and inspirational ideal for the masses.

In the following section I outline the context leading to the Mandal controversy of 1990 and review some key analytical accounts that I will be engaging with. Subsequently, I examine the specific understanding of caste and caste subjectivities deployed in anti-reservation discourses. I then contrast this interpretation of the Mandal Commission to the discourses within anti-caste movements that supported the reservation for OBCs as part of a distinct political imaginary based on the concept of “Bahujan” (majority). Finally, I discuss the relation of the controversy to two significant political developments emerging from this moment: 1) the increased legitimacy of Hindutva ideology and its social and political organizations and 2) the intensification of the Dalit movement, particularly expansion of activist networks and political parties.⁴⁴²

Calculating Backwardness, Secularizing Caste

As noted above, 24 years passed after the shelving of the Kaka Kalelkar Commission Report on Backward Classes and the formation of the Mandal Commission. These were years of largely undisputed national dominance of the Congress Party, which did not regard caste as a relevant category for state directed social transformations. In North India, communist parties came to be increasingly marginalized in electoral politics. These parties showed scant interest in organizing lower castes *as castes* on the grounds that class would inevitably submerge caste.⁴⁴³ In the Northern states in which the intense conflicts over the Mandal Commission Report were staged, it was the Socialists that

⁴⁴² In relation to Dalit politicization, 1991 also marked the centenary celebration of Ambedkar’s birth.

⁴⁴³ Rajni Kothari, “Rise of the Dalits and the Renewed Debate on Caste,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, June 25 1994, 1589-15934; Jaffrelot, *India’s Silent Revolution*, 254.

engaged with lower caste communities as a political constituency of “Shudras.”⁴⁴⁴ Guided by the leadership and political ideas of Ram Manohar Lohia, the Socialists articulated the inseparability of economic inequality and caste inequality to demands for reservations as a means to transform power relations. In the realm of electoral politics the Socialists recruited backward caste political leaders and called for the reservation of administrative posts for OBCs, following the strategies of the non-Brahmin movement in the South. The agenda of OBC empowerment was incorporated into various socialist organizational formations over time, culminating in the creation of the Janata Party in 1977.⁴⁴⁵

The Janata Party was in the forefront of the opposition coalition against Indira Gandhi’s imposition of emergency rule between 1975 and 1977. Its election manifesto of 1977 promised a new deal for “weaker sections”, including 25-30 percent reservation of government service posts for the backward classes as recommended by the Kalelkar Commission.⁴⁴⁶ The party sought to represent itself as an organization of the poor, and build a social base among Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, OBCs and religious minorities. This was reflected in the membership of the Mandal Commission, which contained no upper caste members and was comprised solely of OBCs. Submitted to the government in 1980, the Mandal Commission Report applied a combination of economic, educational and social criteria to produce a national list of caste based communities categorized as OBC.⁴⁴⁷ The report made the case that social backwardness must be seen

⁴⁴⁴ The scriptural caste category indicating the fourth varna, comprising “low caste” laborers and artisans. The term Shudra was mobilized to identify commonalities between diverse occupation based groups and create a broad political identity.

⁴⁴⁵ Jaffrelot, *India’s Silent Revolution*, 309. The Janata Party was a merger of several political parties: the BLD, the Jana Sangh, the Socialist Party, the Congress (O) and the Congress for Democracy.

⁴⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴⁷ *Mandal Commission Report*, 57. The commission used eleven indicators organized under the social, economic and educational categories. Under social: 1) whether the group was regarded as backward by others, 2) dependence on manual labor, 3) marriage at young age, 4) participation of women in labor. Under economic: 1) household assets, 2) type of housing, 3) access to water, 4) debt level. Under educational: 1) proportion of children attending school, 2) student drop out rate 3) proportion of children obtaining matriculation. Social indicators were given a weightage of 3 points each, educational indicators were given 2 points and economic indicators 1 point.

as an effect of caste and further, educational and economic backwardness flowed from the former: “The poverty of these castes stemmed from their social discrimination and they did not become socially backward because of their poverty”.⁴⁴⁸ As such the social indicators were given a greater weight in the designation of a community as backward. The Commission’s interpretation of article 340 also emphasized that the priority of the state had to be the removal of social backwardness, namely, caste-based discrimination. This was supported through discussion of numerous Supreme Court judgments on reservation that confirmed the constitutional validity of identifying backward classes through the category of caste.⁴⁴⁹ Based on the findings of the Commission 2,399 communities constituting 52% of the population of India fit the criteria of the category OBC. Consistent with its analysis, the Report’s recommendations were based on the argument that anti-poverty measures alone would not resolve social and educational backwardness. The recommendation of 27% reservation for OBCs in public sector undertakings – the particular policy that the National Front government sought to take forward in their partial implementation of the Mandal recommendations in 1990-91 – became the most contentious. The Report acknowledged reservations were not being recommended to address economic inequality. Rather, guaranteed representation of OBCs in state institutions were recommended for their affective, symbolic value:

...we must recognize that an essential part of the battle against social backwardness is to be fought in the minds of the backward people...by increasing the representation of OBCs in government services, we give them an immediate feeling of participation in the governance of this country...the psychological spin off of this phenomenon is tremendous; the entire community...feels socially elevated.⁴⁵⁰

Inculcating a sense of inclusion in the nation-state among OBCs was also urged due to the disproportionate representation of higher castes in the public sector relative to their

⁴⁴⁸ *Mandal Commission Report*, 35.

⁴⁴⁹ Part 2: Summary of Cases Under Article 15 (4). *Ibid.*, 137-243. The cases discussed in this section involved challenges to the initiatives of various state governments to make provisions for the advancement of socially and educationally backward classes, authorized by article 15(4) of the Constitution.

⁴⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 62.

percentage of the population. The latter were held responsible for fostering elitism within government and educational institutions. Further, elite responses to the reservation recommendations were anticipated and countered within the text itself. Arguments about the injury reservations caused to hardworking, meritorious (upper caste) candidates were refuted as “the arguments advanced by the ruling elite which is keen on preserving its privileges...it tends to ignore much larger issues of national importance.”⁴⁵¹ In this way, the Report was characterized by a particularly polemical approach to the backward class question. Given the history of resistance to using caste as a category for social policy, the Report prioritized the task of establishing that caste was indispensable to the definition of backward in the category “Other Backward Classes”. Less attention was given to the presentation of empirical data establishing that the caste communities identified should be categorized as OBC.

By the time the Commission’s work was completed the Congress had regained political power at the centre. The Report was submitted to Indira Gandhi’s government in December 1980 but was not discussed in Parliament until 1982. During the Congress led governments of the 1980s, Mandal experienced a fate similar to that of the Kalelkar Commission. It was forwarded to the state governments for obtaining their views and no actions were taken at the national level. Replacing the question of caste and power relations raised by the Commission with a developmental approach, Gandhi introduced a 20-point program emphasizing health care, welfare programs for women and greater access to education.⁴⁵² However, despite having secured large electoral majorities the Congress was unable to contain growing demands from an assertive opposition and from active movements and interest groups.⁴⁵³ The implementation of the Mandal Commission recommendations was a key issue on which the Janata Dal successfully campaigned in the 1989 elections under the leadership of V.P. Singh, a Congress dissident and proponent of Lohia’s politics. Singh announced the party’s intention to fulfill this promise in a statement forwarded to both houses of Parliament on 7th August 1990. Social justice was the key legitimating concept in political arguments over reservations in the

⁴⁵¹ Ibid.

⁴⁵² Jaffrelot, *India’s Silent Revolution*, 330.

⁴⁵³ Thomas Blom Hansen, *The Saffron Wave: Democracy and Hindu Nationalism in Modern India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 136.

Mandal debate in parliament.⁴⁵⁴ Through the concept of social justice the problematic of caste was articulated to transformation in society's power structures. According to Bajpai, supporters of the Mandal Commission extricated social justice from the embrace of discourses of national unity, national integration and development that characterized earlier Congress arguments about affirmative action.⁴⁵⁵ In this discursive framework, it became impossible for any major political party to denounce the Mandal recommendations. In public statements the Congress Party and BJP articulated their opposition to Mandal in terms of the timing of the decision, the lack of adequate consensus, methodological weakness and the need to extend reservation on the basis of economic criteria. That is, their opposition was not directed at the question of caste as such. No party could afford to be perceived as against "lower caste" interests in a context where the significance of this constituency had become crucial for electoral politics. It was the intensity of protest staged by upper castes to the Mandal report that enabled parties to begin shifting their positions in the debate.

Shortly after Singh's announcement upper caste students organized their opposition into various formations such as the Anti-Mandal Commission Forum, Committee for the Struggle Against Reservations and the Committee for the Struggle Against the Mandal Commission, with the aim of abolishing all reservations *including* those for SC/STs.⁴⁵⁶ A case was filed in the Supreme Court in September 1990 challenging the constitutionality of Singh's decision, which subjected the Report to a stay order. In mobilizing against Mandal, anti-reservation protestors perceived of and projected themselves as the true representatives of the nation. Their occupation of public space and discourses sought to communicate a sacrificial mission to defend the nation against divisive sectional interests. For example, college students in Delhi renamed the site of their action "Kranti (Freedom) Chowk".⁴⁵⁷ In other symbolic gestures students

⁴⁵⁴ Hasan, *Politics of Inclusion*, 88; Rochana Bajpai, "Rhetoric as Argument: Social Justice and Affirmative Action in India, 1990," *Modern Asian Studies* 44, no. 4 (2010): 675-708.

⁴⁵⁵ Bajpai, "Rhetoric as Argument," 704. Bajpai argues that this move marks a major shift in justifications of preferential treatment in India.

⁴⁵⁶ Jaffrelot, *India's Silent Revolution*, 346. Emphasis mine.

⁴⁵⁷ "Day 9 of Protest: Students Renamed Maurice Nagar Chowk Kranti Chowk," *Times of India*, 17 August, 1990.

boycotted classes and held rallies in which they burned their degrees and performed caste identified manual labor such as sweeping and shoe shining.⁴⁵⁸ Such performances were accompanied by denunciations of the Mandal Commission and OBC reservations in leading national English newspapers. Journalists overwhelmingly supported the student protestors and presented their destruction of public property across the states of U.P., Bihar, Punjab and Haryana as a justified, spontaneous outburst of anger. These actions were interpreted as a warning to the National Front government: “the student demonstrations must be seen as a symptom of an approaching storm, the ferocity of which may not be confined to the seven states where agitation is currently in evidence”.⁴⁵⁹ Against a government attempting to unleash the divisive forces of caste on the nation, the anti-reservation movement was represented as engaged in a struggle to preserve the primacy of people over castes, of a modern meritocratic society and the values of the freedom movement.⁴⁶⁰ Yet their performance of caste identified labor such as sweeping as a form of protest indicates that the anti-reservation movement was also produced through embodied performances of caste privilege that betrayed abstract appeals to merit and equality. Implicit in the staging of this kind of protest was the tragedy that particular kinds of subjects will have to labor in this manner – not that the labor as such is exploitative and violent. The instrumental concerns about reduced opportunities for employment were thus intertwined with certain understandings of the relationship between the upper caste self as normative citizen subject and lower caste others. One striking example of this was the fast undertaken by BJP Rajya Sabha member Jinendra Kumar against the manner in which Mandal was implemented. Kumar broke his fast by accepting juice from a “harijan girl”, Mrs. Tara Devi, who worked as a sweeper.⁴⁶¹ This benevolent political performance echoed Gandhi’s fast after Amedkar’s

⁴⁵⁸ “Scholars Burn Degrees,” *Hindustan Times*, 27 August, 1990.

⁴⁵⁹ “No Prime Minister,” *Hindustan Times*, 25 August, 1990.

⁴⁶⁰ “A Divided Nation,” *Times of India*, 28 August, 1990; “The Politics of Pell Mell,” *Hindustan Times*, 2 September, 1990.

⁴⁶¹ *Hindustan Times*, 1 September, 1990. The caption accompanying the photograph of this fast identifies Tara Devi as a “harijan girl”. When Gandhi broke his 1933 fast he similarly requested an SC youth to serve him juice, an appointment that the youth did not keep. For the symbolism of this historical event and its significance for the making of the

demand for separate electorates during the Round Table Conference of 1932. Gandhi had invited a Dalit youth to serve him on the day he broke his fast. The historical connection of this protest to the Gandhian framework of purging untouchability in order to create a harmonious form of caste hierarchy suggested that the nation being preserved by opponents of Mandal could only be held together through the sacrificial upper caste body. The fast framed the issue of caste discrimination within a paternalistic approach to social reform emphasizing uplift and empathy for the subaltern caste subject. As I will discuss in this chapter, this indicates the complex ways in which the figure of the Scheduled Caste subject was mobilized in the anti-reservation discourses of the Mandal debate.

Although the anti-reservation movement occupied urban centres for months following Singh's announcement, the Supreme Court upheld the constitutional validity of caste as a criteria for OBC reservation as proposed in the Mandal Commission.⁴⁶² The judgment registered the view that economic criteria alone would not be adequate to address the complexities of disadvantage in Indian society. It also argued for the relevance of caste as an identifiable social unit for the purposes of data collection:

Since caste represents an existing, identifiable, social group spread over an overwhelming majority of the country's population, we say one may well begin with castes...and then go on to other groups, sections and classes. If the real object is to discover and locate backwardness, and if such backwardness is found in a caste, it can be treated as backward...⁴⁶³

Caste was presented in the Supreme Court ruling as one available option among other kinds of social groupings for determination of backward class status. At the same time, the court advised the government to devise a means test through which it could exclude economically advanced caste groups categorized as OBC. Thus proponents of the Mandal Commission were successful in passing some of the report's recommendations, although

Dalit movement, see Nagaraj, "The Lie of a Youth and the Truth of an Anthropologist: Two Tales of the Widening of Emotional Concern," in *The Flaming Feet*, 61-75.

⁴⁶² Indra Sawhney vs. Union of India, 1992. The court made judgments on both the OBC reservations as determined by V.P. Singh's government and the decision by Prime Minister Narshima Rao to add to this policy an additional 10 percent reservation for "economically disadvantaged sections of people" who did not qualify under caste criteria.

⁴⁶³ In Hasan, *Politics of Inclusion*, 92.

V.P. Singh's government did not survive the controversy and was brought down through a no confidence motion that year.

In retrospect it might seem that despite the intensity of the 1990 protests Caste Hindus have largely adjusted themselves to the expanded reservation framework. This is explained by the onset of neo-liberal economic policies in 1991, which increased opportunities for the upper caste middle class to acquire lucrative employment in the private sector.⁴⁶⁴ However, the swift organization of anti-reservation protests in response to the Congress Party's attempt to implement another recommendation of the Mandal Report in 2006-2007 – namely reservation for OBCs in central educational institutions – and the stay order on these measures placed by the Supreme Court illustrates that reservation policies continue to be strongly opposed among privileged castes. Activists have subsequently mobilized against the increased harassment of Dalit students and numerous cases of suicide at AIIMS, IIT and IIM, the institutions that were the site of anti-reservation actions in 2006-2007.⁴⁶⁵ Anti-reservation politics continue to shape the practices and culture of state institutions long after organized protests have subsided. This suggests that despite the claim that Scheduled Caste reservation is historically and morally acceptable in contrast to the illegitimacy of OBC reservation, practices of caste discrimination and violence do not differentiate on the basis of governmental categories

⁴⁶⁴ Jaffrelot, *India's Silent Revolution*, 2003; Hasan, *Politics of Inclusion*, 2009. The caste composition of private sector employees is a key example of the ongoing discriminatory practices which make reservation in employment necessary for subaltern castes. In response to this shift in the political economy of neo-liberal India, the demand for reservation in the private sector has also become an issue around which Dalit organizations have mobilized. See Sukhdeo Thorat, Aryama and Prashant Negi, *Reservation and the Private Sector: Quest for Equal Opportunity and Growth* (New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2005) and Chandra Bhan Prasad, *The Bhopal Document: Charting a New Course for Dalits for the Twenty First Century* (Government of Madhya Pradesh: 2002).

⁴⁶⁵ Gurinder Singh Azad, "AIIMS: Death Trap for Aspiring Reserved Category Students," *Roundtable.Org*, 5th March 2012, http://roundtableindia.co.in/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=4747%3Aaiims-a-death-trap-for-aspiring-reserved-category-students&catid=119%3Afeature&Itemid=132; K.P Girja, "On Suicides, Caste and Higher Education," *Insight Young Voices*, 26 April, 2011, <http://thedeathofmeritinindia.wordpress.com/2011/04/26/84/>. Also see the Death of Merit Campaign, www.thedeathofmeritinindia.wordpress.com.

of classification. Indeed, as a testament to the banal practices of casteism in everyday life the increase in Dalit suicides in the wake of the most recent anti-Mandal protests suggests that “the ‘mistaken for’ itself is not a mistake, insofar as it is the very point.”⁴⁶⁶

It is with this in mind that I will highlight some key points of analysis found in accounts of the Mandal Commission. In both the (upper caste) press coverage and academic interventions in the debate, the constitutional and moral basis for SC/ST reservation was distinguished from the dubious basis upon which reservation was being extended to OBCs: “Only the Harijans and Adivasis have suffered collectively the kind of social abuse and psychological injury that justify very special measures of redress in their cases, including the reservation of jobs. The case of Other Backward Classes and the religious minorities is very different...”⁴⁶⁷ Whereas the historical oppression of Scheduled Castes was seen as self evident, the use of “murky” socioeconomic indicators in delineating the category of OBC justified the resistance to Mandal on two fronts: 1) the lack of moral imperative, as upper castes did not carry the same guilt for oppressing OBCs that they did for Scheduled Castes and 2) the imprecision of the data through which communities were categorized as OBC, which creates doubt as to whether those benefitting from reservation are truly in need of it.⁴⁶⁸ These arguments suggest that regardless of how one feels about caste and social justice, the Mandal report should be

⁴⁶⁶ Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 187. Puar makes this argument in relation to the murders of Sikhs in the United States since September 11 2001. She contests the framing of these murders as a case of mistaken identity, that is, that Sikhs are mistaken for Muslims in the post 9/11 context. Arguments about mistaken identity obscure the historical and structural racism which manifests in violence against Sikhs and Muslims.

⁴⁶⁷ Andre Beteille, “Is Job Reservation A Good Policy,” *India Seminar* 375 *Reserved Futures: A Symposium on the Policy of Positive Discrimination*, November 1990, 41. It is also notable that critics are using the term “harijan” to identify SCs despite its contestation by Dalit activists.

⁴⁶⁸ Partha Ghosh, “Positive Discrimination in India: Political Analysis,” *Ethnic Studies Report* 15, no.2 (1997): 136-172; Dirks, *Castes of Mind*, 283; Hasan, *Politics of Inclusion*, 90 . The problem of accurate data is related to the ongoing refusal of the state to include caste as a category of the census due to its association with the colonial administration. A key critique of the Mandal Report’s data is that its projections were taken from the census of 1931, the last time caste was included in the census. The following section will analyze articles in the press that made similar arguments and provide citations for them.

rejected as an exercise in the production of faulty and unreliable data. This is related to a second interpretation of the debate: the “secularized” conception of caste around which it revolved. Scholars have argued that the Mandal debate did not define caste in terms of purity-pollution, ritual, scriptures and other religious aspects of the concept. Protestors were not concerned with such “traditional anthropological questions” but rather, “feared that they would be denied even the slim chance they already had for acquiring educational credentials and government employment.”⁴⁶⁹ Mandal reflected a decline in the significance of the religious disabilities of caste and an increased emphasis on its secular aspects, including poverty, literacy and representation in state institutions.⁴⁷⁰ This interpretation of the debate can be related to a final point I will engage with in the following sections: the argument that the OBC is a purely instrumental, bureaucratic category. As such the OBCs do not represent a “real political community”. The political subjects mobilizing around this category did so only insofar as the possibility of acquiring reservations from the state existed. These subjects internalized an OBC identity simply because they thought they could derive benefits from it.⁴⁷¹ In fact, more agitation and campaigns have resulted from upper caste opposition to reservations than in its favor.⁴⁷² In this interpretation the OBC category has been produced through electoral expediencies of political parties following the decline of Congress dominance in North India and would not exist outside of the reservations framework. The OBC is thus a product of vote bank politics in post-colonial India.

In the remaining sections of this chapter, my analysis will seek to complicate these interpretations of the Mandal debate. My reading of anti-reservation discourses in the (upper caste) media will show how opposition to the Mandal Commission was forged through specific understandings of colonial legacies, Scheduled Caste reservation and caste practices of purity and pollution. Arguments thus constructed collapsed initial distinctions between Scheduled Castes and OBCs in a call for the elimination of all reservations by the state. These arguments were upheld by representations of SCs and OBCs as the main agents of ritual and religious caste practices. The “real oppressors” of

⁴⁶⁹ Dirks, *Castes of Mind*, 274.

⁴⁷⁰ Bajpai, “Rhetoric as Argument”, 685.

⁴⁷¹ Jaffrelot, *India’s Silent Revolution*, 347.

⁴⁷² Hasan, *Politics of Inclusion*, 96.

modern India were not upper castes but dominant landowning OBCs in rural areas. This betrayed deeply rooted notions about the inferiority of “lower castes” and not simply instrumental concerns about employment. Through these kinds of arguments opponents of Mandal re-produced themselves as the only modern, caste-less citizens of India. The call for economic criteria and developmental solutions as a “secular” alternative to reservation in this discourse de-politicized the issue of caste and power relations. Finally, my reading of arguments supporting Mandal in publications such as *The Oppressed Indian* and *Dalit Voice* will show that to view the OBC as a strictly instrumental category misses the ways in which it was analyzed in Dalit-Bahujan literature. Through mobilization around the politics of the Mandal Commission OBC came to be inhabited as a “vibrant and subjectively experienced political community.”⁴⁷³ Attending to these discourses about the Mandal Commission locates support for reservation historically and philosophically with the movements of Phule and Ambedkar and thus to the search for “a community sans Brahminism.”⁴⁷⁴ This highlights the extent to which the idea of a majority Hindu community is naturalized in dominant discourses regardless of elite claims that they have transcended the parochialisms of caste and community.

“Reserved Category” Subjects and National Decline: Mandal and the Specter of Partition

The Mandal Commission will severely curtail sanskritizing tendencies within the intermediate castes...few will relish the civilizational havoc likely to result from making virtue of the cultural attributes of backwardness.⁴⁷⁵

As mentioned in the previous section, a key argument against the extension of reservation to OBCs was that Scheduled Castes were the only appropriate subjects for such a policy due to their exceptional historical oppression. There was no shortage of

⁴⁷³ Yogendra Yadav, “Reconfiguration in Indian Politics: State Assembly Elections 1993-95,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, January 13-20 1996, 95-104.

⁴⁷⁴ Valerian Rodrigues, “Dalit-Bahujan Discourse in Modern India,” in *Political Ideas in Modern India: Thematic Explorations*, ed. Vrajendra Raj Mehta and Thomas Pantham (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2006), 51.

⁴⁷⁵ Swapan Dasgupta, “Curse of Mandal: Grotesque Caricature of Hinduism,” in *Reservation Crisis in India: Legal and Sociological Study on Mandal Commission Report*, ed. V.C. Mishra (New Delhi: Bar Council of India Trust, 1991).

such arguments about SC reservation in the national English language press. In this discourse the anti-reservation riots and caste atrocities marking the trajectory of post-colonial India disappeared. They were replaced by firm commitments of the nation to atonement for past transgressions: “None of us ever opposed reservation for SC/ST...reservations were a way by which the society was doing penance for the treatment meted out to SC/ST”.⁴⁷⁶ Such expressions of Caste Hindu guilt and atonement were affiliated to a Gandhian framework of Scheduled Caste uplift. In this framework of social reform violent caste relations must be transformed into a harmonious and non-violent hierarchy. For example, one author observed as a sign of declining beliefs in untouchability that in the capital the “outcastes of yore can be seen doing their chores, moving about in the houses of upper castes frequently without any restrictions”. These signs of progress were the legacies of Gandhi’s inter-caste dining programs.⁴⁷⁷ This mapping of social transformation in the space of urban middle class domesticity indicates how the “traditional” issues of purity-pollution continued to inform the conceptualization of caste in the Mandal debate. By drawing upon Gandhi to give moral value to the hiring of domestic workers in the homes of the privileged, an incremental and assimilating trajectory of social reform was provided to counter the alternative social transformations proposed by supporters of the Mandal Commission. As with the “harijan girl” called upon in the BJP hunger strike discussed in the previous section, the domestic workers remain in a subordinate position to the benevolent agent of social reform. Thus Gandhian symbols provided an important historical resource through which the self-articulation and autonomous organizing of subaltern castes as envisioned in Ambedkarite movements – including those in support of Mandal – could be dismissed as unnecessary.

Critics also made their case against Mandal by drawing on the four decades of SC/ST reservation policy. The discursive space of the Mandal debate provided an opportunity for them to narrate their experiences of and reflections on the kinds of

⁴⁷⁶ V.P. Dutt, Vice-Chancellor Delhi University. Quoted in “Now, it is Caste Fanaticism,” *Hindustan Times*, 8 September, 1990. Also see “Open Letter of JNU Faculty”, 4 August, 1990, published in multiple English newspapers; Purshottam Nivas, *Hindustan Times*, 23 August, 1990; J.K. Barthukar, “Key to Reservation,” *Hindustan Times*, 29 August, 1990; Ramashray Roy, “Fiction Into Fact,” *Indian Express*, 30 August, 1990.

⁴⁷⁷ Vijay Dutt, “Why not the Mahatma Way?,” *Hindustan Times*, 2 September, 1990.

subjects that had been produced through the reservations framework. Often the same articles that began with an affirmation of commitment to SC reservation concluded with cautionary tales about the pampered and incapable Scheduled Castes occupying the limited spaces in schools and government offices. They described in detail the incompetence of Scheduled Caste engineers, doctors, pilots and office clerks. Day in and day out papers were filled with “casteist filth” about the “merit the forward castes possess and the imbecility of the Dalits.”⁴⁷⁸ Attending to some of these examples shows the ways in which awareness of caste is generated in the modern secular spaces of the nation-state. Given that the Mandal debate is described as a departure from traditional anthropological conceptions of caste, these examples contribute to understanding how contemporary experiential conceptions of caste re-produce assumptions about lower caste inferiority. In other words, they shed light on what precisely was “casteist” about modern anti-reservation discourses.

In the *Hindustan Times*, one editorial described an encounter between the author, in the capacity of interviewer for a post of Information Officer, and a Scheduled Caste candidate from South India who “...had graduated from an American University; hence it could be assumed that she came from an affluent family.”⁴⁷⁹ This encounter was a dismal one – the candidate was extremely unqualified for the position. For example, she was unable to answer any general knowledge questions put to her. She had no understanding of current events, admitting frankly “she did not read newspapers.”⁴⁸⁰ However, the interviewer’s decision to not recommend the candidate for the post was ignored due to the constraints of the reservation policy. The Chairman of interviews informed him, “...we have no option. A scheduled caste candidate has to be recommended and she is the only one we have.”⁴⁸¹ The encounter with and subsequent hiring of an economically privileged, incompetent SC that would be entrusted with the task of disseminating information to citizens of India served as a cautionary anecdote about caste based reservation policies. It was implicit that her economic privilege made her the daughter of

⁴⁷⁸ R. Balagopal, “This Anti-Mandal Mania,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, 6 October 1990, 2231-2234.

⁴⁷⁹ Editorial, *Hindustan Times*, 8 September, 1990.

⁴⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸¹ *Ibid.*

an SC bureaucrat or politician whose status was only due to the quota system. The dismal performance in the interview suggested the affluent SC girl planned to use this quota as a substitute for merit. Thus the author concluded that while the moral necessity of “undoing wrongs done to outcastes...over the centuries”⁴⁸² is an important national commitment, this must be weighed against the other implications of reservation: the perpetuation of the caste structure and ignoring the merit of the deserving. In this article Caste Hindus, the “we” who must balance these conflicting priorities, may have a moral obligation to Scheduled Castes. However, the implications of reservation policies are ruinous to the nation-state regardless of the subject in question.

In another article the Mandal debate was taken as an opportune moment to raise the issue of Dalit suicides in educational institutions such as IIT. The article began by describing the spate of Dalit suicides in the late 1970s that led author Giriraj Kishore to publish *Parishist*, a book on the real life experiences of Dalit students at the IIT Kanpur.⁴⁸³ But the author does not discuss the experiences described in *Parishist* to explain the reason for these suicides. Rather, he consulted with an (upper caste) IAS officer. Seemingly the officer’s expertise came from his experience of working with SC employees. Based on this he argued: “the only way the SC and ST students can be helped...is by raising their educational standard.”⁴⁸⁴ Thus the IIT had started to provide special coaching sessions for students from these communities. In this analysis the lack of confidence and skill among such students – due to which they commit suicide - is a result of their unpreparedness for higher education. In this way, the Mandal Report’s argument in favor of building a sense of inclusion and confidence among excluded communities was challenged: “Reservation is an opportunity, not a confidence building exercise. That comes from the sort of education and training one has received.”⁴⁸⁵ Subsequently, the officer recounted his own experiences with “reserved category” employees, in which Dalits became sub-standard officers of the IAS.⁴⁸⁶ In one case, an employee whose

⁴⁸² Ibid.

⁴⁸³ Vinod Sharma, “Society’s Supplements,” *Hindustan Times*, 2 September, 1990.

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁶ A detailed description of caste discrimination in the IAS can be found in Balwant Singh, *An Untouchable in the IAS* (B. Singh: 1997). Singh joined the IAS in 1959 and

educational success is attributed to the special coaching sessions of IIT quit the IAS prematurely because his overconfidence led him to conclude: “the administration has not come up to my expectations”. Another officer who was “petrified” by the sheer thought of guns attempted to resign upon learning that IAS officers were required to issue shoot orders. In this infantilizing representation of an SC officer it is the meritorious Caste Hindu who is left to deal with the strains such employees place on the administration. Only the latter is capable of respecting the institutions of the nation-state. So the issue of suicide among “Society’s Supplements” served as evidence that the government must “take a fresh look at the reservation policy to make it more realistic”. Such discourses about the Scheduled Caste as subject of reservations revealed that the anti-Mandal position was not only driven by fears that Caste Hindus will have reduced access to jobs. There was a deeper sense motivating these illustrations of incompetence that this subject does not belong in and cannot maintain the integrity of national institutions.

It is not simply that the questions of discrimination and harassment of Scheduled Castes in education and employment were ignored or unaccounted for in these articles. The concept of discrimination was reduced to an excuse used by reserved category subjects to mask their inadequacies. In the Special Issue of *India Seminar* entitled “Reserved Futures”, the consequences of reservation policy were brought to life through the figure of the “quota appointed” university professor. It was argued that PhD students would refuse to work with this professor, not because of their casteism, but for fear of not “getting their money’s worth.”⁴⁸⁷ This individual would then inflate student grades in order to attract interest in his courses, a strategy that must ultimately backfire because only students admitted *on the basis of quotas* would be interested in such grade inflation. In the end, “the teacher is left...frustrated, isolated and naturally inclined to blame his plight on ‘discrimination’ rather than on the reservation policy.”⁴⁸⁸ In this scenario the resentment of other (Caste Hindu) professors is justified as a natural consequence of having to deal with such costly burdens on the educational system.

resigned in 1964. The article discussed here does not mention the issue of discrimination at IIT or the IAS.

