Caste politics in North, West and South India before Mandal

The low caste movements between sanskritisation and ethnicisation

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Introduction

The North-South contrast is a *locus classicus* of Indian studies. It is partly based on cultural – and more especially linguistic - differences since the North speaks languages from Indo-European origin _ mainly Hindi, hence its designation as the Hindi_belt of India _ whereas the South uses Dravidian idioms and has built a peculiar brand of ethnic regionalism on this very basis. However, the North-South divide derives also from economic and social contrasts. The kind of land settlement that the British introduced in India was not the same in these two areas, and this difference had far-reaching socio-political consequences. In the North, when the coloniser went to levy estate taxes, they often used intermediaries – mainly zamindars - who had been established under the Moghol Empire; those intermediaries of the central authority, who were often Rajputs or Muslims of aristocratic descent, were allowed to levy taxes due by the peasants against payment of a tribute. They were recognised as land-owners by the British in exchange of the collection of taxes in the rural area. In the South, where the Moghol administration had not been as powerful, the British did not find such a dense network of zamindars (or the equivalent). They tended to select individual farmers as land-proprietors and direct taxpayers: hence the system "raiyatwari", from "raiyat" "cultivator". This system was more conducive to the formation of a relatively egalitarian peasantry than the zamindari system, even if both of them tended to converge land, being increasingly concentrated in a small number of hands as commercial agriculture developed in the South, whereas the zamindars' properties tended to be divided up because of the heavy taxes required by the British. The dominant role of the agrarian elite was reinforced in the North because the British considered these "natural leaders" as their most reliable supporters and therefore treated them well.[1]

In addition, the Rajputs and other land-owning groups exerted power in most of the princely states of North India, which were much less numerous in the South. They had been maintained on their throne by the British who were unable to administer the country directly, without such intermediaries. Those states covered two-fifths of the Sub-Continent and represented about one fifth of the population. The highest concentration of princely states was situated in Rajputana – the present-day Rajasthan, where they numbered 22, and in the present-day Madhya Pradesh where they were 67 , (35 in Madhya Pradesh, 25 in Madhya Bharat and about a dozen in Chhattisgarh). The princely states were often conservatories of social order, as the Maharajahs tried to preserve their territories from modern influences. They generally administered their state through a network of zamindari and jagirdari (who unlike the former had a police and even a judicial power in their domain).

Besides this socio-economic and socio-political background, the North and the South always had a different caste composition.

The North-South divide

The Hindi-belt, principally composed by Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan is often considered as the heart of India, not only because of its relative weight – which has no equivalent – (in 1991 the four states represented 335 out of 844 millions of Indians) but also because it is often seen as the cradle of the Hindu civilisation, where the spoken language is the nearest to Sanskrit and the caste system the closest to the varna model.

[1] S. Freitag, "Natural leaders", administrators and social control: communal riots in the United Provinces, 1870-1925", South Asia, 1 (2), pp. 27-41.

This model is more deeply established than in the South where the twice-born are seldom 'complete' : if the Brahmins are present, the warrior and merchant castes are often absent, like in Maharashtra and Bengal by the way. By contrast, in the North all the varnas are there and the system is all the more strict as the upper varnas are in larger number than elsewhere in India : they represent from 13,6% (Bihar) up to 24,2% (Rajasthan) of the population.

In Uttar Pradesh, the largest state of the Indian Union, the upper castes represented in 1931 one fifth of the population, from whom 9,2% were Brahmins – the highest percentage in India. In this area the Rajputs, 7,2% of the population, were traditionally zamindars alongside members of the Muslim aristocracy. However, during the 19th century the tribute claimed by the British was such that many of them were obliged to hand over all or part of their zamindari to merchants they were heavily in debt with, Brahmins, or even Kayasths (scribe castes). The peasants, often tenants who could be expulsed at any moment, mostly belonged to lower and intermediate castes. Amongst the intermediate castes, the Jats stood prominent. They represented only 1,6% of the state population but were concentrated in the west of the state where they competed with the Rajputs. Well considered for their warrior qualities (the British classified them as a 'martial race') number of them were sent to the front during the two world wars. The Jats were also active farmers, hard workers when cultivating their plots of land was concerned. Among the Shudras they were followed by a series of lower castes responsible for services (like for instance the Nais – barbers – or the Telis – toddy tappers –) farmers (Kurmis, Lodhis, Koeris, Gujjars) or ox- and shepherds, the Yadavs, the largest Shudra caste, with 8,7% of the population. No other Shudra caste exceeded 3,5% of the state's population. The Chamars (leather workers), certainly, constituted the largest caste with 12,7% of the state's population but as Untouchables they held a marginal position.

