CHAPTER 8

CASTE IN THE EVERYDAY LIFE OF INDEPENDENT INDIA

INTRODUCTION

Having seen that the modern Indian state has been anything but caste-free in its language and actions, the focus now returns to the domain of family, locality and personal perception. Today, as in the colonial period, the claims of caste still extend well beyond the conventions of public policy and the electoral arena. Yet it is equally clear that these norms have been significantly affected by the many changes which have transformed Indian life and thought in the years since Independence. The aim of Chapters 8 and 9 will be to ask what altered meanings Indians have come to attach to these aspects of jati and varna, exploring those areas of contemporary experience in which assertions of caste logic have had appeal for both the insecure and the advantaged.

There are two distinct though overlapping manifestations of caste to be pursued here. The first, to be explored in this chapter, concerns caste consciousness as it has been manifested in surprising though generally uncontentious forms, most notably where we see conventions of jati and varna difference retaining their power in the modern workplace and in the thinking of educated city-dwellers. The second, to be explored in Chapter 9, is a far more sensitive matter in modern India: the persistence and extreme violence of the so-called caste war outbreaks which have received much sensational coverage since the 1970s.

In both of these areas, a particular conception of caste identity has come to the fore, especially among people who see themselves as informed and modern-minded. In its treatment of caste as something in the nature of an ethnicity or nationality, it draws on themes which were present in many of the earlier reform or uplift movements discussed in previous chapters, but with an enhanced tendency towards rivalry and antagonism in dealings with other jati and varna 'communities'. It is this which has made many contemporary caste interactions appear very different from the networks of interdepen-

dency or structural opposition described in the classic ethnographies of the post-Independence era.[1]

This exclusive or ethnicity-like view of jati and varna rests on a notion of caste as an urgent moral mandate, that is, as a bond of collective virtues and obligations on the basis of which public-spirited people should take decisive action when they hear the call to arms. These appeals have had ramifications far beyond the realm of family and locality; in the cases to be discussed here, the public arena and the supra-local political stage have played a major role. Thus the reality of caste for modern Indians still springs from interactions between the concerns of the parochial face-to-face locality, and an awareness of debates and events in the domain of regional and national politics.

Caste is certainly not the only basis on which Indians have professed bonds of common entitlement and disability in their home localities, and in their dealings with external authority. Since the 1950s, cross-cutting affinities of faith, class and ethno-linguistic identity have often had a more direct and lasting impact on both local and national life than the claims of anti-Brahmanism, or Harijan 'uplift', or so-called caste reform movements.[2] Yet since Independence, large numbers of Indians have found advantage in presenting themselves to state agencies as members of named regional jatis or wider multi-caste groupings, claiming either a shared inheritance of superior worth and virtue, or a history of injustice at the hands of Forward or high-caste 'oppressors'.

Furthermore, references to jati and varna have almost always come into play at some level when more generalised forms of mobilisation have occurred, even among those who claim to speak on public platforms in the name of a Hindu or Aryan 'community', or as Dalits, or peasant *kisans*, or as heirs to a supposedly suppressed regional culture – that of the Kannada-speakers or Tamil-Dravidians, for example.[3] At the very least, the idea of promoting allegiance among people of like caste has come to be invoked in public speech as a way of imputing backward social attitudes to others. Thus 'we' are the ones with a legitimate claim to solidarity; it is always 'they' – one's unworthy rivals – who are given to so-called 'casteism' or 'casteist' values and actions.

[1] For example, Leach 1971, esp. pp. 1–10.
[2] Pinch 1996.
[3] Washbrook 1989; Barnett 1976.

These two English neologisms are invariably used pejoratively. Since Independence, politicians from virtually every mainstream party and ideological tradition have routinely attacked their opponents for making 'casteist' appeals to the electorate. Indeed, until recently, the one point on which conservative Hindu nationalists, Nehruvian 'secularists' and revolutionary Marxists have generally agreed is in their rejection of the old pre-Independence concept of the 'golden chain'. (See Chapter 4.) Yet there can be little doubt that for many modern Indians the idea of pride in caste as an expression of selfless virtue has undergone a real revival. A much-debated example of this trend would be the campaigners for Hindu self-assertion in Rajasthan who, in 1987, publicly glorified *sati* (widow-burning) as a supposed manifestation of noble Rajput values. And while it would be wrong to exaggerate the importance of this one case, both this chapter and the next will seek to explain why such appeals have become increasingly intelligible and attractive in recent years. The aim here will be to ask why caste has come to operate for so many Indians in the manner of an 'imagined community', that is, as a bond of idealised allegiance answering needs which both in India and elsewhere have been more widely associated with the claims of two other forms of supra-local attachment – the modern nation and the ethno-religious 'community'.[4]

THE INSECURITIES OF THE MODERN ENVIRONMENT

While some commentators have portrayed Western academics as being excessively preoccupied with caste, few would deny that jati and varna conventions have remained active and visible in the post-Independence period.[5] In the 1970s it was widely argued that these had come to differ in striking ways from more 'traditional' expressions of caste ideology, and that awareness of caste had undergone a particularly

[4] On 'casteism', see for example the Indian Conference on Social Work's *Report on Casteism and Removal of Untouchability* (1955), cited in Sheth 1979: 188 n. 10. On *sati*, see Unnithan 114–15 in Searle-Chatterjee and Sharma 1994; Hawley in Hawley 1994: 9; and Oldenberg in Hawley 1994: 105.

[5] See the important overview provided in Fuller 1996, esp. pp. 1–31. For a critique of academic writing on caste see Appadurai 1986; for a contrasting view, see Jagjivam Ram 1980, esp. ch. 58, 'Casteless society – a dream'.

profound change in the arena of the modern workplace and the modern nation-state.

The term 'substantialisation', originally coined by Dumont, was employed here. The aim was to explain why caste was still so evidently a force in Indian life, while being understood in ways which were so often at odds with the principles of 'traditional' caste. Thus the puzzle that users of these terms hoped to resolve can be summed up as follows. On the one hand, so-called traditional caste values had been widely portrayed as the props of an immobile, other-worldly, fatalistic and backward-looking social order. Yet on the other hand, it has been those identifying themselves as modern people living in a world of individuality and active agency who have often been most inclined to exalt caste solidarities as embodiments of progressive contemporary values.[6]

For Dumont the traditional caste Hindu had no inviolable caste 'substance'. The essence of caste resided in the structured opposition between ranked groups which perceived one another both hierarchically and holistically. Each caste Hindu shared a particular caste lifestyle; one's own particular *dharma* or code of conduct was distinct from that of other caste groups, but this was a basis on which relations between hierarchically ranked castes and sub-castes were structured. Without fulfilling *dharma* in this interactive sense, with its emphasis on differentiations between ranked sub-castes or *gotras*, one could not be or remain a Bhumihar, Vellala or Patidar. Fulfilling *dharma* was thus not simply a matter of living out the life to which one was born as heir to an innate and permanent Vellala or Patidar 'substance'. Instead, the leading of a 'dharmic' life required the so-called caste Hindu to work continually to maintain personal and collective purity. This was to be achieved in ways which required interactions between high and low or pure and impure caste groups, with those who ranked both higher and lower on this scale being bound together in this asymmetrical symbiosis.

The implication of this theory of substance and 'substantialisation' was that in so-called traditional caste society, all Patidars were not the same as other Patidars. On the contrary, the Patidar caste was an open-ended array of divergent sub-caste units – the 'superior' Leva

[6] This was not why Dumont originally employed the term. His intention was to indicate how modern 'politicised' caste differed from caste in its 'traditional' form, which for Dumont was interactive or relational rather than 'substantialised'.

sub-caste of Patidars being distinct and alien to those of 'lesser' Bhakta, Kadva or Matia sub-caste.[7] Furthermore, caste identity could be lost or forfeited, hence the formalised mechanisms of 'outcasting' which once featured so prominently in the colonial ethnographies.

As we have seen, most Indians did not become insistent on these minutely graded sub-caste barriers until relatively recent times. Yet purity-loving, 'holistic', *gotra*-conscious forms of caste identity had indeed become widespread by the end of the colonial period; it was these manifestations of jati and varna logic which Dumont and his contemporaries had called 'traditional'. What social scientists began to find in the 1960s and 1970s was that many Indians did seem after all to regard their identity as Bhumihars, Vellalas or Patidars as in some sense innate and immutable. It was this apparent shift to an idea of inherent and fixed caste substance or identity which anthropologists came to refer to as 'substantialisation'. This ingrained something that made one Bhumihar or Patidar now seemed to have the features of a fixed ethnicity or blood bond which harmonised with or overrode the sub-caste (*gotra*) as the primary unit of 'traditional' social affiliation.[8]

Of course, this shift to more modern or 'substantialised' experiences of caste has been anything but complete, with both variants often co-existing and overlapping in everyday life and thought. Nevertheless the differences between them are real and important. A number of influential studies have traced the origins of this 'modernised' or 'substance'-centred idea of caste to the 'modern' experiences of economic and political life both during and after the colonial period. It has been noted that these changes of perception were evident in the arguments of many nineteenth- and twentieth-century caste uplift movements. Many of these 'modern' organisations had promoted the goal of sub-caste fusion as a moral value in its own right. They had also argued that 'reformists' could flout dharmic convention by crossing the ocean or practising widow remarriage without losing the essential 'substance' that defined their caste identity.[9]

In the years after Independence, social scientists found further evidence of the spread of these modern-minded or 'substantialised' forms of caste consciousness. One key ethnography of the 1970s

[7] Breman 1984: 84.