⁴⁸⁷ Ashok Guha, “The Mandal Mythology,” *India Seminar* 375 *Reserved Futures: A Symposium on the Policy of Positive Discrimination*, November 1990, 53.

⁴⁸⁸ *Ibid.* Emphasis mine.

In these and other reflections on the experience of SC reservation, the candidate admitted through a quota was always positioned against the larger public interest. Whether it was an inferior teacher hired at the expense of students and educational standards, government officials hired at the cost of substandard public services and corruption, or defense department agents that are a risk to national security, the “reserved category” candidate is by implication an inferior, unqualified candidate.⁴⁸⁹ Nor was this fear of the incompetent limited to the upper castes: “... as one backward officer himself admitted to me, ‘I would be in dithers if a captain commanding a Boeing is one of us, not knowing...if he really merits the responsibility of flying the aircraft.’”⁴⁹⁰ Thus the problem with the Mandal Report was not only that the OBCs had no moral or historical entitlement to reservations. These detailed commentaries on “reserved category” subjectivity suggest that the problem with Mandal was that it would open the floodgates to an increasing amount of similarly unqualified candidates, resulting in deterioration of the nation-state’s institutions. It has been argued that the appeal to merit in elite discourse represents a novel shift emerging out of the Mandal debate.⁴⁹¹ The articles discussed above illustrate how a particular reading of Scheduled Caste reservation was mobilized in the production of this merit discourse. As such the anti-reservation position in the Mandal debate on OBCs was not in contrast to the national acceptance of SC reservation. The former must be located within the trajectory of non-implementation, discriminatory practices and anti-reservation riots in the first four decades of post-colonial affirmative action policy.

How was it that a secular elite who had apparently repressed or disavowed caste, who conceived of themselves as beyond caste, had these examples of SC inferiority so

⁴⁸⁹ Arun Shourie, “This Way Lies not only Folly, but Disaster,” *Indian Express*, 25 August, 1990; Dharma Kumar, “The Problem,” in *India Seminar_375 Reserved Futures: A Symposium on the Policy of Positive Discrimination*, November 1990, 13. In Shourie’s article the mention of defense and counter-terrorism is an example of deliberate misinformation of anti-reservation discourse, as these departments are exempt from reservation policy on grounds of national security.

⁴⁹⁰ Dutt, “Why not the Mahatma Way.”

⁴⁹¹ Balagopal, “This Anti-Mandal Mania”; D.L. Sheth, “Changing the Terms of Elite Discourse: The Case of Reservation for ‘Other Backward Classes,’” in *Region, Religion, Caste, Gender and Culture in Contemporary India*, ed. T.V. Satyamurthy (Oxford and New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), 314-333; Hasan, *Politics of Inclusion*.

readily available? The ways in which the figure of the SC was pressed into service of anti-reservation discourse is indicative of the constant monitoring of SC bodies in educational institutions and workspaces by the “secular caste-less elite” of post-colonial India. The critiques of Mandal in the national English media thus provide insights into the contours of contemporary casteism. They show that the intellectual, historical and cultural resources available to a class that constituted itself through repression of caste are not casteist in the “traditional anthropological sense”. In other words, the casteism displayed in the press cannot be explained solely with reference to the caste of the writers – that the writers are essentially inclined to denounce reservations because they belong to upper caste families, hence their views are remnants of “traditional” religious bias. The casteism displayed in the press as it reconstructed the trajectory of reservations policy was produced through the resources of secular nationalism. For example, Nehru’s letter to Chief Ministers in 1961 in which he expressed his dislike of any kind of reservation because they promote “second rate” standards was printed in numerous English dailies in August and September 1990. Thus the “secularized” conception of caste deployed in the Mandal debate facilitated the secularization of caste prejudice. The framework of developmental modernizing nationalism did secularize caste categories by defining communities through indicators such as poverty, literacy and income levels. However, this same framework also informed representations of the “reserved class” as undisciplined in the task of national development: “reservations should only be given to those who follow family planning norms and have fewer children, because due to the pressure of this class on national resources persons are forced to migrate leading to brain drain”⁴⁹². Eminent scholars of caste such as MN Srivnavas blamed the tragedy of hoards of teenagers leaving India for American universities on the reservation system.⁴⁹³ In this articulation a class of subjects inferior in skill and undisciplined in development goals was literally pushing disciplined, secular subjects outside the nation’s borders. The anti-reservation discourse thus demonstrates the “secularization of casteism”: the naturalization of hierarchy through the framework of developmental, modernizing

⁴⁹² Sanjay Kumar Maheshwari, “Letter to the Editor,” *Hindustan Times*, 16 August, 1990.

⁴⁹³ In Omvedt, “Twice-Born Riot Against Democracy.”

nationalism. Through this framework critics could simultaneously denounce Mandal and re-produce themselves as beyond caste identity.

The representation of OBCs in the media further reinforced the modern secular credentials of the Caste Hindu citizen. There are two key ways in which the category of OBC was described in anti-reservation discourse. Firstly, as a category so vast and incomprehensible that it was virtually meaningless: “a huge but as yet undefined and almost undefineable mass of many millions of people clamoring for special treatment.”⁴⁹⁴ Communities on the OBC list did not share a common history or common interests. Thus the state could easily manipulate the category by redefining criteria and adding new castes for its own political interests. This tendency would be encouraged by the methodological weaknesses of the report itself, as it had generated data based on projections from the 1931 census. As a purely administrative category there was no meaningful form of political community or internal unity among subjects qualifying as OBC. Secondly, when the OBC subject was described in more specific detail, it was only as part of a dominant, landowning elite that perpetuated casteist oppression in rural India: “...the primary contradiction is not between so-called forward castes and the sudras, but between dominant castes many of which are clubbed as backward castes by Mandal and the Harijans.”⁴⁹⁵ Economically this section of OBCs - principally Yadavs and Kurmis in North India – were already privileged due to the way land and agrarian reform policies had been implemented in previous decades. They now sought to gain political power in accordance with their economic status:

...the light that inspires the Prime Minister’s flights of lyricism is not the glimmer of hope in the eyes of the oppressed; it is the glitter of greed in the eyes of an OBC elite offered a sudden bonanza which it could never have hoped for under open competition.⁴⁹⁶

The main support base for Mandal was this small OBC elite, who would also be the only group to benefit from reservation. Using the rhetoric of social justice and caste discrimination, these elites were manipulating the OBC masses. The latter would see no

⁴⁹⁴ Parmanand Singh, “A Question of Legality,” *India Seminar_375 Reserved Futures: A Symposium on the Policy of Positive Discrimination*, November 1990, 26.

⁴⁹⁵ Swapan Dasgupta, “Curse of Mandal.”

⁴⁹⁶ Guha, “The Mandal Mythology,” 52.

improvement in their employment prospects through the proposed policy. Furthermore, it was these elites who were the principal agents of casteism in society: “today it is not Thakurs who rape scheduled caste women but some of those who belong to the so-called other backward classes also do.”⁴⁹⁷ As such, the exceptional forms of oppression suffered by the Scheduled Castes and due to which they received reservation, were perpetuated in contemporary India by the very subjects that the Mandal report sought to provide reservation for.⁴⁹⁸ The representation of OBC subjectivity reinforced the upper caste markers of the secular citizen through a displacement of the purity-pollution framework onto the life-worlds of rural subaltern caste communities. Again, these arguments were supported by the scholarly authority of academics such as Srinavas: “it is not only the OBCs who are “ruthless oppressors” but Scheduled Castes also continue to practice untouchability amongst themselves.”⁴⁹⁹ Such claims echo those made by Ghurye about Scheduled Caste legislators who practiced untouchability against each other but united in order to secure reservation, discussed in the previous chapter. In anti-reservation discourses Dalits were represented either as violated subjects of the rural social order or as unqualified bureaucrats interested in maintaining this order. Taken together, the Scheduled Castes and OBCs constitute the principal agents interested in maintaining caste hierarchy. They are thus incapable of working together across caste divisions. This amounts to the claim that the majority of the population of India is unable to move beyond their narrow caste identities. In this way, anti-reservation discourses re-produced a static, colonial view of caste as an endless series of antagonistic compartmentalized communities.

⁴⁹⁷ V.P. Dutt, quoted in “Now, it is Caste Fanaticism,” *Hindustan Times*, 8 September, 1990.

⁴⁹⁸ This is not to deny the involvement of dominant OBC communities in casteist violence or investment in Brahmanical cultural norms. However my critique is that the entire representational space is occupied by attention on 2-3 dominant caste communities out of a list of over 2,000 castes, including Christians and Muslims that experience untouchability but are excluded from the Scheduled Caste category. In addition, these arguments say nothing about casteism in urban centres or among upper castes. The latter are portrayed as having moved beyond these practices.

⁴⁹⁹ M.N. Srinavas, A.M. Shah and B.S. Baviskar, “Kothari’s Illusion of Secular Upsurge,” *Times of India*, 17 October 1990.

In their critiques however, it was the Mandal Commission Report that opponents of reservation charged with portraying Indian society, and Hindu society in particular, as a static, unchanging and rigid hierarchical structure. The report drew on ancient religious scriptures in explaining caste inequality but did not account for the changes that had significantly loosened the rigidity of caste structures over time: “in order to show that it must right a grievous wrong, the Mandal Commission resorted to the most brazen misrepresentation of history, sociology and above all, the dynamics of popular Hinduism.”⁵⁰⁰ In this discourse only the historical social reform movements and liberal attitudes of upper castes in urban spaces qualified as evidence of social change. What did not qualify were anti-caste mobilizations that sought social transformation by consolidating SC and OBC communities. Any autonomous political organizing of this kind was only to continue securing the benefit of reservation. Thus the “secular profile” of contemporary casteism in the Mandal debate relied on portraying subaltern castes as the subjects responsible for the perpetuation of caste identities and practices in society. It was then the responsibility of the casteless secular subject to save the nation from these divisive forces.

An important historical resource drawn upon by the critics of the Mandal Commission in order to position themselves as beyond caste and communal identities was the nationalist narrative linking separate electorates, the Muslim League and the India-Pakistan partition. For example, an open letter by faculty and staff at JNU stated: “the dismal lesson of history that partition of the country was primarily the result of the colonial policy of reservation and separate electorates on communal lines has been forgotten too soon.”⁵⁰¹ These arguments framed OBC reservation as an extension of colonial policies of divide and rule and linked its proponents to the figure of the divisive and disloyal Muslim. They sought to remind the public that caste and religion were the principal instruments by which the colonizers ruled over India, and that the whole policy of reservation was a politically motivated policy coming down from British days.⁵⁰² It was argued that reservations for OBCs would make caste just as divisive as religious

⁵⁰⁰ Dasgupta, “Curse of Mandal.”

⁵⁰¹ “Unlearned Lesson”, *Indian Express*, 4 August, 1990.

⁵⁰² Masroor Hasan Siddiqui, “Letter to the Editor,” *Hindustan Times*, 21 August, 1990; Meenakshi Jain, “Divide and Rule Redivivus!,” *Indian Express*, 29 August, 1990.

communalism. This historical narrative enabled critics to establish the nationalist credentials of the secular elite. V.P. Singh was compared to Mohammad Ali Jinnah because neither held aspirations to be national in character.⁵⁰³ Discussions of imperial legacies also served to provide alternate explanations for the dominance of upper castes in state institutions to those made in the Mandal Report. For example, Jain explained that Brahmins had experienced exclusion from the institutions of the Mughal Empire despite being a literate and priestly class. This is why they so readily took to Western education under the British. The Sudras who lived off the land had no use for such education. This explained their minimal representation in the bureaucracy, yet today OBCs were being portrayed as the victims of “Brahmin marauders of the North.”⁵⁰⁴ Discourses about Mughals and Muslims displaced the role of Brahminism in the perpetuation of caste inequalities. The figure of the Muslim and other religious minorities enabled a portrayal of caste hierarchy as a defense against threatening others: “the report ignores the concrete circumstances – notably the proselytizing zeal of Islam and Christianity – that led to the rigidities of the caste system”.⁵⁰⁵ In this way, anti-reservation discourses drew upon longer histories of articulation of the Hindu community as historically subjected to the violence of foreign invaders and external others that sought to weaken its “majority status”. In this narrative the Caste Hindu subject must struggle to hold the nation together against the divisive forces of caste and communalism, represented by historical figures such as Jinnah and Ambedkar.

These historical linkages also tapped into ongoing cartographic anxieties⁵⁰⁶ about the nation-state’s territorial integrity. With the spread of militant nationalist movements in Punjab, Kashmir and Assam in the 1980s that also implicated the Pakistani state, the question of national integration had great significance: “it is precisely our hearts...that appear to be divided today by a multiplicity of lines. Drawing yet another dividing line

⁵⁰³ Kewal Sharma, “Running the Nation in Back Gear,” *The Telegraph*, 1 September, 1990.

⁵⁰⁴ Jain, “Divide and Rule Redivivus!”

⁵⁰⁵ Dasgupta “Curse of Mandal.”

⁵⁰⁶ Sankaran Krishna, “Cartographic Anxiety: Mapping the Body Politic in India,” *Alternatives* 19 (1994): 507-521.

would only...push national consciousness still farther from our grasp.”⁵⁰⁷ It was seen as reckless and irresponsible for V.P. Singh to introduce a divisive reservation policy in a moment where internal and external forces threatened the borders of the nation-state. For example, a slogan of the anti-Mandal protestors read: “We don’t require Pakistan or China to destroy us, we have V.P., Ram Vilas and Sharad Yadav.”⁵⁰⁸ These anxieties coincided with and contributed to Hindu right wing discourses of the inherently threatening presence of Muslims in India. The Ram Janambhoomi movement that would lead to the destruction of the Babri Masjid and widespread violence across India was intensifying at this time.⁵⁰⁹ However, the looming threat of religious communalism was defined solely in relation to the Mandal Commission in the national media. In fact, the Hindutva movement was held up as an example of national unification and caste reform efforts. Its interest in the social reform of Hindu society was evident because a “Harijan” was invited to lay the first stone at the ceremony for building the Ram Temple at the site of the Babri Masjid.⁵¹⁰

V.P. Singh’s position on the Babri Masjid issue, and by implication the “Muslim question” was explained as evidence of his personal political ambitions in contrast to the Hindutva concern for Hindu and/as national unity. His tough stance with the BJP on the Masjid and decision to put “Muslims in a political position so that they can play a crucial role in determining the political fortunes of secular India” demonstrated his desire to restructure the polity⁵¹¹. The implementation of Mandal was but one aspect of Singh’s

⁵⁰⁷ Niraj Singh, “Job Reservation Policy: Populism sans Rationalism,” *Times of India*, 16 August, 1990.

⁵⁰⁸ *Times of India*, 6 September, 1990 (photograph). Paswan was Union Minister for Labor and Welfare in the National Front Government and a prominent Dalit political leader. Sharad Yadav held the portfolio of textiles and food processing industries in the Cabinet.

⁵⁰⁹ This movement was organized and supported by Hindu right wing organizations that claimed the 16th century Mughal emperor Babur had built a mosque on the sacred site of the birthplace of the Hindu deity Ram. The movement’s objective was to reclaim this space for Hindus and build a temple on the site of the mosque. This was framed as an issue of historical justice for Hindu suffering perpetrated by Muslim invaders.

⁵¹⁰ Dasgupta, “Curse of Mandal.” The author uses this as an example of social reform in the Hindu community.

⁵¹¹ Dharma Kumar, “Mandal Commission Threatens Disaster,” 18 August, 1990.

attempt to consolidate a support base among OBCs, Scheduled Castes and Muslims.⁵¹² The consolidation of this kind of majority would bring about national decline, disintegration, chaos and caste war. When located against the self-representation of the critics of Mandal as the only subjects that prioritized the nation over caste, it is evident that these discourses were not simply rhetorical embellishment. They expressed a deeply felt threat to the dominant framework of secular nationalism. The exclusion of the Caste Hindu from this support base meant the exclusion of the subject integral to a cohesive and unifying framework for nationhood: “the burgeoning denunciation of the Brahmin-Bania combine can only unleash an anti-intellectual fury.”⁵¹³ Both Nehru’s modernization framework and the BJP’s framework of Hindutva were preferred to Singh’s political project because despite their drawbacks, both provided “the individual with a chance to identify...with a pan-Indian vision of the state and society.”⁵¹⁴ These arguments reflect the naturalization of the concept of a majority Hindu community within articulations of secular nationalism.

Yet it is not that these critics saw no place for the demographic majority – lower castes and religious minorities - in their visions of national unity. In presenting themselves as the enemies of caste and communalism, they simultaneously claimed to be champions of the poor. They argued that rather than reservation OBCs would be better served by educational, health, nutritional and other social welfare benefits.⁵¹⁵ The costs of implementing the Mandal Commission would in fact reduce the funds available for such development priorities, particularly primary education. The real problems of poverty, illiteracy and unemployment were being obscured through the divisive politics of caste identity, distracting the poor from understanding their real interests. Hence, one of the organizations formed in response to the Mandal Commission was a central forum of teachers, researchers and senior students across Delhi University, AIIMS, IIT and JNU

⁵¹² Ibid.; Dilip Padgaonkar, “A Grim Anniversary: Social Framework Under Threat,” *Times of India*, 15 August, 1990; Arvind Das, “Manu For all Seasons: VP Seeks Larger than Life Image,” *Times of India*; Siddiqui, “Letter to the Editor”.

⁵¹³ Kumar, “Mandal Commission Threatens Disaster.”

⁵¹⁴ Padgaonkar, “A Grim Anniversary.”

⁵¹⁵ “Not by Violence,” *Hindustan Times*, 18 August, 1990; Amrik Singh, “Mandal Commission: Educational Impact,” *Hindustan Times*, 18 August, 1990; Purshottam Nivas, *Hindustan Times*, 23 August, 1990.

seeking to evolve a “rational strategy for socio-economic uplift and scientific development of the country.”⁵¹⁶ These proposed solutions to the problem of socio-economic inequality contradicted accusations that OBCs constituted an elite, landowning class and in fact deserved very few entitlements from the state. That the full list of recommendations in the Mandal Report included sections on literacy, educational access and land reforms was also excluded from discourses that emphasized “rational” development. The issues of participation and distribution of power raised by the Mandal Commission and its supporters could then be marginalized. This insistence on the need to “uplift” the poor rather than confront and engage with the assertion of subaltern caste political subjects assimilated the categories of SC, OBC, Dalit, Muslim etc. to an abstract category of the “masses”. While the elite can relate to the masses through paternalism and benevolence, the latter cannot be imagined as agential political subjects capable of sharing the same spaces or making decisions for the nation-state with the former. The category of the masses subsumes the contradictions between privileged and subaltern castes, thus enabling the representation of a nationalist elite committed to development. In the following section, it will be seen that pro-reservation discourses conceptualized the demographic majority of India through a very different representational frame. This frame underscored the issues of power and political agency and maintained that any reference to “development” or “economic criteria” divorced from these issues sought to maintain the privileges of Caste Hindus.

Dalit-Bahujan Discourse on Reservation: Envisioning Alternative Communities

If we are uniting 6000 castes, how can you call us casteist?⁵¹⁷

According to the press coverage of the Mandal Commission discussed above, the supporters of OBC reservation were limited to V.P. Singh, the JD and dominant OBC caste groups, namely Yadavs and Kurmis in North India. These groups and individuals had mobilized around the reservation issue due to their personal ambitions for political power rather than genuine concern for social justice. They were distracting the vast

⁵¹⁶ “Yadav Calls on OBCs to Start Pro-Mandal Stir,” *Hindustan Times*, 4 September, 1990.

⁵¹⁷ Interview with Kanshi Ram, *Illustrated Weekly of India*, 8 March, 1987.

majority of India's poor from their real material interests using the "crumbs of reservation".⁵¹⁸ The anti-reservation protests of 1990 were represented as spontaneous outbursts of justified anger about these developments, with no historical connection to other upper caste mobilizations against affirmative action. Pro-reservation arguments in publications serving politicized SC/ST, OBC and minority communities such as the *Oppressed Indian* and *Dalit Voice* presented an alternative trajectory in which the experiences of SC/ST reservation, casteism and anti-reservation protests over time justified the implementation of the Mandal recommendations. Although these publications emerged out of different regional contexts and vary in ideological orientation, the common arguments that I will focus on in this section point to a shared set of ideas that have been revisited and reasserted overtime in the production of Dalit-Bahujan discourse.⁵¹⁹ Linking these diverse contexts of Dalit politicization were the shared resources of over a century of anti-caste thought through which arguments in support of reservation were constructed. These arguments framed caste inequality as not only economic but also political, and emphasized the importance of power for Dalits to bring about a radical transformation in society as part of the Bahujan Samaj (society of the majority).⁵²⁰ This was largely ignored in the mainstream media, which portrayed OBC reservation as a product of instrumental party politics and vote banks.

While the Congress Party put the Mandal Commission Report in cold storage in the 1980s, the Marathwada agitations and the anti-reservation riots in Gujarat produced collective memories of violence that contributed to further politicization across subaltern caste communities. Of particular significance in this context was the intensification of the

⁵¹⁸ Open letter from JNU faculty and staff, in *The Politics of Backwardness: Reservation Policy in India*, ed. V.A. Panandiker (New Delhi: Konark Publishers, 1997).

⁵¹⁹ On explicating a common Dalit-Bahujan discourse across different contexts and socio-political movements, see Rodrigues, "Dalit-Bahujan Discourse"; Eva-Maria Hardtmann, *The Dalit Movement in India: Local Practices, Global Connections* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009). *Dalit Voice* is based in Kerala and was founded in 1981 by V.T. Rajashekhar, a former journalist for Indian Express. Rajashekhar emphasizes conversion to Islam and alliances between Muslims and backward castes in particular. *The Oppressed Indian* emerged from the Backward and Minority Communities Employees Federation (BAMCEF) under the leadership of Kanshi Ram, who placed greater emphasis on political power through electoral participation.

⁵²⁰ Kothari, "Rise of the Dalits" 1589; Rodrigues, "Dalit-Bahujan Discourse", 58; Bajpai, "Rhetoric as Argument", 691.

Dalit movement in U.P., a state in which anti-caste mobilization declined after independence. From the 1960s to the 1980s issues relating to Dalits in U.P. were addressed by non-Dalit political leaders and subsumed within the broader agenda of development promoted by the Congress.⁵²¹ By the 1980s an educated and politically conscious middle and lower middle class of U.P. Dalits was formed. These classes became active in writing and publishing literature with the aim of creating awareness among Dalit communities, and supported the formation of an exclusively Dalit political party.⁵²² These processes gained momentum under the leadership of Kanshi Ram, a Scheduled Caste Sikh from Punjab who worked as a researcher for the ERDL (Research and Development Laboratory) in Pune, Maharashtra. His experiences of caste discrimination in Pune and exposure to the more oppressive conditions for Dalits in Maharashtra led to an engagement with Ambedkar's writings. Kanshi Ram resigned from his research position to participate in struggles against caste inequality, forming the BAMCEF (Backward and Minority Communities Employees Federation) in 1978. He travelled across North India and Maharashtra to convince SC government employees to organize within the BAMCEF, an organization he envisioned as the "think bank", "talent bank" and "financial bank" of the Bahujan Samaj.⁵²³ The objective of building a capable and educated leadership among Dalits through the BAMCEF was linked to the historical critique of Indian democracy and caste inequality presented in his book the *Chamcha Age: Era of the Stooges*. Released on the 50th Anniversary of the Poona Pact, the text argued that Gandhi's hunger strike, which forced Ambedkar to give up the demand of separate electorates for Dalits in 1932, created a political structure in which post-colonial Dalit leaders operated as stooges or agents of the high-caste Hindus. "The Poona Pact was the scalpel that cut short the life of a genuine democratic revolution".⁵²⁴ The BAMCEF was defined as a non-religious and non-political organization committed to social activities. Its establishment was necessary to overcome the isolation of SC public

⁵²¹ Sudha Pai, *Dalit Assertion and the Unfinished Democratic Revolution: The Bahujan Samaj Party in Uttar Pradesh* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2002), 78.

⁵²² Ibid.; Badri Narayan, "Heroes, Histories and Booklets" *Economic and Political Weekly*, October 13 2001, 3923-3934.

⁵²³ Omvedt, 1994. In Jaffrelot, *India's Silent Revolution*, 393.

⁵²⁴ Mahesh Gavaskar, "Bahujans as Vanguard – BSP and BMS in Maharashtra Politics", *Economic and Political Weekly*, April 16-23, 1994, 895-896.

sector employees and encourage them to give back to the more exploited and oppressed sections of the society to which they belonged. Kanshi Ram argued, “the disease of the age was the alienation of the elite and the cure was BAMCEF”. However, government fears about politicized SC employees led to continual harassment and transfer of BAMCEF members, resulting in its transformation into a shadow organization in 1985.⁵²⁵

Alongside the BAMCEF Kanshi Ram established the Dalit Shoshit Sangharsh Samiti (DS-4) in 1981 to carry forward the work of mass mobilization, consciousness raising and political action that government employees were restricted from participating in. The DS-4 aimed to organize Scheduled Caste Dalits, as well as OBC, Tribal and Muslim communities to achieve the legitimate political rule of the Bahujan Samaj. Its main focus was in rural areas where it organized activities such as people’s parliaments, the “Poona Pact Denunciation Program” and anti-liquor agitations. Between March and April 1983, the DS-4 organized a 3,000 km cycle procession across seven states to “educate the oppressed and the exploited people that they need to build up their own organization and independent movement.”⁵²⁶ The bicycle used by common people was meant to demonstrate that the oppressed could, and should, use whatever means they have to be self-sufficient and to organize and agitate for betterment.⁵²⁷ The following year, a similar campaign with meetings across the country concluded in Delhi and culminated in the formation of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP). The latter gained in prominence at the expense of BAMCEF and the DS-4, reflecting the prioritization by Kanshi Ram of the attainment of political power by the Bahujan Samaj. The prime focus of the category Bahujan was “to point out the marginalization of the majority by the minority caste Hindu groups and challenge this condition through electoral politics”.⁵²⁸ It was declared that while upper castes were welcome to join the BSP, the leadership of the party would be in the hands of Dalits. In Kanshi Ram’s political vision it was necessary to replace sub-caste hierarchy with horizontal relations between oppressed communities

⁵²⁵ Jaffrelot, *India’s Silent Revolution*, 393.

⁵²⁶ “Marching to Awaken the Ambedkarite Masses”, *The Oppressed Indian*, April 1983.

⁵²⁷ Pai, *Dalit Assertion*, 92.

⁵²⁸ KC Das, *Indian Dalits: Voices, Visions and Politics* (New Delhi: Global Vision Publishing House, 2005), 49-59.

before caste could be abolished.⁵²⁹ The political possibilities that Dalit-Bahujans perceived in the implementation of the Mandal Commission were related to this broader project of social transformation for which communities were mobilizing in the 1980s.

Although mainstream political discourses expressed shock towards the unexpected (and unwanted) announcement of V.P. Singh to partially implement the Mandal recommendations in 1990, articles in the *Oppressed Indian* had stressed the relevance of the Report throughout the 80s. In 1985 BAMCEF, DS-4 and the BSP initiated a pro-reservation movement to counter the challenges of anti-reservation agitations. That year they sponsored symposiums and rallies across India in support of reservation, as well as a three-week long demonstration in Delhi during the winter session of parliament.⁵³⁰ The pro-reservation movement sought to:

...impress upon the government that non-implementation and non-acceptance of the Mandal Commission report for OBC can be the interest of the higher castes and their government but how can it be in the interests of the SC, ST, OBC and the converted minorities...they, therefore, should not be expected to keep silent at all times.⁵³¹

A nationwide movement was considered necessary for SC/ST and OBCs because the first four decades of the post-colonial nation-state was characterized by systematic undermining of the reservation policy. The publication stressed, “all the reservation of SC/ST and Other Backward Communities are only on papers, they have not been implemented...though more than 30 years have passed.”⁵³² Written years before the “crisis point” of 1990, these articles counter the framing of V.P. Singh’s decision to implement Mandal as an undemocratic attempt to further empower dominant OBC landowners. Rather, reservation was a necessary but insufficient means to transform caste based power relations by democratizing political structures:

⁵²⁹ Kancha Ilaiah, “A Paradigm Shift Called Kanshi Ram,” *Deccan Herald*, November 6, 2003.

⁵³⁰ “Struggle of the Backward and Minority Communities,” *The Oppressed Indian*, January 1986.

⁵³¹ Kanshi Ram, “Reservation: A Matter of Participation,” *The Oppressed Indian*, November 1985.

⁵³² R.L. Kureel, “Case for Reservation for SC, ST and OBC,” *The Oppressed Indian*,

...reservation is not a question of our daily bread, reservation is not a question of our jobs, reservation is a matter of participation in the government and administration...we want participation in the government and administration of this country...if 52% of the people cannot participate in the republic, then which is the system in which they can participate?⁵³³

Dalit activists supported OBC reservation despite the fact that it did not immediately benefit them. In some cases, Dalits seemed to have been more militant and organized on the issue than the fragmented Shudras.⁵³⁴ For supporters of reservation, the category OBC did not have a fixed, essential meaning or political subjectivity attached to it. Thus it could be harnessed towards the building of an alternative political community. The Mandal Commission was seen to have the potential to facilitate alliances between SC/ST and OBCs, and hence the realization of political rule by the Bahujan Samaj, which comprised 85% of the population of India.

This is evident from the way that the demand for the implementation of the Mandal Commission was linked to a series of other demands by the pro-reservation movement in 1985: 1) the extension of reservation to private sector undertakings, 2) representation of SC, ST, OBC and religious minorities on all Public Service Commissions and Selection boards, 3) justice for victims of caste atrocities, 4) the establishment of a national university in the name of Dr. Ambedkar and 5) the re-naming of Marathwada University.⁵³⁵ Additional demands for uniform compulsory education, the right to work, and protection for artisans and primary agricultural producers indicated how the politics of caste power were intertwined with those of economic inequality. This stands in contrast to the arguments discussed in the previous section, in which economic and social welfare concerns were presented as the “real interests” obscured by divisive caste identities created by reservation policy. From the perspective of Dalit-Bahujan politics accepting a tradeoff between developmental programs and the surrender of

⁵³³ Kanshi Ram, 1987, In Jaffrelot, *India's Silent Revolution*, 398.

⁵³⁴ Omvedt, “Twice Born Riot Against Democracy.”

⁵³⁵ “Charter of Demands Adopted at the Mass Rally at Boat Club New Delhi on 6th December, 1985”, *The Oppressed Indian*, January 1986.

reservation would reinforce the dominance of privileged castes in the nation-state.⁵³⁶

According to Omvedt, Dalits were quite aware that upper caste opposition was not simply to OBC reservation, but to any kind of reservations, and if they succeeded in beating back the former they would next move on to push back the Dalits.⁵³⁷ These demands illustrated the linkages between issues of representation, inequality and violence in pro-reservation positions. As such they challenged the notion of reservation as an upper caste concession or gesture of atonement that makes autonomous Dalit politicization unnecessary.

Arguments in support of the Mandal Commission were thus articulated to a critique of Indian democracy. They called for a deepening of democratic politics by explicating the historical, demographic and moral dimensions of the Bahujan Samaj.