The socio-economic conditions of Bihar, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh had much in common with Uttar Pradesh. In Bihar, the upper castes represented 13,6% of the population including 4,2% Rajputs, 4,7% Brahmins and 2,9% Bhumihars – an upper caste controlling a vast superficy of land which claim that they are Brahmins[2]. During the British Raj, most of the zamindars were Rajputs, Bhumihars and Brahmins. While the province was mainly subjected to direct administration, the British allowed the zamindars wide-ranging prerogatives. They could go as far as seizing a tenant's personal possessions and crop in repayment of debts. After in 1857 having resisted to the insurrection thanks to the support of zamindari, the British increased the links with the landowners and accorded them a higher autonomy.[3] Like in Uttar Pradesh, they mostly belonged to Shudra castes (Yadav, Kurmi, and Koeri etc.), among them the Yadavs again represented the highest number, 11% of the population. As for agricultural labourers and/or landless peasants, they were principally Untouchables (and more specially the Chamars).

Rajasthan is the North Indian state where the upper castes are in the largest number : 8% Brahmins, 9,2% Rajputs and 7% Banyas. Another significant factor is due to the high proportion of Jats, 9%. The fact that two princely states of Rajputana, Bharatpur and Dholpur were governed by Jat dynasties recognised as Kshatriyas is worth noticing. However, this possibility of elevation of the Shudras was inhibited by the Rajputs' domination. They controlled the overwhelming part of princely states and at a lower level exercised the function of jagirdar or zamindar; hence a cultural as well as a political effect:

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[2] Yet, the Rajputs refuse to consider them as Brahmins and consequently claim the second rank in the varna hierarchy, like elsewhere.

[3] F. Frankel, Caste, land and dominance in Bihar" in F. Frankel and M.S.A. Rao (eds), Dominance and state power in modern India, vol. 1, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1989, pp. 58-59.

…for over a thousand years the people of Rajasthan did not look up to the Brahmans as cultural models, nor did they adopt brahminical customs and life-styles to advance their ritual status. The people of Rajasthan did try to emulate the cultural norms and ritual forms adopted by their respective princes and jagirdars [who were Rajputs][4].

This imitation of the Rajputs reflects a general rule very little compatible with the rise of lower castes in a social and a political field. The Shudra castes for instance, may have preferred this 'kshatriyaisation' to the constitution of a separated collective identity.

The distribution of castes was almost the same in Madhya Pradesh. In this state the largest princely states (Gwalior, Indore and Dewas) were governed by Maratha dynasties, but the jagirdars and zamindars were often Rajputs. In 1931, the upper castes represented 12,9% (with 5,7% Brahmins, 5,3% Rajputs and 2% Banyas), whereas the Shudras were 42.5%, the Untouchables 14% and the Tribals are exceptionally high 22%[5].

On the whole, the Hindi-speaking states display a relative social and political homogeneity, inherited from the structures left by the British regarding land-owning and fiscal levy and related to the influence of the upper castes. The social hierarchy was all the more rigid and oppressive as the upper castes (particularly the Rajputs) were in many regions the dominant castes.[6] In the Hindi-belt the 'twice-born' often meet those three criteria and thus cumulate superiority in terms of status as well as the quality of dominant caste. Generally the Rajputs hold this position, but there are also exceptions like the Bhumihars in Bihar, the Tyagis (Brahmins who cultivate the land) and even the Jats in western Uttar Pradesh.

In the South, the caste system does not derive so closely from the varna model. The proportion of the Brahmins and even of the twice-born is often low. In Tamil Nadu the Brahmins represented in 1891 only 3% of the population and were concentrated in the Kaveri-delta. Correlatively, Tamil society was more fragmented and fluid. If the Vellalas – a caste of Shudra cultivators claiming the statute of Kshatriya – represented 12,42% of the population, no caste, even not this one, extended its domination over more than one district _ in fact, in most districts the Vellalas shared the dominance with warrior castes, immigrated from Andhra Pradesh between the 15th and the 18th-century and with castes of craftsmen and merchants.[7] Fragmentation was reinforced because of the division of these castes into many sub-groups, as show the schemes of matrimonial unions in which the endogamous jatis rarely extend than in more than a few neighbouring villages. Ritual purity, except in the extreme ends of the system (the Brahmins and the Untouchables) was less strictly enforced than in the North and the caste-status hindered less than elsewhere the change of professional activities, outside the sphere of those traditionally allowed in the caste.