[8] Compare Parry 1979 on the existence of Rajputs who come both above and below the line of 'dharmic' conformity.

[9] See Barnett 1977.

explored this trend in the experience of a particular supra-local 'clean-caste' jati, the Kontaikkattai Vellalas (KVs) of Tamil Nadu state.[10] When this study was undertaken by Barnett, those identifying themselves as KV/Kontaikkattais still claimed seigneurial origins and often held title to ancestral rice lands. But, as in other densely populated cash-crop regions, their much-subdivided holdings had become uneconomic, and many KVs had turned to employment in the region's turbulent mill towns. Far from making them indifferent to the claims of caste, Barnett found that these experiences fostered a sense of shared identity which defined all KVs regardless of sub-caste or occupation as heirs to an immutable essence or 'substance' which was unique to the entire jati. Being Kontaikkattai in this modern or 'substantialised' sense, therefore, did not depend on what members of particular kin groups or KV sub-castes might do or fail to do towards the preservation of personal or collective purity.[11]

At the same time, this study found KVs having to make difficult individual judgements about how and to what extent considerations of caste should apply in complex 'modern' situations, especially those involving interactions with Harijan-untouchables. One revealing vignette in Barnett's account has KV factory labourers debating whether to stage a walk-out in which they might have been joined by fellow workers of Harijan-untouchable background. None of them seems to have been in any doubt about the caste identity of their fellow workers. Furthermore, those discussing the strike proposal clearly found it natural to act as a joint decision-making unit on the basis of their shared KV jati origin. Some apparently felt that a multi-caste strike might be good strategy in this workplace; there was no suggestion that such an alliance might involve food-sharing or other polluting contacts across caste lines.

Yet there were KV workers who resisted the idea of joint action with Harijans precisely because these workers were of untouchable/*avarna* origin like their own or their rural kinsmen's agricultural labourers. Others argued that KVs were inherently lords and leaders of men, and that in the factory environment it was therefore incumbent on them to act as leaders of all the strikers. With hindsight, the

[10] *Ibid.*

[11] Equally well documented is the trend towards the fusion or 'substantialisation' of the Karnataka cultivating groups who have come to be identified as members of the Vokkaliga 'community'. See Manor 1989; Kaul 1993.

key point here is the all-important power of the pollution barrier in the thinking of these 'clean-caste' workers. As has already been seen, even in the colonial period this increasingly compelling differentiation between those of 'clean' and 'unclean' caste had become the most powerful and enduring expression of 'modern' caste experience.[12]

BEYOND 'SUBSTANTIALISATION' – MARRIAGE AND THE DOMESTIC ARENA

The idea of caste as a real and forceful presence in contemporary environments is also conveyed in T. N. Madan's studies of Kashmiri Brahmans, though his work improves very considerably on formulations relying on a crude opposition between 'traditional' and modern or 'substantialised' forms of caste awareness. Madan's accounts of these Kashmiri Brahmans who use the title Pandit as a jati designation employ the two terms *qaum* (*quom*) and *zat*: both are commonly rendered into English as 'caste'. Kashmiris of Pandit birth, says Madan, conceive of themselves as a single *qaum*, that is, a people: a Kashmiri Pandit is born into this and no other *qaum*, and there is no other way to acquire Pandit identity. *Zat* is a regional variant on the word jati; all beings and entities possess a *zat* or essence, 'a product of physical and moral elements'.[13]

In humans, this innate and distinctive *zat* essence is the basis on which one defines those who are alien and therefore unmarriageable, though the affinity created by *zat* involves something more subtle than the mere biological fact of shared blood and kinship ties. Yet this quality of corporate caste essence, which is inborn in all members of a given jati, is simultaneously both innate and alterable, Madan says. It

[12] This aspect of 'caste Hindu' life and the continuing claims of the seigneurial model of caste are discussed in greater detail in this chapter and in Chapter 9. Again, though today a real and forceful element of Indian life, the pollution barrier is not being treated here as a static or ahistorical manifestation of caste values. (See above, Chapter 5.) New light will be shed on the often limited extent of caste consciousness in a variety of modern workplaces in Jonathan Parry's forthcoming study of north Indian factory environments. Among older works documenting the persistence of caste differentiations in 'modern' environments, Desai (1976) found untouchability exclusions being regularly practised in village *panchayat* (local government) meetings, as well as widespread exclusion of Harijan/untouchables from village wells. (Compare Anant 1972.) Khan 1980: 130 reports perpetuation of caste-specific residence patterns in the operation of government house-building schemes for the low-caste poor, and Gough (1989) notes resistance to the admission of untouchables to village schools in the 1980s.

[13] Madan 1992: 104.

can be lost altogether by an individual, as for example by marrying a Muslim. In everyday life it must therefore be sustained through proper dharmic conduct. Far from being immutable, one's ingrained *zat* essence can be 'refined' through appropriate effort, or corrupted through neglect of the dharmic duties that are correct for one's particular caste.[14]

Contemporary caste logic is thus decidedly not an expression of unchanging Indian cultural 'essences', though by the same token it is not mere orientalist fantasy, or a fiction of the modern public arena. And, although concepts of hierarchy, ritual purity and shared caste essence or *zat* still often underpin coercive class relations, they are not just an oppressor's charter. There is much controversy on these issues, but few academic specialists would dismiss caste as an irrelevance in modern India. Most though not all would accept that there is more to jati and varna than a simple structure of disability, even those who contend that it is primarily the effects of 'retarded capitalism' that have kept caste 'alive' in contemporary India.[15]

André Béteille has intervened decisively in these debates by arguing that for members of India's English-speaking administrative and professional intelligentsias, considerations of caste have ceased to be paramount in areas where even 'modern' people are commonly thought to defer to them. He notes this both in the making of marriages, and also in the strategies which anglophone city-dwellers adopt to advance the careers of their children. Of course, it must be remembered that in matters of marriage the English-speaking intelligentsias are often unlike other Indians. Nevertheless, these cosmopolitan English-speakers exercise a disproportionate effect on the country at large. As Béteille shows, their world has become a domain of individualised decision-making and concern for the small-scale family unit; these are definitely not milieux in which age-old caste codes are passively accepted and transmitted from generation to generation.[16]

Yet it is precisely in this world of dynamism and individual agency that we can still see large numbers of Indians for whom a complex mixture of seemingly 'traditional' and modern-day versions of caste

[14] *Ibid.*

[15] Alam 1989: 248; compare Ilaih 1996.

[16] Béteille 1986 and 1991a. But see too his treatment (Béteille 1992b) of the increasingly powerful influence of caste in political life, especially the expansion of 'distributive justice' schemes involving caste-based employment quotas in universities and other major public institutions.

norms have remained powerful. This is true both where people have made conscious choices in the matter, and also for those coerced and 'essentialised' by others through the language of jati and varna, as will be seen in Chapter 9 in the discussion of so-called 'caste wars'.

This interpenetration of caste concerns with apparently caste-free thought and behaviour is apparent throughout India's complex social terrain. Even in the most cosmopolitan professional households, where the values of 'secular' anti-'casteism' are ardently endorsed, everyday domestic service still commonly draws on caste-defined specialisms. When middle-class city-dwellers employ cooks and superior manservants (still known by the Anglo-Indian term bearer), these salaried employees would seem to have little in common with 'traditional' *kamins* or ritual dependants. Yet purity-consciousness in regard to food and kitchen areas still prevails to the extent that people of 'clean'-caste descent are unlikely to employ bearers and kitchen servants from anything other than 'clean'-caste backgrounds. By the same token, the cleaning of bathrooms – even in blocks of modern flats – will almost certainly be carried out by servants of Harijan/ 'Sweeper' background.

Similar complexities can be seen too in the moves made by the many members of India's expanding middle classes who arrange matches for their educated sons and daughters by advertising in the classified matrimonial columns of India's vernacular and English-language newspapers. In the late 1990s both the home and international editions of these journals still publish thousands of 'bride/ groom wanted' advertisements every week. Those placing these items include many non-Hindus, but in the most widely read anglophone dailies the great majority identify themselves as Hindus for whom the matching of caste and sub-caste (*gotra*) in marriage is a major priority.