Both the *Oppressed Indian* and *Dalit Voice* historicized the Bahujan Samaj as a political community on the basis of indigeneity. They drew on Jyotirao Phule's conception of a racial theory of conquest to explain the subjugation of Shudras (OBCs) and AtiShudras (SCs) by Aryan Brahmin invaders. Phule argued that a permanent hostility between Brahmin and non-Brahmin had characterized caste society from its very inception.⁵³⁸ Bahujan communities pre-existed Brahmanical Hinduism and the system of caste it imposed on the subcontinent. The colonizing Aryans – Caste Hindus – of Central Asia had subjugated the Shudras and Atishudras who had largely practiced Buddhism. The Aryans subjected them to the caste system in order to exploit their labor and composed sacred texts to justify their ill treatment. The motif of original inhabitant was used as an instrument to motivate communities to struggle for socio-political transformation.⁵³⁹ For example:

The history of India is full of daring stories of the shudras and atishudras...thousands of years ago, they were the rulers of the land...unfortunately, the high caste historians of this land, who pose as the

⁵³⁶ A key critique of the BSP's ideology and practices is the lack of specificity on the economic dimensions of inequality, particularly in the context of neo-liberal transformations at state and national levels. However the point is that reservation is often framed as an issue that is fronted at the expense of, or to distract subjects from, the issues of economic inequality.

⁵³⁷ Omvedt, "Twice Born Riot Against Democracy."

⁵³⁸ Rao, *The Caste Question*, 48.

⁵³⁹ Narayan, "Heroes, Histories and Booklets", 3927.

custodians of culture and literature, distorted the facts and wrote the history in such a way that for all times, shudras and atishudras were projected as helpless and hopeless creatures.⁵⁴⁰

Hence, the history of reservation was traced back to Phule's struggle for the education of Shudras and Atishudras launched in 1850, the first reservation scheme by Shahu Maharaj in Kolhapur in 1902 and the efforts of Dr. Ambedkar at the Round Table Conferences in 1932. This trajectory highlighted a history of antagonisms between Aryans and Bahujans in which the "evolutionary process of reservation was resisted by the higher castes from the very beginning."⁵⁴¹ Caste based reservations provided in the Constitution did not represent a historical settlement between Caste Hindus and Scheduled Castes. From this perspective the end of British colonial rule in 1947 had only given independence to 15% of the population, the upper castes who continued to expect submission from the Bahujans. Thus reservation as one aspect of the struggle against caste inequality was linked to "the struggle for the freedom of the downtrodden inhabitants of this country to get freedom from those who have come from Central Asia and other places."⁵⁴² In Dalit-Bahujan discourse the Caste Hindu was thus externalized as foreign presence. Muslims, Christians and other non-Hindu communities were included in the concept of Bahujan as indigenous converts whose change of religion signified an attempt to escape caste hierarchy. The demographic and historical basis of the Bahujan Samaj was posited as an alternative to the concept of "Hindu majority". Identification as an indigenous majority emphasized the illegitimacy of a casteist minority occupying the power structures of the nation-state and resisting its transformation. The Mandal Commission Report reflected this view of a national non-Hindu majority, as its figure of OBCs as 52% of the population included Christian and Muslim caste-based communities.

The expansion of the reservation policy was viewed as a progressive development because it would encourage the identification of diverse groups with the concept of Bahujan as a political community. The multiple divisions of caste and religion produced by Caste Hindu society worked against this process and had to be countered. It was in

⁵⁴⁰ *Oppressed Indian*, April 1983, in Pai, *Dalit Assertion*, 123.

⁵⁴¹ "Pro-Reservation Dharna – Why? Reservations – Evolved Over the Years" *The Oppressed Indian*, January 1986.

⁵⁴² R.L. Kureel, "Case for Reservation"

facilitating this process of identification that the political potential of the Mandal Commission was seen for supporters of OBC reservation. The Mandal Report contributed to the Dalit-Bahujan discourse of numbers as it centralized in public debate the fact that 52% of the population was effectively absent from the institutions of the nation-state. The figure of 52% (OBC) was constantly reiterated alongside 65% (SC/ST and OBC) and 85% (ST/ST, OBC and indigenous religious minorities) in speeches and articles supporting the Mandal Commission. For example,

We need to ask why the Other Backward Castes, accounting for 52% of the population have not been able to produce even a single supreme court judge in 43 years of independence. We need to ask why Brahmins, accounting for less than 5% of the population hog around 95% of all executive posts.⁵⁴³

The case for implementation of the Mandal Commission was made by calling attention to these figures as evidence of severe inequality and discrimination. This emphasis on the overwhelming exclusion of the majority of the population from public representation enabled a distinct reading of the colonial legacies of the nation-state. Whereas anti-reservation critics argued the Mandal Commission would reproduce colonial policies of divide and rule, Dalit-Bahujan discourses framed the debate as an issue of self-rule for a subjugated population. By arguing against reservation in the name of merit and efficiency, the upper castes were effectively arguing that the majority of Indians did not possess these qualities. Upper castes had conveniently forgotten that similar arguments were made by the British to exclude them from state structures:

Those who talk about merit and efficiency, may I ask them as to how after independence the so-called higher caste people who were otherwise unfit for the senior post overnight became suitable and efficient? If it could be so then why...SC/ST are not given their due share in every area of life?⁵⁴⁴

In light of the glaring exclusion of 52% of the population from state institutions, elite arguments about efficiency amounted to the claim that the majority was incapable of governing themselves. However,

⁵⁴³ Naval Kishore Yadav, "In Defense of Mandal," *Hindustan Times*, 21 August, 1990.

⁵⁴⁴ Kureel, "Case for Reservation".

...self-government is any day better than efficient government. The British advanced the same argument to deny 'home rule' to India...they said India will go to the dogs if...given independence...BG Tilak, MK Gandhi and others said 'we Indians prefer self-rule to efficient British rule.'⁵⁴⁵

Similar critiques of the merit discourse as re-producing the arguments of British colonizers were also made in the parliament during the debate on the Mandal Commission in 1990.⁵⁴⁶ This indicates how the historic debates between Gandhi and Ambedkar on political independence versus social emancipation remained unsettled. The Mandal debate revealed how Dalit memory of 1932 as the year of Gandhi's betrayal continued to animate their position on the post-colonial reservation policy. Those opposed to the policy argued that it would fragment the nation into innumerable caste identities. Those who supported it called into question the very idea of national independence as marking a distinct break from colonial domination and in turn, the concept of national unity itself. The political aspirations of the Dalits had been betrayed much before 1947 in the Poona Pact of 1932. This moment marked the beginning of a series of similar betrayals in the "post-colonial" context: the denial of reservation to SCs through failure of implementation, the long denial of national recognition to Dr. Ambedkar, the violent opposition to the renaming of Marathwada University and the anti-reservation riots of Gujarat in 1981 and 1985.⁵⁴⁷ It was through continual thwarting of policies and movements for subaltern caste progress that an elite representing 15% of the population was able to claim to speak in the national interest.

In this discourse, categories such as SC and OBC were not administrative containers for an endless variety of sub-caste groups perpetually locked into practices of purity-pollution. Rather, these governmental categories of classification could serve to consolidate larger collectivities for progressive social transformation:

Previously, the four thousand castes could not come together and overthrow the system, but today these...castes are reduced into three groupings...the Scheduled

⁵⁴⁵ "Racism behind anti-Mandal War and Violence," *Dalit Voice*, April 16-30, 1991.

⁵⁴⁶ See Bajpai, "Rhetoric as Argument."

⁵⁴⁷ Kureel, "Case for Reservation"; "Hindu Unity Means What? Why this Unity and Against Whom?" *Dalit Voice*, January 16-31, 1991.

Castes...the Scheduled Tribes...the Other Backward Castes. All these groups put together number about six hundred million people in India.⁵⁴⁸

These categories did not simply reflect existing caste relations in society, but acted upon these relations and altered them. DS-4 and BAMCEF activists recognized that many communities categorized as OBC were not politicized and would have to be engaged with in order for Bahujan politics to gain strength. Although OBCs/Shudras were not subjected to untouchability they had been historically excluded from education, property rights and religious leadership.⁵⁴⁹ Alliances between SCs and OBCs were presented as a fulfillment of Ambedkar's political vision. Ambedkar's call for the establishment of the Republican Party and his inclusion of Article 340 in the Constitution reflected his interest in expanding Dalit struggles to include other oppressed groups in society.⁵⁵⁰ It is in destabilizing the dominance of the 15% minority in government institutions and facilitating alliances between different marginalized groups to act as a collective of 85% that the transformative potential of the reservation policy was seen:

The Mandal Commission Report is a document of fulfillment and emancipation of Bahujan Samaj. It is a document to bring about unity and solidarity...to bring about fraternity and a sense of...intercommunication and interstimulation...our enemies do not want this to happen.⁵⁵¹

Thus Dalit-Bahujan discourse articulated an alternative form of community that was expansive and non-essentialist. In cutting across differentiations of sub-caste, governmental category and religious community, the concept of Bahujan challenged the notion that caste and religion were pre-determined, static identities. This also enabled a certain degree of reflexivity around the concept, as its realization was linked to the need for ongoing politicization and education.

⁵⁴⁸ Kanshi Ram, "The Oppressed Indian and the Struggle of BAMCEF" (Address to the General Meeting on International Unity against Oppression, Exploitation, Injustice and Discrimination, Japan, 1982), *The Oppressed Indian*, February 1983.

⁵⁴⁹ Ibid. Also see articles on DS-4 rallies, *The Oppressed Indian*, February 1983.

⁵⁵⁰ S.D. Singh Chaurasia, "Is Reservation Policy of Government Right or Wrong?," *The Oppressed Indian*, DS-4 Regional Conference at Vidharba.

⁵⁵¹ Tejinder Singh Jhally, "Change Yourself to Change the Society" BAMCEF Convention Speech, 1990.

In the coverage of the mainstream media there was minimal engagement with these arguments or recognition of political organizations aside from the JD involved in the reservation debate. Rajni Kothari's contribution to the *Times of India* stands apart as an exception to this trend.⁵⁵² Kothari conceptualized caste formations as both aggregative and dis-aggregative. Since endogamous, occupation based jatis (sub-castes) were too small and numerous to wield much influence by themselves they required affiliation with larger collectivities such as Dalit and OBC. These processes worked to introduce pluralism into homogenizing religious categories such as "Hindu". The transformation of caste through the forging of collectivities cut across religiously invoked symbolism and it is in this sense that "Dalit" and "OBC" can be seen as broad secular identities: "caste, indeed, is the great seculariser in a society being pulled apart by convoluted religions bent upon tearing apart the social fabric."⁵⁵³ Kothari also criticized scholars for not recognizing that class is intricately bound up with caste in India: "class finds its basis in the transformation of caste, the basic unit of not just the Hindus but of Muslims, Christians and Sikhs as well."⁵⁵⁴ In this analysis the main message of Mandal was the class-consciousness associated with trans-caste mobilization based on a numerical majority of the population. Mandal facilitated a form of class-consciousness that built upon rather than destroyed caste identities. The continued importance of caste in the distribution of property and power and its use in the maintenance of inequality made class struggle and caste struggle coterminous.⁵⁵⁵

Kothari's analysis provides a vantage point from which to further nuance the argument that a secular conception of caste was at work in the Mandal debate. As mentioned earlier this argument was often made with reference to the shift from ritualistic and religious definitions of caste to the economic and developmental profile of caste groups as seen in the Mandal Report and the preference of economic criteria by its critics. The anti-reservation discourse demanded "objective" developmental solutions and simultaneously identified SCs and OBCs as the primary agents of casteism and purity-pollution practices in India. Kothari's analysis points to the secularization of caste in a

⁵⁵² "Caste and Politics: The Great Secular Upsurge," *Times of India*, 28 September, 1990.

⁵⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁵ Balagopal, "This Anti-Mandal Mania."

different sense, by insisting that caste be seen as a principle of social organization that cuts across all religious communities. Caste becomes secularized when its exclusive association with Hinduism is challenged. Indeed, the national list of OBCs produced by the Mandal Commission reflected this view of society. With the inclusion of Muslims and Christians communities the list challenged representation of these communities solely as part of a “religious minority” to be governed through the framework of religious freedom and cultural rights. Caste as mobilized in Dalit-Bahujan politics is understood as a secularizing force because it: 1) complicates Orientalist conceptions of India as comprised of distinct, homogenous religious communities and 2) challenges the notion that secularism in India strictly concerns the regulation of relations between the Hindu majority and various religious minorities. Thus, in the political ideology of the BSP under Kanshi Ram, social (i.e. caste) identity not only replaced the class category but was also democratized by sanctioning autonomy to every cultural, social and religious group before forming the alliance: “Bahujan identity neither believes in the total submission of all deprived communitarian identities to become one nor does it philosophize a complete suppression of the minority ruling elites to achieve its political ideals”.⁵⁵⁶ In the context of Maharashtra, the Bahujan Mahasangh also defined the “Bahujan” category to include all religious affiliations whether Buddhists, Sikhs, Jains or Muslims as well as caste groups – Shudra and ati-Shudra, tribes, women and finally poor Marathas and poor Brahmins.⁵⁵⁷ In the pages of *Dalit Voice*, the Muslim was not an external “other” but a co-sufferer of Brahmanical supremacy. It is in the shared practices of labor and experiences of discrimination that a case for this alternate, expansive form of community was made.

⁵⁵⁶ Harish Wenkhede, “The Political and the Social in the Dalit Movement Today,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, February 9-15 2008, 50-57. Electoral alliances between the BSP and the Hindu nationalist BJP in 1995 and 1997 have compromised these principles. However, this political decision also cost the former sections of Dalit/minorities support base. Mayavati’s alliance with the BJP must be considered against the fact that Dalit’s winning elections outside of reserved constituencies continues to be very rare. See Das, *Indian Dalits*, 227-243; Chittibabu Padavala, “The Meaning of Mayavati for the Dalit Movement”, *Kafila: Media, Politics, Dissent*, June 11 2007, <http://kafila.org/2007/06/11/the-meaning-of-maywati-for-the-dalit-movement/>

⁵⁵⁷ Gopal Guru, “Emergence of Bahujan Mahasangha in Maharashtra,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, November 13-20 1993, 2500-2502.

The framework of a secular, non-Hindu majority informed distinct readings of upper caste mobilizations, both against the Mandal Commission and in support of the Ram Janambhoomi movement. Dalit-Bahujan publications identified the BJP's attempt to consolidate a united Hindu community on the latter issue as a means to negate the caste based power relations revealed by Mandal. In *Dalit Voice* the image of L.K. Advani's Rath Yatra was repeatedly invoked as a desperate attempt to maintain a casteist social order:

...the parties are not interested in their god Rama or the temple they vowed to build. It is all a cruel, violent drama periodically enacted to 'unite' the SC/ST/BCs under their Hindutva flag, flown over a Toyota Rath so that the upper castes could rule and use this 'unity' of the Hindus to torment the religious minorities...they simply cannot accept sharing of power with 85% of the country's deprived.⁵⁵⁸

The very fact that a Rath Yatra was being undertaken in the name of Hindu unity belied the absence of such unity in the first place. The Muslim had been manufactured by the BJP as an enemy subject to displace the real source of threat to upper caste rulers: "the 65% SC/ST/BCs falsely described as Hindus."⁵⁵⁹ The targeting of Muslims by Hindutva activists was inseparable from their claiming of Dalits and OBCs as part of a Hindu majority – a form of incorporation that maintains Brahmanical superiority. Confronted by the assertion of subaltern castes, Hindutva organizations had resorted to "chauvinism as the main instrument...to consolidate the majority community as a bulwark against social change", revealing the "sense of insecurity and psychosis" in the Hindu mind.⁵⁶⁰ This was not a novel strategy; Dalit-Bahujan communities recognized it from the way anti-reservation protests turned into the systematic targeting of Muslims in Gujarat in 1985.⁵⁶¹ These arguments provided a critique of "secular nationalism" by exposing the extent to which this nationalism relies on a static conception of the majority as Hindu. Demands

⁵⁵⁸ *Dalit Voice*, November 15-30, 1990.

⁵⁵⁹ "Hindu Unity Means What? Why this Unity and Against Whom?," *Dalit Voice*, January 16-31, 1991.

⁵⁶⁰ "NUBC: Policy Statement, New Delhi, 25 May 1990", *Muslim India*, September 1990.

⁵⁶¹ For a detailed account see Ornit Shani, "The Rise of Hindu Nationalism in India: The Case Study of Ahmedabad in the 1980s," *Modern Asian Studies* 39, no. 4 (2005): 861-896.

for OBC reservation were in this way linked to a cultural politics that rejected any attempt to define Indian culture in terms of the primacy of one religion or region, or to exploit culture as an instrument of domination.⁵⁶²

Although the mainstream media represented the anti-reservation protests as a “struggle for nothing less than the principles on which Indian nationhood were founded”⁵⁶³, supporters of the Mandal Commission identified these actions as a spectacle of unrestrained casteism. Months of vandalism and offensive performances reinforced the importance of alliances between SCs and OBCs and their mobilization as an alternative political community. While both anti-reservation and Ram Janambhoomi movements claimed to defend or preserve the nation in the face of divisive politics, they had the effect of communicating a social order divided between the Brahmanical elite and the Bahujan. The force with which the movements denounced reservation in the streets of Delhi, Patna, Chandigarh and Lucknow had never been mobilized to denounce caste atrocities. Thus the protests worked to “rip aside the benign mask of nationalism and lay bare the ugly face of Hindu chauvinism.”⁵⁶⁴ The swift unification of a Brahmanical minority in the protests was particularly instructive for OBCs who had earlier never sought to align with SCs and STs at the all-India level.⁵⁶⁵ The responses of journalists, intellectuals and political parties to the Mandal Commission underscored the thesis of the report: the domination of particular privileged castes within institutions of knowledge and power was a result of social discrimination. In this way, upper caste discourses and practices worked to facilitate those political solidarities between SCs and OBCs that they dismissed as non-existent and impossible to create. While the bureaucratic ambiguity of the category OBC led particular communities to identify with it due to the possibility of reservation, the experience of the anti-reservation movement produced shared meanings and memories around, and in turn stronger identification with, the category. Thus a significant outcome of the Mandal controversy was that it “convinced everybody of the logic of our oft-repeated statement of 15% versus 85% and that this 85% are non-Hindus.

⁵⁶² “NUBC: Policy Statement.”

⁵⁶³ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁴ Maqbool Ahmad Siraj, *Dalit Voice*, December 1-15, 1990.

⁵⁶⁵ Kancha Ilaiah, *The Weapon of the Other: Dalit-Bahujan Writings and the Remaking of Indian Nationalist Thought* (New Delhi: Dorling Kindersley India, 2010), 95.

The 85% Bahujan Samaj is under formation.”⁵⁶⁶ The moment in which “the 15%” displayed without restraint their sense of entitlement was simultaneously one through which anti-caste struggles intensified and extended into multiple terrains such as electoral politics, trans-national rights based campaigns, activist networks and cultural production. In this way the Mandal debate illustrates the co-production of upper caste and anti-caste subjectivities.

Hindutva and Dalit Assertion: The Politics of Nation and Community Post-Mandalization

Due to the Aura of Ram, the demon of reservation ran away.⁵⁶⁷

...so let the Arjunas roam the streets burning buses and let the Dronas write their editorials; Eklavya will no longer sacrifice his thumb.⁵⁶⁸

The contentions over the implementation of the Mandal recommendations illustrate that debates over reservation always articulate the beyond of reservation – these debates imagine futurities as alterations to the social order and the kinds of subjects that would be empowered by these alterations. Those in opposition to the reservation policy imagined a future of fragmentation, chaos and violence brought on by the empowerment of subjects at once unqualified in secular credentials and parochial in disposition. The passionate, elaborate rejections of the Mandal Commission in these terms appears disproportionate if compared to the relatively minimal amount of jobs that would be

⁵⁶⁶ “Hindu Unity Means What? Why this Unity and Against Whom?”

⁵⁶⁷ *Aaj*. Newspaper published in Banares, 9 December, 1990, in Shani, “The Rise of Hindu Nationalism”, 895.

⁵⁶⁸ Yadav, “In Defense of Mandal.” Written about in the Hindu epic *Mahabharat*, Eklavya was a tribal prince who was prevented from learning archery because of his caste. He persists by secretly studying the lessons of Drona, the guru of the royal family. To protect the fated superiority of his pupils, Drona orders Eklavya to cut off his thumb. This argument reflects a preoccupation in Dalit cultural politics with subversive readings of Hindu mythologies and exposing the caste oppressions sanctioned and enacted in these texts. These readings reclaim marginalized Dalit figures whose narrative function was to bear punishment for the breaking of caste hierarchy.

moved from the “general category” as a reserved position. However, when located in relation to the growing assertiveness of subaltern caste communities and the alternative conceptions of caste, community and nation articulated in Dalit-Bahujan discourse, one can better understand how the deep sense of dislocation amongst Caste Hindus came to be framed as a threat to national unity, secularism and merit. Indeed, those supporting OBC reservation were challenging the exclusions built into dominant conceptions of these terms. Emerging out of broader struggles for self-respect, they rejected the politics of empathy and injured subjectivity to which upper castes confined the caste question. As such they “challenged the power of the elite to nominate, classify and represent”.⁵⁶⁹ From this perspective we can also understand the rejection in pro-reservation discourses of elite appeals to national unity and secularism: “the appeal to social meaning cannot secure legitimacy or consensus because social meaning is what is being contested”.⁵⁷⁰

The Rath Yatra led by L.K. Advani began on September 25th, 1990 to unify the nation around the Ram Janambhoomi movement. The BJP leader claimed that the procession to Ayodhya had “taken away the cynicism that was fostered by the Mandal Commission.”⁵⁷¹ On December 6th, 1992, 150,000 Hindutva activists converged in Ayodhya and succeeded in demolishing the Babri Masjid, sparking off months of violence in multiple cities that resulted in over 2,000 deaths. The destruction in Ayodhya and its aftermath provoked a deep sense of shock and loss of confidence about the viability of Indian secularism. This led to debates about the “crisis of secularism” and the status of the Muslim minority in India. In particular, this was a crisis of the Constitutional commitment to minority rights and the project of Nehruvian secularism: “what came crashing down that day in Ayodhya was the very structure of Indian citizenship... the figure of the secular citizen subject itself.”⁵⁷² This sense of crisis only amplified with the electoral gains made by the BJP throughout the 1990s, the naturalization of Hindutva discourses in popular culture and daily life, and the horrific days of violence in Gujarat 2002 in which thousand of Muslims were killed and hundreds of thousands (remain)

⁵⁶⁹ Dhareshwar, “Caste and the Secular Self,” 116.

⁵⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 122.

⁵⁷¹ *The Sunday Times of India*, 14 October, 1990, in Chandra Prakash Upadhaya, “The Politics of Indian Secularism,” *Modern Asian Studies* 26, no.4 (1992): 815-853.

⁵⁷² Mufti, *Enlightenment in the Colony*, 2.

displaced, unable to return to their homes. These forms of violence have led to investigations of the historical roots of Hindu nationalism and the distinctly majoritarian character of Indian secularism that enabled the former to gain ground since the 1980s.

One must consider the contemporary “communalization” of the polity in relation to the politics of caste and particularly the intensification of anti-caste struggles after 1990-1991. Those (Caste Hindu) classes who had historically supported the Congress turned to the BJP’s Hindutva politics in a moment where they felt “a sense of encroachment on their social world by ascending groups of peasants, traders and entrepreneurs, compounding the dislocation already being felt by the gradual retreat of the state from the economic model of which it had been the main beneficiary.”⁵⁷³ If the BJP appeared to upper castes as the best guarantor of their privileges, the party simultaneously confronted subaltern caste politicizations with strategies of incorporation and cooptation. In the 1980s the RSS established a Social Harmony Forum with a view to appropriating Dalits under their own fold, deploying reformist arguments that social inequality could only be eradicated by a change of heart among the upper castes.⁵⁷⁴ Dalit and OBC leaders have since been recruited into the BJP. Furthermore, distinct readings of Dalit myths and Ambedkar’s writings have been generated with the objective of appropriating them within the logic of Hindutva. For example, narratives stressing the similarities between RSS founder Hedegwar and Ambedkar, and interpretations of Ambedkar’s writings on Pakistan to illustrate an anti-Muslim politics. In this way, Hindutva forces are projecting themselves as the most egalitarian and non-Brahmin organizations, which have accommodated certain Bahujan sections into their network of opportunity structures.⁵⁷⁵ If the Congress typically dealt with caste through disavowal, the BJP has sought to diffuse the challenges posed by the growth of Dalit-Bahujan movements through a re-articulation of their histories, mythologies and political objectives in line with Hindutva ideology. Certain OBC communities have been particularly attracted to BJP politics, indicating the heterogeneous and conflicting interests and positions encompassed by the category.

⁵⁷³ Hansen, *The Saffron Wave*, 145.

⁵⁷⁴ Badri Narayan, “Memories, Saffronising Statues and Constructing Communal Politics,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, November 11, 2006, 4695-4701.

⁵⁷⁵ Guru, “Emergence of Bahujan Mahasangha in Maharashtra”, 2500.

Despite these efforts the core social base of Hindutva parties remains upper caste-middle class. Hindu nationalism could not consolidate any major constituency among the millions of marginalized and poor Indians.⁵⁷⁶ At the height of the violence following the destruction in Ayodhya it was members of the Congress Party that demonstrated a strong attraction to Hindutva politics. Meanwhile, organizations such as the Bahujan Mahasangha in Maharashtra emerged during 1992-1993, prioritizing the socio-cultural mobilization of Bahujans rooted in the lived interaction of Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, Christianity, Islam, Charwaka, Sufi and Mahanubhav cultures, as a counter to both Hindutva and the Congress.⁵⁷⁷ The BMS specifically sought to demobilize Dalits and OBCs from Hindutva organizations at this time. Similarly in UP, the Bahujan Samaj Party opposed BJP communalism and forged political alliances among OBCs, SCs and Muslims in the state. While the BJP gained important ground in the elections of 1991 and 1993 these gains came at the expense of the Congress rather than the BSP. The BJP performed well in precisely those regions where the BSP was either weak or Dalits did not assert themselves in an organized manner.⁵⁷⁸ Subaltern caste consciousness has thus been one of the major antidotes to the growth of Hindu nationalism.⁵⁷⁹ In considering these kinds of political engagements we can locate reservation debates in relation to broader social transformations. The BMS and BSP examples indicate that subjects that mobilized in support of reservation simultaneously participated in broader struggles through which the meanings of caste, community and nation were contested. If the project of Nehruvian secularism cannot be restored in the post-Babri Masjid context this is not simply because of the success of Hindutva mobilization. It is also related to the transformations in the politics of caste and community out of which a strong critique of secular majoritarianism has emerged. Identifying both the Congress and the BJP as Brahminical organizations challenges the identification of the Congress Party with secularism. From this perspective the problem with secular majoritarianism is not just that it naturalizes the privileges of the Hindu majority, but that it naturalizes the very

⁵⁷⁶ Hansen, *The Saffron Wave*, 7.

⁵⁷⁷ Guru, "Emergence of Bahujan Mahasangha in Maharashtra," 2500.

⁵⁷⁸ Das, *Indian Dalits*, 158.

⁵⁷⁹ Kothari, "Rise of Dalits", 1591; Amrita Basu, "Reflections on Community Conflicts and the State in India," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 56 (1997): 391-397.

notion of a Hindu majority as such. Accordingly the problem with Hindu nationalism is not simply that it violates secular nationalism and its symbols – the constitution, Gandhian pluralism, Nehruvian modernity – but that it seeks to contain Dalit-Bahujan assertions and perpetuate the violence of the lived experiences of caste identity.

The attempts to counter the violent and exclusionary politics of Hindutva through cultural and electoral participation reflects the ways in which Dalit-Bahujan political consciousness came to be forged in the context of the Mandal debate. As mentioned in this chapter, activists recognized early on the attempts of the BJP to displace the question of caste inequality by centering the Muslim minority subject as a threatening, foreign presence that had to be expelled from the nation-state. As Narayan argues, the Mandal debate contributed to pull the historical question to the centre of Dalit-Bahujan discourse in the Hindi region, in order to provide historical support to the report and its recommendations⁵⁸⁰. As such this emergent political consciousness has played a role in developing a corpus of counter knowledge about Dalit-Bahujan history, culture and tradition in North India. Importantly, this search for counter-knowledge is “not a normal outcome of reading and literacy but a defining stage in which the downtrodden seek forms of knowledge wrested from the Brahmannical tradition and in opposition to it”⁵⁸¹. These kinds of socio-political developments are missed if we consider the reservation issue only from the perspective of policy evaluation – the extent to which quotas have been filled, or the proportion of SC/ST and OBCs in educational institutions and government employment. A broader view of the “effects” of reservation complicates questions about the kinds of “access” and “opportunities” that reservation politics and discourses facilitate for Dalit-Bahujan communities. In turn, this can further our understanding of the kinds of subjectivities forged at the intersections of caste discrimination, quota politics and Dalit assertion.

The shifting politics of nation and community in the post-Mandal context reveal a contradictory terrain. On the one hand the BJP and its affiliated organizations have gained a level of prominence and acceptability that seemed impossible in the post-colonial decades of Congress hegemony. On the other, processes of democratization have

⁵⁸⁰ Narayan, “Heroes, Histories and Booklets”, 3926.

⁵⁸¹ Ibid.

advanced due to the mobilization and greater politicization of marginalized sections of the population.⁵⁸² In Yadav's early assessment of this terrain as marking the effective end of Congress dominance, the democratic upsurge is an example of the creative role of politics in the process of articulating, and thereby transforming social cleavages through shared narratives of the past and sometimes, of the future. The traditional notion of pluralism has been replaced by a more radical version with the massive influx of new beliefs not shaped by the high ideology of liberal democracy.⁵⁸³ At the same time, Mandal coincided with the onset of sweeping neo-liberal economic reforms intensifying inequality and producing dire consequences for the most marginalized Dalit-Bahujan communities: landless laborers, farmers with small landholdings, and artisans. The entry of large numbers of previously excluded subjects in state institutions coincided with the moment in which the state re-defined its political-economic role. This has heightened the consequences of the limiting emphasis on political power by Dalit-Bahujan leadership. Acceptance of the unrestricted entry of foreign firms and retreat of the state not only from a regime of controls but also from social welfare programs have been accepted across all the major political formations.⁵⁸⁴ In this context caste inequalities are also manifesting in novel ways, for example, in the glaring absence of SCs and OBCs in the private firms and multinational corporations that have come to signify a new "globalized" India. In the following chapter, I will turn to the impact these processes of communalization, caste mobilizations and increasing inequality have had on the politics of minority and Muslim subjectivity in the ongoing debate on reservation for Muslims.

⁵⁸² Yogendra Yadav, "Reconfiguration in Indian Politics: State Assembly Elections: 1993-95" *Economic and Political Weekly*, January 13-20 1996, 95-104; Hansen, *The Saffron Wave*; Wankhede, "The Political and the Social in the Dalit Movement Today"; Jaffrelot, *India's Silent Revolution*.

⁵⁸³ Yadav, "Reconfiguration in Indian Politics", 103.