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[4] I. Narain and P. C. Mathur, "The thousand year Raj: regional isolation and Rajput Hinduism in Rajasthan before and after 1947" in F. Frankel and M. S .A. Rao (eds), op. cit., p. 17.

[5]. For more details, see C. Jaffrelot, 'The Sangh Parivar Between Sanskritisation and Social Engineering', in T.B. Hansen and C. Jaffrelot (eds), The BJP and the Compulsions of Politics in India, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. 22-71.

[6] The concept of dominant caste, introduced by the Indian anthropologist M. N. Srinivas, designates an upper _ or an intermediate _ caste which controls a large part of land and is locally in great number. (M. N. Srinivas, Social Change in Modern India, New Delhi, Orient Longman, 1995 [1966], p. 10).

[7] D.A. Washbrook, 'Caste, class and dominance in modern Tamil Nadu', in F. Frankel and M.S.A. Rao (eds), op. cit., p. 223.

In Karnataka like in Tamil Nadu, the demographic weight of the upper castes _ mainly Brahmins _ was greatly inferior to that of the Hindi-belt, but in addition to that, the 'varnic' scheme was even more deeply affected by the rise of a religious movement – a sect actually – the Lingayats, that was eventually integrated in the caste system as a dominant caste – in some way comparable to that of another land owning, cultivating caste, the Vokkaligas.[8] The domination of these castes, in the villages, has always been less oppressive than in the Hindi-belt for two series of reasons. Firstly, they never locally combine superiority in terms of ritual purity (the twice-born status) with a predominant position in the rural economy (as dominant castes) : in the areas where the Vokkaligas are the dominant caste, the Brahmins continue to act as priests ; in the areas where the Lingayats dominate, the dominant castes are part of the Lingayat jatis who till land, whereas the priests are recruited in another jati[9]. For James Manor, the cohesiveness of society in Karnataka is above all a product of the early presence of an economy of rather small farmer-proprietors. In the former princely state of Mysore – the heart of modern Karnataka – in the 1950s, 65,2% of the farmers made one third of their income with the land they owned[10]. Karnataka, like Tamil Nadu, had an anti-Brahmin movement, led by the Vokkaligas and the Lingayats. But if targeted mainly the arrogant Brahmins living in towns and working in the administrative and the professions. In the villages, where the Brahmins were often poorer and depended on the patronage of the dominant castes, they showed them greater respect[11].

In Andhra Pradesh too, the balance of demographic power had the effect of putting political power in the hands of the dominant castes at the expense of the Brahmins. In 1921 the latter were only 3% of the state population. Like everywhere else, the Brahmins had been the first to benefit from the modern education system introduced by the British but the castes of cultivators like the Kapu and the Kamma, respectively 15,2 and 4,8% of the population in 1921, fully profited of the modernisation of agriculture, especially in the areas where the ryotwari system prevailed, hence the emergence of middle class people in their midst.[12] Gradually these groups joined Congress and captured its second line of leadership.

In Maharashtra, bridge state between the North and the South, the twice-born were in a larger number than in Andhra Pradesh with 3,9% Brahmins, 1% Kshatriyas and 1,69% Vaishyas. Nevertheless, the total number of these varna was lower than in the Hindi-speaking region. The Brahmins took advantage of social change due to colonisation in a dramatic way. By the late 19th century they almost monopolised administrative functions open to Indians as

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[8] J. Assayag, 'Modernisation ot the caste and indianisation of the democracy en India : the case of the Lingayats', Archives Européennes de Sociologie, 27 (2), 1986, pp. 319-352.

[9] J. Manor, 'Karnataka: caste, class, dominance and politics in a cohesive society', in F. Frankel and M.S.A. Rao (eds), op. cit., p 322., pp. 333-334.

[10] Ibid., p. 334.

[11] J. Manor concluded that "these people joined the non-Brahman movement not because they wanted to *overturn* the social order, but because they wanted to *conserve* it by extending the rules and logic of power relations in the villages to the newly developing urban sector" (Ibid., p. 341).