This is done by those of high or 'clean' caste, as well as those at the bottom of the varna hierarchy. Some of these advertisements appear in separate sections headed 'Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe', with families using such jati titles as Chamar to identify themselves, even though these have come to be regarded as pejorative and demeaning in other contexts. Typical of the 'matrimonial classifieds' to be found in the national dailies are the following:

> Hindu Nadar wheatish [fair-skinned] … slim pretty girl 25 yrs … highly educated USA green card holder alliance invited from Broadminded USA settled boys of same caste. (*Hindu* 24 December 1994: 7)

Matrimonial Bride Wanted Hindu – Pallar, B.E. [degree qualification] … Civil Engineer and Entrepreneur [age] 31/ [height] 163[cm]/ [salary Rs] 6000 seeks suitable bride. (*Hindu* 27 June 1995: 10)

Wanted – … well educated and well placed bridegroom from Kalinga Vysya Community. For a Kalinga Vysya Telugu girl of Visakhapatnam. [Educational] Qualification: M.C.A … Height: 162 cms. Age: 24 …, good looking and of wheatish complexion, employed in a Computer Software Company. Father Senior Professor … Swagotram: Mantrikula. Maternal Gotram: Srivatsala (we are not particular) … (*Hindu* 18 January 1997: 11)

Sindhi Bhaiband [age] 41 [height] 64 [inches]; … Divorced. Well settled. Business Japan … Vegetarian Cool nature Sincere Seeks bride [age] 30–40 Hindu healthy cultured home-loving vegetarian. High caste family of moral Indian values. Full photo [and] Horoscope [required] … (*Times of India* 14 December 1997: iii)

Alliance invited for well educated Chamar girl … pure vegetarian, religious, Haryana based … (*ibid.*: vii)

Alliance invited by an aristocratic, Brahmin, progressive, highly educated business family … (*ibid.*: i)

Suitable Brahmin bride for handsome Sanadhya Brahmin boy … completing Ph.D. (Physics) … Write with biodata, photograph, horoscope … (*ibid.*)

Suitable Rajput match for US citizen … [*ibid.*: vii)[17]

Clearly, some at least of these families would appear to have little difficulty in seeing caste both as a 'substantialised' ethnicity, and as a manifestation of 'traditional' sub-caste gradations. Yet in neither sense is caste the only concern here. Much emphasis is given to skin colour and general appearance, as well as parents' occupation and the spouse-seeker's current or potential earnings in a 'modern' profession. An entitlement to reside and work abroad is another valued asset. Advertisements may also signal comparatively 'modern' or 'cosmopolitan' attitudes by such phrases as 'broad-minded', 'caste no bar' and even '[groom must be] willing to respect girl's individuality and career ambition'.

What then about the apparent conflict between concern with caste and even sub-caste, which in a sense treats individuality as irrelevant to marriage choice, and the evident interest taken in determining the couple's astrological compatibility, which would seem to show just

[17] Nadar and Pallar are Tamil jati titles, both formerly conveying very low-caste rural origins. 'Green card' is a reference to a foreigner's certificate of entitlement to take employment in the United States. 'Wheatish' (or 'wheaten') is one of the skin-colour classifications used in colonial police reportage; this terminology is still widely employed today.

the opposite? Clearly many of these advertisements indicate that while a potential match must first be deemed suitable on caste grounds, tests must also be made of the couple's personal suitability; at this point individuality does come into play, with the comparing of horoscopes being widely seen as a reliable guide on this point.

At the same time, however, within some sections of India's expanding middle classes, there has been a trend for parents to downgrade 'traditional' caste considerations, and to give far greater priority to astrological calculations in matrimonial searches.[18] Even so, there can be little doubt that in these situations those of 'clean' caste will expect spouses to be of broadly 'respectable' origin, thus ruling out 'tribals' or low-castes, as well as Hindu–Muslim matches. Once this is determined, such families employ the complex *jyotish* (astrology) techniques which were perfected for use in temples and royal courts in past centuries. These are held to be mathematically rigorous and therefore 'scientific'. Furthermore, since such calculations are individualised, they are often perceived as being better suited to the spirit of a progressive modern nation than a concern for the specifics of jati and gotra. Yet, paradoxically, parents seeking a *jyotish* expert in these situations would rarely find one who does not descend from one of the tightly-knit specialist regional sub-castes (often though not invariably Brahmans) whose members deployed these techniques on behalf of rulers and other elites in the pre-colonial kingdoms. This is the case even for those contemporary astrologers who underline the modernity and precision of their art through the use of computer graphics and web sites on the Internet.

CASTE-SPECIFIC PURSUITS AND ENVIRONMENTS

Ironically, it is largely because of the complexity of these modern environments that so many Indians have found reason to turn to one or other of the contemporary forms of caste logic. This is clearly not just a matter of external coercion or state policy. Despite all that the politicians and the law-makers have done to make caste real for modern Indians, awareness of jati and varna distinctions has come from within as well as outside and above the local environment. It has been the pressures and insecurities of everyday life in both towns and

[18] Compare Kemper 1979.

villages that have kept the sacred thread and the caste *purana* in widespread use across so much of the subcontinent. These experiences have also ensured that the distinction between the pure and the impure has remained a matter of importance to the ordinary householder, as well as the specialist temple priest or tonsurer.[19]

Thus, intertwined with awareness of what the politicians and the law-courts may say or do are judgements about the relevance of one's own and other people's caste origins to the more intimate concerns of life. The complex calculations that contribute to marriage choices, as well as decisions about food, dress and ritual observances, still provide many Indians with important challenges and opportunities through which they may negotiate standards of decorum and piety within the household or small-scale 'community'.

So what else has this entailed in a complex society which possessed so many 'modern' economic and cultural features – including a large and ostensibly 'secular' intelligentsia – even before the end of colonial rule? To whom do concepts of caste matter, and in what areas of social interaction? In past centuries, caste in its varied forms was as much a value system of the cities and long-distance commercial networks as of the supposedly parochial 'peasant' locality. Since Independence, massive population growth and rapid urbanisation have had very disparate effects on both regional cultures and livelihoods, though here again one cannot make simplistic distinctions between 'traditional' environments where caste ideals prevail and those of the 'modern' milieu where such conventions recede.

Over half the Indian population still live in the countryside, though the trend in densely settled agricultural regions has been for both the landless poor and descendants of the old rural elites to migrate to the towns. Those left on the land include significant numbers of large-scale commercial producers. These are characteristically the *sat-sudra* or non-elite 'middle peasants' who have been widely referred to as members of the 'dominant' landed castes. Yet in many grain-growing areas, agricultural productivity has improved just enough since the 1950s to sustain large numbers of petty owner-cultivators, the so-called 'dwarf-holders'. These are people who survive at extremely low levels of subsistence by maximising the output of tiny holdings, while competing for whatever low-paid wage labour these locales can

[19] Parry 1994; Fuller 1984.

provide. Official statistics indicate that these poor labourers and smallholders are still drawn disproportionately from the ex-untouchable or Scheduled castes. Furthermore, despite the emergence of a prosperous and educated 'creamy layer' element within many low-caste populations, overall these groups still reportedly have far lower average levels of income and literacy than Indians of 'clean'-caste origin.[20]

In the cities, sophisticated enclaves of computerised high-technology enterprise have come into being since the 1980s, most notably in the mushrooming 'silicon suburbs' of Bangalore, Delhi and Bombay. At the same time, both the expansion of education since Independence, and the growth of the public sector with its swollen bureaucracies and appetite for clerical labour, have intensified one of the other key trends of the later colonial period, this being the continuing growth of large, vocal and insecure populations of literate city-dwellers whose livelihoods derive primarily from 'modern' occupations. These office workers may seem well off compared with the much larger populations of unskilled labourers and rural smallholders. Nevertheless, they are a threat to the established intelligentsias. At the same time, their aspirations have often been frustrated as they and their children struggle to find employment in 'respectable' fields, that is, in teaching, administration and commerce, or in the technical and managerial professions for those with the most sought-after qualifications. These frustrations have kept the cities volatile and, as we will see in the final chapter, have interconnected with the tensions of the turbulent rural regions.[21]

Broadly speaking, the economies of big towns have tended to be unevenly split. On the one hand, there is generally an extensive domain of small-scale workshops and petty artisanal production. At the same time, most cities contain a volatile though often vigorous industrial sector. Even in the 1990s this sector of the urban economies is still dominated by the railways, mills and other inefficient old public

[20] On rural economies, see Washbrook 1989 and Tomlinson 1993: 73–91. Regional variations have been considerable, however, as shown for example in Mitra's (1992) contrasting accounts of Orissa and Gujarat. On economic differentials, Shukla and Verma (1993: ix) report that approximately half the members of officially recognised Scheduled Castes are agricultural labourers and one-quarter marginal or small farmers; they also show only half the rate of literacy among Scheduled Castes compared with that of clean-caste groups.