⁵⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

Chapter Four. Interrogating Minority: Difference, Discrimination and the Muslim Reservation Debate

The only way forward is to stop this coyness. Call Muslims, Muslims. Shift lenses, change paradigms. For once, see them not as a ‘religious community’ (of veils and fatwas), but as development subjects, suffering from underserved want. Accordingly, design interventions, schemes and programmes with ‘Muslim’ targets that will be monitored and met.⁵⁸⁵

We brought a significant change in the perceptions of Muslim identity. Previously, the question was whether or not they were Muslim, but now the question is whether or not they are Pasmanda Muslim. With this new identity we were able to address the problems specific to the lower caste Muslims.⁵⁸⁶

The preceding chapters have shown how different understandings of caste circulate in discussions about affirmative action. Caste is described as a marker of pre-modern religious tradition, as an indicator of socio-economic disadvantage and as a politicized, oppositional identity. During the controversy over the Mandal Commission Report, these varied meanings were considered from the vantage point of secularism. Anti-reservation arguments held that further caste-based quotas would perpetuate divisive caste identities and thus harm the nation’s secular ethos. Critical scholarship on the debate observed that Mandal contributed to the secularization of caste by shifting the focus from its religious and ritualistic aspects to the human development profiles of different groups.⁵⁸⁷ Focusing on lower caste mobilization, Rajni Kothari argued that dynamic caste identities could be a secularizing force in society. In this analysis the aggregation of disparate occupational groups under larger collectives such as “Dalit” and “OBC” introduced pluralism into homogenized religious categories.⁵⁸⁸ For caste to become secularized, its exclusive association with Hinduism had to be challenged.

⁵⁸⁵ Farah Naqvi, “Open a Window,” *Hindustan Times*, 2 November 2006.

⁵⁸⁶ Mohd. Noor Hasan Azad and Khalid Anis Ansari, “We Merely Want to Raise the Curtain,” *Countercurrents.Org*, 3 September 2010, <http://www.countercurrents.org/ansari030910.htm>.

⁵⁸⁷ Nicolas Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); Rochana Bajpai, “Rhetoric as Argument: Social Justice and Affirmative Action in India, 1990,” *Modern Asian Studies* 44, no. 4 (2010): 675-708.

⁵⁸⁸ “Caste and Politics: The Great Secular Upsurge,” *Times of India*, 28 September, 1990.

Kothari's analysis was substantiated by the response of the Hindu Right to the Mandal controversy, namely, its calls for Hindu unity against a homogenous Muslim community. Confronted with lower caste political assertion, Hindu nationalist discourses demonized Muslims as historical enemies that created disorder and prevented the emergence of a strong nation.⁵⁸⁹ Muslims were portrayed as undemocratic, anti-modern and patriarchal subjects that refused to integrate in the national mainstream. Based on stereotypes of aggressive Muslim sexuality and polygamy, the community was held responsible for overpopulation and in turn, for hindering national development. The consolidation of a Hindu majority through discourses of Muslim otherness markedly shifted national political discourse in a communal direction.⁵⁹⁰ The Hindu right attacked secular nationalism as a product of Westernized elites. They argued that the secular ideology of the Congress catered to the demands of religious minorities at the expense of the interests of the Hindu majority. The increased prominence of the Hindu right and electoral success of the BJP in the 1990s served to reinforce the association of the Congress Party with secularism and tolerance for minority groups. However, the secular framework that the right wing sought to replace with an assertive Hindu nationalism also relied on the premise of essential difference between religious communities. That is, secularism was conceived of as a means to peacefully manage the differences between distinct, bounded and demographically imbalanced religious communities. Official state secularism recognized and protected religious difference but also restricted the kinds of claims minority subjects could make on the nation-state. While the self-designated secular elite opposed the politicization of caste as manifested in lower caste mobilizations and claims for reservation, it was more amenable to translating caste inequality into the language of disadvantage and development. This stands in contrast to the approach to the categories of religion and religious community. If the provision of religious and cultural rights for minorities was a secular commitment, so too was the refusal to tabulate religious identity with socio-economic disadvantage. The collection of such data about

⁵⁸⁹ Thomas Blom Hansen, "Globalization and Nationalist Imaginations: Hindutva's Promise of Equality through Difference," *Economic and Political Weekly*, March 9 1996, 603-616.

⁵⁹⁰ Ibid.

religious minorities was framed as a threat to the secularism of the nation-state, insofar as it could enable claims to separate social policies, thus bolstering separatist politics.

The results of the 2004 national elections revealed the limits to mobilizing Hindu nationalism as a political strategy. The virulent anti-Muslim rhetoric and its culmination in horrific mass violence against Muslims in Gujarat in 2002, combined with celebratory rhetoric about neo-liberal economic reforms in the face of increasing inequality, were key factors in the electoral defeat of the BJP. The reinstatement of a Congress led coalition at the centre was perceived as an opportunity for the restoration of secularism and the adoption of equitable and inclusive economic growth policies. The major challenges before the new government would be to reverse the trends of imperialist globalization and Hindutva fascism.⁵⁹¹ Muslims in particular, described as a wounded community whose psyche had to be soothed, required a sense of security in the nation-state.⁵⁹² It was imperative that the government should re-gain the confidence of Muslims through concrete actions. Signaling a firm commitment to this task, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh established the Rajinder Sachar Committee in 2005 to investigate the social, economic and educational conditions of Muslims in India. This was a departure not only from the religious polarizations that had characterized the BJP government, but also from the longer history of confining the Muslim question to state accommodation of religious identity.

Released in November 2006, the Sachar Committee Report (SCR) stated its “innocuous” purpose was to know if Muslims were under-represented in some departments or any other sphere, and the reasons thereof, so that the Government could take corrective steps.⁵⁹³ The contents of the Report, portions of which were leaked before the official government release, quickly attracted the attention of the media. This was the

⁵⁹¹ Goldy M. George, “Emergent Challenges Before the New Government,” *Countercurrents.Org*, 19 July 2004, <http://www.countercurrents.org/ie-goldy190704.htm>.

⁵⁹² Ashgar Ali Engineer, “New Secular Government and its Secular Tasks,” *Countercurrents.Org*, 6 June 2004, <http://www.countercurrents.org/ie-engineer060604.htm>; Ram Puniyani, “Indian Elections 2004 – Implications for Democratic Polity,” *Countercurrents.Org*, 16 June 2004, <http://www.countercurrents.org/ie-puniyani160604.htm>.

⁵⁹³ “Forward,” *Social, Economic and Educational Status of the Muslim Community in India: A Report (hereafter, SCR)*, Prime Minister’s High Level Committee, Cabinet Secretariat, Government of India (November 2006), xiii.

first government report on the status of India's largest religious minority to be publicly circulated and debated since Independence. The kind of data that the committee obtained had "never been attempted in India in her history, not even after independence and not even when the Gopal Singh Committee was set up in the 1980s".⁵⁹⁴ Indeed, the SCR contains an extensive amount of statistical data on human development indicators, including income, employment, health, education, poverty, consumption levels, access to credit, the conditions of infrastructure in Muslim majority localities and the representation of Muslims in governance at various levels. The data revealed the widespread conditions of poverty and insecurity in which the majority of Muslims lived, their near absence from institutions of higher education and formal employment and the indifference of successive governments to these circumstances over time.⁵⁹⁵ The SCR concluded, "...the Community exhibits deficits and deprivation in practically all dimensions of development. In fact, by and large, Muslims rank somewhere above SC/STs but below Hindu-OBCs, Other Minorities and Hindu-General (mostly upper castes)."⁵⁹⁶ Many commentators welcomed this official recognition of the extent of marginalization and inequality among Muslims as a positive step forward. The Report had "stirred the national conscience" and was a "historic service to secularism."⁵⁹⁷ The importance of this data was related to the charges of "minority appeasement" made by Hindu Right Wing political parties and civil society organizations: that since 1947 Muslims had been unnecessarily privileged and appeased by the "secular" Congress Party at the expense of broader national interests. The SCR, a "shocking testimony to the institutional neglect and bias that has left Muslims far behind", exposed the myth of

⁵⁹⁴ M.A. Kalam, "Conditioned Lives?," *Economic and Political Weekly*, March 10 2007, 843-845. The Gopal Singh Committee Report on Minorities (1983) was shelved by Indira Gandhi's government. It was not placed before the Parliament and policy interventions were not taken based on its findings.

⁵⁹⁵ For example, the Report found that the literacy rate of Muslims at 59.1% was far below the national average of 65.1%. Muslims had the highest drop-out rate at primary, secondary and higher secondary levels. Muslim graduates had the highest rates of unemployment among other Socio-Religious Communities; their share in government employment was 4.9% although the community comprises 13.4% of the national population.

⁵⁹⁶ SCR, 237.

⁵⁹⁷ G.M. Bentawalla, "The Sachar Truth", *Manthan*, January-March 2007, 8.

Muslim appeasement as a baseless claim mobilized to generate hatred towards the community.⁵⁹⁸

Although the SCR did not include quota-based reservations in its list of recommendations, the public debate promptly focused in on this issue as a potential solution to Muslim backwardness. For many participants of the post-Sachar debate, this was a predictable and expected conversation. Farah Naqvi, a prominent writer and activist on gender and minority issues, argued that this predictability was due to the fact that quotas provided politicians with a cheap and easy answer to a complex problem: “having given ‘the quota’, it’s a home run for politicians, and governments will do little else.”⁵⁹⁹ While she supported reservations in principle, Naqvi questioned why issues of development, equitable growth and inclusive citizenship could not be thought of outside of the paradigm of quotas and reservations. An alternate explanation is found in Javeed Alam’s post-Sachar analysis. Alam located the emergence of the post-Sachar reservation debate in relation to the various struggles of marginalized groups over time. “Oppressed people across social divides have come to look on affirmative action as necessarily involving reservations and quotas. And quotas are viewed as empowerment.”⁶⁰⁰ This historical association placed a discursive limit on the question of how to surmount backwardness. However, quotas had proved effective in improving the circumstances of SCs and STs, a fact which the SCR also acknowledged. Access to reservation over an extended period of time had enabled the emergence of a middle class among Dalits, which in turn provided a reserve of energy for protracted struggle.⁶⁰¹ These differing responses indicate the entanglement of reservation politics with both electoral expediencies and subaltern politicizations. As seen in the previous chapter, opponents of the Mandal recommendations argued that 27% reservation for OBCs would only serve

⁵⁹⁸ Muslims for a Secular Democracy, *Minority Report: Executive Summary of Rajinder Sachar Committee- Status of the Muslim Community in India*. The discourse of appeasement was also discussed briefly in the SCR: “While Muslims need to prove on a daily basis that they are not ‘anti-national’ and ‘terrorists’, it is not recognized that the alleged ‘appeasement’ has not resulted in the desired level of socio-economic development of the Community”. SCR, 11.

⁵⁹⁹ “Re-Constructing Community,” *India Seminar 569: India 2006*, January 2007, http://www.india-seminar.com/2007/569/569_farah_naqvi.htm.

⁶⁰⁰ “A Turning Point,” *Frontline*, December 15, 2006, 10.

⁶⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 12.

individual political ambitions while the communities in question would see few benefits from the policy. However, support for Mandal went beyond the instrumental concern for middle class employment. Dalit-Bahujan activists saw the Report as having the potential to politicize OBC groups, and in turn, create solidarities across caste divides in the articulation of a non-religious conception of majority community.

If the “quota question” was a predictable aspect of the post-Sachar debate, so was the response of the BJP and other right wing organizations that the Report and the reservation issue were part of an ongoing policy of “Muslim appeasement”. They strongly opposed the possibility of Muslim reservation on both Constitutional and historical grounds. First, the Constitution did not sanction reservation on the basis of religious identity. Second, Muslim reservation was historically associated with separatist politics. BJP leader L.K. Advani argued that “communal” reservations would “legitimize and in the course of time, revive the very same communal and separatist tendency that developed into the two-nation theory and led to the partition of our motherland.”⁶⁰² However, opposition to a Muslim quota was not limited to the Hindu Right wing. It was also criticized by Muslim groups that called attention to the pronounced internal inequality on the basis of caste among the community. The Mandal Commission Report had acknowledged the existence of caste based inequality across religious communities and included approximately 80 caste groups among Muslims within the OBC list. These groups argued that all initiatives of the state emerging from the SCR must be cognizant of these intra-community inequalities:

Pasmada Muslims apprehend that they will lose if they are submerged in the pressures of seeking planning for the entire religious community. Instead there should be planning for the Backward Muslims... wherever possible in conjunction with their counterparts in other religions with mechanisms to preclude discrimination.⁶⁰³

This intervention illustrates that post-Sachar debates about socio-economic inequality and reservations for Muslims have unfolded in a context in which dominant conceptions of

⁶⁰² Zoya Hasan, *The Politics of Inclusion: Caste, Minorities and Affirmative Action* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009), 188.

⁶⁰³ Memorandum presented to Sonia Gandhi on Behalf of the Pasmada Muslim Mahaz and 30 Other Muslim-OBC Organizations, 2006.

“Muslim” and “minority” politics have been undermined from within the community. The SCR was significant because discrimination and socio-economic inequality among Muslims had never been meaningfully addressed in post-partition India. However, lower caste Muslims argued that these issues could not be addressed without a re-conceptualization of the “Muslim community” vis-à-vis caste hierarchy.

The post-Sachar debate was not the first time that the issue of Muslim reservation had been raised. In 1994 prominent members of the Muslim political elite founded the Association for Promoting Education and Employment of Muslims. In a Convention on Reservation organized in the same year, the Association put forth a demand of 10% reservations for the entire Muslim community on the grounds that the community was educationally, socially and economically backward.⁶⁰⁴ The demand was reiterated in its publication “Muslim Agenda 99”, which was endorsed by key Muslim organizations including the All India Muslim Personal Law Board, All India Muslim Majlis-e-Mashawwarat and the Jamat e Islami Hind.⁶⁰⁵ Its emergence is linked to the Muslim leadership’s loss of legitimacy after the Babri Masjid demolition. After 1992 the discourse of community representatives shifted in focus from culture and identity to issues of development, education and employment.⁶⁰⁶ However, this context also produced the vocal dis-identification of non-elite Muslims with established minority organizations. With the implementation of the Mandal Commission Report, Muslims from artisan and working class communities increasingly identified with OBC communities that were “adjacent to them in terms of social standing, status and occupation”.⁶⁰⁷ Enduring alliances and articulated understandings emerged between non-

⁶⁰⁴ Theodore Wright, “A New Demand for Muslim Reservations in India,” *Asian Survey* 37, no.9 (September 1997): 852-858. As the Constitution prohibits reservation on the grounds of religious identity, this categorization of all Muslims as a “backward class” made possible the extension of reservation without a Constitutional amendment.

⁶⁰⁵ Arshad Alam, “Challenging the Ashrafs: The Politics of Pasmanda Muslim Mahaz,” *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 29, no.2 (2009): 171-181.

⁶⁰⁶ Mushirul Hasan, *Legacy of a Divided Nation: India’s Muslims since Independence* (London: Hurst and Company, 1997); Hasan, *The Politics of Inclusion*; Basharat Peer, “The Road Back from Ayodhya: Muslim Quest for Inclusion in the New India,” *The Caravan: A Journal of Politics and Culture*, February 2010, <http://caravanmagazine.in/reportage/road-back-ayodhya>.

⁶⁰⁷ Alam, “A Turning Point,” 12.

elite Muslims and OBCs and their leadership.⁶⁰⁸ An early assessment of these developments suggested that Muslim OBC politics could perhaps be “the best antidote to all religion based identity politics”.⁶⁰⁹ Mobilization of Dalits and OBCs in the 1990s posed a significant challenge to Hindu Right Wing politics and the established Muslim leadership.⁶¹⁰

In this chapter I examine how debates about Muslim inequality and reservation generate conflicting understandings of community, difference and discrimination. I begin by reviewing the production of knowledge about Muslims in post-partition India, and highlight their constitution as a religious minority community through affective discourses of fear, suspicion and nostalgia. Echoing the discourses in the Constituent Assembly, Muslims are diagnosed with a pathological “minority complex” that results in an emotional resistance to national integration. In these assessments of the “Muslim problem”, the community requires moderate secular leaders that can encourage modernization among the Muslim masses. Next, I trace the politicization of backward or Pasmada Muslims since the 1990s, which resulted in the formation of organizations representing their interests. These movements challenge the notion of a homogenous, monolithic Muslim community in India through their specific position on caste, discrimination and reservation. A significant aspect of this challenge is the critique of the upper caste, or Ashraf elite, and a rejection of their authority to speak for the interests of a national “Muslim community”. In contrast to “modernization”, Pasmada Muslims emphasize the need for democratization to counter the historical privileging of a small section of the community. By attending to this historical background of minority politics and contemporary developments vis-à-vis caste, the contours of the reservation debate can be better understood. I will conclude this section by bringing into relief the distinct

⁶⁰⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁰⁹ Praful Bidwai, “Age of Empowerment: Muslim OBCs Discover Mandal,” *The Times of India*, 12 September, 1996.

⁶¹⁰ According to Imtiaz Ahmad, it is only after Mandal and the entry of some OBC Muslims in the All India Central services that the Muslim elite began to ask for reservations in government jobs on behalf of “their” community. “Marginalization of Dalit Muslims in Indian Democracy” (presented at seminar on Marginalization of Dalit Muslims with Special Reference to Democracy, Identity and Livelihood for Deshkal Society. Patna, Bihar, 14 July 2002).

positions of Ashraf and Pasmada Muslims on the reservation issue. Finally, I assess how their competing interests have been addressed in the Ranganath Mishra Commission Report on Religious and Linguistic Minorities.⁶¹¹

It will be seen that through the production of historical and ethnographic knowledge about caste discrimination and Muslims, Pasmada activists articulate a political subjectivity in opposition to the category “religious minority”. Dominant ways of telling the history of Muslims and minority politics are thus particularized as emanating from a location of caste privilege. Their critiques reveal that the notion of fixed majority and minority religious communities contribute to the oppression of marginalized caste groups. In this way, they draw upon and extend the epistemological challenges posed by Dalit-Bahujan thought to established categories of majority and minority, secularism and nationalism. However, while both government commissions and prominent “minority” representatives acknowledge the existence of caste among Muslims, these are considered of little relevance for understanding or addressing inequality. My analysis connects this specific mode of recognition and disavowal of Muslim caste to the entrenched assumption that religion is the principal marker of difference in the nation-state. As such, this response to Pasmada politics draws upon the intellectual and historical resources that obscure questions of caste discrimination to naturalize privilege.

Muslims and the “Minority Complex” in Post-Partition India

In post-partition India Muslims became the principal subjects through which an inquiry into the appropriate place and status of “minorities” in the nation was conducted. Pandey argues that partition and nation-state formation worked to fix the terms “majority” and “minority” in a national sense for Indian society and politics.⁶¹² “Muslims were the minority that had fought for, or wanted, Pakistan, and now they had to choose

⁶¹¹ Established in 2007, this Commission was responsible for determining whether Muslims constitute a backward class for the purposes of affirmative action. It was also asked to recommend a position for the government on recognition of caste discrimination, particularly untouchability, in Muslims and Christian communities.

⁶¹² Gyanendra Pandey, “Can a Muslim be an Indian?,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 41, no. 4 (1999): 608-629.

not only where they belonged, but also to demonstrate the sincerity of their choice.”⁶¹³ Members of the Muslim League and other participants in the Pakistan movement who remained in India were especially regarded with suspicion and called upon in numerous ways to demonstrate their loyalty to the nation-state. The association of the category Muslim with Pakistan made it possible to speak of a homogenous minority community whose true loyalties extended outside of the borders of the nation-state. Emphasis was placed on the inner sympathies they harbored for the Pakistani state. This meant that public assertions and activities would never be adequate proof of Muslim loyalty to India. The essential and threatening difference of the minority subject was reinforced with reference to Islam as a non-indigenous religion that encouraged extra-territorial attachments among its followers. Muslim attachment to Pakistan was the latest manifestation of their tendency to identify with the Arab world. Hindu nationalists argued that even local populations that had converted to Islam, belonging largely to “lower” castes, had come to think of themselves as descendents of Arab and Mughal communities, thus denying their “Hindu” origins.⁶¹⁴ The category Muslim was over-determined by a fundamental difference and this difference was framed as threatening to the territorial integrity of the nation-state. It was believed that if Muslims were to live peaceful lives in India, they must cease to articulate political demands, needs or perspectives on the basis of religious identity.

As seen from the Constituent Assembly Debates discussed in Chapter 1, secularism was considered integral to facilitating relations of trust and goodwill between majority and minority communities. Secularism would guarantee existential security for religious minorities. Importantly, it would replace the separate electorates and reservation quotas available to them under colonial rule. The conception of secularism as minority security framed the Muslim as a protected subject different from the majority Hindu community and hence a potential victim of its discrimination. According to Ansari, whereas caste was defined negatively in terms of disadvantage and captured by the term “social justice” in public discourse, the religious identity of minorities was associated with a core set of ethics and a substantive notion of the “good life”, seen as requiring protection and

⁶¹³ Ibid.

⁶¹⁴ Ibid.

safeguards from the state through minority rights.⁶¹⁵ The Constitution tried to promote equality between different religious communities by acknowledging their separate character and by protecting the distinctiveness of each.⁶¹⁶ Religious minorities were guaranteed freedom of religion, the right to conserve their language, script and culture, and to establish and administer educational institutions. Minority rights were thus framed primarily as rights to religious and cultural difference. It was expected that they would render unnecessary political or socio-economic rights for these communities. Indeed, those most supportive of religious and cultural rights were also the most vocal opponents of political rights for Muslims in the Constituent Assembly.⁶¹⁷ This approach to the management of difference reinforced the pervasive silencing of issues and perspectives considered to be distinctly “Muslim” in post-partition public discourse. After the release of the Sachar Committee Report in 2006, Farah Naqvi described how this approach had shaped Muslim subjectivity in India:

The defining characteristics of the Muslim became the right to celebrate Eid, go on Haj, cook cauldrons of biryani, and smilingly pose for the national photo-op (along with the turbaned Sikh and cross-bearing Christian)...discrimination, riots, communalism – these experiences of the Indian Muslim became lodged only in a frustrated political space, never cross-feeding into the development trajectory.⁶¹⁸

This passage indicates how the restriction of minority rights to protection of difference sought to reduce Muslim subjectivity to an essentialized, non-political difference. The identification of Muslims as a religious minority in turn normalized the notion of Hindus as the national majority. In this way, while secular nationalism posited a transcendent ideal, it also re-produced the very object that had to be transcended.

⁶¹⁵ Khalid Anis Ansari, “Pluralism, Civil Society and Subaltern Counterpublics: Reflecting on Contemporary Challenges in India through the Case Study of the Pasmanda Movement,” *Promoting Pluralism Knowledge Program*, Pluralism Working Paper no. 9 (2011), 21.

⁶¹⁶ Gurpreet Mahajan, “Religion and the Indian Constitution: Questions of Separation and Equality,” in *Politics and Ethics of the Indian Constitution*, ed. Rajeev Bhargava (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009), 300.

⁶¹⁷ Shefali Jha, “Rights versus Representation: Defending Minority Interests in the Constituent Assembly,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, April 19 2003, 1579-1583.

⁶¹⁸ “Re-Constructing Community.”

The emphasis on irreducible difference and extra-territorial attachments significantly shaped the ways in which the “Indian Muslim” was represented in writings about the status of minorities after 1947. Widespread suspicions about their ability to be loyal citizens of India in light of the existence of Pakistan that circulated amidst the uncertain and fluid conditions of the partition came to settle in later years as a discourse about the “Muslim problem” in India. The problem was the failure of Muslims to integrate into the nation-state. In 1954, Nehru wrote to the Chief Ministers about the “state of the Muslims’ deep frustration, persistent discrimination in the public services and in commerce and industry, educational backwardness, the apathy of the Congress and the Muslims’ withdrawal into a political ghetto.”⁶¹⁹ Indeed, the limited information available on the socio-economic status of Muslims following the partition bears strong resemblance to the evidence of marginality provided by the Sachar Committee Report. For example, the proportion of Muslims in select institutions of public employment in 1965 was described as “abysmally low”:

...it does seem shocking that...there should have been only 111 Muslims out of more than 2,100 IAS officers; around dozen Muslims out of 270 members of the Indian Foreign Service; and a mere 43 Muslims officers out of 1,200 in the Indian Police service...there were only six Muslim officers in the top two grades of the CSS out of 681...And if this is not shocking enough, there were only 21 Muslims out of 9,900 clerks.⁶²⁰

Although the state did not collect systematic information about minority representation, there was a general acceptance that “on practically every elementary item of the categories of socio-economic indicators of development...the bulk of the Muslims are at the lower rung of the ladder.”⁶²¹ However, this perception did not result in the development of social or economic policies targeted to address Muslim inequality. Any mention of Muslim grievances provoked strong reactions against empowering a

⁶¹⁹ Cited in A.G. Noorani, ed., *The Muslims of India: A Documentary Record* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), 8.

⁶²⁰ Inder Malhotra, in S. Abid Husain, *The Destiny of Indian Muslims* (London: London Asian Publishing House, 1965), 102-3. In this passage, Husain seeks to prove the objectivity of his claims by noting that the source of this information is a non-Muslim.

⁶²¹ Rasheeduddin Khan, “Minority Segments in Indian Polity: Muslim Situation and Plight of Urdu,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, September 2 1978, 1509-1515.

community that had “caused” the partition. The lack of state intervention was justified through an explanatory discourse that linked Muslim backwardness to a specific mode of thinking. The principal barrier to Muslim participation in the nation-state was their affliction by a “minority complex”. Given this mental state targeted social policies were of little use.

Explanations of the under-representation of the community in public employment made only minimal reference to discrimination and structural inequalities. Discussions about the “Muslim problem” in India centered on socio-psychological explanations in which the failure of national integration was described in terms of a “minority complex” and a “fear psychosis” among the community. For example, a Hindustan Times editorial stated that the Muslim problem was an “emotional one” that existed “largely because of the unwillingness of the Muslims to integrate themselves into the country, and the desire to consider themselves separate and even to emphasize that separation.”⁶²² Through arguments that the essential difference of the Muslim subject resulted in a refusal to participate in public life, evidence of structural inequality such as low levels of education and unemployment were reduced to the effects of a bad attitude that pervaded the community. The debates about caste based inequality discussed in previous chapters showed a concern with determining the relative importance of economic criteria and social discrimination in explaining the backwardness of SCs and/or OBCs. In contrast, the backward Muslim was framed as a product of the irrational fear and anxiety that underpins minority consciousness. The minority community was described in static and homogenous terms on the basis of a collective resistance to identification with the nation-state and its modern, secular institutions. In these arguments a particular historical legacy was highlighted to support the claim that Muslims were inherently inclined to see themselves as not only different from, but also culturally superior to, the Hindu community. Specifically, Muslims refused the abstract equality of national citizenship because they desired the privileges bestowed upon them during the Mughal Empire, which the British had upheld. The Muslim perception of having ruled over India for a

⁶²² M.C. Chagla, in Noorani, *The Muslims of India*, 25. Also see C.M. Naim, “The Muslim Problem in India,” *Quest* 75, March-April 1972, <http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealc/pritchett/00litlinks/naim/ambiguities/06muslimproblem.html>.

thousand years, which “played a major role in the rise of Muslim nationalism” continued to persist in post-colonial India.⁶²³ This minority mindset held the community back from socio-economic progress and was disruptive to the process of national integration.

An instructive example of the articulation of the “Muslim problem” as one of minority mentality is the text *The Muslim Dilemma in India* by MRA Baig.⁶²⁴ Baig argued that collectively, Muslims were steeped in superstition, mentally bound by dogma, and governed by irrational customs. Hence the Muslim had become the “problem child” of the Indian family and was “dependent on the intellectual charity of the more healthy members”.⁶²⁵ The relationship of the Muslim subject to Islam had resulted in a situation in which Muslims were in India, but not of India. The Islamic outlook produced trans-national attachments that were a barrier to the socio-economic progress of Indian Muslims. Therefore, they had to decide “whether they are Indian Muslims... whose heartland is in West Asia, or whether they are Muslim Indians... of the Indian family which is rooted in the Indian soil.”⁶²⁶ While Baig acknowledged that the community did face instances of discrimination in India, he was convinced that if Muslims were educationally backward and unemployed it was largely their own fault. Their inferiority complex vis-à-vis Hindus led them to imagine discrimination where none existed.

Baig described the existence of caste-based divisions between Muslims in terms of the historical adaptation of Islam in the subcontinent and as evidence of Muslim diversity. However, caste was not considered relevant for understanding the contemporary structural location of Indian Muslims. Caste-based labor was translated into the framework of religious difference. Therefore, the fact that the majority of Muslims labored as weavers, artisans, mechanics and clerks was evidence of their irrational attachment to traditional community occupations.⁶²⁷ They did not even attempt

⁶²³ Girilal Jain, “Muslims after Partition,” *The Times of India*, January 7, 1988. In Maulana Wahiduddin Khan, *Indian Muslims: The Need for a Positive Outlook* (New Delhi: Al-Risala Books, 1994), 40.

⁶²⁴ (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1974). Baig was a former member of the Muslim League and a speech writer for Jinnah. He later joined the nationalist movement led by the Congress Party.

⁶²⁵ Baig, *The Muslim Dilemma*, x.

⁶²⁶ *Ibid.*, xii.

⁶²⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

to enter modern educational institutions. For Baig, “the lack of enterprising Muslims is simply astonishing.”⁶²⁸ In this way, the specific socio-economic locations of artisan and working classes are subsumed within a generalized account of a progress resistant religious community. The historical caste basis of these occupations is overlooked. Baig argued that a new leadership was required to liberate Muslims from the stranglehold of religious authorities that kept them as prisoners of the past.⁶²⁹ This leadership should draw inspiration from the historical lessons of the 1857 war that led to the collapse of the Mughal Empire and the consolidation of British rule in the subcontinent. In this context Muslim leaders had encouraged the modernization of the community in order to face the challenges of British colonialism. Specifically, in the movement led by Syed Ahmed Khan, who founded the Mohammaden Anglo-Oriental College at Aligarh to encourage Muslims to start thinking on modern and rational lines. Syed Ahmed Khan stood apart from all other Muslim leaders in India, who continuously emphasized a pan-Islamic consciousness and a sense of separatism.

The reading of the post-partition crisis of the Indian Muslim in relation to the crisis of the Mughal Empire in 1857 recurs in numerous texts devoted to assessing the state of the community. In S. Abid Hussain’s text *Destiny of Indian Muslims* the point of comparison is the collective sense of defeat in both contexts.⁶³⁰ In 1857 Indian Muslims, especially those of Northern India, felt as if “the end of the world had come”. They felt condemned to live under foreign rulers who wanted to suppress them politically and economically, and strike at the roots of their religion and culture.⁶³¹ However, Muslim princes continued to rule after the end of the Mughal Empire, and thousands of landed estates owned by Muslims also survived. Thus, they had been able to maintain their self-respect and way of life under British colonialism; “they were broken by a superior force but had not bent before it.”⁶³² In comparison, Husain felt that the plight of Muslims in 1947 was in many

⁶²⁸ Ibid.

⁶²⁹ Ibid., 101

⁶³⁰ Husain was a prominent economist, civil servant and diplomat. He served as an employee of the Indian Administrative Service, the National Planning Commission and as the Indian Ambassador to the United States from 1990-1992, in addition to serving on numerous committees in the fields of government, academia and arts and culture.