[12] G. Ram Reddy, 'The politics of accommodation – Caste, Class and Dominance in Andhra Pradesh', in F. Frankel and M.S.A. Rao (eds), op. cit., p. 274. The situation was naturally very different in the princely state of Hyderabad where the jagirdars and the zamindars reigned supreme over land.

well as the professions[13]. Hence the vigour of the anti-Brahmin movement led by Shudra leaders and then even by Untouchables like B.R. Ambedkar[14]. Actually, Maharashtra had a long history of conflict between Brahmins and Shudra castes, mainly Marathas, who formed a dominant caste. Right from the 17th century, Marathas carved out a state for themselves at the expense of the Moghol empire. The dynasty then established by Shivaji claimed the status of Kshatriya. However, Maharashtrian Brahmins - and more particularly the Chitpavans _ a Brahmin jati _ acknowledged such a promotion very reluctantly and usurped the throne in the 18th century after having served the Maratha kingdom as administrators and generals. This bone of contention served as backdrop to the anti-brahmin movement initiated at the end of the 19th century[15]. The Marathas took an even more active part in this movement as the modernisation of agriculture within the ryotwari system as well as an intense collaboration with the British enabled them to make rapid economic progress[16]. Eventually, Marathas gained control over the Congress which had become a serious contender for power _ and indeed formed the government in 1937. The Brahmins who then run the party, refused to allow them a large space within the governments of 1937 and 1946, but from 1950 onwards, the Congress was gradually dominated by Marathas.

This rapid survey of the North-South contrast suggests that the Hindi-belt remained dominated by an upper-caste élite whose influence derived from numbers, political structures (the continuation of princely states) and the pattern of land ownership as well as tax levy. However, the role of the low caste movements needs to be scrutinised too. While they were very active in South India, they did not succeed in making such a big impact in the North. This contrast partly resulted from the fact that the lower castes were in larger number in the South but I would like to argue that in this area these castes were able to shape new identities and coalesce in such a way that they very early became a force to reckon with. And here, the southern pattern partly apply to West India. Indeed, in addition to the North-South contrast I would like to examine the original contribution of Maharashtra and Gujarat to low caste politics.

The uneven transformation of caste

The caste system has been traditionally analysed as a 'sacralised social order' based on the notion of ritual purity[17]. In this view, its holistic character - to use the terminology of Louis Dumont[18] - implies that the dominant values, that of the Brahmins, are regarded by the

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[13] G. Johnson, 'Chitpavan Brahmins and politics in western India in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries', in : E. Leach and S.N. Mukherjee (eds), Elites in South Asia, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1970, p. 105.

[14] E. Zelliot, From Untouchable to Dalit – Essays on Ambedkar movement, New Delhi, Manohar, 1992.

[15] R. O'Hanlon, Caste, conflict and ideology – Mahatma Jotirao Phule and low caste protest in nineteenth-century Western India, Cambridge, Cambridge University press, 1985.

[16] J. Lele, 'Caste, Class and Dominance : Political mobilization in Maharashtra', in F. Frankel and M.S.A. Rao (eds), op. cit., p. 153

[17] See H. Gould, The Hindu caste system – Volume 1. The sacralization of a social order, Delhi, Chanakya Publications, 1987.

[18] . L. Dumont, Homo Hierarchicus, Paris, Gallimard, 1966.

whole society as providing universal references, role models. Hence the central role played by "Sanskritisation", a practice that M.N. Srinivas has defined as 'the process by which a "low" Hindu caste, or tribal or other group, changes its customs, ritual, ideology and way of life in the direction of a high, and frequently, "twice-born" caste' that is the Brahmins, but also the Kshatriyas or even the Vaishyas[19]. Low castes may for instance adopt the most prestigious features of the Brahmins' diet and therefore emulate vegetarianism. Such a process reflects a special coherence in society, all the groups admitting the values of the upper castes as the legitimate value system. Such a coherence is not synonymous with cohesion. In fact, sanskritisation itself bears witness of an aspiration to social mobility : low castes constantly try to improve their social status by imitating the high castes and contest the position which has been assigned to them in the system. Moreover, the myths of origin of the low castes are always centred around the idea of an initial decline: even Untouchable castes claim to descend from Brahmin castes and that they have fallen from this rank often because of the malicious intent of some upper caste people[20]. Robert Deliège points out that through such myths, the Untouchables 'take caste for granted, and by stressing their brotherhood with Brahmans, they acknowledge the superiority of the latter'[21]. This is pure sanskritisation.