[21] See, for example, Washbrook's (1989) account of '*petit-bourgeoisification*' in Tamil Nadu.

concerns employing large numbers of unskilled workers. In theory, caste is not a factor in recruitment or occupational choices in these environments. In reality, however, many towns still contain high concentrations of industrial and artisanal labourers whose occupations still have at least an indirect connection with their 'traditional' caste livelihoods. Jatav/Chamars and their regional equivalents still predominate in the urban leather-working trades and municipal sanitation services; the big textile-manufacturing towns, especially in western India, are also known for their high concentrations of Harijan/untouchable mill operatives.[22]

At the same time, the great pilgrimage places and all-India sacred centres (*puris*) – Banaras, Ayodhya and Madurai, together with Puri in Orissa and dozens of other much frequented shrine and pilgrimage locales – have all continued to sustain highly organised forms of commercial enterprise which are based around the marketing of specialist priestly expertise. Large numbers of ritualists, as well as purveyors of pilgrims' supplies (including sacred images and holy offerings, and also food, lodging and transport), all derive their livelihoods from servicing these shrines and their worshippers. Every year, these localities attract thousands or even millions of pilgrims of both low and high caste origin.[23] Those taking part include many prosperous and widely travelled 'modern' people as well as uneducated farmers and labourers. In many cases, ritual specialists have adopted the marketing techniques of Western-style retail catalogue businesses to sustain and expand their clienteles. A number of the great south Indian temples sell Shaivite sacred-ash parcels by post, publishing price lists for acts of worship which devotees can commission *in absentia*. Those taking advantage of these mail-order schemes do so on the understanding that a specialist of appropriate caste, usually a Brahman, will perform their chosen rituals.[24]

In north India, the needs of the modern worshipper are catered for with equal efficiency by the vigorous forms of commerce which

[22] Isaacs 1965: 55, 153; Lynch 1969: 207; Searle-Chatterjee 1981, 1994; Gagnik and Bhatt 1984.

[23] Parry 1994: 66.

[24] A leaflet issued by the Thirunallur temple in Tamil Nadu offers devotees *vibuti* (sacred ash) by return of post: '[those wishing] to perform poojas to Lord Saneeswara Bhagwan … are requested to … send [the prescribed amount] through M.O. [money order] …'; charges range from Rs 32.50 for a year's 'simple *archana*' (ritual) performed monthly on the devotee's birth star day, to Rs 208 for a year's 'deluxe Sahashranama *archana*'.

sustain the hereditary Brahman pilgrimage priests (*pandas*) of the great Gangetic holy places. The highly commercialised livelihoods of these *pandas* are based on the receipt of cash fees (theoretically gifts, *dan*) for the performance of funerary rituals on behalf of the millions of pilgrims who use their services annually.[25]

For all their entrepreneurial features, these pilgrimage centres' specialised ritual occupations are still followed by members of specific named regional caste groups. As Jonathan Parry has shown, in Banaras men of Harijan-untouchable Dom birth predominate in the trade of funeral pyre attendants; members of an ambivalently regarded quasi-Brahman *jati*, the Mahabrahmans, follow yet another of the Banaras funerary callings, that of the officiating mortuary ritualist. Vrindavan, the great centre of pilgrimage and devotion to the god Krishna, further illustrates the intertwining of caste with the functional specialisms of the 'modern' city. One of Vrindavan's devotional specialities is the housing of thousands of destitute widows from Bengal and Upper India; these women fulfil the norms of high-caste dharmic life-cyle teachings by living out their days as practitioners of radical austerities in the town's vast purpose-built widows' *ashrams* (hospices).[26]

In other areas too, a significant proportion of the country's population has continued to follow the sort of artisanal, commercial and priestly occupations which in past centuries gave rise to unusually tight bonds of guildlike caste affiliation. Wherever such livelihoods exist today, there are all sorts of skills and commodities on offer that would have been recognisable in India's towns and villages a century or more ago. The specialists who purvey these goods and services include grand trader-bankers like the Nattukottai Chettiars of Tamil Nadu and north India's Oswals and Agarwals, as well as humble fishermen, ritualists and craftsmen.

[25] Parry 1994: 99. Commercial marriage bureaux embody yet another form of lucrative caste-conscious entrepreneurship; in big cities there is vigorous competition between matchmaking agencies which advertise their ability to provide 'state of the art' services to discriminating spouse-seekers 'of all castes and communities' (*Times of India* 14 Dec. 1997: VIII).

[26] On Mahabrahmans, see Parry 1994: 81; compare Randeria 1989 on the funerary role of Bhangis in Gujarat. Parry 1994: 91 notes that Punjabi and Bengali pilgrims support members of different named jatis as mortuary ritualists; compare Fuller 1984 on Madurai temple priests. See Searle-Chatterjee 1981: 13–14 on the high concentrations of untouchable 'sweepers' and other household pollution-removers in Banaras, where covert anti-Chamar 'temple entry' bans still prevailed in the 1970s.

These are all people who find that the connections they define through the conventions of jati and varna are still valuable assets. Indeed, in uncertain times, a wide range of 'modern' Indian businesses have continued to find that profit margins can be protected or enhanced by pooling assets and sharing information within established kin and caste networks. This is true of the descendant of so-called traditional merchants in Ahmedabad, Madras or Banaras who does business in a 'modern' computerised environment, but takes pains to preserve the trappings of a purity-conscious Vaishya lifestyle within his household, shunning meat and alcohol and maintaining a cow-shelter or bird-feeding platform as an expression of 'pure' *ahimsa* values. It is even characteristic of the thriving commercial expatriates in London or New York who use their wealth to commission histories of their 'community', and who send cash to the tutelary shrines or *maths* (preceptoral foundations) around which their ancestors originally defined their identity as Komatis, Lohanas or Agarwals.

None of this is consistent with the aims of the official planners of the 1950s and 1960s who favoured a socialist model for India's post-Independence development, and who therefore subordinated producers in the private sector to the regime of 'permit Raj'. The expectation was that India would thereby combine rapid economic growth with a move toward casteless egalitarianism. Yet, in the short term at least, these policies tended to preserve or even reinforce the differentials of caste in everyday life. In order to operate the system's quotas, licences and protective labour laws, both central and state government recruited far larger official bureaucracies than those of the colonial era. Not surprisingly, given the stringent educational qualifications required for senior posts in state service, those at the higher administrative levels remained predominantly of high-caste origin, just as they had done under British rule.

Today such people often lead 'secular' or even partially 'casteless' lives insofar as their food habits or marriage choices are concerned. It is harder though to visualise the disappearance of caste differentials in matters of middle-class education and occupation, even if the trend towards economic liberalisation eventually shifts more areas of employment into the private sector. Certainly in the 1990s, few Indians are in any doubt about the disproportionately small numbers of low-caste or 'backward class' officials in senior government service posts; the issue is still a matter of active public debate.

Furthermore, as M. N. Panini has shown, throughout the period of 'permit Raj', businesses in the private sector were far from caste-neutral in matters of employment and promotion. It was often the most competitive 'modern' entrepreneurs who found that their profits depended on being able to circumvent import quotas and other official restrictions. In these conditions, what businesses needed above all were docile workers and managers who could be relied on to preserve the firm's secrets. Such firms found that they could often achieve this by building on the experience of caste in its 'substantialised' form, that is, on the capacity of broadly homogenised jati and varna ties to become a basis for solidarity and preferment in the modern workplace.

This of course had been the aspect of caste which British officials had feared and exaggerated in their attempts to break so-called caste cliques in public service employment. Yet many post-Independence managers found that it was more advantageous in the conditions of 'permit Raj' to build on such ties of blood and 'community' in recruitment rather than on the apparently more rational criteria of individual skills and qualifications. More recently, the retreat from 'permit Raj' has certainly not led central or state governments to impose caste-specific reservations quotas on new private sector ventures. Yet the maintenance of 'community' allegiance in the workplace is still seen to make sound business sense in many areas, even under these conditions of so-called economic liberalisation.[27]

RURAL 'COMMUNITY' VALUES AND THE POWER OF THE POLLUTION BARRIER

Above all, though, it has been the volatile fortunes of cultivating people that have kept many Indians alert to the nuances of caste. The bonds of shared 'community' have been most ardently proclaimed in environments where agrarian resources have been scarce, and where control of land and labour has proven contentious and unpredictable. This has been apparent in times of conflict involving the large 'middle peasant' populations who gained a powerful new voice in politics by rallying to the assertive *kisan*-power agrarianism of the 1970s and 1980s.

[27] Panini 1996.

The situation of these owner-cultivators has been far from secure, and very few of them can truly be described as members of 'dominant' landowning networks. As so-called bullock capitalists, the commodity-producing smallholders reaped uncertain benefits from the Green Revolution. These, above all, are the people who have regarded the language of caste as a means of minimising loss and adapting to uncertainty. Whether the community they claimed to constitute was known as Jat or Kapu, Patidar, Namasudra or Yadav-Ahir, these *kisan/khedut* 'peasant' populations have become increasingly inclined to assert a strong perception of their own and other people's caste endowments. Those who share their titles and marriage ties still tend to live in large homogeneous clusters. There are still sizable areas of western UP where virtually all the substantial tillers still call themselves Jat. Their 'clean-caste' counterparts in south India identify themselves as Gounders in Tamil Nadu's dry-grain Konku region, as Kammas and Reddis in the Telugu country, and as Vokkaligas and Lingayats in Karnataka. This concentrated numerical predominance has been widely identified as one of the great assets of so-called 'dominant castes'.