⁶³¹ Husain, *Destiny of Indian Muslims*, 127.

⁶³² Ibid., 128.

ways worse than that of 1857, as they had to “pay in the form of spiritual and mental anguish as well as in economic depression and educational and cultural backwardness.” Husain’s discussion of this dislocation focuses on the abolition of feudal estates after 1947, which had been a source of income for upper and upper middle class Muslims for centuries. This was compounded by the marginalization of Urdu in public institutions and the selection of Hindi as the national language, which provoked a cultural and educational crisis within the upper and middle classes.⁶³³

Similarly, in Mushirul Hasan’s text *Legacy of a Divided Nation: Indian Muslims since Independence*, the discussion of the dislocation experienced by Muslims in the aftermath of partition focuses on the landed elite of North India and Hyderabad. The text describes how the rulers of Hyderabad, Bhopal and Rampur “continued living in their decaying palaces... wallowing in grief for a bygone era, they cursed the politicians who had brought the British raj to an end... they were insulated from the populace and blissfully unaware of the changes that were visibly taking place in urban and rural areas.”⁶³⁴ For the landed classes the partition and abolition of feudal estates “signified not only the loss of land but also the end of a cultural and intellectual ambience they had fashioned meticulously.”⁶³⁵ With its relationship to Arab and Persian scripts, Urdu, like Islam, was considered an object of cultural identity that Muslims were greatly attached to and in fear of losing. The increasing neglect of Urdu by the state and educational organizations struck at “the very heart of the fear of cultural assimilation and their apprehensions about their employability in government services.”⁶³⁶ The externalization of Urdu from the emergent national culture and its status as a language without a state presented a poignant statement on the alienation of the Muslim subject from national life. This focus on the experiences of landed elites and the degeneration of their socio-cultural ethos produced the Muslim community as an affective formation of nostalgia, loss and fear. The community was represented as pervaded by an overwhelming sense of defeat that hindered their ability to live as productive citizens of the nation-state.

⁶³³ Ibid., 132.

⁶³⁴ Hasan, *Legacy of a Divided Nation*, 183.

⁶³⁵ Ibid., 185.

⁶³⁶ Khan, “Minority Segments in Indian Polity,” 1515.

Across various texts about the problems and prospects of the Indian Muslim, very little information can be found on the perspectives of working class, rural or artisan communities. Non-elite Muslims are represented as voiceless masses whose relationship to the nation-state is mediated by the established elite and dependent on the latter's political and religious orientation. Such an assumption is not specific to Muslim elites. As seen in previous chapters the dominant political vision of the nation-state and social transformation assumes a distinction between a modernizing elite and the traditional, backward masses that the former must guide towards socio-economic progress. Importantly, this vision renders invisible the caste privileges of the former and trivializes the different political engagements among the latter. In the case of Muslims, the implications of this silencing are compounded by the refusal of the state to collect and disseminate information on their socio-economic status, reinforcing the representation of "Muslim backwardness" in homogenized, socio-psychological terms. Although class and caste inequalities can be acknowledged, the "Muslim problem" is overdetermined by the assumption of religious difference. Accordingly, the irrational attachment to religion must be resolved within the community.

The strong sentiments of Muslims towards Islam and Urdu, those aspects of their identity that made them different and thus resistant to national integration, were attributed to the failure of the community leadership. The partition resulted in the large-scale migration of the modern educated classes of intellectuals and politicians to Pakistan, thus creating a leadership vacuum.⁶³⁷ Unfortunately this was filled by the nationalist ulama, which took on the leadership of the community after partition. "Clouded with the shadows of the past", the ulama confined itself to limited religious reform and religious education, refusing to modernize the traditional syllabus.⁶³⁸ Religious authorities encouraged Muslims to adopt a manner of thinking at odds with secular principles. Although the ulama was politically connected to the Congress Party and responsible for securing votes for its candidates in elections, they had failed to secure tangible benefits

⁶³⁷ Baig, *The Muslim Dilemma*; Husain, *Destiny of Indian Muslims*; Noorani, *The Muslims of India*; SCR; Hasan, *Politics of Inclusion*; Abdul Shaban, ed., *Lives of Muslims in India: Politics, Exclusion and Violence* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

⁶³⁸ Husain, *Destiny of Indian Muslims*, 138.

for the Muslim masses in this arrangement.⁶³⁹ In such assessments any prospects of an improved future for the Muslim “masses” would be dependent on the ability of secular and moderate elites to gain influence over them at the expense of the religious establishment. In Hasan’s discussion of the future of Muslim politics after the Babri Masjid demolition, the most notable development is that for the first time since independence the secular modernist Muslims have begun to gain ground and define the parameters of public debate. Hasan relates the significance of the task before them by comparing it to the great historical mission of Syed Ahmad Khan. Interestingly, even the historical-class location of these intellectuals is noted to stress the similarity with Khan, as they are identified as members of the former “landed gentry” of U.P. Secular intellectuals are confronted by the same issues that were bravely faced by Khan after 1857: “the steady impoverishment of Muslims, their poor representation in public and private sectors, their educational stagnation, the oppressive state of Muslim women, the stranglehold of traditionalists and their antipathy to modernizing processes.”⁶⁴⁰ In its movement from structural conditions of marginality to the mental state of the community this list reinforces the notion of the “Muslim problem” as an internal, community problem. Secular intellectuals are simultaneously within this community and stand in a position of distance to it, from which they lament “the steadfast refusal of their community to come to terms with the reality of the present day.”⁶⁴¹

More than two decades prior to the release of the highly praised Sachar Committee Report, Imtiaz Ahmad and Peter Mayer observed the limited scope and content of literature on Indian Muslims.⁶⁴² According to Ahmad, modernization and social change among Muslims had been discussed almost entirely in terms of certain commonly prevalent stereotypes or clichés, specifically, that the community was either not modernizing at all or lagging behind other communities in the pace of modernization.⁶⁴³ Further, this “failure to modernize” was due to the inherently anti-modern orientation of

⁶³⁹ Ibid., 139.

⁶⁴⁰ Hasan, *Legacy of a Divided Nation*, 321-322.

⁶⁴¹ Ibid.

⁶⁴² Imtiaz Ahmad, ed., *Modernization and Social Change Among Muslims in India* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishing, 1983).

⁶⁴³ Ibid., xix.

Islam. Thus much of the available literature explained the social reality of Muslims as if they were completely isolated from broader structural and relational processes that occurred within and across various communities. Often the Indian example was framed as a localized manifestation of the Muslim world, making religion the single most important determinant of minority behavior.⁶⁴⁴ Mayer argues that by and large it has been taken for granted that the important questions to be answered with regard to the community relate to the ways in which it is different from other Indian communities.⁶⁴⁵ Even in studies of Muslim intellectual history, the focus is on the literary legacy of select individuals who are implicitly assumed to have provided leadership for very large, highly unified segments of the Muslim population.⁶⁴⁶ This is registered in the preoccupation with Syed Ahmad Khan as the exemplary negotiator of Islam and modernity after 1857 in the texts discussed above. Mayer argues that accounts of these intellectuals must be taken as studies of the ideological position of the Muslim elite and not a valid statement about the community as a whole. The premise of the distinctive and unified nature of Islamic political actors forecloses inquiries into the changes in social relations, organization and political outlook among diverse groups of Muslims in India, which are importantly shaped by region and class.⁶⁴⁷ However, the middle class often generalizes their particular experiences as those of the whole Muslim community.

The comparison of contemporary community leaders with Syed Ahmad Khan's specific negotiation of Islam and modernity in 1857 takes for granted the authority of the landed elite over the general population. Further, it creates the impression of Muslim backwardness as a static condition. In the literature reviewed above the issue of intra-community inequalities is not significant to assessments of Muslim backwardness. Various texts share the assumption that there is a community that can be addressed as a

⁶⁴⁴ Ibid., xxvii.

⁶⁴⁵ Peter Mayer, "Tombs and Dark Horses: Ideology, Intellectuals and Proletarians in the Study of Contemporary Indian Islam," in Ibid., 2.

⁶⁴⁶ Ibid., 6.

⁶⁴⁷ In his study of middle class Muslims in Tamil Nadu and Madhya Pradesh, Mayer suggests that there exists a generalized pessimism among this class regardless of religious identity, as seen in their disenchantment with popular democracy. Further, hostility to Hindi is found across religious communities in Tamil Nadu, indicating how regional variations are obscured in assumptions about the emotional attachment of Muslims to Urdu language and literary heritage.

single distinctive unit, characterized by an emotional and psychological inability to face the challenges of modern life. In the following section, I turn to a different set of responses to the problems of Muslim and minority politics by non-elite Muslims who deploy the analytics of caste inequality. In these responses the notion of democratization replaces modernization as the grounds of “minority” politics are interrogated.

Democratizing Community: Pasmanda-Dalit Interventions and Minority Politics

The previous section showed that in the dominant interpretive frameworks through which knowledge about Indian Muslims has been produced, the socio-economic heterogeneity of Muslim communities and the role of caste based stratification in their social organization were minimally acknowledged. As such, they were not considered significant to understanding Muslim subjectivity and community formation in post-partition India. Inequalities of caste and class among Muslims were largely collapsed into the terms “elites” and “masses”. According to Ahmad, the lack of analysis of social change among Muslims resulted in the production of large-scale works about Indian society that were focused almost exclusively on social change among Hindus.⁶⁴⁸ Despite the tendency to write about the status of Indian Muslims in homogenizing terms, scholars have long acknowledged that social relations between distinct groups of Muslims resemble those of the Hindu caste hierarchy.⁶⁴⁹ That is, hereditary occupational groups with similar social locations are found in both religious communities. There are also notable differences shaped by the history of Mughal rule and the large-scale conversion of indigenous subaltern communities to Islam over time. These historical processes produced a distinction between foreign and indigenous Muslims in South Asia. As such, an alternate set of caste categories are applied to Muslim social stratification: 1) Ashraf: the Muslim nobility that trace their origins to Central Asia. These groups constitute the “upper caste” and are identified by the surnames Syed, Shaikh, Mughal, Khan and

⁶⁴⁸ Ahmad, *Modernization and Social Change*, xvii.

⁶⁴⁹ Ghaus Ansari, *Muslim Caste in Upper Pradesh: A Study of Culture Contact* (Ethnographic and Folk Culture Society, 1960); Imtiaz Ahmad, ed., *Caste and Social Stratification among the Muslims* (Delhi: Manohar Publishing, 1973); Seik Rahim Mondal, “Social Structure, OBCs and Muslims,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, November 15 2003, 4892-4897; Nadeem Hasnain, “Muslims in India: Caste Affinity and Social Boundaries of Backwardness,” in *The OBCs and the Ruling Classes in India*, ed. H.S. Verma (Jaipur and Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2005), 85-97.

Pathan, 2) Ajlaf: hereditary occupational communities such as weavers, tailors, butchers, barbers and cotton carders, considered to be “middle” or “lower” caste, and 3) Arzal: groups engaged in the most exploitative forms of labor such as sweeping and scavenging and subjected to practices of untouchability. The latter two groups comprise communities of indigenous converts to Islam. Most of these communities were categorized as Other Backward Classes (OBC) by the Mandal Commission and as such are eligible for the reservations in public sector employment. Although Arzal communities are subject to practices of untouchability, they are prevented from accessing the more extensive social policies available for Scheduled Castes due to the Presidential Order, 1950, which prohibits Muslims and Christians from being identified as SC. Arzal communities have been misclassified in the affirmative action framework. These communities are generally referred to as Dalit Muslims in recognition of the extreme degree of stigmatization and exclusion to which they are subjected.

In his response to the Sachar Committee Report and the anticipated reservation debate in *Frontline*, Javeed Alam argued that among the features that distinguished Muslims from other religious communities in India was that historically, the Muslim gentry and their representatives never treated the Muslim masses any better or differently than the other subjects under them; “all people were equally unworthy of respect or dignity”.⁶⁵⁰ The conditions of colonial rule, as informed by Orientalist discourses, governmental knowledge and the positioning of the colonial state as neutral mediator of group interests further empowered elites across religious categories to represent “their” communities at different levels of governance. Revivalist religious movements also emerged during this time in response to Christian missionary activity. According to Menon, both Hindu and Muslim revivalists responded to the portrayal of their religious beliefs as uncivilized and irrational with attempts to recreate their traditional religions through textual exegesis, a return to essentials and a distancing from popular forms of religion.⁶⁵¹ These efforts resulted in the further consolidation of an upper caste, elite Ashraf identity premised on “pure”, textual practice of Islam and a move away from spaces of syncretic and shared practices within the popular realm. During colonial census

⁶⁵⁰ “A Turning Point,” 12.

⁶⁵¹ Menon, *The Blindness of Insight*, 11.

operations the Ashraf insisted that their foreign ancestry be acknowledged by the state, effecting a division between “original Muslims”, defined as those who comprised the higher classes, and local Muslim converts from Hinduism, who were consistently identified with the lower classes.⁶⁵² These historical developments indicate some of the ways in which the contours of “upper caste” identity were sharpened during colonial rule, in tandem with the construction of the categories “Hindu” and “Muslim” as bounded religious communities with oppositional interests.

Ashraf elite dominance was strengthened in the post-colonial nation-state due to the conditions of violence that threatened the security of Muslims after the partition. While the texts discussed in the previous section described the “Muslim problem” as fear of cultural assimilation in a Hindu dominated society, they minimized the extent to which post-partition Muslim politics were shaped by insecurity and fear of violence. Alam explains that most communities dealt with this situation by relying on elites to negotiate and make deals with the Congress for security and small relief in return for electoral support.⁶⁵³ In the religion and caste based mobilizations around the Babri Masjid and the Mandal Commission respectively, these relations between elite and non-elite Muslims, primarily among artisans and the working class, began to change. Muslims had decisively broken off from the politics of leaning on the Congress.⁶⁵⁴ As non-elite Muslims became more politically assertive they subordinated the issue of security to concerns for dignity⁶⁵⁵. More broadly they challenged the authority of the elite to act as representatives of a nationwide Muslim community and set political priorities on its behalf.

The contemporary political mobilization among these groups is connected to the spaces created by the Mandal Commission for public debates about caste, discrimination and community. Regional political parties formed around the articulation of “lower caste” interests also began to attract wide support in this context. In the 1980s an OBC Muslim movement was formed in Maharashtra with the influence of progressive Muslim writers of Marathi literature who challenged the claim that Urdu was the “natural” language of

⁶⁵² Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold*, 160.

⁶⁵³ “A Turning Point,” 12.

⁶⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

Muslims.⁶⁵⁶ Initial organizing involved surveying and compiling a list of backward caste Muslims for recognition in Mandal's list of OBCs as well as for educational, economic and political empowerment.⁶⁵⁷ 115 Muslim castes were identified in the state, which largely corresponded to occupational divisions and ritual status differentiations found among Hindus. These efforts were paralleled in Bihar with the formation of the All India Backward Muslim Morcha and the Pasmanda Muslim Mahaz (PMM) in the early 1990s. These two organizations are differentiated by the latter's emphasis on the question of Dalit Muslims. Alam notes that the former is concerned with the social and political advancement of "backward Muslims" more generally and uses the term Dalit in a more nebulous fashion, including dominant middle castes and at times, supporting the inclusion of certain upper castes in the reservation framework.⁶⁵⁸ As such, the Backward Muslim Morcha has been losing ground among lower caste Muslims. The PMM began as a local organization founded by journalist Ali Anwar. From time to time it had published articles in regional newspapers about the need for lower caste Muslims to unite under a common platform.⁶⁵⁹ Its organization as a social movement coincided with and has been shaped partly in response to the mobilization of elite representatives for a 10% Muslim reservation, as discussed in the introduction. In response to the publication of "Muslim Agenda 99" by prominent Muslim leaders, the PMM produced "Pasmanda Agenda 99". Released on 15 August 1999, the publication categorically rejected the demand for Muslim reservation. It argued that since the majority of Muslims were already beneficiaries of reservation as part of the 27% OBC quota, the real purpose of "Muslim Agenda 99" seemed to be to bring the upper caste Muslims within the fold of reservations.⁶⁶⁰ This would not only make the upper castes more dominant, it would further polarize society on religious lines as the Hindu Right would certainly oppose any such scheme as an exercise in minority appeasement. The PMM expanded from the regional to the national level in July 2004 as an umbrella organization for various caste based associations. It held that these different groups need not be dissolved and should

⁶⁵⁶ Bidwai, "Age of Empowerment."

⁶⁵⁷ Ibid.; Mondal, "Social Structure, OBCs and Muslims," 4892-3.

⁶⁵⁸ Alam, "Challenging the Ashrafs," 174.

⁶⁵⁹ Ibid., 172.

⁶⁶⁰ Ibid.

maintain separate identities connected to the PMM, which would seek to coordinate its activities.

Pasmanda is a Persian word, which means deprived or left behind. It is mobilized as a collective identity to bring together and represent the concerns of distinct Muslim castes. According to Ali Anwar, former president of the Pasmanda Muslim Mahaz (PMM): “the Pasmanda movement, i.e. the mobilization of lower caste Muslims, or we may call it the Shudra Muslim, particularly in the 90s, is the child of the Mandal Revolution. The Pasmanda section is the biggest population block of Muslims in India”⁶⁶¹. Anwar and other activists insist that there has never been a single, homogenous Muslim community in India. Nor is a national level politics organized around the category Muslim beneficial for non-elite Muslims.⁶⁶² The PMM argues that approximately 80% of India’s Muslim population belongs to castes that have been historically marginalized from power and resources in society. The articulation of Pasmanda Muslim politics is thus related to changing self-perceptions of these communities based on a rupture within the category “Muslim”, which foregrounds divisions between elites and marginalized groups maintained through caste privilege. Activists emphasize that while the post-Mandal context created new political possibilities for their communities, the issues of discrimination and inequality are historically rooted and experienced in their daily lives. “There has always been one or other kind of caste movement within Muslims, even before independence...what is novel in these recent movements is that they form a united platform to represent the concerns of otherwise discrete Muslim castes.”⁶⁶³ The PMM draws from the anti-caste philosophical traditions of Phule, Ambedkar and Lohia. Thus, it is emphasized that the Pasmanda Muslims comprise the demographic and indigenous majority of the community, whose interests have been neglected due to the historical privileges of the Ashraf elite. Their empowerment is linked to the empowerment of the Bahujan Samaj, the legitimate

⁶⁶¹ Letter from Ali Anwar, M.P. Rajya Sabha to Ajay Maken, Union Minister, Home Affairs on Caste Census, 2010.

⁶⁶² Hilal Ahmed, “Muslims as a Political Community,” *India Seminar 602 India’s Religious Minorities: A Symposium on Exclusion, Identity and Citizenship*, October 2009, http://www.india-seminar.com/2009/602/602_hilal_ahmed.htm.

⁶⁶³ Azad and Ansari, “We Merely Want to Raise the Curtain.”

majority community comprised of the indigenous groups of India.⁶⁶⁴ In these discourses the terms Pasmada, Bahujan and Dalit often appear as overlapping and inclusive identifications based on common experiences of and struggles against oppressive structures. This understanding of anti-caste subjectivity is articulated in opposition to the notion of fixed majority and minority religious communities, as these categories have contributed to the oppression of marginalized castes:

The identity of Pasmada Muslims was hitherto obscured in the name of minority. Now we fear the word minority and feel that it is a fake word. In the name of minority either someone terrorizes us or someone snatches away our rights. In real terms we are the majority (bahujan) in this country...there is a bond of pain between Pasmada-Dalit Muslims and the Pasmada-Dalit sections of other religions.⁶⁶⁵

This statement reflects the political objective of strengthening solidarities between similarly placed caste-class groups across religious divides. It is also the basis for one of the principal demands of the movement, namely, that the Presidential Order 1950 should be repealed and Muslim and Christian Dalits should be recognized as Scheduled Castes.

In Chapter 1 it was seen that members of the Constituent Assembly attempted to include a clause on “conversions by coercion” in the fundamental rights, on the grounds that Scheduled Castes were vulnerable to the manipulation of religious minorities. Although this clause was not included in the Constitution, the Presidential Order 1950 provided an alternate means to regulate religious conversions by excluding SCs who converted to Buddhism, Islam or Christianity from social policies and anti-discrimination laws intended to address untouchability. The Order was amended in 1990 to enable recognition of Buddhists as Scheduled Castes. This restriction has been a site of struggle for Muslims and Christians who challenge the Constitutional validity of the Order. Numerous petitions have been filed in the courts on behalf of Dalit Christians and Muslims on the basis that the Presidential Order violates their rights to freedom of religion and equality before the law. A common argument made against these petitions is

⁶⁶⁴ Ali Anwar, interview with Yoginder Sikand, “Ali Anwar’s Struggle,” *Countercurrents.Org*, 5 October 2005, <http://www.countercurrents.org/dalit-anwar051005.htm>.

⁶⁶⁵ *Pasmada Awaaz*, 2005, in Ansari, “Civil Society and Subaltern Counterpublics,” 29.

that Islam and Christianity do not sanction caste hierarchy in their respective scriptures and thus caste does not exist among its followers. The judiciary has consistently upheld the Order based on a particular understanding of the relationship between caste, religion and discrimination. The courts have been willing to concede the point that discriminatory practices, including untouchability, continue to be experienced in religious communities in which there is no scriptural or theological basis for caste distinction. However, the “fact” of discrimination has not been considered sufficient for the official recognition of Christians and Muslims as Scheduled Castes. The ruling of the 1985 case Soosai vs. Union of India provided a justification for the exclusion that has been applied in subsequent judgments on this issue. It is worth considering the dominant judicial perspective here in order to appreciate its difference from the ways in which the relationship between caste and religion is articulated in Pasmada discourse:

It is not sufficient to show that the same caste continues after conversion. It is necessary to establish further that the disabilities and handicaps suffered from such caste membership in the social order of origin – Hinduism – continue in their *oppressive severity* in the new environment of a religious community.⁶⁶⁶

In this way, the state demands from petitioners that they establish a comparable level of oppression and discrimination to that of an “original” caste hierarchy as sanctioned in Hindu religious scripture. This implies that the principal site of discrimination is the “religious community”, bounded and distinct from other faith based communities. Moreover, the social relations and practices of each community are derived primarily from religious texts.⁶⁶⁷

⁶⁶⁶ Cited in Satish Deshpande, *Dalits in the Muslim and Christian Communities: A Status Report on Current Social Scientific Knowledge*, Prepared for the National Commission for Minorities, Government of India (2008), 71-72. The issue involved in this case was the allotment of free housing for cobblers under a Special Central Assistance Scheme for the welfare of Scheduled Castes. This order specifically stated that Scheduled Castes who had converted to Christianity were not eligible for assistance under this scheme.

⁶⁶⁷ The issue has been further complicated by the list of backward classes produced by the Mandal Commission, which includes Muslim and Christian groups whose socio-economic conditions resemble those of other Dalits. As such the state can more easily dismiss demands for recognition of SC status on the basis that these groups already receive some benefits under the provision of reservations for OBCs.

In their demand for the repeal of the Presidential Order 1950, the AIBMM and PMM point out that whereas the OBC provisions are limited to government employment and limited educational concessions, Scheduled Castes are also provided political reservations in state legislatures and parliament and facilities such as housing schemes, interest free loans and protection from caste based violence under the Prevention of Atrocities Act, 1989.⁶⁶⁸ These more extensive provisions can better address the socio-economic conditions of Dalits, due to which they cannot compete for reserved seats against more privileged communities as part of the OBC category. The denial of SC reservation to Dalit Muslims is a key reason why they have not made the kinds of advancements in education and employment seen among Dalits recognized as SC.⁶⁶⁹ The Report commissioned by the Ministry of Minority Affairs on this question also supports claims about the extent of deprivation among Dalit Muslims and Christians:

...regardless of whether and to what extent the caste disabilities of Dalit Muslims and Dalit Christians resemble those of Hindus or other Dalits...Dalits suffer the most from their caste identity...if Muslims and Christians in India 'have' caste, then it is clear that Dalit Muslims and Dalits Christians have it the most.⁶⁷⁰

On the grounds of economic backwardness as well, the Report finds Dalit Muslims are “unquestionably the worst off among all Dalits” in both the rural and urban sectors and completely absent from affluent classes. The absence of Dalit Muslims from mainstream politics and political discourse is thus related to complex processes of exclusion at historical, social and constitutional levels. The arbitrary nature of the Presidential Order 1950 is underscored with reference to its departure from the reservation framework in the Government of India Act, 1935, which did not have a religious restriction.⁶⁷¹ It is argued that the Order violates the “professed secularism of the Indian constitution”, in particular the right to freedom of religion. This is seen in the qualification in Constitutional Article

⁶⁶⁸ Eijaz Ali, Interview with Yoginder Sikand, “Dalit Muslims,” *Outlook Magazine*, June 20 2002, <http://www.outlookindia.com/article.aspx?216144>.

⁶⁶⁹ Ali Anwar, *Masawat Ki Jung*, trans. Mohammad Imran Ali and Zakia Jowher (New Delhi: Indian Social Institute, 2005), 3; Alam, “Challenging the Ashrafs”, 173.

⁶⁷⁰ Deshpande, *Dalits in the Muslim and Christian Communities*, 12.

⁶⁷¹ Safdar Imam Quadri and Sanjay Kumar, “Introduction” (presented at seminar on Marginalization of Dalit Muslims with Special Reference to Democracy, Identity and Livelihood for Deshkal Society. Patna, Bihar, 14 July 2002).

341, on the classification of Scheduled Castes. This article states that SC status can be re-acquired by those who re-convert to Hinduism: “what is this but an inducement for Dalit Muslims and Christians to accept Hinduism, and a threat of punishment to Dalit Hindus seeking to convert to other religions in search of religious equality?”⁶⁷² By linking access to resources with certain religious identities the state fails to recognize the right of all citizens to choose their religion. Further, the state fails to recognize the dynamic and contextual aspects of religious practices. In contrast to the argument that caste cannot be as “severely oppressive” in religious communities whose scriptures uphold egalitarian principles, Pasmada-Dalit activists demand that state categories reflect the divergence between “text” and “practice” in the social organization of all communities. They highlight the diversity of indigenous communities that pre-existed categorized religious difference: “the so called ‘untouchables’ in India were not a homogenous group of people. They belonged to different ethnic and regional groups and were spread and oppressed throughout the country.”⁶⁷³ The conception of caste here refutes the view that all Dalits were originally part of a “Hindu community” and have only recently converted out of the fold. This challenges the dominant distinction made between “indigenous” (Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh) and “foreign” (Islam, Christianity) religions. Instead it makes a distinction between indigenous and foreign subjects across religious communities, onto which unequal relations of power and privileges have been imposed. Caste is identified as the principal axis of discrimination in Indian society, and its practice is not dependent on scriptural sanction.

The demand for Constitutional recognition and alterations to the existing reservation framework require of activists that they interrogate and de-naturalize dominant meanings of caste and community. As seen above, the PMM maintains that the framework of “minority politics” homogenizes Muslims and obscures the commonality of experience and political priorities they share with other communities. This claim has been substantiated through generation of knowledge about the ways in which caste discrimination is practiced and legitimized in Muslim communities. Further, it is

⁶⁷² Ibid.

⁶⁷³ Writ Petition No 13 of 2008 versus Union of India, Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment.

grounded by a historical critique of the Ashraf elite and the limited set of interests it has promoted while claiming to represent the interests of the Muslim minority. These are key aspects of the broader analysis of power relations and Indian democracy through which specific positions on the reservation debate are taken by the movement. Pasmanda discourse thus relates to the arguments made by Badri Narayan discussed in the previous chapter. Namely, that the Mandal debate contributed to pull the historical question to the centre of Dalit-Bahujan discourse in the Hindi region in order to provide historical support to the report and its recommendations.⁶⁷⁴ The production of historical knowledge is linked to the development of political consciousness and a corpus of counter-knowledge about Dalit-Bahujan history, culture and tradition in North India.

Two significant contributions to this knowledge base that have been translated into English are Ali Anwar's book *Masawat ki Jung* (Battle for Equality) and Masood Alam Falahi's *Hindustan mein Zat-Pat aur Musalman* (Caste and Caste Based Discrimination Among Indian Muslims).⁶⁷⁵ Falahi and Anwar both write of how the silence surrounding caste discrimination among Muslims is maintained by an emphasis on their difference from Hindus. Through the premise of difference political and religious authorities blame those who have converted from Hinduism to Islam for perpetuating casteist practices. That is, caste distinction is due to the inferior cultural traditions of lower caste Hindus who have converted to Islam. This argument maintains a dichotomy between an original, textual Islam and the syncretic, Hinduised practices of indigenous Muslims. By tracing the various initiatives of political elites and prominent religious authorities that have legitimized exclusion and discrimination on the basis of caste, these texts refute such arguments. They also stress the socio-historical differences between Ashraf and Pasmanda Muslims.

The historical critique of the Ashraf identifies the upper castes as responsible for introducing casteism among Muslims and formalizing it within religious and political institutions. In the introduction to his text, Falahi recalls an exchange between a Dalit youth and an activist of the Jamaat-e Islami during an "Introducing the Quran" program

⁶⁷⁴ Narayan, "Heroes, Histories and Booklets" *Economic and Political Weekly*, October 13 2001, 3923-3934.

⁶⁷⁵ Falahi's text has been translated from Urdu by Yoginder Sikand. Accessed from <http://www.newageislam.com/article/details.aspx?ID=3611>.

in Uttar Pradesh in 1994.⁶⁷⁶ When the Dalit youth raised concerns about the casteism practiced by Muslims in his village, the latter remarked: “some people concoct lame excuses so as not to accept Islam because they know that if they embrace Islam they are bound to be confronted with problems.”⁶⁷⁷ This dismissal of the Dalit youth prompted Falahi to consult the writings of prominent Sunni scholar Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanvi, in which he discovered that caste, caste-based discrimination and notions of social parity that governed the choice of marital partners had been declared an integral part of the Islamic shariah. Falahi describes a sense of horror upon learning that Thanvi

legitimized the division of Muslims into what he considered ‘high’ and ‘low’, ‘noble’ and ‘despicable’... on the basis of individuals’ birth in particular social or caste-like groups... Thanvi went further and even declared that newly-converted Muslims were not the social equal of other Muslims, and that inter-marriage between the two was not advisable.⁶⁷⁸

Falahi articulates his own investment in challenging these hierarchies as a commitment to Islamic notions of truth and duty, which means a politics characterized by justice, equality and equal treatment of all people irrespective of social status. As such he seeks to impress upon the reader that supporters of casteism are not restricted to particular communities: “widespread caste-based discrimination and fiqh based rules of kufu (suitability in marriage) prevalent among the Indian Muslims resemble very closely the Hindu case, and in fact, correspond to the teachings of Manusmriti.”⁶⁷⁹ The text traces various expressions of contempt and scorn for indigenous Muslims in policies, speeches and practices of the nobility during the era of Mughal rule and into the modern reform movements during British rule. In both contexts Falahi highlights the official exclusion of indigenous Muslims from political positions and educational institutions. He argues that not only have prominent ulema and intellectuals failed to combat casteism, but have implicitly or explicitly rendered its practices as “Islamic”. Tracing the historical

⁶⁷⁶ Falahi, “Why I Have Written this Book”, <http://www.newageislam.com/articledetails.aspx?ID=3611>.