For Srinivas 'Sanskritisation is generally accompanied by, and often results in, upward mobility for the caste in question but the mobility associated with Sanskritisation results only in positional changes in the system and does not lead to any structural change. That is, a caste moves up above its neighbours and another comes down, but all this takes place in an essentially stable hierarchical order. The system itself does not change'[22]. Indeed, the values sustaining the social system remain the same. In a way, the caste system, with sanskritisation, incorporates a mechanism of safety valves that enables the upper castes to channel of even defuse the revolt of the plebeians; this is how coherence can be maintained while the system does not display any real cohesion. H. Gould suggests that 'one of the prime motive force motive-forces behind Sanskritization is this factor of repressed hostility which manifests itself not in the form of rejecting the caste system but in the form of its victims trying to seize control of it and thereby expiate their frustrations on the same battlefield where they acquired them. Only then can there be a sense of satisfaction in something achieved that is tangible, concrete, and relevant to past experience'[23].

Besides sanskritisation, low caste groups have explored avenues for upward mobility through the bhakti movements and the sectarian model. Since the Buddha, gurus have recurrently questioned the caste system on behalf of the fundamental equality of men before god. Their disciples who were initiated into monastic orders forgot about their caste to form

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[19] . M.N. Srinivas, Social Change in Modern India, Hyderabad, Orient Longman, 1972, p. 6.

[20] . The myth of origin of the Chamars is very telling in this aspect : their original ancestor was the youngest of four Brahmins brethren who went to bathe in a river and found a cow struggling in a quicksand. They sent the youngest brother in to rescue the animal, but before he could get to the spot it had been drowned. He was compelled therefore by his brothers to remove the carcass and after he had done this they turned him out of their caste and gave him the name of Chamar (Voir, R.V. Russel, The tribes and Castes of the Central Provinces of India, Amsterdam, Anthropological Publications, 1969 [1916] vol.2, p. 405).

[21] . R. Deliège, 'The myth of origin of Indian Untouchables', Man, 28 (3), p. 534.

[22] . M.N. Srinivas, Social Change in Modern India, p. 6.

[23] . H. Gould, 'Sanskritization and Westernization: A Dynamic View', in H. Gould, The Hindu castge system. Volume 2. Caste adaptation in modernizing Indian society, Delhi, Chanakya, 1988, p. 146.

new fraternities. Srinivas emphasised that the 'protest sects' in a way 'offered opportunities for mobility to members of the so-called low castes'[24]. However, this equality was other worldly: it did not affect the social order, even if it devalued it as a purely mundane exercise. Ambedkar rightly pointed out that 'from the point of view of the annihilation of caste, the struggle of the saints did not have any effect on society'[25]. The traditional caste system was more directly challenged during the British Raj, when the values propagated through schooling and Christian missionaries and the impact of the State apparatus did not leave it unaltered.

The development of the means of communication led to the opening up of the jati which, till then, was confined to a reduced territory, delimited by matrimonial relations (in North India caste endogamy and village exogamy are compelling rules). Hence the emergence of horizontal solidarities and the territorial extension of the frontiers of caste. The members of a same jati were enabled to migrate to find jobs or even obliged to do so, if they were transferred within the British administration for instance. The State building process - by which I mean the construction as well as the formation of the State[26] – played an important role since it led to the establishment of an all India bureaucracy. Transfers of bureaucrats out of their native place often generated feelings of anomie and made the finding of the suitable match for endogamous marriages more complicated; hence the idea to create associations which could link members of a same caste.

These institutions were also stirred up by the census, which was a key element in the formation of the colonial state. From 1871 onwards the British enumerated the castes (like the religious groups) and therefore these 'human groups (castes) [we]re treated to a considerable extent as abstractable from the regional and territorial contexts in which they function[ed]'[27]. This effect reinforced those of the state construction process but the census also raised among several castes the sentiment of having common interests since the British did not content themselves with enumerating them ; they also classified them. In 1901, the Census Commissioner, Herbert Risley, decided to give the ranking of the jatis in their local context and their varna, which was a much more delicate enterprise. Castes immediately organised themselves and even formed councils to take steps to see that their status was recorded in the way they thought was honourable to them. Caste associations were therefore created also as pressure groups whose aim was to improve their rank in the census. Naturally this process was especially prominent among the low castes and therefore give 'An indication of the widespread desire for mobility among the backward castes...'[28]. Each census provided castes with an opportunity to petition the government for getting a higher place in the order of precedence and for being recorded under new, sanskritised, names. Indeed, this move was in keeping with the logic of sanskritisation since the objective was not to opt out from the system but to rise within it according to its own rules and values.