Anthropologists have often reported that these 'clean' non-lordly groups do not concern themselves with the sort of intricately graded ladders of precedence to be found in the deltaic south or the Anavil-dominated tracts of southern Gujarat. These are the places where Brahmans are far more numerous, and where complex 'transactional' pecking orders appear to be carefully worked out in a way that establishes a composite hierarchy among all the different high-, middling- and low-caste groups in a given locality.[28]

But if Jats or Kammas do not much care how they might be 'transactionally' ranked in relation to other middling non-elite groups, they will almost invariably be fiercely strict about the pollution barrier. This has become the norm even in regions like the Tamil country where 'peasants' contest virtually all forms of privilege and status, professing anti-hierarchical sentiments which echo the themes of regional *bhakti* spirituality as well as the populist egalitarianism of the non-Brahman and Dravidian supremacist movements. These are places where most other features of caste as a 'traditional' pan-Indian

[28] Marriot 1976; on the often qualified and uncertain nature of this 'dominance' see, for example, Beck 1972.

'system' are largely absent, but where the one point of consensus is the decisive 'otherness' of the Adi-Dravida or Jatav-Chamar.[29]

This sense of differentiation has had a powerful impact on the tactics used by rural people to cope with threats to their assets and livelihoods. Whether victim or victimiser, tenant or landlord, labourer or struggling 'bullock capitalist', those trying to sustain themselves in unsettled times would be unwise to disregard the gulf that divides those of 'unclean' descent from the non-polluting *sat-sudra*. The circumstances of rural life have created equally strong incentives for the householder who claims lordly Nayar, Rajput or Anavil Brahman descent to cling to his family's vestiges of superiority, and above all to insist that his children may not marry the kin of the plough-touching 'peasant'.

There are great diversities in all this, but distinctions of title, rank and corporate honour still matter, even in localities where those whose forebears were called Kolis and Koeris have taken to wearing the sacred thread and calling themselves twice-born Kshatriyas, where the Shanar or Kurmi have acquired as much land as the Rajput or Brahman, and where the so-called Sudras or Upper Backwards have long been worshipping bloodlessly and maintaining scrupulously 'pure' vegetarian households. The rituals of village life – marriage feasts, temple processions, *tamashas* (festive assemblies) to welcome visiting politicians – are still often orchestrated in ways that both contest and confirm local ranking schemes.

However fluid and variable these pecking orders may be, they do still operate in ways which distinguish the high from the low, and the clean from the unclean.[30] Marriages between people of substantially different caste background are still as rare in the countryside as they are in the cities. Furthermore, in both towns and 'nucleated' village settlements (the type of rural locality found in most areas of peninsular India), there are still older housing areas containing single-caste residential streets. These include the Brahman-only streets surrounding many Hindu temples, as well as the concentrations of impoverished Harijan-untouchables who still live apart from 'clean'-caste populations in their own separate hamlets and urban slum enclaves.[31]

Above all, in times of change and upheaval in the countryside, those

[29] As illustrated by Daniel 1984: 112.
[30] See, for example, Breman 1985: 146.
[31] Randeria 1989: 173; Daniel 1984: 111–13.

of different jati and varna have had good reason to consider the claims of caste before deciding on their objective 'class' interests. People of supposedly unclean or tribal descent have found since Independence that when they look for supporters in a struggle over tenancy rights or labour conditions, their natural allies will still be those of like 'kind' and 'community'. This is consistent with a wider trend that has been much commented on in recent years. Even where economic issues have contributed to mass regional 'mobilisations', appeals to either caste or ethno-religious community are now commonly held to have become more and more the dominant mode of Indian political activity since the 1960s.[32]

Thus, even where labour unions or militant agrarian organisations call for joint class-based alliances, untouchable Jatav-Chamars, Paraiyans or Dheds will generally discover, often painfully, that their situation is not the same as that of poor wage-labourers or dwarf-holders who can locate themselves on the other side of the pollution barrier. In times of strife, a locality's 'clean'-caste Ahir or Kanbi labourers and cultivators will probably still be inclined to distance themselves from lowly 'Dalit'/untouchables. Such poor non-untouchables will be likely to claim affinity with landed 'big men' of their own or similar caste origin, particularly where such potential allies include rich or educated individuals with connections outside the locality. This will be the case even in situations where, in 'rational' economic terms, the clean-caste tiller has more in common with the untouchable labourer or dwarf-holder.

Putting jati and varna first in these situations is a response to conditions in the here and now, and not a survival from the primordial past. As was seen in the case of the strike debate among the Kontaikattai Vellalas, 'clean' *sat-sudras* of modest means would have good 'rational' reasons not to risk a slim margin of advantage in insecure times by making common cause with people of untouchable descent. To do so might endanger valuable marriage and ritual connections with more powerful people of their own blood and 'kind' while simultaneously eroding the fragile profitability of ancestral landholdings. Indeed, even where such holdings seem to have little obvious economic value, there is still advantage in being seen in one's locality as a person of respectable proprietary stock. Above all, even in

[32] Alam 1989: 237–8.

an ostensibly egalitarian age, such 'modern' people as Barnett's KV informants have continued to distinguish themselves from descendants of servile toilers and dependants.

CASTE AND THE OLD LORDS OF THE LAND

These appeals to a 'substantialised' or homogenising 'imagined community' of jati and varna have been sustained by two forces in particular. The first of these, the continuing power of the pollution barrier in most regions of the subcontinent, has already been discussed. The second is the continuing power and conspicuousness of grand 'feudal' landowners. In this case particularly, one can see how readily these 'substantialised' forms of caste have co-existed with ideals deriving from a more 'traditional' version of dharmic codes.

Not all patricians have found new livelihoods in the towns, and the lordly styles of life with which they are identified have certainly not disappeared from agrarian India. Many of these seigneurial groups have had to struggle to retain their symbolic and material assets, but their power in large areas of both the north and the south still signals to the wider society that 'good' blood is a desirable asset in a world of change and insecurity, even though its worth may have been significantly devalued by reservations and 'Mandalite' social justice schemes. But even fifty years after Independence, few Indians are surprised to find people who claim lordly warrior descent still trying to treat their field labourers as personal retainers, demanding sexual access to their women, and using force to exact *begar*-like service dues from them.

Militant 'Dalit' activists have attempted to challenge this kind of coercion. Yet it is notable that *begar* has remained a live issue in many areas of so-called caste war conflict.[33] Attempts to challenge *begar*-like practices have been frustrated by the fact that neither Nehruvian socialists nor *gharibi hatao* populists have persuaded all rural Indians that such claims are 'feudal' and illegitimate. The complex changes that have occurred in rural economic life since the 1940s have tended, at least for some struggling landed people, to lend credibility to the idea that there is righteousness and protection for the weak to be found when the big man exercises his lordly will.

For those who take this view, the 'feudal' landowner's seigneurial

[33] See Chapter 9. Hasan 'Class and caste' p. 266, in Hasan *et al.* 1989.

acts may be held to spring from something higher than one man's lusts or material interests. That something is an aspect of 'caste' (or *zat* as it has been understood in recent centuries), this being an ideal of order and predictable moral obligations. These ideals are still visibly rooted in recognition of the fragility of that order. Even today, ordinary conformist 'caste Hindus' have good reason to conceive of the environment in which they live as one of barely contained disharmonies. If danger and upheaval are the norms of everyday experience in both the supernatural and the material world, there will always be a need for the sword-wearing tribute-taker who is equipped to act as both usurper and orderer on behalf of the meek tiller and toiler.

It is at this point that the logic of caste often still takes shape, at least in part, as an exaltation of the man of prowess, rather than the 'pure' or ascetic Brahman or *bania*/merchant. In modern India, there are still many people who see the Kshatriya's mandate to dominate as a normal fact of life. Although much weakened in the colonial period, when the sturdy toiler came to be widely valued over the rapacious seigneur/*girasidar*, there are many comparatively remote areas where the fortress-dwelling land-controllers survived long after Independence.

Well into the 1970s, the Telengana region on the Maharashtra–Andhra Pradesh borderlands contained one such group, a class of landlords known as *doras*. These were 'squireen' lords in the unmistakable tradition of the *girasi* rajas whose forebears had acquired their revenue-taking rights in past centuries through force of arms. At this time the *dora* families still lived in miniature forts which were known locally as *ghadis* or princely seats, a term evoking the rent-receiver's claims of martial power and kingliness. Even forty years on from the anti-*begar* campaigns of the colonial era, these 'little kings' were still reportedly exacting unpaid labour and dues in kind – usually sheep and other livestock – from untouchable labourers. *Doras* also reportedly made much of the seigneur's tradition of sexual dominance, claiming the right to deflower labourers' daughters on their wedding night, and taking over a dependant's wife when their own were pregnant.[34]

In Bihar and UP, as in many other regions, people of lordly background used false title transfers and other means to evade the anti-landlord legislation of the 1950s and 1960s. Even where big holdings

[34] C. V. Subba Rao 'Resurgence of peasant movement in Telengana' *EPW* 14 Nov. 1978: 1878–80; see also Ilaih 1996.

were reassigned, those confirmed as direct owners of land were not humble 'tillers': in much of the Gangetic plain, people of acknowledged Brahman, Rajput or Bhumihar descent remained the largest and most numerous owner-occupiers of arable land.[35] Elsewhere too in rural India, 'squireen' traditions of rank and honour were contested but never wholly expunged. Landed Bhumihars and Rajputs of *girasidar* origin were still visible to the wider society, and other rural people looked to them as models of honour and prowess who embodied in their diet, dress and worship the ideal of the worthy Kshatriya.