⁶⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁷⁹ Ibid.

development of religious interpretation in South Asia refutes the argument that there is no scriptural sanction for caste in Islam, as textual meaning is not static over time.

Falahi's analysis of Syed Ahmad Khan provides an instructive contrast to the works described in the previous section.⁶⁸⁰ This analysis challenges the perception of Khan as a great Indian Muslim intellectual, reformer and modernist by showing how his politics sought to maintain Ashraf hegemony. Falahi's reading of Khan's modernist response in the aftermath of the 1857 revolt highlights his use of caste distinctions to counter British accusations of disloyalty among Muslims. Khan made every effort to convince the British that the Ashraf had little role in the Revolt, which he blamed entirely on low caste Muslims. As he impressed upon the British the loyalty of his caste, he denounced demands for equality and self-respect for the "low" caste Muslims. Notably, Khan opposed the democratic election of members to the Legislative Council on the grounds that "ordinary people" could also be chosen. In his correspondence with colonial administrators Khan argued, "you must certainly believe that people from lowly families are not useful for the country or for the government...the noble communities of India would not like a low-grade person, whose roots they know well, to rule over their lives and wealth."⁶⁸¹ Similarly, his educational reforms in Aligarh were intended to modernize the Ashraf and he advised that Western education be limited to them: "Syed Ahmad insisted on numerous occasions that his college was not meant for 'julahas' (weavers), or in other words, non-Ashraf Muslims."⁶⁸² Ali Anwar's text also critiques the status of Syed Ahmad Khan as an exemplary historical figure whose principal achievement was to reconcile Islam and modernity. Instead he is portrayed as a figure unflinching in his loyalty to the British and a staunch supporter of the feudal system.⁶⁸³ These texts underscore the difference between the concern for "modernization" with which figures such as Syed Ahmad Khan are associated and indeed celebrated, and the concern for democratization in Pasmanda politics.

⁶⁸⁰ Falahi, "Part 12: Modern Indian Ulema on the Caste Question," in *Hindustan*, <http://www.newageislam.com/articledetails.aspx?ID=3678>.

⁶⁸¹ Ibid.

⁶⁸² Ibid.

⁶⁸³ Anwar, *Masawat ki Jung*, 78-82.

Anwar argues that the consolidation of Ashraf Muslim interests during colonial rule was also furthered through the Muslim League. The operation of caste-class privilege within the party has been discussed in Anwar's text to show its unrepresentative character. The emergence of the Muslim League in North India is related to the challenges posed to Ashraf dominance by the distinct political engagements of "lower" caste Muslims during colonial rule. These mobilizations took place among communities of weavers who shared an occupational caste-class identity and constituted a significant proportion of the Muslim population in North India. Their politics displayed an alternative worldview that sought to challenge social hierarchies and create an autonomous political space.⁶⁸⁴ This took organizational form in 1926 as the Momin Conference, which avoided identification with the Muslim League or the Congress Party. The Momin Conference petitioned the British for recognition as a distinct group on the grounds that "being influenced by the Brahmanic idea of supremacy and domination" upper class Muslims divided Indian Muslims into several castes and sections.⁶⁸⁵ Anwar observes the similar position of the League and the Hindus in the context of lower caste struggles during the colonial period. The League shared the demand of the upper caste Hindus that caste be eliminated as a category in the census: "does it not prove that the marginalized and suppressed classes of this society, be it Hindu or Muslim, think on the common line, likewise the upper caste, be it Pandit or Maulana, who think and work in the same direction."⁶⁸⁶ The Momin Conference opposed the two-nation theory on which the Muslim League's claim for a separate nation was based. However, like the Scheduled Caste Federation, the Momins were marginalized in negotiations between the League, the Congress and the British during the transfer of power culminating in the India-Pakistan partition. The restricted electorate in the 1946 provincial assembly elections skewed results in favor of the Muslim League, ensuring the representation of elite upper caste interests.⁶⁸⁷ In *Masawat ki Jung* Anwar states, "it is worth noticing that when a new

⁶⁸⁴ Ibid., see Chapter 3 "Half Truth", 50-100; Santosh Kumar Rai, "Muslim Weaver's Politics in Early 20th Century Northern India: Locating an Identity," *Economic and Political Weekly*, April 14 2012, 61-70.

⁶⁸⁵ Rai, "Muslim Weaver's Politics," 65.

⁶⁸⁶ Anwar, *Masawat ki Jung*, 6.

⁶⁸⁷ Ansari, "Civil Society and Subaltern Counterpublics," 26.

awareness was developing among Dalit Muslims, in the leadership of Muhammad Ali Jinnah, Muslim League demanded for Pakistan...the nawabs, landlords, respectables and upper sections supported this demand of the Muslim League.”⁶⁸⁸ In this way, Falahi and Anwar provide alternate understandings of individuals and institutions that continue to dominate representations of “Muslim” history and politics in South Asia. These are particularized and shown to serve narrow interests of caste and class.

The PMM locates its articulation of a distinct lower caste Muslim perspective in relation to the historical legacy of the Momin Conference and its leaders, notably Abdul Quayam Ansari. The Conference aligned itself with the Congress after 1947, which contributed to the weakening of the movement and the dilution of its independent identity. Despite this the Congress made greater accommodations for the Ashraf elite in its political structure. This enabled the Ashraf to maintain certain privileges after partition while Pasmandas were marginalized from political participation. Anwar argues that the Congress perceived that the neglect of the vocal middle and upper middle class Ashraf would affect its hold on political power: “Congress wanted slavish Muslim leaders and not independent ones. That is why they preferred ex Muslim League supporters. Basically, these leaders went seeking shelter to Congress. Had there been any other party in power they would have joined it too.”⁶⁸⁹ The negligible presence of Pasmanda Muslims and non-existence of Dalit Muslims in mainstream and minority institutions is explained as the outcome of these elite power struggles. From this perspective caste remains the principal barrier to political representation and socio-economic mobility across the boundaries of religious communities.

The Pasmanda critique of the elite Muslim leadership in post-partition India and its empowerment as legitimate representatives of the “Muslim community” challenges the conflation of the experiences and interests of the Ashraf with those of Muslims across India. It is argued that the popular projection of Muslims as a monolithic group is rooted in the class character of the Muslim elite in the Hindi heartland.⁶⁹⁰ This elite has never

⁶⁸⁸ Anwar, *Masawat ki Jang*, 84.

⁶⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 145-146.

⁶⁹⁰ Anwar Alam, “Democracy and Muslim Society” (presented at seminar on Marginalization of Dalit Muslims with Special Reference to Democracy, Identity and Livelihood for Deshkal Society. Patna, Bihar, 14 July 2002).

shown any interest in building alliances with Dalits because they “suffer from an enormous sense of superiority, owing to their supposedly foreign extraction and because they claim descent from Muslim elites who ruled...India for over 1,000 years. Because of this, they feel they have the right to control all Muslims throughout India.”⁶⁹¹ Their longstanding alliance with the Congress and monopolization of various minority institutions is the means through which this elite safeguarded its power after the dismantling of feudal landholdings. In other words, they were able to extract state resources by projecting themselves as legitimate representatives of the community at the expense of the majority of Muslims. The generation of fear about the dilution of cultural-religious identity and vulnerability to violence in a Hindu dominated society is used to silence marginalized caste-class groups.

In this context of an elite seeking to protect its privileges after partition, the leadership focused on select “cultural-emotional issues” related to a specifically Ashraf conception of Indian Muslim identity: preservation of Urdu, preservation of the ‘minority character’ of Aligarh Muslim University, personal law and the Babri Masjid.⁶⁹² The attention received by these issues as definitive of community experience is ensured by the dominance of the Ashraf in all national organizations that claim to represent Muslims, as well as in the Urdu press. “Whenever an issue arises that concerns Muslims, the media approaches certain name-sake and un-elected Muslim ‘leaders’ in Delhi...and present them as spokesmen for the 150 million Muslims of India.”⁶⁹³ The homogenization of minority politics is also enabled by dominant political parties who ignore the diversity of opinion within the community. The recognition and support the state provides to a particular segment of the Muslim elite reveals the undemocratic character of the state and its various institutions. The critique of minority politics is thus linked to an analysis of the actual working of Indian democracy, which has “tended to take care of the dominant

⁶⁹¹ Iqbal Ahmad, Interview with Yoginder Sikand, “Interview: Iqbal Ahmad on Dalit-Muslim Unity,” *Countercurrents.Org*, 29 April 2010, <http://www.countercurrents.org/sikand290410.htm>.

⁶⁹² *Ibid.*; Anwar, *Masawat Ki Jung*, 12; Eijaz Ali, “Marginalization of Dalit Muslims in Indian Democracy”; Ansari, “Civil Society and Subaltern Counterpublics,” 28.

⁶⁹³ Ahmad and Sikand, “Interview.”

socio-economic interests of the elite of various castes and communities”.⁶⁹⁴ The PMM calls for the democratization of minority institutions via greater representation of Pasmada-Dalit Muslims on their boards. It has called for the implementation of reservations within Muslim managed organizations that receive state support, such as Aligarh Muslim University and Jamia Milia Islamia University. According to Alam, the demand is provocative because the AMU has been made a symbol of Indian Muslim politics, and any interference is construed as interference in the “internal affairs of the community.”⁶⁹⁵

Yet it is not only that these select community issues prioritize cultural and identity politics over those of socio-economic inequality. Pasmada-Dalit interventions illustrate that the use of these issues to define the cultural content of the category Muslim naturalizes the authority of the Ashraf elite. This content is challenged by highlighting the different socio-cultural practices of Pasmada-Dalit communities, for example, on language: “The mother tongue(s) for Dalit Muslims is region-based... it is a false claim that Urdu is the mother tongue of Muslims. Neither Urdu, nor Hindi, is their mother tongue.”⁶⁹⁶ By re-defining such markers of “Islamic culture” as markers of caste status, they can be seen as the means through which Ashraf superiority is maintained vis-à-vis other Muslim communities. Pasmada discourses emphasize the affective and cultural constitution of the Ashraf as a class whose nostalgia for former glory determines its politics: “it is in fact a lamentation for the loss of our glorious past that pervades the minds and writings of these writers and is projected as the universal Muslim truth... needless to say that these Muslim authors’ concern emanates from the same high-caste location that abhorred Shudra Muslim.”⁶⁹⁷ Alongside the pride in “Islamic civilization” marked by high Urdu culture and Mughal rule, a disdain for the “uncultured” indigenous Muslim is constitutive of Ashraf identity. It is through drawing

⁶⁹⁴ Anwar, *Masawat ki Jang*; Anwar Alam, “Democratization of Indian Muslims: Some Reflections,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, November 15 2003, 4881-4885.

⁶⁹⁵ Alam, “Challenging the Ashrafs”, 176.

⁶⁹⁶ Azad and Ansari, “We Merely Want to Raise the Curtain.”

⁶⁹⁷ Neshat Quaiser, “Locating the Muslim Mind: An Incomplete Conversation”, *History and Sociology of South Asia* 5, no. 1 (2011): 49-68.

on these relationships and politicizing them that Pasmanda subjectivities come to be articulated in opposition to the category of religious minority.

Pasmanda-Dalit politics has also involved the documentation of caste based discriminatory practices and related deprivation which structure social relations between differently located Muslims. Anwar's text extensively documents these practices through the collection of oral histories of non-Ashraf Muslims across the state of Bihar. It provides an account of the multiple ways in which the maintenance of social distance, hierarchy and segregation impacts the daily lives of these communities. Prominent examples include the separation of cemeteries on a caste basis, barring of Dalit Muslims from taking the front rows for prayers and restrictions on inter-caste marriages. According to Ansari, most of the Pasmanda communities are subjected to a "complex culture of humiliation through circulation of several stories and jokes by the upper castes where even the titles of their castes are used in derogatory terms and often as an abuse".⁶⁹⁸ In many of the interviews collected by Anwar, this social world is described in terms of affective distance maintained by the local Ashraf from "lower caste" Muslims. Despite their adherence to Islamic practices, "the other Muslims of Patna never care for them". He is informed by one respondent from the Lalbegi (sweeper) community, "though the people of our own religion avoid us in the event of marriage, death or celebration our Hindu neighbors join us."⁶⁹⁹ Anwar is told that he is the first Muslim to visit this community. The text also describes the lack of support given to Pasmanda political activities. During elections Ashraf politicians take for granted that they will be supported by all Muslims on the grounds of religious unity. Pasmanda Muslims are actively discouraged from entering politics, and subject to humiliation and insult during their attempts to do so. The "so-called forward Muslims" refuse to vote for candidates from their communities: "several leaders of backward community complain that during the election, we get to hear from the upper caste, 'instead of voting for the julaha-dhuniya-kunjra, we will tear up our votes'."⁷⁰⁰ The interviews are organized according to hereditary occupational community and include if they have been mentioned in any

⁶⁹⁸ Ansari, "Civil Society and Subaltern Counter Publics," 29.

⁶⁹⁹ Parween Bano, in Anwar, *Masawat ki Jang*, 23.

⁷⁰⁰ Anwar, *Masawat ki Jang*, 46.

historical documents, their socio-economic conditions and religious-cultural practices. In this way they capture an array of diverse cultural practices of smaller Muslim castes, which often combine Islam with local syncretic customs. As Alam argues, this extends the critique of the way the state represents Muslims to debates on pluralism and multiculturalism.⁷⁰¹ Dominant representations of Indian diversity produce the categories “Hindu” and “Muslim” in reference to upper caste cultural and religious practices, at the expense of the multiple and often syncretic practices of subaltern communities.

These accounts of the role of caste in structuring relationships between Muslims illustrate why Pasmada activists oppose the demands for “total” Muslim reservation. According to Ashfaq Husain Ansari, Former President of the Centre for Backward Muslims, the Ashraf leadership has continually denied the existence of caste-based divisions among Muslims. It has further placed the blame on backward groups for having invented these divisions and fragmenting the religious community. In their campaigns to build support for a separate Muslim quota within the reservations framework, “minority” leaders have elided the fact that most Muslim groups are already eligible for benefits as part of the OBC category. Their position deliberately gives the impression that the community as a whole is excluded from such benefits. Therefore, “political parties claiming to be secular and well wishers of the OBCs and Muslims should clearly realize the fact that 85% of the total population of Muslims is backward and most such communities are included in the OBC list. These parties have deliberately sidelined the OBCs until now.”⁷⁰² That is, “secular” parties have also taken for granted that the legitimate representatives of the “Muslim community” are the Ashraf and thus failed to support struggles for democratization of minority politics. This assertion interrogates the basis on which certain political parties identify as “secular”, namely, against the communal, anti-Muslim rhetoric of the Hindu right wing. Ansari dismisses the notion that it is possible to have a singular “pro-Muslim” position in the post-Mandal political context.

⁷⁰¹ Alam, “Challenging the Ashrafs,” 175.

⁷⁰² “Predicament of Backward Muslims,” *Alpjan Quarterly: A Chronicle of Minorities* 4, no. 4 (2004).

From the perspective of Pasmanda Muslims the reservation framework can only address the problem of social and educational backwardness of the majority of present day Indian Muslims of “indigenous origin”. It is not appropriate to use the policy to address the problem of discrimination based on religious identity.⁷⁰³ Therefore any further policy changes must be made within the Constitutional framework and strengthen the existing Mandal provisions, both of which prioritize social discrimination based on caste. This position defines a secular process as one in which religious categories are not made the basis of social policies. Two proposals are advanced in accordance with this position. The first is to address the unevenness and structural differences between communities of all religious groups in the OBC list by bifurcating the quota into the categories of “backward” and “most backward”. Most Muslim OBCs would fall into the latter category, increasing their chances of employment alongside similarly located communities of other religions. Secondly, Ashrafs must be counted as a distinct group in assessments of Muslim representation in state institutions. This illustrates that even in the post-Mandal context Ashraf Muslims as a caste have been well represented in legislatures:

Of the total religious minorities population more than 75% belongs to these ‘bulk’ (backward Muslim groups) and less than 25% belong to the other category who are generally called the ‘Ashraf’ or elite and ‘non-indigenous’...From first to fourteenth Lok Sabha around 7500 members were elected but out of this only 400 Muslims could be elected, and out of this 400, 340 belong to Ashraf elites or Muslims of non-indigenous category. The representation of “bulk” of backward Muslims is only 60.⁷⁰⁴

By considering the Ashrafs as a distinct group comprising 2% of the national population, the statistics cited above indicate that their representation in the Lok Sabha works out to

⁷⁰³ Anwar and Sikand, “Ali Anwar’s Struggle.”

⁷⁰⁴ Cited in Ashfaq Hussain Ansari, “The Facts Speak for Themselves!,” *Alpjan Quarterly: Chronicle of Minorities* 4, no. 4 (2004); Khalid Anis Ansari, “Reflections on the Muslim Reservation Debate,” *Countercurrents.Org*, 11 March, 2010, <http://www.countercurrents.org/ansari110310.htm>; Ashok Yadav, “Total Muslim Reservation: A Lesson to Learn for SP, BSP and Congress,” *Countercurrents.Org*, 23 November 2011, <http://www.countercurrents.org/yadav231111.htm>.

4.5%, that is, much beyond their actual population.⁷⁰⁵ This undermines the claims made by proponents of “total” Muslim reservation that discriminatory treatment has been meted out to the community in a uniform manner since independence.

Syed Shahbuddin, a prominent politician that led the Babri Masjid Action Coalition and the demand for Muslim reservation, presents counter arguments to this position. His case for Muslim reservation is based on the argument that the entire community faces common discrimination on account of being a religious minority in India:

One would have expected that a religious minority which has been targeted in every conceivable manner, treated, consciously and unconsciously, as a historic adversary of the Hindus, which has shared common sufferings and which has a common objective for securing a place of security, equality and dignity in its motherland was more likely to struggle collectively and unitedly for its constitutional and human rights.⁷⁰⁶

In this argument the experiences of religious discrimination and violence constitute the Muslims as a singular unit despite regional, sectarian and caste differences. “In situations of communal violence and all situations of discretion at any level all Muslims are treated alike.”⁷⁰⁷ Caste based reservations are divisive and ineffective: “Muslim OBCs can never receive their due as part of a conglomerate because they suffer from a double jeopardy – backwardness and communal bias.”⁷⁰⁸ The denial of religion as an aspect of backwardness is therefore “nothing more than a symptom of the delayed shell shock caused by partition”. In Shahbuddin’s position recognition of caste based stratification among Muslims is reconciled with the claim that all Muslims are discriminated against based on their religious identity. These forms of inequality can be isolated from each other in making a case for a separate Muslim quota by highlighting the issue of anti-Muslim violence. Other representatives of the Muslim Reservation Movement have similarly argued that it is necessary to increase the presence of Muslims in public

⁷⁰⁵ Ansari, “Reflections on the Muslim Reservation Debate.”

⁷⁰⁶ “Reservations of Muslims: Constitutionally and Socially Necessary,” *Alpjan Quarterly: A Chronicle of Minorities* 4, no. 4 (2004).

⁷⁰⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁰⁸ Ibid.

institutions in order to influence the distribution of goods and services in ways that counteract communal bias, particularly in security agencies during situations of communal violence.⁷⁰⁹ In this way, the claims of the Movement remain reliant on the dominant framework of minority security. For example:

Babri was to my generation what partition was to my father's generation.

Something that might help erase the trauma is if our government finally moves to provide reservation for Muslims in jobs and educational institutions in India.

Reservations have empowered the Dalits and similar measures can help empower Muslims, help them join the Indian middle class in proportionate numbers.⁷¹⁰

In this argument reservation is a form of compensation from the state for the failure to prevent anti-Muslim violence. However, critics of Muslim reservation argue that the quota would deepen religious polarization and be used by the Hindu right to incite further violence. The following section will review how the National Commission on Religious and Linguistic Minorities addressed these issues in its suggestions to the government on the question of Muslim reservation.

Reservations and the Search for “Objective” Inequality

Although the Sachar Committee did not include reservation in its list of recommendations, its conclusions created greater receptivity to the institution of such a policy for Muslims. Thereafter, the Ranganath Mishra National Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities (NCLRM) was formed to develop criteria for the identification of socially and *economically* backward sections of minorities and suggest measures for their welfare, including reservations in education and government employment. Due to the increasing number of petitions filed in the Supreme Court by Muslim and Christian Dalit organizations for recognition as Scheduled Castes, the terms of reference were subsequently expanded to provide an official government position on this question. In response these communities submitted “kilograms of data” and “scores of historical records including some dating back to the 19th century law courts of the

⁷⁰⁹ Hasan, *Politics of Inclusion*; Peer, “The Road Back from Ayodhya.”

⁷¹⁰ Peer, “The Road Back from Ayodhya.”

Madras presidency” to support their claims.⁷¹¹ The PMM argued that this mandate effectively translated into devising constitutional modalities through which reservation could be extended to upper caste Muslims, since the state and central OBC lists already identified socially and *educationally* backward religious minorities. In a memorandum submitted to the Commission, Ali Anwar argued,

‘economically backward classes/sections’ or ‘socially and economically backward classes/sections’ of religious and linguistic minorities...are spurious constructs and irrational classifications which cannot be accommodated within the four walls of the Constitution by any amendment.⁷¹²

Both in the Constitution and the Mandal Commission Report on Backward Classes there is no use of the term “economically backward classes”. The inequalities reservation is intended to address are related to historical, social (i.e. caste-based) discrimination. “The economic criterion by itself cannot identify a class as backward unless the economic backwardness of the class is on account of its social backwardness.”⁷¹³ Pasmada activists argued that by introducing a new term to accommodate upper caste Muslims, the Commission neglected their dominance in state institutions relative to OBC and Dalit Muslims, who constituted the majority of the Muslims in India. They unsuccessfully demanded that the Commission be dissolved.

In its recommendations the NCLRM distinguishes between short-term and long-term solutions. In terms of the former, it recommends that 15% of posts in all grades of the state and central governments and seats in educational institutions be reserved for religious minorities, on the grounds that they constitute an economically backward class. 10% of this quota should be allotted specifically to Muslims.⁷¹⁴ On the question of Dalit Muslims and Christians, the Report concludes that “the caste system should be

⁷¹¹ John Dayal, “Ominous Portends in Administration’s Response to Dalit Christians’ Complaint,” 28 February 2011, http://rivr.sulekha.com/ominous-portends-in-administration-s-response-to-dalit-christian-plaint_509866_blog.

⁷¹² In Yadav, “Total Muslim Reservation: A Lesson to Learn for SP, BSP, and Congress.”

⁷¹³ Ashfaq Hussain Ansari, in *Ibid*.

⁷¹⁴ In the event that the constitutional validity of such a measure is challenged, the Commission recommends that an 8.4% sub-quota should be earmarked for minorities within the 27% OBC quota, of which 6% should be for Muslims. *Report of the National Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities*, Ministry of Minority Affairs (2007), 152-153 (hereafter *NCRLM*).

recognized as a general social phenomenon, without questioning whether the philosophy or teachings of any particular religion recognizes it or not.”⁷¹⁵ Therefore, there is no basis for the continued exclusion of Muslims and Christians from the SC category. The Commission recommends the transfer of communities to the SC list whose Hindu, Sikh and Buddhist counterparts are categorized therein. These recommendations of the NCRLM appear to be a departure from the existing reservation framework in three ways: 1) by creating space for religious minorities, which has been opposed as both unconstitutional and non-secular, 2) by recognizing the claims of Dalit Christians and Muslims, which the judiciary has refused to do and 3) by making a case for economic criteria, which is not recognized in the Constitution as a basis for reservation.

While the recommendations reviewed above represent a position on the specific terms of the Commission’s mandate, the long-term recommendations shed light on the broader concerns and perspective that animate the report. When these are considered the NCRLM illustrates continuity with long-standing dominant perceptions on reservation, caste and discrimination. In the long term, the Commission recommends the elimination of all caste and religious considerations from the reservation policy: “there should be a single list of socially and economically backward including religious and linguistic minorities based on common criteria.”⁷¹⁶ This new list of the socially and economically backward should be based on the family or household unit rather than caste or tribe. Even with this more objective list of the “truly backward”, reforms in education are preferable to quotas. Improving access to education for all would alleviate the need for reservations.⁷¹⁷ As such, “the socially and economically backward minorities need to be enlightened about the importance of acquiring knowledge and creating competitive spirit with a view to ensuring that merit is properly rewarded and reservation is not used to kill initiative and competitive spirit.”⁷¹⁸ In this statement one can see how an established understanding of what reservation policies do and the kinds of subjects they produce is drawn upon to attack the entire framework.

⁷¹⁵ Ibid., 153-154.

⁷¹⁶ Ibid., 144-5.

⁷¹⁷ Ibid., 146.

⁷¹⁸ Ibid., 146.

The report does not focus on the specific forms of discrimination that lead to disadvantages among religious minorities or the practices of untouchability in non-Hindu communities. Rather, its primary engagement is with the question of economic criteria and a quota for “economically backward” Muslims. Two key arguments are made consistently throughout the Report: 1) the existing procedures for identifying the backward classes are subjective, inaccurate and rely on faulty or non-existent data and 2) this had led to an abuse of the reservation system across the categories of SC, ST and OBC, thus preventing those in genuine need from accessing the quotas. In this way anti-reservation discourses that circulated in the context of the Mandal debate have been incorporated into the Report as an official position. The use of social criteria, specifically caste, is also seen as contributing to these problems, especially for religious minorities:

The norms of caste-based criteria (used by the Mandal Commission) were not suited to non-Hindus. Uniform parameters which were both religion and caste neutral should have been identified to ensure that the socially, educationally, and economically backward of all communities irrespective of religion, caste, etc., are equally included.⁷¹⁹

This position on the unsuitability of caste criteria for non-Hindus is contradictory to the Committee’s recommendation on Dalit Muslims and Christians discussed above, where it is argued that caste must be seen as a “general characteristic of Indian society”. On the one hand, it is being argued that caste is an inadequate criterion for identifying backward groups among Muslims. On the other hand, it is recognized that caste structures social relations across different communities. One possible reason for the existence of these opposing views in the Report is that the issue of Presidential Order 1950 was an ad-hoc addition to its terms of reference, and its treatment in the text reflects this. This is the shortest chapter in the volume, consisting of a brief summary of the arguments for and against recognizing Muslim and Christian Dalits as SCs, with scant attention to where these arguments come from. However, another reason is that both views of caste can be reconciled to the overarching efforts in the Report to discredit the significance of social (caste) criteria in the reservation framework in favor of economic criteria.

⁷¹⁹ Ibid., 62.

This is seen in the Report's assessment of the existing criteria used to identify Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribes and OBCs for the purposes of affirmative action. In order for criteria to be effective in identifying eligible and deserving groups, it should have a "scientific basis" which makes the process rational and judicious.⁷²⁰ Secondly, it must provide for a constant review and exclusion of those who are able to rise above the levels that determine backwardness. The Commission states that the procedures for identifying SCs and OBCs both fail in this regard as they are "unscientific, ad hoc and subjective."⁷²¹ The restriction on enumerating caste in the Census is cited as one reason for the inaccuracy of the existing procedures. However, the Commission does not recommend including caste in the Census as a solution. A more important issue for the Commission is that the number of backward classes in the lists has increased over time despite the state's investment in developmental programs and positive discrimination policies for SCs, STs and OBCs over the last several decades. According to the NCRLM, "this by itself is indicative of the fact that considerations other than actual socio-economic backwardness of classes are perhaps responsible for increasing tendency of... governments for recognizing new castes/classes...it is indicative of failure to reach out to the deserving."⁷²² The implication here is that most of the communities being added to these lists are merely interested in gaining concessions from the state but are not genuinely in need of them. An economic yardstick would enable the gradual removal of communities from SC and OBC lists that are more politically organized and have benefited from quotas. The economic criteria would facilitate the de-listing of communities by providing a transparent means of identifying which groups can be excluded. Ultimately, "a deadline may be fixed when the lists of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes are totally dispensed with."⁷²³ In this way, the Report casts doubt on the authenticity of any recognized claims for Constitutional status that make communities eligible for affirmative action. Recognition of Dalit Muslims and Christians as Scheduled Caste is not inconsistent with the view that the entire SC category should be ultimately dismantled. Implicit in this position is that the reservation framework produces a range of

⁷²⁰ Ibid., 61.

⁷²¹ Ibid., 62. Also see 71, 137.

⁷²² Ibid., 62.

⁷²³ Ibid., 64.

political subjects that have a vested interest in claiming backwardness. Applying economic criteria would expose these false claims. In this way, the question of whether a specific population group should qualify for reservation is resolved by claiming the irrational basis of all reservations for any group.

Special emphasis is also given in the NCRLM to the issue of fake caste certificates obtained by non-backward groups. According to the Commission this has assumed alarming proportions in several states and contributed to the marginalization of the deprived and poor. It argues that the increase in the number of backward communities must be based on fraudulent claims because decades of concerted development planning have taken place in India. It is inconceivable that so many groups could have “become backward” in a context of a myriad of policies aimed at improving the economic wellbeing of the population. Moreover, “untouchability as a practice in cities and towns has considerably changed and is visible in a diluted form. In fact demarcation between the high castes and low castes in cities specially in public spaces has become meaningless.”⁷²⁴ Based on these two aspects of perceived social change, it is untenable that any community’s status could have deteriorated to such an extent that they require recognition as a “backward class”. Thus “caste or tribe as criterion for identifying the socio-economic backward has become totally irrelevant.”⁷²⁵ This line of argumentation clearly illustrates how a deliberate conflation of the meaning and purpose of the reservation framework operates in the Report. The existing procedures for identification of backward classes – social and educational backwardness – are obfuscated with what the Committee believes *should be* the correct basis of affirmative action policies. However, developmental efforts aimed at economic improvement do not rule out the ability of communities to seek provisions for greater representation in public institutions on the grounds of social discrimination. Nor do arguments about the decline of untouchability bear much relevance to a discussion of backward classes (OBCs), as they are identified by a distinct set of social, educational and economic criteria. In the two examples given in the Report on instances where fake certificates have been issued, these were certificates for Scheduled Tribes. That the specificity of each category – SC, ST and

⁷²⁴ Ibid., 65.

⁷²⁵ Ibid.

OBC – is irrelevant in this discussion indicates a perspective from which any kind of “identity based” reservation is intolerable. The emphasis on fake certificates is such that it comprises almost the entire discussion of “Difficulties Encountered in Implementing Reservation Policy.”⁷²⁶

From these arguments of the NCRLM on the objectivity of economic criteria, the problem of fraud and need to initiate a process of de-listing communities from SC, ST and OBC lists that have already benefitted from reservation policies, we can see how the subjects of these policies continue to be imagined as disruptive to the achievement of a secular, modern nation-state. Against the re-scripting of political normativity that has resulted from Dalit-Bahujan assertion in the post-Mandal context, the position described here is a reminder that sites like “civil society” and “policy” remain overly informed by the modernizing impulses of the ruling caste-class elite across religions.⁷²⁷ The recognition of Dalit Muslims as Scheduled Castes by the Mishra Commission indicates the inability of the state to continually bracket the politics of minority from that of caste when faced with competing political claims emerging from a heterogeneous and unequal Muslim community. However, these claims are considered from an entrenched perspective in which a desire for an “objective” and “scientific” basis for devising social policies seeks to achieve this goal by displacing the category “social” in favor of the “economic”. It is important to remember that the preference for economic criteria has always emerged out of a concern for upper caste Hindus. Since caste based reservation was debated in the Constituent Assembly, concerns have been expressed around the figure of the poor Brahmin as a victim of “reverse” caste discrimination. That the mandate of the NCRLM and the aims of the Muslim Reservation Movement converge in the attempt to include upper caste Muslims within the reservation framework is illustrated by the fact that the economic criteria had to be employed for this purpose. The Commission focused heavily on the economic criteria despite the knowledge that it does

⁷²⁶ Ibid., 133. The under implementation of the policy and discriminatory treatment of “reserved seat candidates” discussed in previous chapters are absent from the discussion. As is the difficulty that Muslims OBCs encounter in obtaining necessary caste certification, an important barrier to accessing reserved seats by minorities noted in the Sachar Committee Report.