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[24] . Ibid., p. 238.

[25] . Cited in D. Keer, Dr Ambedkar. Life and Mission, op. cit., p. 109.

[26] . On this twofold process, see B. Berman, J. Lonsdale, Unhappy Valley, Portstmouth, James Currey, 1992.

[27] . A. Appadurai, 'Number in the colonial imagination', in A. Appadurai, Modernity at large - Cultural Dimensions of Globalization, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1996(?), p. 119.

[28] . M.N. Srinivas, Social Change in Modern India, op. cit., p. 100.

The Kayasths of North India were probably the first to show the way in that direction. In late XIXth century, Munshi Kali Prasad, a Lucknow-based rich lawyer from this caste, wrote Kayasthas Ethnology, a book where he showed 'to which of the four great divisions of the Aryans in India [,the Kshatriyas,] the Kayasthas belonged'[29]. Subsequently, the Kayasths claimed that they were the descendants of the Emperor Chandragupta[30]. The Kayastha Conference was founded in 1886 on the basis of the Kayasth Dharma Sabha. One of its resolutions it passed at its first annual meeting in 1887 established a Temperance section and repeatedly - and allegedly successfully - requested the Kayasths to give up drinking[31]. Moreover, the Kayastha Conference still endeavoured in the 1920s-1930s to sanskritise caste rituals and invited its members to emulate the 'dvijas'. Certainly, this attitude stemmed from modern motives since the main reason for sanskritisation was to standardise the Kayasth culture and to create a homogenous social group[32], however, sanskritisation remained the key idiom, with its emphasis on positional mobility instead of structural changes.

Caste associations were more successful in promoting the unity of the caste groups and in emancipating themselves from sanskritisation in southern and western India. They have incited the sub-castes to adopt the same name in the Census and to break the barriers of endogamy, even if, within a caste, the members of the upper class still tend to inter-marry - but then it is more economic endogamy than purely caste-based endogamy. This process has been observed by Robert Hardgrave in the case of the Nadars of Tamil Nadu whose caste association, the Nadar Mahajana Sangam was founded in 1910 and promoted what he calls 'caste fusion', as 'the unit of endogamy expanded'[33]. For S. Barnett this kind of fusion tended to transform castes into ethnic groups. His demonstration is based on another Tamil case study, the Kontaikkatti Vellalars who do not represent a large number of people but are influential since many of them are landlords. From 1920 onwards, the caste association has encouraged them to expand endogamy in new territories and to other Vellallars in order to make up for their numerical weakness. It may then be one of the first examples of caste federations _ a notion to which we shall return in the next section. For Barnett these innovations introduced 'qualitative change in the ideological field of caste'[34], since 'blood purity', on which _ according to him _ relies ritual purity, has lost its importance. The relevant unit is not the original jati any more, but groups of castes, which represents 'a transition from caste to ethniclike regional caste blocs' [35]. However, this is only the first step towards an ethnicisation of caste which also implies a collective history - at least a golden Age - and a separate, cultural identity. This kind of ethnicisation of castes or caste federations

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[29] A short account of the aims, objects, achievements and proceedings of the Kayastha Conference, Allahabad, Conference Reception Committee Muttra, 1893, p. IV.

[30] L. Carroll, 'Caste, social change, and the social scientist: a note on the historical approach to Indian social history', Journal of Asian Studies, 35 (1), November 1975, p. 67.

[31]. A short account of the aims, objects, achievements and proceedings of the Kayastha Conference, Allahabad, Conference Reception Committee Muttra, 1893.

[32]. L. Carroll, 'Caste, social change and the social scientist', op. cit.

[33]. R. L. Hardgrave, Jr., 'Caste: Fission and Fusion', Economic and Political Weekly, July 1968, pp. 1065-1070.