It is true, of course, that in the years before Independence, such people as Bihar Kurmis and other 'clean' *sat-sudras* embraced so-called caste reform movements which denied the superiority of the landed Rajput or Bhumihar grandees. But even these assertive 'peasants' were conscious of the refined seigneurial traditions associated with the grander proprietary groups. Many of them therefore insisted that their own virtues were lordly ones, in other words, that one could plough and still be an Aryan and a Kshatriya in the tradition of the royal warrior forebears of the divine Ram and Krishna.[36] It was often these lineages of non-lordly Jat, Kanbi or Kurmi descent who used the profits of both pre- and post-Independence cash-crop farming to sustain hitherto unaccustomed forms of squireen-style consumption and patronage. Increasing numbers of 'kisans' thus adopted the rich diet and lavish piety of the grandee households. Such people became particularly Kshatriya-like in their assertions of power and authority over 'tribal' or Harijan-untouchable dependants, as in the case of the Kanbi-Patidar landowners who had come to display these lordly pretensions in their dealings with the class of unfree client labourers known as Halis or 'bond-servants'.[37]

Examples of continuing fascination with the Kshatriya ideal abound, as can be seen in the many post-Independence publications which exalt the doings of individual named jatis. The production of these 'community' histories has been as active an industry in the late twentieth century as it was in the pre-Independence period.[38] As recently as 1988, a polemicist representing himself as an Oxford-trained Indian 'socio-historian' published an account of the supposed

[35] Brass and Robinson 1987; Frankel and Rao 1989–90; Rudolph and Rudolph 1987.
[36] Pinch 1996.
[37] Breman 1985.
[38] See, for example, Hardgrave 1969.

origins and heritage of north India's Khatris. Today, as in the past, those who call themselves Khatri favour the livelihoods of the pen and the ledger. In the colonial period, however, Khatri caste associations extolled the heritage of their 'community' as one of prowess and noble service (*seva*), claiming that their dharmic essence was that of the arms-bearing Kshatriya and therefore quite unlike that of the commercial Agarwals and other pacific Vaishyas. These same themes were recapitulated by the author of the 1988 text: the Khatris, 'one of the most acute, energetic, and remarkable race [*sic*] in India', are heirs to a glorious martial past, 'pure descendants of the old Vedic Kshatriyas'. The writer even tries to exalt Khatris above Rajputs, whose blood he considers 'impure', being supposedly mixed with that of 'inferior' Kols or 'aborigines': in his view only Khatris are 'true representatives of the Aryan nobility'.[39]

Kshatriya models of 'community' also loom large in the claims of those identified as Kolis in the Deccan and Upper India. Until the 1940s (and even later in some cases), to be known as a Koli was to be classed as a person of base criminal stock, hence ineligible for military and police recruitment.[40] This was deeply damaging to precariously placed Koli smallholders, for whom the sober Vaishya-style values of their Vaishnavising new-peasant forebears offered little real security in an uncertain market economy. People in this situation had often turned to soldiering to supplement declining incomes; many tillers of Koli descent now had reason to do this. They therefore took on what they viewed as a Rajput way of life, proclaiming kinship with true Kshatriyas, and thereby denying the stigma of lowliness attached to Koli origins.

In the decades since Independence there have been good reasons for the same people or their descendants to rally to the 'Mandalite' banner, seeking to be declared 'backward' and thus eligible for employment reservations and other preferences for 'OBCs'. And yet this did not wipe out that special regard for the lordly Rajput-like way of life that has remained prominent in debates about the rights and wrongs of landowners, tenants and labourers in contentious situations

[39] Puri 1988: 3, 78, 163, 166. The writer appeals to the Khatri 'race' to 'wake up' and cherish their heritage as 'followers of the Hindu Dharma Sastras' (5). Above all they should guard against 'hybridising', i.e. marrying non-Khatris (166). These views closely resemble those of pre-Independence race theorists (see Chapters 3–4). Compare Seth 1904.

[40] Parry 1979: 119.

in many parts of India. The state of Gujarat is a case in point here. Beginning soon after Independence, landed people in northern and central districts sought to oppose anti-zamindari and land-ceiling legislation through the operations of a pressure group calling itself the Gujarat Kshatriya Sabha. This body remained a powerful force in state politics until the late 1960s. It resurfaced as a promoter of 'Backward Class' interests in the 1980s, having originated as one of many organisations in different states using the language of caste-defined moral mandate to generate large-scale opposition to the logic of Nehruvian land-reform.[41]

The areas in which this idealised Kshatriya allegiance came to be invoked were those in which official land-ceiling schemes had been widely expected to advantage *sat-sudra* 'middle peasant' groups over the old lordly rent-receiving populations. The message of this organisation was that far from being feudal oppressors, the region's comparatively small number of landed Rajput lineages were part of a much larger array of deserving and honourable 'communities' who included the state's Koli population, together with other groups of armed pastoral and 'tribal' descent. This was ironic: in Gujarat those identified as Kolis were generally much poorer and far less 'Sanskritically' Hindu than the big Rajput landowners. In addition, Kolis had formerly been defined by those claiming both Rajput and Patidar identity as one of the 'wild' and unworthy groups whose women were no longer acceptable as partners for those of 'good' blood and lineage. Furthermore, in common with their Kallar-like ex-'predator' counterparts in other states, this was also a time when organisations claiming to represent Kolis as a 'community' were campaigning for their inclusion in the new state-level Backward Classes listings.

Yet the new Gujarat Kshatriya Sabha (GKS) organisation had much to gain by telling state officials that its campaign against land reform embodied the 'mobilisation' of this very wide range of ex-armsbearers in opposition to the 'kulak'/'rich-peasant' Kanbi-Patidars. In numerical terms, this self-proclaimed Kshatriya coalition claimed to represent as much as 40 per cent of the state's population, as opposed to the estimated 20 per cent who fell within the 'Kanbi-Patidar' category. These polemicists therefore argued that while it was acceptable for Kolis to exploit the reservations system if they wished, people of Koli

[41] Mitra 1992: 46.

birth should recognise that they and the region's Rajputs were all of martial stock, and therefore of like quality and heritage. This, ran the message, made them joint heirs with Rajputs to the *girasidar*'s turban and sword. They should all exalt the divinely sanctioned bond that divided righteous Kshatriyas from non-martial *kisan* groups; the Koli and the Rajput should see themselves as natural allies against the common 'peasant' enemy. These enemies, too, were identified in caste terms: they were the Patidars, to be reviled as commercial opportunists who had enriched themselves at the expense of worthy Kshatriyas through corrupt links with the Congress. These were unjust gains which the righteous Rajput and his worthy Koli ally had both a right and a duty to contest.[42]

THE PATRIOTIC 'MIDDLE PEASANT'

Here then we see one of the important regional manifestations of the trend described at the beginning of this chapter, that is, the shift towards a widely shared view of caste as a form of broadly homogenised ethnicity or 'imagined community' with powerful moral claims and entitlements. Since Independence, such views have been closely bound up with expressions of hostility towards the non-martial tiller; they have derived much of their bitterness from resentment of the 'middle-peasant''s supposed economic advantages. Equally salient, however, has been the fact that such people as Patidars have been so widely praised and courted in Indian public life. Since the 1930s, Gandhian nationalists have exalted the virtues of Indian villagers. Under Gandhi's influence, the productive 'son of the soil' became the Indian National Congress's image of the Indian *lok* or 'masses'. Here local values and concepts of 'community' (i.e. caste identities) have met and interacted with the great themes of the country's recent history.

David Pocock's classic anthropological studies revealed that the Gujarat *sat-sudra* peasants who had adopted the prestigious designation 'Patidar' distinguished themselves from humbler cultivators, notably Kanbis and Kolis, through the vigour with which they pursued schemes of competitive honour and marriage-making within their home regions. To be Patidar when these observations were made

[42] Shah 1990: 103–4; figures from Gould 1990: 365.

in the 1960s and 1970s was therefore to proclaim ancestral roots in a locality where 'good' marriageable Patidars were known to reside. By definition, this was not a place of dubious repute, meaning one in which the inhabitants were either Kanbi- or Koli-like in their living habits, giving bride-price instead of dowry, or performing blood sacrifice and openly consuming alcohol. In south India too there are comparable zones of high farming where the physical features of the village or 'native place' have been found to define and sustain the virtues of the sober, credit-worthy 'peasant'.[43]

As was seen in Chapter 5, in many cash-crop regions the origins of these ideals of the worthy 'peasant' way of life involved long-term success in commodity production, as well as adherence to devotional Vaishnavism, and the impact of overseas migration and colonial ethnographic stereotyping. As a result, the use of the superior 'peasant' jati title Patidar and its numerous regional equivalents has come to convey a message that is still widely recognised. This is a message of well-deserved gains achieved at the expense of thriftless people, meaning both the 'unclean' toiler and the *girasi*-like man of ease. This is certainly what Gandhians and Nehruvian modernisers have seen when looking at such people as the blood-spilling Koli and the swaggering, mustachioed Rajput: not valorous preservers of order, but hangovers from a bad 'feudal' past, and oppressors of the good, worthy son of the soil.