⁷²⁷ Khalid Anis Ansari, “Analysing the OBC-Minority Sub-Quota,” *Mainstream Weekly* L, no. 10, February 25 2012, <http://www.mainstreamweekly.net/article3285.html>.

not have a Constitutional basis and hence would be unlikely to withstand legal challenges. In other words, it developed a set of recommendations that it knew could not be implemented. The work of the Commission thus highlights the relations of power that structure the terrain of reservation debates, always ensuring a prominent space for arguments about the illegitimacy of the existing policy and its beneficiaries. This is confirmed by way of a specific representation of the subject of reservation policy: lacking in merit, developing a vested interest in backwardness, accessing policies based on fraud and thus preventing the truly deserving from receiving state benefits.

Conclusion

Despite the validation that the NCLRM gave to a quota for (socially and economically backward) religious minorities and to the transfer of Muslim and Christian Dalits to the SC lists neither recommendation has been taken up by the UPA government. One reason for this is the threat posed by Hindu nationalists who are hostile to any positive discrimination in favor of Muslims and have gained political power through charges of minority appeasement in the past.⁷²⁸ While advocates of total Muslim reservation frame the demand in terms of a compensation for anti-Muslim violence, it is felt that such a policy would increase the vulnerability of the community to violent campaigns organized by the Hindu Right. Moreover, the Commission's case rests to a large extent on categorizations that do not have a Constitutional sanction and will inevitably be contested.

In the case of Dalit Muslims and Christians, the government has effectively assigned the issue to the courts and thus avoided any further action even though it has the authority to do so. The extension of SC status to Buddhists and Sikhs was accomplished not through the courts but through the parliamentary process.⁷²⁹ It is also complicated by the Mandal framework's placement of both "lower caste" and "Dalit" Muslims under the OBC category. On the one hand, the inclusion of both groups enables the courts and opponents of the demand more generally to claim that there is no need for a change in status because Dalit Muslims already receive some benefits from the state. On the other

⁷²⁸ Hasan, *Politics of Inclusion*, 187.

⁷²⁹ Dayal, "Ominous Portends."

hand, many Dalit Muslim communities have been identifying as OBC for years in their interactions with the state. There is no way within existing government surveys to separate out those OBCs who are Dalit Muslims and Dalit Christians. These problems of identification also discourage serious attempts to re-work existing policies of affirmative action. Any attempt to clarify this would require enumeration of caste in the census, which is also highly unpopular among upper castes, on the grounds that the information gained will further proliferate demands for reservation.

In this way, contemporary debates about Muslim inequality highlight the complicated interactions between governmental categories and social locations. In the NCRLM it is argued that these complications are due to the use of caste itself as an indicator of inequality. As such, the Commission can recognize the existence of caste and casteism among non-Hindu communities and simultaneously advocate the replacement of caste with the assumed objectivity and neutrality of economic criteria for social policy. The recognition need not force a re-thinking of the relationship between discrimination and socio-economic inequality, or the dominant view that religion is the principal marker of Muslim difference. The NCRLM indicates how the ongoing disavowal of caste structures the debate on Muslim reservation. Any specific mandate or policy question can be resolved by expressing a deep concern for improving educational standards and the alleviation of poverty, the “real issues” that all citizens must prioritize over the divisiveness of “quota politics”. The dominant presence of this position in any debate relating to reservation reveals that upper caste subjectivity is re-produced not only as “Ashraf” and “Brahmin” but also as “modern”, “educated” and “secular”. From this perspective the problem to address is how to make the “masses” similarly modern and secular, rather than question the content of these terms or the privileges that they conceal.

The concept of “democratization” in Pasmada Muslim discourse challenges this perspective in important ways. The rejection of the dominant framework of Muslim politics as minority politics enables a recognition of conflicts and strivings for democratic transformation within communities. As such, the agents of secular and democratic transformations are seen to exist within all communities.⁷³⁰ According to Kancha Illiah, no secularist school has constructed a systematic critique of Brahminism or examined its

⁷³⁰ Partha Chatterjee, in Aditya Nigam, *The Insurrection of Little Selves*, 168.

implications for secularist notions of life.⁷³¹ Illiah argues that it is necessary to Dalitize secularism in terms of everyday practices and cultural forms. This intervention opens a space to explore the interactions between governmental categories and social location against a different set of questions raised by Dalit struggles. Specifically, what is the appropriate constituency for a struggle against upper caste hegemony? How can a political agenda be articulated in a way that is inclusive of different marginalized groups without minimizing the specific conditions of untouchability? From Ambedkar's call for the establishment of the Republican Party of India, to disagreements about Buddhism and Marxism as guiding the principles of the Dalit movement, to articulations of the "Bahujan" as indigenous majority, such questions have been engaged through dynamic and shifting notions of anti-caste subjectivity. To Dalitize secularism would require the conceptualization of "community" in dynamic, non-essentialist terms. This is in contrast to the static distinctions of the categories Hindu and Muslim. In recognition of this trajectory, how can we understand the relationship between the terms Dalit, Muslim and Scheduled Caste? Does the term "Dalit Muslim" indicate the "fact" of caste or point to the formation of a politicized, anti-caste positionality? These questions suggest the historical specificity that might be lost if the term "Dalit" is reduced to a term simply interchangeable with "Scheduled Caste" and "untouchable" in the struggle over Constitutional status.

Critiques of the reservation framework in general and the Pasmada movement in particular also indicate the tension between the terms Dalit and Scheduled Caste, and their entangled but distinct political trajectories. In recent years the PMM has come to focus too largely on affirmative action and electoral politics at the expense of developing a comprehensive alternative socio-cultural-economic agenda.⁷³² Ansari thus suggests an important area of intervention for Bahujan politics should be in the realm of knowledge and culture. Further, a more robust critique of political economy is required of the movement, as a greater part of the Pasmada population works in unorganized sectors of the economy – as artisans and landless labor – that have been adversely affected by

⁷³¹ *The Weapon of the Other: Dalitbahujan Writings and the Remaking of Indian Nationalist Thought* (Dorling Kindersley Private Limited, 2010).

⁷³² Ansari, "Analysing the OBC-Minority Sub-Quota"; Alam, "Challenging the Ashrafs," 179.

processes of neo-liberal globalization. A comprehensive alternative framework across various spheres of life draws inspiration here from Ambedkar's socio-political vision. Similarly, in a series of proposals for re-invigorating the politics of social justice, Yadav underscores the variety of languages in which the idea of justice unfolded in modern Indian thought: Phule's idiom of radical social reform, the religious vocabulary of Bhakti and Ambedkar's language of legal rights and the constitutional framework.⁷³³ He suggests the need to recover and reconstruct the paradigms of these different approaches in order to recover lost spaces and claim new ones for social justice. These critiques perceive the need to re-situate the struggles for and politics of reservation within the multi-faceted traditions of anti-caste movements and philosophy. The limitations of the existing framework are from this perspective not served by the search for "economic objectivity" and "neutral" indicators, but by a critical analysis of power relations.

⁷³³ "Rethinking Social Justice," *India Seminar Issue 601 The Republic of Ideas: A Symposium of Some Concerns and Concepts Engaging our Society*, September 2009, http://www.india-seminar.com/2009/601/601_yogendra_yadav.htm.

Conclusion

When I began to study the history and politics of reservation policy, I found that two points were consistently made. First, that the inclusion of quotas in the Constitution was a clear indication of the nationalist commitment to the creation of a just and egalitarian society. Second, that reservations were an ineffective, insufficient measure for achieving social equality. I sought to understand how the policy had attained the status of a highly contentious, emotionally charged issue if it had made such little impact in Indian society. Why was it perceived as capable of severely threatening national unity, secularism and the realization of a modern, meritocratic society? What were the meanings of caste, community and nation that enabled these dire predictions? How did reservation policy operate as a mechanism for the inclusion of target groups and simultaneously, for the differentiation of groups on the basis of caste and religion?

As I read through the various texts dedicated to the subject, I noticed the almost complete absence of the experiences and opinions of the beneficiaries of the policy. My time spent in newspaper archives yielded similar results. From this initial survey it appeared that an overwhelmingly unpopular policy had managed to survive and indeed expand for over 60 years. Not only did it provoke outrage among average (upper caste) citizens, it did very little to improve the lives of SCs, STs and OBCs. An array of policy options to improve the framework – replace caste with economic criteria, remove communities that are relatively better off from the lists, divert resources to universal primary education, set firm deadlines for the removal of all reservations – could be discussed without reference to the perspectives of the subjects eligible for reservation. Anti-reservation protests served as occasions to revisit the validity of the policy. The intensity of the protests and the forms of discrimination and privilege that they were connected to did not become the focus of inquiry.

The structural exclusions that shaped the results of my research started to become clear when I encountered a collection of essays entitled *Dalit Diary 1999-2003: Reflections on Apartheid in India* by Chandra Bhan Prasad. The essays were selected from Prasad's weekly contributions to the English newspaper *Pioneer*. Prasad was the only Dalit writer to have a regular column in a mainstream English newspaper. In 1996 the publication had carried out an investigation that revealed there was not a single

accredited Dalit journalist in Delhi.⁷³⁴ Ten years after the investigation not a single SC or ST was found among more than 300 media decision makers.⁷³⁵ Prasad's column challenged the journalistic trend of reporting on caste only in cases of violent atrocities. He dedicated a regular series to investigating the operation of caste in prestigious public institutions such as the Delhi School of Economics (D School), the Center for Policy Research (CPR), the Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund (JNMF) and Delhi University. The results connected the pervasive absence of knowledge produced by Dalits with the meager presence of Dalit bodies – indicating noncompliance with constitutionally mandated reservation policy – in publically funded institutions. Despite a library collection of 250,000 books Delhi School of Economics did not have the complete works of B.R. Ambedkar, the first Indian to acquire a degree in economics from a foreign university. There was one Dalit in its faculty of 29.⁷³⁶ Ambedkar's works were non-existent in the CPR's collection of 10,000 books. A centre with the objective of “studying major policy issues before the nation to help develop a body of knowledge about policy-making” did not have a single Dalit on faculty, nor did any of its members specialize in caste studies.⁷³⁷ The JNMF runs a prestigious fellowship for doctoral and post-doctoral study. Prasad's inquiries found that it did not implement reservation for SCs/STs, did not list caste as a possible area of study and had no Dalits on its 29-member board of trustees.⁷³⁸ Similarly, Kancha Ilaiah begins his book on Dalit-Bahujan writings and Indian nationalism by describing the conditions of his research fellowship at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library. “There were several racks of books on Gandhi and

⁷³⁴ The investigation followed the unsuccessful attempts of Kenneth J. Cooper, a black journalist with the Washington Post, to find a Dalit media person in Delhi. This story was published in the Pioneer. B.N. Uniyal, a journalist with the paper wrote that “Suddenly I realized, that in all the 30 years I worked as a journalist I had never met a fellow journalist who was Dalit; not one.” Quoted in Robin Jeffrey, “Missing From the Indian Newsroom”, *The Hindu*, April 9, 2012, <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/missing-from-the-indian-newsroom/article3294285.ece>.

⁷³⁵ Ibid.

⁷³⁶ Chandra Bhan Prasad, “Delhi School of Economics: An Investigation -1,” in *Dalit Diary 1999-2003: Reflections on Apartheid in India* (Pondicherry: Navayana Publishing, 2004) 4-6.

⁷³⁷ “Centre for Policy Research: An Investigation,” in Ibid., 16-18.

⁷³⁸ “Nehru Memorial Fund: An Investigation,” in Ibid., 19-21.

Nehru. But to my surprise, there were hardly any books on Ambedkar.”⁷³⁹ Ambedkar hardly seemed to exist in the memory of research scholars in the library. Ilaiah connects this absence to the silence on caste in discourses of modern nationalism, a refusal to recognize the contributions of Dalits in nation building and the portrayal of their movements as threatening to the nationalist project.

In their respective discussions about how caste inequality structures the politics of knowledge in the country’s most reputable, well funded and influential institutions, Prasad and Ilaiah underline absence and denial. The torturous conditions of Dalit presence and inclusion are seen in the Death of Merit Campaign. Launched in 2011, the purpose of the Campaign is to document the prevalence of caste discrimination in higher education and expose the disturbing pattern of suicide among SC and ST students in these institutions. Between 2007 and 2011, 18 Dalit students took their lives in 16 institutes of higher education, including various campuses of the Indian Institute of Technology, the Indian Institute of Science and the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS). The Campaign provides a site of remembrance for students who have lost their lives in the struggle against caste inequality.⁷⁴⁰ By collecting testimonies of friends and family members, their experiences are reconstructed through an anti-caste framework. That is, their deaths are read as a sign of protest:

The death of young people, the hopes of their parents and communities, has forced the festering casteism and anti-democracy of the ‘prestigious’ educational institution into the public realm. Their deaths remind us again that Merit has blood on its hands, that bloody Merit is the offspring of generations of privilege and exploitation, that Merit was fed on blood.⁷⁴¹

In addition to collecting written commentaries the Campaign has produced a series of documentaries which detail how the unrelenting practice of caste hatred led to the death of three students: Jaspreet Singh (age 22, final year medical student, Government

⁷³⁹ *The Weapon of the Other: Dalit-Bahujan Writings and the Remaking of Indian Nationalist Thought* (New Delhi: Dorling Kindersley India, 2010), ix.

⁷⁴⁰ <http://thedeathofmeritinindia.wordpress.com/>.

⁷⁴¹ Marharivzhi Jayanth, “Why we Must Read These Suicides as Protest,” May 23, 2011, <http://thedeathofmeritinindia.wordpress.com/2011/05/23/why-we-must-read-these-suicides-as-protest/>.

Medical College, Punjab), Manish Kumar (age 20, computer science and information technology student, Indian Institute of Technology, Uttarakhand) and Balmukund Bharti (final year medical student, All India Institute of Medical Sciences, Delhi).⁷⁴² In the respective films their families describe the sacrifices they had made to bear the costs of higher education, the determination with which their children had prepared for entrance exams and their excellent academic records. In each case, not only did the administration refuse to acknowledge the role of caste discrimination in the suicide, they actively obstructed inquiries on this basis. The families of Manish Kumar and Balmukund Bharti had been aware of the treatment they had been enduring in college and both had arranged meetings with the respective administrations to address the issue. Kumar's uncle recounts the day he went to meet with the hostel warden to discuss the effects that harassment was having on his nephew's health. The warden suggested that he should find accommodation outside the hostel and offered the following advice: "Ambedkar, because of whom you have reservations, never bothered about what others said to him. You should all learn to be like him". Another commonality between these suicides was the refusal of the police in each state to register them as hate crimes under the SC/ST Prevention of Atrocities Act. Such callous denial was particularly striking in the death of Balmukund Bharti. AIIMS was subject to a government inquiry in 2006 due to ongoing complaints of harassment by SC/ST students. Headed by Dalit professor Sukhdeo Thorat, the results of the inquiry revealed that casteist violence shaped all aspects of student life for reserved category students at AIIMS, from differential and humiliating treatment by professors, segregation in hostels and verbal and physical abuse by "general category" students.⁷⁴³ The Thorat Committee reported that the pace of these practices had intensified with the organization of anti-reservation protests in 2006. The administration of AIIMS played a proactive role in the coordination of the national agitation against reservation in higher education for OBCs. During this time students from reserved categories had been forced to move from their hostel rooms and were segregated to one floor. The administration rejected the Report, citing its use of faulty methodology. Three years later, it attributed

⁷⁴² All three documentaries are available online via the Death of Merit website.

⁷⁴³ See *Report of the Committee to Enquire into the Allegation of Differential Treatment of SC/ST Students in All India Institute of Medical Science* (Delhi: 2007). Accessible via the Death of Merit website.

Bharti's death to his inability to cope with academic pressures, which led him to depression. In turn, the police pressured his father to sign a statement that he did not want to pursue further investigation into the matter.

The personal interviews and written statements collected by the Thorat Committee and the Death of Merit Campaign show how the politics of reservation shape the culture of educational institutions and encounters between “general” and “reserved” category students, educators and administrators. A respondent for the Thorat Committee describes how this distinction between “students who enter through merit” and “students who enter through quota” is established early through hazing in hostels. “They used to call us into their rooms and order us – tell ten reasons why you should get reservation, why you don't deserve to be in AIIMS. If you don't tell then we will beat you. We will lock you (in your room).”⁷⁴⁴ The Death of Merit Campaign illustrates that even the privileges of middle-classness that are supposed to insulate Dalits from the worst forms of casteism fail to save lives. Among the deaths it documents is the suicide of Ajay Shree Chandra, PhD student at Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore and a second generation literate. “As a middle class student, Ajay had all the tools to be a meritorious student, to compete with the mainstream upper caste students.”⁷⁴⁵ Despite having secured the marks for admission as a General category student he was offered a seat in the Reserved Category. The only resource that can be used to re-construct his experiences is his diary, in which he describes the atmosphere of his lab. “Those eyes, they scare me, they look with such inferiority/superiority complex at you...those eyes scare me. They tell everything. Those scares me a lot. My legs are paining.”⁷⁴⁶ The tragedies documented by the Campaign illustrate the connections between discourse, inequality and violence in the politics of reservation. In particular, the argument made by Roy, that discourses cannot be separated from “real politics” or be seen merely as reflections of social, economic and political processes. Rather, they affect real lives and real bodies in tangible ways.⁷⁴⁷ Anti-

⁷⁴⁴ Ibid., Annexure 3.1-3.2.

⁷⁴⁵ K.P Girija, “On Castes, Suicide and Higher Education,” April 26, 2011, <http://thedeathofmeritinindia.wordpress.com/2011/04/26/84/>.

⁷⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁴⁷ Srirupa Roy, *Beyond Belief: India and the Politics of Postcolonial Nationalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 17.

reservation protests have a long afterlife; the political positions staged through public demonstrations are also expressed at the levels of the individual and the everyday. As the prevalence of discrimination and harassment are routinely ignored in dominant discourses about reservation, they must be implicated in the re-production of these practices and of caste inequality more broadly. The Death of Merit Campaign starkly demonstrates the banality of the argument that the existence of the reservation policy perpetuates caste consciousness because the benefits of the quota encourage eligible groups to maintain their caste identities. The quota is assumed to be both a reminder and a reward. Rendered invisible by this argument are the ways in which privileged caste subjects come to understand themselves and their relationship to state institutions, including their refusal to implement reservations, participation in anti-quota protests and rejection of any evidence of discrimination. So are the ways that these practices inform the decisions of groups eligible for reservation. For Balmukund Bharti's father the loss of his son, the first person in their community to become a doctor, has taught him that aspirations can kill. He explains the decision of his family to keep their surviving son close to home and be satisfied with "a small education and a small job."

It is rare to find an extensive volume dedicated to the subject of reservations in Dalit and anti-caste literature.⁷⁴⁸ As indicated by the materials I have drawn upon in the preceding chapters, the reservation issue is embedded within broader questions about the role of caste in Indian democracy, autonomous anti-caste struggles and the role of literate, middle class Dalits within them, the building of political consciousness and the exercise of political power. In this way, the implications of quotas are assessed from a distinct set of criteria and support for them is articulated to and with alternative understandings of history, community and nation. My engagement with this literature prompted me to think more carefully about the status of Dalit perspectives and experiences in dominant discourses about reservation – absent, irrelevant or briefly mentioned. Specifically, to be attentive to the ways in which SCs, OBCs and "reserved category" students and workers were portrayed within this general trend of absence. Engagement with anti-caste analytics thus provided a vantage point from which to

⁷⁴⁸ An exception to this is D.N. Sandanshiv, *Reservations for Social Justice: A Socio-Constitutional Approach* (Mumbai: Current Law Publishers, 1986).

interrogate the arguments, examples and historical memories that constitute dominant discourses about reservation. Not only was there significant continuity in these discourses across time, this continuity had persisted despite the shifts in anti-caste politics and knowledge organized under the terms Dalit, Bahujan and Pasmānda.

Over the course of researching my initial formulations around the dynamic between inclusion and differentiation felt inadequate for working through the intractability of debates about reservation. If inclusion is the obvious desired outcome of social policies aimed at non-discrimination and equal opportunity, continued differentiation is generally considered the problematic outcome. The problem of differentiation is especially acute in the Indian context due to the colonial legacy of using caste and religious categories in relations of rule. My dissertation has approached this in an alternate way by specifying the multiple, conflicting political objectives that circulate in these debates and the social imaginaries that underpin them. I have shown that dominant discourses about reservation are constructed through a conflation of the issue of caste based discrimination with a series of structural consequences that stem from discrimination, such as illiteracy, poverty and landlessness. This conflation enables the argument that the policy has dismally failed to redress widespread poverty and perpetuates divisive identities. In this line of argumentation supporters of the policy are intellectually inadequate subjects that are unable to recognize their real interests and thus manipulated as vote banks. However, the issue of caste has been consistently organized out of official state discourses of poverty in India.⁷⁴⁹ Colonial shame regarding the backwardness of caste, the imperative of national unity and Nehru's vision of economic change and modernization as the preferred instruments to eradicate abhorrent social legacies combined to neglect the fundamentally social basis of poverty in India.⁷⁵⁰ Thus, arguments about how the reservation policy prevents the development of a meaningful approach to eradicate poverty effectively subordinate issues of caste categories and caste

⁷⁴⁹ David Mosse, "A Relational Approach to Durable Poverty, Inequality and Power," *Journal of Development Studies* 46, no. 7 (2010):1156-1178.

⁷⁵⁰ Gopal Guru and Anuradha Chaudhary, "Who are the Country's Poor? Social Movement Politics and Dalit Poverty," in *Social Movements in India: Poverty, Power, Politics*, ed. Raka Ray and Mary Fainsod Katzenstein (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2004), 135-160.

discrimination within the debate.⁷⁵¹ Concealed by these discourses are historical contestations over the meaning of the quota, in particular, the quota as a demand for equitable power sharing in the nation-state and the quota as an expression of the principle that public institutions should reflect the various communities within the nation. In this way, reservations can “be framed as a guilt driven concession being made by a majority that ‘owns’ the nation”⁷⁵², which sustains the overarching sense that the policy is tolerated but ultimately abhorrent.

By attending to the ways in which these different meanings are concealed and rendered illegitimate, my dissertation clarifies that the limits to tolerance of the reservation policy are not staged at the question of the appropriate subject. The presumed moral imperative that prevailed in the case of quotas for SCs and STs during the Constituent Assembly Debates is often taken as the basis for adjudicating the claims of other population groups. The expansion of the framework to include OBCs and Muslims is thus opposed by underlining the exceptional historical circumstances that made reservations justifiable for SCs and STs. However, in Chapter 1 it was seen that members of the Constituent Assembly continually expressed ambivalence about the purposes that reservation for these subjects would serve in the nation-state, stating their preference for their complete elimination. The dominant discourse in the Assembly connected reservation to the argument that the backwardness of SCs was primarily economic. As economic disadvantage was redressed SCs would no longer be “different” and would assimilate into the Hindu community. Moreover, the socio-economic location of the SCs made them intellectually and politically inadequate. As such their expression of interests that were different from those of the “majority community” was not only intolerable but also impossible. It was due to their vulnerability to manipulation by self-serving political leaders like Ambedkar and Jinnah that some SCs were unable to recognize Caste Hindu benevolence. In Chapter 2, I discussed how the figure of the middle class, educated

⁷⁵¹ For discussion on the relationship between caste and poverty see *ibid.*; Mosse, “A Relational Approach.” On the relationship between political economy, poverty and caste violence see Anand Teltumbde, *The Persistence of Caste: The Khairlanji Murders and India’s Hidden Apartheid* (New Delhi: Navayana, 2010).

⁷⁵² Satish Deshpande, “Caste and Castelessness: Towards a Biography of the General Category,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, April 13 2013, 32-39.

Scheduled Caste came to organize opposition to reservation as a justifiable resentment against those who benefitted from their caste identity at the nation's expense. The numerous forms of anti-reservation practices that had developed in the early decades of the post-colonial nation-state – from non-implementation, the formation of anti-reservation worker's organizations and the harassment and humiliation of Dalits in universities and government offices - illustrates an overarching sense of disdain towards the policy regardless of the subject in question. As such, while a key argument against the implementation of the Mandal Commission Report was that there was no historically or morally legitimate basis for the extension of reservation to OBCs, anti-reservation critics drew extensively upon their impressions of SC students and workers to argue that the policy filled prestigious public institutions with unqualified, underperforming people. Similarly, the Mishra Commission Report, while assigned the task of determining whether religious discrimination should be addressed through separate categorization within the reservation framework, approached its mandate by calling into question the use of caste criteria in any of the existing categories. The Commission argued that a single list of beneficiaries should be compiled based on "transparent" economic criteria. The petitions of Dalit Muslims and Christians to be recognized as Scheduled Caste by the state had been rejected in numerous court cases and opposed by political parties. Its swift approval by the Mishra Commission was reconcilable to its position that all caste categorizations are ultimately unreliable and politically motivated. Finally, although the anti-reservation protests organized at AIIMS in 2006 were a response to the provision of quotas for OBCs in higher education, they generated an atmosphere of hate that increased the vulnerability of all "reserved category" students to harassment and violence.

Caste Privilege, Colonial Knowledge and Indian Nationalism

That the conflation of anti-discrimination principles with economic welfare measures can be mobilized to discredit the claims to reservation for any category of subjects indicates the broader processes of which these debates are a part. My argument identifies debates about reservation as a site through which caste prejudice is reproduced and caste privilege is naturalized. According to Deshpande, a principal way in which the reservation framework naturalizes caste privilege is through the notion of the non-

reserved or general category.⁷⁵³ By defining caste solely as a source of disadvantage and vulnerability and not as a form of privilege and advantages, the Constitution made possible a “presumptive castelessness.”⁷⁵⁴ That is, it did not require upper castes to “give up” their caste identity. It simply assured them that they would be presumed casteless as long as they did not explicitly invoke their caste.⁷⁵⁵ Prior to the debates over the Mandal Commission OBCs were also included within the general category. However, as Deshpande points out, the negligible presence of the latter in public institutions meant that the general category had always been effectively comprised of upper castes. The general category does not coincide with the general population. Rather, “it is a substitute that conceals the absence of a general population.”⁷⁵⁶

My approach to studying debates about reservation contributes to understanding the discursive and representational practices through which caste privilege is generated. In his book on identity formation among Brahmins in Karnataka, Ramesh Bairy argues that the category Brahmin has retained coherence and unity of self; it is seemingly so self-evident that it needs no explanation or analysis.⁷⁵⁷ To understand how caste is reinvented in new and even antithetical circumstances, we must consider the myriad subtleties with which upper castes present themselves as secularized modern subjects shorn completely of the “abhorring” traces of caste, thereby arrogating themselves as spokespersons of the modern nation.⁷⁵⁸ Since the claim to casteless identity depends on not explicitly invoking one’s own caste location, I have found it instructive to examine how this secularized subject articulates the caste location of “others”. A prevalent argument against reservations that I have highlighted in the preceding chapters is that the beneficiaries of quotas are responsible for preventing the amelioration of widespread disadvantage because they monopolize policy benefits and prevent the development of social policies that would reach a larger segment of the population. “Lower castes” either

⁷⁵³ Deshpande, “Caste and Castelessness,” 32.

⁷⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁷⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁷⁵⁶ Susie Tharu et al., “Reservations and the Return to Politics,” *SocialSciences.In*, August 3, 2011, <http://socialsciences.in/article/reservations-and-return-politics>.

⁷⁵⁷ *Being Brahmin, Being Modern: Exploring the Lives of Caste Today* (New Delhi and Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), 2.

⁷⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

selfishly pose a hindrance to national development or they are part of the voiceless masses. Charting the debates over time shows the development of a discourse in which it is possible to lament caste based disadvantage and simultaneously, frame disadvantage in isolation from questions of discrimination and power relations. It has been argued that the translation of caste into the language of human development and disadvantage represents a secularization of caste categories. I have pointed to a parallel process, which is the secularization of caste prejudice. This can be seen in representations of the “reserved class” as parochial and undisciplined in the task of national development. Attending to the discursive production of caste privilege contributes to understanding how it is maintained despite fluidities in religious and ritual hierarchy.

If the claim to casteless identity is integral to the naturalization of privilege, this claim depends upon a specific conceptualization of caste. I have argued that while opponents of reservation denounce the policy as a legacy of colonialism and its policies of divide and rule, they simultaneously rely upon colonial discourses of caste as static, pre-modern and antithetical to nationhood in order to position themselves as unmarked, casteless citizens. The claim to a casteless identity does not deny the existence of ongoing violence and discrimination, but rather, displaces them from the spaces inhabited by upper castes. The horrific atrocities inflicted on Dalits are thus bracketed from the daily, banal and subtle acts of discrimination and humiliation that shape the context in which they occur, and determine how and if legal authorities intervene, the amount of media attention they receive and the tenor of protest (if any) at different levels of society. My argument clarifies that the epistemological critique advanced within post-colonial scholarship can contribute to understanding ongoing forms of (upper) caste politics. The import of this scholarship is its attention to techniques of essentialisation and distancing in colonial knowledge practices and their role in the maintenance of power relations. Moreover, the tracing of how this form of knowledge was empowered over other forms by claiming scientific authority and objectivity.⁷⁵⁹ I have shown that a colonial

⁷⁵⁹ In my reading of the scholarship on colonial knowledge/power as it pertains to the caste question, the key argument is not that colonialism “invented” caste. Rather, it is that the attempts within colonial institutions to develop a systematized, trans-regional and objective conception of caste transformed its meaning and the ways in which colonized subjects understood and navigated their society.

understanding of caste continues to operate in debates about reservation, especially in structuring the representation of SCs, STs and OBCs as subjects that are incapable of self-transformation. When Dalit and anti-caste struggles to forge political consciousness and alliances among different marginalized groups are rejected as the rhetoric of self-serving politicians, this rejection is based on an essentialist understanding of caste identities as irreducibly divided. Caste associations are framed as instrumental bodies that deny these divisions long enough to secure a greater portion of reservations. In Dalit-Bahujan writings on the Mandal Commission it was argued that these discourses paralleled those of the colonial state about the inability of natives to govern themselves. The description of “lower caste” subjects as the principal agents of casteism in Indian society by “casteless” subjects” is indebted to colonial knowledge practices. The persistence of colonial discourse is also seen in assessments of social transformation that are premised on the essentially scriptural basis of caste.⁷⁶⁰ Contemporary arguments about the disappearance and irrelevance of caste in urban spaces (as in the argument that untouchability has disappeared in cities) define caste in terms of observable, scripturally sanctioned ritualistic practices. Similarly, despite the documentation of discrimination and segregation experienced by Muslims and Christians on the grounds of caste, their rights and status have been assessed against an original, textual interpretation of caste as an objectively Hindu institution. In both cases, the complexity and dynamism of discriminatory practices can be dismissed.