Furthermore, in the case of Gujarat it is widely known that 'peasants' of Patidar origin were among the earliest rural recruits to the anti-colonial 'freedom struggle'.[44] Therefore, the Patidar who celebrates his distinctive caste identity through the exaltation of sobriety and pacific Vaishnavism is in effect being a good son of the Gandhian nation. Those who knew and emulated the superior Patidar's version of 'peasant' conventions were widely idealised both before and after Independence as simple sages in homespun (Gandhian *khadi*), authentically rustic, but also responsive when called to the national cause. This message was reinforced by the fact that Vallabhai Patel, a leading figure in Nehru's cabinet and one of the most prominent Indian politicians of the twentieth century, was systematically represented in public life both as Patel the peasant '*khedut*' and Patel the Patidar. The

[43] Pocock 1972, 1973; Daniel 1984.
[44] Hardiman 1981.

two were mutually reinforcing. It was a great asset to Congress that Patel, their 'Iron *Sirdar*', was so widely known to the electorate as an embodiment of 'peasant'/Patidar values. This idealisation of 'community' gave the impersonal force of nationhood a human face, the face of a 'peasant' with heroic strengths and virtues.[45]

Again though, the response to these messages reflected the intersection of local and external views of the caste Hindu's *dharma*. The ability to show that one is not of unknown or suspect origins is obviously of great importance in environments where long-distance migration has been common for many centuries, and where the unsettled mobile populations of raiders, 'tribals' and roaming pastoralists are known to have lived in uncomfortable proximity to the *satsudra* 'caste Hindu' peasant. Given the delicate gradations of honour and genealogy which, at least in the recent past, distinguished the superior 'son of the soil' from lowlier rural groups, it has clearly paid to advertise the trappings of 'peasant' virtue, that is, the virtue of the settled *kisan* whose gains are derived from stability and the meritorious use of his skill and acumen.

These considerations could even be made to accommodate the 'peasant''s familiarity with Gandhian social precepts. A willingness to encourage the remarriage of widows was an established test of progressive credentials, and, as good nationalists, a given clean-caste 'community' might therefore be expected to adjust accordingly. Yet an equally strong legacy of social and ideological changes in previous centuries was the pressure on superior men of the soil to treat widow marriage as a sign of lowly warrior-pastoralist descent. Here, though, the open-endedness of 'caste' values came readily to the rescue. The Patidar of modest means could say that the practices of the 'reform'-minded were appropriate only to those of the greatest wealth and standing within the 'community', indeed that it was unseemly for humbler people to go so far beyond the safety net of known everyday proprieties. To be a Gandhi is a goal unattainable by ordinary men: in real life very few could be expected to embrace the highest and most rarefied codes of propriety.[46]

[45] Breman 1985: 99, 136–7.

[46] Thus in villages visited by Pocock in the 1960s, one could be a meat-eating Patidar and a Patidar who worshipped blood-taking divinities. Here too conventions that might be proper for the 'superior' and affluent would have been signs of undue pretension in those of lesser means and status. Pocock 1972: 68–9; compare Parry 1979.

These then are 'caste Hindus' for whom caste identity has remained notably open-ended, despite the trend towards a more Brahmanical view of worth, order and purity in everyday life. Among Patidars and their counterparts in other rural areas, such standards will still leave room for doubt, for the need to prove oneself and one's kin as being of 'good' quality, and therefore unlike the thriftless meat-eater or servile toiler. In a world of material uncertainty, the match of every worthy 'peasant' remains a test of achievement and worth, and the parameters remain extremely wide, without fixed definitions of the behaviour that might secure a 'good' match, or a reputation for conformity to the superior version of a Patidar, Vellala or Jat way of life. On the contrary, the post-Independence Patidar or a Vellala was found to belong to a 'community' in the sense that he or she claimed an established caste title and a reputation for high moral endowments, but no body of universally shared custom, no uniform diet or rituals, no standard rate of marriage expenditure or period of death pollution.

Yet with all its variations and diversities, the everyday life of the caste-conscious 'peasant' has played a critical role in shaping the ways in which both rural and urban Indians have come to understand the phenomenon of caste. Anthropologists have found remarkable flexibility in these manifestations of modern caste life, and yet at the same time a notably clear understanding of what it means to belong to a worthy 'peasant' jati. This rests on a sense of affinity which is both open-ended and demanding in its consciousness of rank, and its claims of differentiation between those of superior and lesser blood.

The other element to stress here is how strongly this consciousness of 'substantialised' caste ideals has been reinforced by the rhetoric of the all-India political arena. The pervasiveness of claims about 'peasant' virtues as the values of modern patriotic Indians has kept alive a perception of certain modern or 'substantialised' forms of caste as a strong and valid force in national life. The sturdy Jat, the valorous Khatri and the humbly virtuous Chamar or Bhangi have all been repeatedly told that while some manifestations of jati and varna convention are bad, backward or 'casteist', it is nevertheless modern and progressive to identify with the heritage and entitlements of one's 'community'. It is by this means that the party boss may tell voters that he embodies the will and character of a 'community', and that by acting as their guardian or instrument he has thereby transcended considerations of career and personal gain.

As seen in Chapter 7, this is what the Janata leader Charan Singh did, communicating a message of strength and populist mission to his electorate by cultivating the image of Charan Singh the 'Jat' and Charan Singh the larger-than-life champion of the common man. The two interlocked all the more successfully because this use of familiar caste stereotypes left no doubt about who and what Charan Singh was opposing. In the 1977 electoral campaign he made much of the Janata caricature of Congress as a Brahman-run clique. And when his political rival the Gujarati ex-Congressman Morarji Desai was chosen to lead the fragile Janata coalition, Charan Singh bemoaned this as yet another unjust assertion of conspiratorial Brahmanism in Indian public life. Such charges are still both made and refuted in ways which convey to the electorate that caste is real, and that jati and varna identity have meaning in the modern environment as a source of collective entitlements and moral mandates.

CASTE CONVENTIONS IN EVERYDAY LIFE

Of course, these messages from the public arena did not of themselves keep caste conventions alive in the everyday world; indeed in many cases they have been contested by trends and messages which were far from favourable to those promoting the claims of caste-based 'community'. Yet, despite the great diversity of India's social and political experience since Independence, awareness of both 'substantialised' and 'traditional' jati and varna norms continues to be transmitted from one generation to another, subtly changing to accommodate new circumstances, and yet persistently recapitulating messages about the importance of preserving and perpetuating one's 'community'. These features of Indian life have been extensively documented in accounts of both town and village experience from the 1950s through to the 1990s.

In the anthropologist R. S. Khare's account of the typical north Indian 'hearth and home' (published in 1976), the forms of service enacted were far more elaborate than those of the urban households described at the beginning of this chapter. Among the 'twice-born' villagers whom he observed, Khare found women devoting great care to the supervision of specialist cooks, water-carriers and pollution-removers, each from a different named jati group. There were the Kahar, for example, whose occupational specialities have been re-

ported since the colonial period as the carrying of palanquins (sedan chairs), the carrying of water, and the purification of household cooking areas with cow-dung.[47]

These specialities all have important ritual connotations: palanquins are still widely used in marriages and other ceremonial occasions, and the milk and dung of cows have been employed for centuries as temple and household sanctifying substances. In the locales which Khare studied, the retention of specialised service-providers was still regarded as an act which defined thread-wearing Kanyakubja and Bhumihar Brahman householders as persons of worth and substance. Even families with experience of 'modern' consumer products chose to persist with these routines despite the availability of affordable labour-saving alternatives. Prosperous villagers ate 'Western-style' foods from factory-made chinaware which they washed with commercial detergents. Yet these households maintained a separate hearth equipped with brass and bronze vessels to be used for 'traditional' food; cleansing in this case was carried out with 'traditional' materials possessing ritual purifying properties.[48]

In many cases, superior thread-wearing villagers and low-status service groups have been equally determined to sustain such networks and conventions. This may seem surprising given the efforts of early twentieth-century 'caste reform' movements to persuade lowly specialists like the Kahar to repudiate ideas of collective ritual inferiority by insisting that their water-carrying services were merely a form of wage labour, to be freely entered into like any other.[49] Yet it is clear from modern anthropological evidence that people of Kahar birth often have little choice but to sustain themselves through the cleansing of twice-born hearths. This may well be the best livelihood available in areas where land and employment are scarce, even though such work defines the Kahar as a service-giver who contributes to other people's dharmic correctness, and therefore lower in *zat* essence than the householders who pay for his services.