A central concern in post-colonial studies is the relationship of Indian nationalism to notions of tradition and modernity. As essentialist representations of caste and religion (as signifiers of native tradition) were deployed to demonstrate that natives were incapable of self-rule, they also became a key site of struggle in imaginings of non-colonial pasts and futures. Mani’s study of the debates between colonial officials, native social reformers and the religious orthodoxy on the practice of sati argues that tradition was reconstituted under colonial rule. Colonial officials and native elites shared the

⁷⁶⁰ Lata Mani’s historical research has shown how the privileging of Brahminic scripture and the equation of tradition with scripture is an effect of colonial discourse in India. See “Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India,” in *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, ed. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989), 89-119.

assumption of textual hegemony, which was tied to their belief that Hindu society had fallen from a Golden age with the onset of Islamic tyranny. Over time the theme of glorious past/degraded present became crucial to nineteenth century indigenous articulations, both progressive and conservative, of specifically Hindu discourses of political and cultural regeneration.⁷⁶¹ Partha Chatterjee's influential contribution to this debate foregrounds the fashioning of a sovereign and superior realm of spiritual culture as a response to the humiliation of colonial domination. Chatterjee argues that much before it beings its political battle with the imperial power anti-colonial nationalism creates its own domain of sovereignty, the domain of the spiritual.⁷⁶² Manu Goswami's study of colonial state space and the nationalist re-signification of the state's territorial borders also traces the restorative reading of Brahminical religious scriptures by anti-colonial nationalists.⁷⁶³ These texts were selectively appropriated to contest colonial historiography and posit unity between an ancient past and a noncolonial future. This empowered the hierarchical and relational elaboration of the interlinked categories of Hindu (as true national), Muslim (as foreign, contaminating body) and India as Bharat (organic, authentic national space).⁷⁶⁴

This scholarship illuminates the contradictions of nationalism as a modern discourse that re-constructs religio-cultural traditions which are then projected as organic and authentic. While anti-colonial nationalism aimed to unify the colonized population its selective use of tradition produced exclusions of gender, religion and caste. Nationalism was defined in Hindu, male, upper caste terms. The exclusions and contradictions of the nationalist project are largely explained in terms of the inescapability of colonial categories. Thus, in his analysis of the silence on caste in nationalist thought Aditya Nigam argues that the most problematic part of the enterprise of nationalism is that the reconstitution of selfhood, the aspiration for political liberation and self-determination,

⁷⁶¹ Ibid., 112.

⁷⁶² *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

⁷⁶³ *Producing India: From Colonial Economy to National Space* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

⁷⁶⁴ Ibid., 166.

was already being defined by the parameters laid out by the colonial encounter.⁷⁶⁵ Nigam suggests that the neglect of caste inequality was due to the transformation of the Brahmin under colonial rule into a “mutated nationalist”. Through the privatization of religious identity and the firm self-perception that he had transcended traditional caste socialization, the new Brahmin self became secular and modernist. The mutated nationalist insisted that all questions of internal reform of Hindu society be subordinated to the fight for independence. The exclusion of subaltern castes was thus a byproduct of colonized subjectivity: “this mutated upper-caste self too became, willy-nilly, a party to the suppression of the urge of Dalits for liberation.”⁷⁶⁶ It is as a blind spot of modernist anti-imperialist nationalism, rather than a practice of upper-caste identity, that issues of caste were marginalized. Thus, the critique of Brahminism by Dalit scholars is misplaced as it fails to recognize the violence of colonial modernity.⁷⁶⁷

In the texts reviewed above the caste based exclusions produced by nationalism are identified but not explored in detail. The focus is on delineating the negotiations between colonial officials and native elites as the principal site through which the notions of tradition, modernity and nation acquire specific meanings. Nigam’s approach indicates the limitations of positing the colonial state as the determining interlocutor of the emergent nationalist subject, rendering marginal subjects non-conversant. The theory of a Hindu golden age, the positioning of scriptures as the essence of Hinduism and the belief in spiritual superiority vis-à-vis the West were as much a sign of privilege and dominance over other groups as they were a response to colonial humiliation. To explicate this process requires engagement with an alternate set of questions. For example, in what ways did coloniality shape encounters between modern, mutated Brahmins and marginal caste groups whose perceptions of self and society were also shifting? How was (upper

⁷⁶⁵ *The Insurrection of Little Selves: The Crisis of Secular Nationalism in India* (New Delhi and London: Oxford University Press, 2006), 253.

⁷⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 238.

⁷⁶⁷ Nigam’s intervention is framed as a debate with Kancha Ilaiah’s anti-caste critique of Indian nationalism. Specifically, Ilaiah’s argument that after 1947 Nehru implemented a Hindu nationalist agenda by transferring the control of state institutions to Brahminical forces, thus opposing Nehru’s reputation as a secular nationalist. Nigam reads this argument as a “conspiracy theory” because it fails to recognize that the dominance of upper castes in the state does not have a religious basis.

caste) anti-colonialism nationalism affected by the direct challenges posed by anti-caste thought?

G. Aloysius argues that while regionally dispersed and uncoordinated, the post-1857 period is replete with conscious, systematic and collective public action to challenge caste hierarchy.⁷⁶⁸ These include violation of caste norms, demands for civic equality, the development of alternative spiritual practices and myths of dignified origins and the establishment of journals. “Instead of meeting these struggles halfway and carrying them forward dominant castes tended by and large to sabotage them, arguing that they were inspired and abetted by the colonial state”.⁷⁶⁹ As such, it is not only that upper caste nationalists subordinated questions of caste inequality in the struggle for independence. Rather, nationalist discourse facilitated the trivialization of anti-caste arguments and actions. For example, as pro-British and designed to serve the individual ambitions of politicians with little connection to the “masses.” Ambedkar repeatedly linked annihilation of caste with the abandonment of scriptures, the Shastras, Shrutis and Vedas. The context in which he targeted these texts as foundational to the sanctioned degradation of stigmatized castes is one in which upper caste intellectuals had rediscovered and appropriated them in charting a course for the development of nationalism.

As upper castes acquired secular power through a privileged relationship to colonial institutions they simultaneously participated in projects of religious reform. Dilip Menon notes that parallel to the creation of a pan-Hindu identity and the imagination of a unitary Islam in South Asia was the withdrawal of elites from a space of popular religious practices and quotidian interaction. The sphere of abstract, intellectual religion was seen as constitutive of the fundamentals, and the sphere of everyday localized practices considered a corrupt set of accretions.⁷⁷⁰ The ability to secure dominance in colonial institutions required the re-negotiation of ritual and religious obligations, which were pursued at the level of the community. The initial stages of campaigns for caste reform in

⁷⁶⁸ G. Aloysius, *Nationalism without a Nation in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), 76-83.

⁷⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁷⁷⁰ *The Blindness of Insight: Essays on Caste in Modern India* (Pondicherry: Navayana, 2006), 21.

the 19th and early 20th century were aimed at consolidating the predominance of the Brahmin community in state structures.⁷⁷¹ For example, inter-dining and inter-marriage were promoted among Brahmin sub-castes only, in order to consolidate a more effective collective caste identity in colonial institutions. In his discussion of these changes at a cross-regional level, G. Aloysius argues that the colonial process of bureaucratization transformed the hitherto disparate and localized dominance of upper castes through structural unification.⁷⁷² This suggests that the privatization of upper caste identity was related to the minimizing of practiced and perceived differences amongst sub-castes within the upper strata. The practices that enable identity to be privatized involve a homogenization and nationalization of Brahmin identity. According to Aloysius, this meant that nationalists had two levers of power: first, the national-secular organizations for the promotion of economic and political interests and second, religio-cultural organizations based on the traditional and the sacred – either reformed, revived or rediscovered.⁷⁷³ It is in this context that we need to consider the self-imposed limits that nationalists placed on their social reform programs vis-à-vis caste inequality. Therefore, an important area of future research is to evaluate specific religious reform projects for their effects on caste identification.

Reservations, Affect and Historical Memory

My project has attended to the role of affective discourses in articulations of distinct positions on reservation policy and their connections to historical memory. I pursued this mode of inquiry in order to understand how and why this policy has endured as a prominent site of social conflict. My approach assumes that emotive language cannot be separated from other forms of language; “language works as a form of power in which emotions align some bodies with others and stick different figures

⁷⁷¹ Aloysius, *Nationalism without a Nation*; Bairy, *Being Modern, Being Brahmin*; Deshpande, “Caste and Castelessness.”

⁷⁷² *Nationalism without a Nation*, 45. Also see Bairy, *Being Modern, Being Brahmin*, 53-80. Bairy’s research in Karnataka draws on personal memoirs of employees in the colonial bureaucracy to show the existence of informal networks which facilitated the entry of their own caste-men to bureaucratic employment and their demonstrated ability to block the entry of non-Brahmins into colonial institutions.

⁷⁷³ Aloysius, *Nationalism with a Nation*, 113.

together, by the way they move us”.⁷⁷⁴ The affective justifications for quotas as a compensatory measure to absolve societal guilt co-exist with an intense anger towards the policy and its beneficiaries, conjuring images of insulated elites, manipulated masses clamoring for the meager crumbs of reservations, and meritorious students denied the opportunities they rightfully deserved. This twinned structure of guilt and anger is sustained by the conflation of anti-discrimination measures with economic welfare measures in dominant discourses about reservation. The conflation is registered in a representative structure based on non-correspondence between those who benefit from reservation and the vast majority who suffer from caste related disadvantage. Hatred and resentment towards the “government Brahmin” is thus not only a result of the opportunities lost by casteless (upper caste) citizens. Resentment is articulated as a moral opposition towards the comforts enjoyed by a small reserved elite while the majority of the nation remains in unaltered backwardness. By enabling the sympathetic identification of upper castes with the “masses”, this representative structure offers a resolution to what Elizabeth Povinelli describes as the conflicting obligations to reason and moral sensibility. The ways in which individual and collective subjects performatively enact and overcome these moments of impasse are generative; they give rise to new social imaginaries.⁷⁷⁵ Such a generative moment was seen during Nehru’s speech in defense of the elimination of political rights for Muslims during the Constituent Assembly debates. Nehru welcomed this as a momentous occasion because it finally released the collective consciousness of the Assembly from the persistent unease of having to accept a provision that they knew in their hearts to be fundamentally wrong. Unfortunately, since reservations for SCs could not be eliminated Nehru asked the Assembly to reconcile themselves to it by shifting their perspective. They should not see it as a “caste” issue but as a sense of duty towards helping backward groups in society. In offering this perspective to the Assembly as a way for members to tolerate the provision, Nehru disconnected quotas from the autonomous politics of Ambedkar and re-framed them as a benevolent gesture.

⁷⁷⁴ Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 195.

⁷⁷⁵ *The Cunning of Recognition: Indigenous Alterities and the Making of Australian Multiculturalism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), 5.

In her work on the relation between pain and politics Laura Berlant claims that the production of national sentimentality maintains the hegemony of the national identity form. As a rhetoric of promise that a nation can be built across fields of social difference through affective identification and empathy, national sentimentality upholds the notion of abstract citizenship by certain appropriations of mass subaltern pain.⁷⁷⁶ In the Constituent Assembly Debates members argued that legal rights and protections were inferior to the forging of relations of love, trust and goodwill between majority and minority groups. Moreover, rights to representation amplified feelings of difference among minorities and thus threatened the possibility of these relationships to emerge. The Constituent Assembly Debates reveal how complex political trajectories among Muslims and Dalits were reduced to an effect of emotional resistance. Claims to political representation were translated as irrational feelings of mistrust, fear and suspicion of the benevolent majority. As Ahmed argues, the idealization of the social bond through affect translates historical and political relationships into a moral duty, which others fail. Importantly, this leaves no room for considering justice as the right to not enter into certain relationships, to reject the expression of sympathy.⁷⁷⁷

The mobilization of guilt, shame, resentment and hate in dominant discourses about reservation is historically related to the contestations between institutionalized nationalism and anti-caste politics, which these discourses displace. The nationalists' response to lower caste struggles that rejected the authority of the Congress was to delegitimize them as job-hunting, casteist, communal and pro-imperialism.⁷⁷⁸ The construction of anti-caste movements as a threat to national cohesion is an absent presence in debates about reservation. As discussed in Chapter 2, the vision of the post-colonial state assumed that economic modernization and the inculcation of a scientific outlook among the population would inevitably lead to the transcendence of caste identity. Shashi Tharoor's rendering of this trajectory in "Scheduled Caste, Unscheduled Change" illustrates the conversion of upper caste guilt into national pride through the

⁷⁷⁶ "The Subject of True Feeling: Pain, Privacy and Politics," in *Left Legalism/Left Critique*, ed. Wendy Brown and Janet Halley (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), 105-134.

⁷⁷⁷ Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 199.

⁷⁷⁸ Aloysius, *Nationalism without a Nation*, 172.

figure of Charlis. Tharoor attributes the ability of Charlis to become an IAS officer to the nationalist movement's recognition that a unified opposition to the British could only be forged through an assault on caste hierarchy. However, the narrative of change ends with a precautionary note about the scions of privilege that continue to benefit from caste quotas and perpetuate divisive identities. Empowered by the reservation policy, these subjects have made India a more caste conscious society, something "the leaders of the anti-British struggle would never have imagined."⁷⁷⁹ In Chapter 3 it was seen that the press coverage of the anti-Mandal protests portrayed upper caste students as defending national unity against the forces of caste and communalism, thus upholding the ideals of the independence movement.⁷⁸⁰ The Mandal Commission underscored the minority status of upper castes against the vast majority of the population that constituted the reserved categories. This brought to light the long forgotten "power sharing" or consociational argument for reservations articulated in anti-caste thought.⁷⁸¹ The vociferous mobilization of bodies and texts to prevent the implementation of the Mandal recommendations drew from the historical association of power sharing and community representation with colonial governance. In turn, Dalit-Bahujan activists pointed out the resemblance of this argument to the colonial claim that Indians were essentially incapable of governing themselves. It is telling that at this juncture the Hindu Right's call for sealing the fissures of caste through restoring the fundamentally Hindu basis of the nation had such a powerful appeal. Hindu nationalism named religious difference as the central fault line of Indian society through the construction of Muslims as essentially other – followers of a foreign religion, sympathizers of Pakistan and receivers of undeserved privileges by the Congress in the name of secularism. Post-partition writings of the Muslim problem in India that were reviewed in Chapter 4 reveal the longer history to which these representations belong. The writings of avowedly secular intellectuals in post-partition India attributed the marginalization of Muslims to their emotional resistance to national

⁷⁷⁹ Shashi Tharoor, *India: From Midnight to Millennium* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1997), 110.

⁷⁸⁰ Satish Deshpande argues that in retrospect, the first and most significant consequence of OBC assertion for quotas was that with the addition of OBCs to the reserved category, the general category became a euphemism for upper castes. In "Caste and Castelessness," 38.

⁷⁸¹ *Ibid.*

integration and modernization, thus constituting the community as a pathological affective formation. This was an extension of the separate organization of Muslim politics in the colonial period, which was linked to the foreign origin of Islam. Thus, the tendency to view themselves as irreducibly different from other groups was framed as an essential quality of Muslim subjectivity. The anti-caste analytic applied by Pasmada activists demonstrates that neither Hindu or Muslim elites envisioned an agential role for the majority of rural and working class Muslims in altering these conditions. They link the economic and political marginalization of the latter to the co-option of the Momin Conference, organized autonomously by Muslim weaver communities in the early 20th century, by the Congress after 1947.

The rejection of upper caste affect is necessary for the articulation of anti-caste political thought. Ambedkar's incisive critique of the notion of "untouchable uplift" clearly explains the implications of "sympathetic" social reform:

It is usual to hear all those who feel moved by the deplorable condition of the Untouchables unburden themselves by uttering the cry, 'We must do something for the Untouchables.' One seldom hears any of the persons interested in the problem saying, 'Let us do something to change the Touchable Hindu.' It is invariably assumed that the object to be reclaimed is the Untouchables. If there is to be a mission, it must be to the Untouchables and if the Untouchables can be cured, untouchability will vanish. Nothing requires to be done to the Touchable. He is sound in mind, manners and morals. He is whole, there is nothing wrong with him. Is this assumption correct? Whether correct or not, the Hindus like to cling to it. The assumption has the supreme merit of satisfying themselves that they are not responsible for the problem of the Untouchables.⁷⁸²

Individual and collective actions motivated by pity and guilt maintain caste based power relations by concealing the implication of caste Hindus in their re-production. In *What Gandhi and the Congress Have Done to the Untouchables*, Ambedkar described Gandhian social reform as a plan to "kill the Untouchables with kindness". Ambedkar's impassioned reading of textual Hinduism helped him build a new political community of Dalits, which mobilized itself as a nationwide movement through rage filled readings of

⁷⁸² "Untouchables or the Children of India's Ghetto," in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches* vol. 5 (Bombay: Education Department Government of Maharashtra, 1989), 3.

Indian history and culture.⁷⁸³ Self-respect was expressed militantly in the Dalit Panther movement as it rejected the patronizing view of Scheduled Castes as docile and compliant objects of reform. This redefinition of Dalit identity “valorized anger as the expression of a legitimate moral stand taken by the oppressed”.⁷⁸⁴ The movement developed a command of the language of outrage not only by publicizing their anger, but also by inspiring adverse reactions from nationalists, displaying their rightful ability to shock the conservative sections of society⁷⁸⁵. In the literature that emerged through the movement, attacks on Hindu scriptures and middle class lifestyles assaulted upper caste pity, provoking the contempt beneath its surface.

Dalit literature illustrates the connections between affect, self-transformation and knowledge production in practices of community formation. Rejecting objectification makes self-representation integral to political assertion. Rodrigues argues that self-respect occupies a central place in Dalit-Bahujan thought and is regarded as a “pre-condition for other political claims and rights expressive of those claims”.⁷⁸⁶ The pursuit of self-respect requires transformation of beliefs and practices that have treated people with contempt and humiliation; it cannot be engendered through the generosity of others.⁷⁸⁷ Marathi Dalit literature was a medium through which activists that had benefitted from reservation in education expressed humiliation as a collective condition and sought to transform it into collective rage. The relationship between self-respect, knowledge production and community formation was also seen in Kanshi Ram’s efforts to politically unite disparate castes into a community of the Bahujan Samaj. Kanshi Ram argued that the Poona Pact had produced a class of Scheduled Caste stooges beholden to upper caste politicians. The cost of Gandhi’s assimilative benevolence was the perpetual

⁷⁸³ D.R. Nagaraj, *The Flaming Feet: Essays on the Dalit Movement in India*, ed. Prithvi Datta and Chandra Shobhi (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2010), 105.

⁷⁸⁴ Nicolas Jaoul, “The Righteous Anger of the Powerless: Investigating Dalit Outrage over Caste Violence,” *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal* 2 (2008), <http://samaj.revues.org/1892>.

⁷⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁸⁶ Valerian Rodrigues, “Dalit-Bahujan Discourse in Modern India,” in *Political Ideas in Modern India*, ed. Vrajendra Raj Mehta and Thomas Pantham (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2006), 48.

⁷⁸⁷ Ibid.

marginalization of autonomous Dalit politics. Thus, the significance of the Mandal Commission was its potential catalyzing role in the mobilization of Dalit-Bahujan communities.⁷⁸⁸ The prolonged spectacle of anti-reservation protests contributed to the building of political consciousness, as upper caste students polishing boots and sweeping in the streets blatantly attacked the self-respect of laboring communities. As privilege and prejudice were unabashedly put on display, the anti-Mandal agitations became a collective memory that facilitated anti-caste politicization. The actions of the protestors and their support in media outlets were presented as evidence that SCs, OBCs and religious minorities did not belong to the Hindu nation. Similarly, Pasmanda discourses link the marginalization of indigenous Muslims to their misrecognition as a religious minority community, thus challenging the notion that the national majority and minority are “Hindu” and “Muslim”. Ali Anwar and Masood Falahi have challenged the dominant narratives about Muslim history by revealing the institutionalization of caste discrimination as Islamic practice. The reputation of Syed Ahmad Khan as a great modernizer of Indian Muslims is dismantled as attention is drawn to the casteist, anti-democratic character of his educational vision and his deliberate distancing of Ashraf Muslims from weaver communities in the aftermath of the failed anti-colonial uprising of 1857. Ongoing attempts to forge different kinds of relationships across class, caste and religious locations presents a much more complex picture of reservation politics than dominant representations of an insulated reserved elite disconnected from the backward masses.

⁷⁸⁸ The post-Mandal phase of Dalit-Bahujan politics in UP and Bihar has also been accompanied by the growth of Dalit publishing. The presence of over 100 Dalit publishing presses in these states, positioned outside the mainstream market catering to urban English speaking consumers shows how reservations in education have contributed to the democratization of knowledge. The key themes of the literature are the deconstruction of Brahminical texts and mythology and critical re-interpretations of the role of Dalit-Bahujan communities in anti-colonial struggles. See Badri Narayan, “Heroes, Histories and Booklets,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, October 13 2001, 3923-3934; Sara Beth, “Taking to the Streets: Dalit Mela and the Public Performance of Dalit Cultural Identity,” *Contemporary South Asia* 14, no.4 (2005): 397-410.

Caste and Race: Difference, Equality and Discrimination

Sikhs may remain as such in perpetuity, so may Mohamedans, so may Europeans. Will untouchables remain untouchables in perpetuity? I would far rather Hinduism died than that untouchability lived.⁷⁸⁹

In his engagement with Ambedkar over the status of Scheduled Castes, Gandhi posed the problem that continues to drive debates about group rights, difference and equality in multiple contexts. If the condition of equality is achieved when group differences cease to justify exclusion, realizing this objective requires that differences be invoked, stalling their transcendence. However, Gandhi also made a distinction between the value of religio-cultural differences that impart identity and belonging within a group, and the discriminatory difference that prevents entry into the group. This came to be registered in the separation of the rights of religious minorities from the policy of reservations in the Indian Constitution. Much before debates about group rights and multiculturalism gained momentum in Britain and settler colonial nation-states like the US, Canada and Australia, the Constitution had established a framework that recognized religio-cultural difference and targeted discriminatory difference. However, the contentious politics of difference and equality were not thereby resolved. As the debates about Muslim inequality initiated by the Sachar Committee Report demonstrate, the confinement of minority issues to (homogenized forms of) religion and culture obscured how discrimination and poverty affected diverse Muslim communities. On the other hand, anti-caste practices such as religious conversion, critical interrogations of Hindu scriptures and mythologies, literary activism and historical re-construction underscore the role of self-definition in struggles against discrimination. As Beth argues, Dalit assertions in public space both constitute a claim to a separate cultural identity and to a position as equal citizens of the nation-state.⁷⁹⁰ This trajectory of group rights challenges

⁷⁸⁹ M.K. Gandhi, in B.R. Ambedkar, *What Gandhi and Congress Have Done to the Untouchables* (Bombay: Thacker and Company, 1945), 68.

⁷⁹⁰ Beth, "Taking to the Streets," 497.

arguments in critical scholarship about the de-politicizing and de-historicizing effects of rights discourse and its production of atomized individuals.⁷⁹¹ They show that the struggles of historically stigmatized groups for equal rights generate novel understandings of difference, commonality and personhood. The difference being asserted is a political claim. For Ambedkar, attacking discriminatory difference necessitated a fundamental re-definition of the religio-cultural group designated as Hindu. Anti-caste thought identifies the symbols and stories of Caste Hindu and/as nationalist culture as dependent on the subordination of Dalit-Bahujan communities. This emphasis on the relational production of difference shows the limits of group rights premised on the protection of culture as expressed in discourses of liberal multiculturalism. We must move beyond dilemmas of individual rights versus group rights in order to engage how historically produced inequalities are implicated in the production of cultural differences between groups.

If debates about caste, minority and reservation are to be situated within comparative studies on the relationship between difference, discrimination and inequality, it is imperative to counter the ongoing representation of caste as a marker of South Asian exceptionalism. The identification of caste as a traditional Hindu institution has meant that there have been limited studies of the differences and similarities of caste practices and religious communities across national borders in South Asia.⁷⁹² In 2001 Dalit activists and transnational solidarity networks challenged the exceptionality of caste by campaigning to have caste discrimination internationally recognized as a form of racial discrimination at the International Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination and Xenophobia and Related Intolerance in Durban. The Government of India opposed the campaign on the grounds that caste was a social institution and thus

⁷⁹¹ Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press); Duncan Kennedy, "The Critique of Rights in Critical Legal Studies," in *Left Legalism/Left Critique*, ed. Wendy Brown and Janet Halley (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), 178-229.

⁷⁹² For a comparative study of caste in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Nepal, see Surinder Jhodhka and Ghanshyam Shah, "Comparative Contexts of Discrimination: Caste and Untouchability in South Asia," *Economic and Political Weekly*, November 27, 2010, 99-106. The authors argue that between 15-25% of the populations in these four states experience caste discrimination, which produces poverty and social exclusion.

could not be considered as a form of racial discrimination, as race was a biological characteristic. This position illustrates how the notion of caste as an exceptional, incomparable institution also involved the essentialization of race. Although the campaign efforts were ultimately unsuccessful in placing “caste” alongside race in the UN framework, the experience of Durban is hailed as a historic landmark for anti-caste activism as it raised the profile of caste discrimination within and beyond the borders of the Indian nation-state.⁷⁹³

Balmurli Natrajan and Paul Greenough argue that Durban was significant for the study of struggles against inequality because it challenged the sociological convention that casteism and racism are different theoretical problems.⁷⁹⁴ They anticipate a “post-Durban turn” in caste scholarship informed by the intellectual tradition of critical race theory. This requires theorizing caste within the language of social construction and in intersection with other structures of differentiation and inequality, such as class, gender, race and religion. Future comparative research must move beyond the question of whether or not caste/casteism is similar to race/racism and deepen our understanding of both sets of terms by attending to the global context of their productions. An important starting point for critical comparison is that even as Dalit activists advanced struggles against discrimination by drawing on the concept of racial discrimination, the recognition of racial inequality in the US has been consistently de-legitimized since the 1990s. In the 1990s and early 2000s highly charged debates and widespread student protests marked the dismantling of affirmative action programs in the University of California system and the University of Michigan. This resulted in a series of assaults on affirmative action which coincided with efforts to control immigrant rights and restrict public support for welfare, undergirded by discourses of responsible individualism, colorblindness and post-

⁷⁹³ See Sukhdeo Thorat and Umakant, ed. *Caste, Race and Discrimination: Discourses in International Context* (New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2004); Balmurli Natrajan and Paul Greenough, ed. *Against Stigma: Studies in Caste, Race and Justice since Durban* (Hyderabad: Orient Black Swan, 2009); Eva-Maria Hardtmann, *The Dalit Movement in India: Local Practices, Global Connections* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009).

⁷⁹⁴ Balmurli Natrajan and Paul Greenough, “Introduction,” in *Against Stigma*, 1-45.

racial America⁷⁹⁵. Neo-liberal economic restructuring has operated through racial logics in the US by demonizing black women's bodies as "welfare queens" and criminalizing black poverty through mass incarceration, while announcing the arrival of a post-racial era. Moreover, the representation of South Asian diasporic subjects as "model minorities", a projection that generalizes from the caste-class background of a particular section of migrants, has contributed to anti-black racism and the erasure of the specific histories of racialized communities. A significant parallel between the US context and the arguments I have made in this dissertation is that the erasure of the concept of discrimination from public debate has been integral to the dismantling of affirmative action policies. According to Kimberle Crenshaw the movement against affirmative action is not simply about eliminating a set of policies, but rather, seeks to install a particular orientation towards inequality itself – one that mandates the elimination of race and gender discourses rooted in distribution.⁷⁹⁶

The trans-national circulation of discourses about caste has increased in the post-Durban context, in large part due to Dalit civil society activism and campaigns among Dalit transnational advocacy networks across Europe and North America. The latter have prioritized proposals for affirmative action that draw upon the US experience of "diversity policies" such as supplier diversification in federal contracts. They are also engaged in lobbying foreign corporations to incorporate Dalit human rights within their corporate social responsibility programs. In the context of neo-liberal restructuring trans-national networks are part of a complicated interaction between donors, development agencies, activists and the state.⁷⁹⁷ A second area of trans-national circulation is the growing interest in Dalit literature from major publishers in India, the US and France. However, this is in tandem with the popularity of South Asian creative literature more broadly, in which Dalit characters penned by non-Dalit writers figure prominently. The

⁷⁹⁵ Roopali Mukherjee, *The Racial Order of Things: Cultural Imaginaries of the Post Soul Era* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); Kimberle Crenshaw, "Framing Affirmative Action", *Michigan Law Review* 123 (2007): 123-133.

⁷⁹⁶ "Framing Affirmative Action," 126.

⁷⁹⁷ For analysis on these interactions see Jens Lerche, "Transnational Advocacy Networks and Affirmative Action for Dalits in India," *Development and Change* 39, no. 2 (2008): 239-261 and Luisa Steur, "Dalit Civil Society Activism," *India Seminar* 633 *Caste Matters*, May 2012, http://www.india-seminar.com/2012/633/633_luisa_steur.htm.

operation of caste inequality in the realm of cultural production is evident from the ways in which non-Dalit portrayals of (lower) castes gain critical acclaim and reach larger global audiences than English translations of Dalit literature. The tenor of these works continues to be one of “empathy sans agency”.⁷⁹⁸ Finally, the UK has been the site of an ongoing campaign to include caste discrimination within equality legislation, a move opposed by the Hindu Council UK. Networks of Ambedkarite Buddhist organizations and Ravidassi Sikh temples, organized through the platform Caste Watch UK, have documented how caste related harassment impacts their communities. An important challenge in this process has been to prove that discrimination is a result of caste specifically, as opposed to other categories of difference already existing within equality legislation.⁷⁹⁹

If these developments are to be theorized the concepts of caste and race cannot be assigned to distinct geographical spaces. The global inequalities that structure Dalit transnational advocacy networks and international civil society organizations have been historically produced through a racialized division of labor. At the same time, Orientalist perceptions of the non-West critically influence the politics of reception of South Asian fiction. The documentation of Caste Watch UK also notes how these perceptions resulted in the failure of white subjects in positions of authority to take seriously grievances related to caste discrimination. Further research into the processes of translation that unfold in these sites should seek to understand how engagement with the concept of caste impacts perceptions about social difference and discrimination among development workers, reading publics and legislators in European and North American societies. Tracing how race and caste operate and condition each other in specific contexts requires understanding these concepts in terms of privilege as well as oppression. The circulation of and conflicts between multiple meanings crucially shape power relations and the struggles to alter them.

⁷⁹⁸ For a critical account of Dalit literature and international markets see S. Anand, “Lighting out for the Territory: The Arduous Journey of Modern Dalit Literature,” *The Caravan: A Journal of Politics and Literature*, 1 February 2011, <http://caravanmagazine.in/essay/lighting-out-territory>.

⁷⁹⁹ See <http://www.castewatchuk.org/> and Hilary Metcalf and Heather Rolfe, *Caste Discrimination and Harassment in Great Britain*, National Institute of Social and Economic Research (United Kingdom: 2010).

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