In many other ways too, and despite all that the 'secular' Constitution has to say about the ideal of a casteless and classless India, the

[47] Khare 1976.
[48] *Ibid.*
[49] Pinch 1996: 111 discusses one such early polemic enjoining Kahars to see themselves as a population of noble Kshatriyas who were entitled to follow modern livelihoods carrying no connotations of ritualised clientage or dependency.

logic of rank and 'community' still pervades the etiquette of everyday life. In Tamilnad, cosmopolitan 'peasants' with long-standing experience of overseas migration and far-flung commercial interests were found in the 1980s to speak of themselves in 'fluid' terms as being shaped by the unique balance of essences that characterise the soil, air and water of their particular *ur* or natal locality.[50] And even in localities where the prosperous clean-caste 'peasant' has access to satellite television and the internet, Jat and Bhumihar parents may still teach their children to avoid the shadow and touch of the Chamar. The Thakur and the Kurmi might send their children to the same school, but will be unlikely to smoke together in the tea shop; and at the public watering-places which still supply so many rural households, the Thakur's wife will expect to fill her bucket ahead of women of lesser *sat-sudra* status.

Correct conduct often matters more than ever in these 'modern' environments, especially in the demands it places on women. A 'modern' woman's husband, sons and even unmarried daughters may well earn a wage in a multi-caste workplace. But even where women themselves are employed outside the home, it is still primarily the task of wives and mothers to counteract the inescapable pollutions which afflict their households by undergoing fasts and penances, and by supervising the cleansings, tonsurings and other rituals that identify the household with the conventions of their 'kind'. So the Hindu 'caste person' is not really man-in-society, if this is taken to mean a male whose existence is radically unlike that of the renouncer who transcends worldly ties of kin and caste. Now more than ever, respectability in caste terms may depend on what a household's women do on both of these fronts, meaning their activities as guardians of the family's jati and varna endowments, and also their periodic forays into the renouncer's way of life.

The conventions defining this kind of respectable caste lifestyle may be subtly or even openly subverted by 'Dalit' labourers and service-providers, in some cases through oral traditions which give a distinctive gloss to ideologies of hierarchy and pollution.[51] They can also be at least partly suspended in the appropriate context, for example in the

[50] Daniel 1984.
[51] Prakash 1990a, 1991.

ecstatic communion of pilgrims on the road to a Ganges bathing site or a great south Indian hill shrine.[52]

This apparent castelessness is also a feature of the giant *melas* or worshippers' concourses that have become one of the hallmarks of contemporary devotional Hinduism. Yet on these occasions 'casteless' pilgrims commonly seek the services of Brahmans and hereditary ritualists from other named jati groups. Furthermore, as Parry has shown, there is generally a subtle interplay between the ascetic, renunciatory and apparently caste-denying or transcendent features of these pilgrimage experiences, and the elements which emphasise fulfilment of dharmic caste duty.[53] And whether alone or in a bus load of fellow villagers, the fasting barefoot pilgrim on the road to the shrines of Banaras or Sabirimalai follows conventions that only temporarily approximate to an ideal of caste-free unworldliness and renunciation. They apply when approaching an abode of divinity, but are not expected to dissolve the claims of caste in everyday town or village life. So these moments of wholly or partially casteless renunciation implicitly acknowledge the inescapability of worldly ties. Few would deny that there are claims of kin, blood and jati that must reassert themselves when the questing pilgrim returns to the life of the ordinary householder.[54]

Of course it is not just as a devotee that a villager or city-dweller can suspend the conventions of rank and 'community'. In a crowded bus or railway carriage the touch of an unknown Chamar or Paraiyan carries no lasting danger; and, of necessity, strangers address one another in neutral casteless language. On their home terrain, too, the Thakur landlord and Koiri ploughman may joke and share a cigarette in the fields, but when they re-enter their home village's streets the lower-caste man still uses formalised terms of deference to those of superior birth. He may even be expected to remove his shoes or shirt like a pious suppliant before entering the lanes where his thread-wearing superiors reside.[55]

These conventions allow for complex shadings and variations and may well reflect distinctions of wealth and power as well as birth. The

[52] Daniel 1984: 245–87; Gold 1988: 268–9, esp. n. 5; Karve 1988.

[53] Parry 1994; also works cited in note 52, above.

[54] Menon's study (1994: 40–61) provides a typology of regional temple worship in Kerala, with different types of festivals either confirming, challenging or disregarding 'traditional' caste hierarchies.

[55] See, for example, Deliège 1992, 1993.

village 'big man' of high caste will be spoken to more respectfully than a person of high caste who lacks means or strong local political affiliations. Even so, within those sensitive zones of 'hearth and home' where personal conduct and standards of household purity are closely scrutinised, it is widely expected that the Rajput speaks, dresses and behaves like a Rajput, and that he and his mustachioed kin will have a stake in policing the boundaries between those of different 'blood' or kind.

What then of the many recent studies which maintain that Indians of low or untouchable rank systematically deploy 'weapons of the weak' as a reaction against the conventions of a caste-based moral order? Clearly, everyday life and worship may sometimes provide the means by which members of the 'subaltern' classes can seek to contest or evade the principles of caste. This is what 'Dalits' are held to achieve when they use coded language to caricature the pretensions of the lordly, or when they build a critique of high-caste injustices into the cults of blood-taking goddesses and avenger divinities.[56] There are also forms of modern *bhakti* devotional faith which reshape the traditions of the Vaishnavite and Shaivite 'high gods', extolling the lowly Jatav/Chamar as a morally superior exemplar to the sinful caste Hindu.[57]

Yet if these are best seen as forms of 'resistance', such moves do not indicate unawareness of the conventions which make caste real and pervasive in rural society. Indeed, there is strong anthropological evidence to suggest that it is relatively low-ranking people, and not those who are usually thought of as purest and highest in varna terms, who are inclined to emphasise hierarchical caste logic in their everyday expressions of devotional faith.[58]

This would seem to be consistent with the findings of many fieldworkers about the enduring power of the pollution barrier for both high- and low-caste people throughout the country. Significantly, these researchers report that regardless of what the law and the Constitution have said about the abolition of untouchability, high or 'clean-caste' people respond very consistently when their views are probed about the status and identity of Harijan/Dalits, both in their localities and in the country at large. The findings here are that clean-

[56] Menon 1994; Lorenzen 1987.
[57] Khare 1984.
[58] Fuller 1988.

caste people generally regard all those whom they know to be of Harijan/untouchable origin as permanently polluted and unclean in ritual terms, without any further differentiation between them. On this basis it seems correct to argue that the paramount manifestation of caste in Indian life today is not so much the phenomenon of 'substantialisation' as it was reported on in the 1970s, but the distinction between those who can proclaim clean-caste origin and those whom higher-caste people can stigmatise as *avarna*, i.e. innately unclean and polluted.

Furthermore, it has been found that in contrast to this generalising view of untouchables, which appears to be widely shared by members of 'clean' castes, those who are known to belong to specific 'Scheduled' or 'Dalit' caste groups make a crucial distinction on this matter. These low-caste populations reportedly differentiate between the quality and nature of their own and other people's untouchability. It is members of *other* low-caste groups who are permanently and inherently polluted in the eyes of the north Gujarat Bhangi 'scavengers' and other 'unclean' informants who were studied by Shalini Randeria in the 1980s. 'Our' pollution, say these same Harijan/untouchables, is a consequence of having accidentally violated a known norm of dharmic conduct; 'our' uncleanliness is therefore reversible rather than innate and enduring.[59]

It is notable that in neither case do these Harijan/untouchables actually appear to question or reject the concept of ritual pollution itself. Nor is there evidence of a sense of common identity uniting those who belong to different 'unclean' or *avarna* jati groups.[60] Furthermore, even instances of so-called Dalit 'resistance' still commonly take their language and symbolism from the logic of caste. Thus, far from ignoring or repudiating the 'twice-born' man's distinctive caste markers, the militant Harijan makes a point of sporting upturned Rajput-style moustaches, knowing full well that such a signal is as recognisable and provocative in certain modern-day localities as it was in the days of the Raj.[61]

Despite the fact that ideas about the power and reality of caste,

[59] Randeria 1989; as noted in the Introduction, there has been much debate about whether members of low castes share or reject perceptions of their ritual inferiority.

[60] See, for example, Bose 1985b: 146 on the refusal by low-caste Mangs and Dhors to ally with Mahar victims of the 1978 'caste war' outbreaks (discussed in Chapter 9, below).

[61] Kamble 1981: 133.

pollution and untouchability are so widely shared in Indian society, 'caste society' should not be seen as static, unchanging and harmonious. Quite the contrary: without subscribing to a simplistic idea of India as a domain of universal high-caste oppression and Dalit 'resistance', one can see that in the India of the 1990s a significant proportion of regional and pan-Indian economic and social conflict has come to be bound up with claims of caste-based solidarity and moral mandate. It is this painful and controversial aspect of post-Independence caste life which the final chapter will explore.