[34] . S. Barnett, 'Identity Choice and Caste Ideology in Contemporary South India', in K. David (ed.), The New Wind - Changing Identities in South India, La Haye, Mouton, 1977, p. 401.

[35]. Ibid., 402.

are much more conducive to social change than caste associations or caste fusion pure and simple.

The ethnicisation of caste in western and southern India

Maharashtra between sanskritisation and ethnicisation of caste

In western India, the ethnicisation process has been started early by the Satyashodak Movement. Developed by Phule in the Bombay Presidency in the late XIXth century, it was more than a caste association since it intended to represent the 'bahujan samaj', the majority of the people, the masses. Yet, this capacity to aggregate low caste people was short lived even though it rested on a rather solid ethnic bedrock.

Jotirao Phule[36] was a Mali (market gardener), a cultivating caste in close contact with towns where its members sold their products. In one of these towns, Poona, Phule could attend a school of the Scottish Mission. What he learnt about the Blacks in the United States suggested to him a comparison with the lower castes - hence his book, Slavery (1873) that he dedicated to the people of America[37]. The writings of Thomas Paine exerted a special influence on Phule who discovered the individualist values of liberty and equality in The Age of Reason and Human Rights. This source of inspiration developed in conjunction with that of Christianity. For Phule, Jesus-Christ epitomises equality and fraternity. He also regards him as the spokesman for the poor people. However, Phule did not convert to Christianity and even translated the Christian idiom into a new discourse focused on King Bali, the subterranean god who reigns in the underground world according to Hindu mythology[38].

Phule tried to give the 'bahujan samaj' a new history on the basis of some of the findings of Orientalism. In 1792, William Jones had deduced from the discovery of the Indo-european linguistic family the notion of a common, original race whose branches had migrated towards Europe and India[39]. This theory was developed during the nineteenth century by many German philologists such as Albrecht Weber, R. Roth, A. Kuhn and J. Möhl (whose books were published in the 1840s-1850s). In their writings appear the notions of 'Sanskritic race' or 'Vedic people'. These speculations reached India from the late 1850s onwards through Max Müller, who tended to be somewhat more cautious, and Muir who published in 1860 a study on 'The Trans-Himalayan Origin of the Hindus, and their affinity with the western branches of the Aryan race'[40].

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[36] For biographical details, see D. Keer, Mahatma Jotirao Phooley - Father of Indian Social Revolution, Bombay, Popular Prakashan, 1974.

[37] J. Phule, Slavery - Collected works of Mahatma Jotirao Phule, vol. 1, Bombay, Government of Maharashtra, 1991, p. XXVII.

[38] J. Phule, Slavery, op. cit., pp. 36-38.

[39] P.J. Marshall 'Introduction' in : P.J. Marshall (ed.), The British Discovery of Hinduism in the Eighteenth Century, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1970, p. 15.

[40] I am most grateful to Bruce Graham for the information contained in this paragraph which he developed in the still unpublished first chapters of his book on the Jana Sangh where the argument is summarized in one page : B. Graham Hindu Nationalism and Indian politics -

The first Hindu nationalist ideologues of the late 19th century and early 20th century _ from Dayananda to Tilak _ borrowed heavily from the European orientalists. Among other themes, the one they used assiduously related to the common racial origin of the European and Indian people and its corollary, the southward migration which they interpreted to prove that the Hindus were the first race and that they once dominated the whole world. This myth helped the first Hindu revivalists to regain a certain self-esteem by claiming that their ancestors were the first inhabitants of the world[41].

Phule used the Aryan theory to his own advantage: the fact that upper castes leaders traced their origin from Aryan conquerors could be used to argue that they descended from foreigners and that their culture, including the caste system was alien to India's original people. Phule, therefore, portrayed the Aryans as invaders who had settled in India at a rather late period to subjugate the first inhabitants of India and destroyed their civilisation. For him, the low castes were the descendants of these people. In this reinterpretation of the past, the invaders are identified as Brahmins whereas the indigenous groups are described as descending from the original ruling class, the Kshatriyas. In Phule's ideology, this category does not refer to the second varna but to includes 'all original Indians, from Kunbi-Marathas through Mahars'[42]. The king of these original Kshatriyas, Bali, was described by Phule as reigning over a rich and prosperous country made of "milk and honey"[43].

The extreme fertility of the soil of India, its rich productions, the proverbial wealth of the people, and the other innumerable gifts which this favourable land enjoys, and which have more recently tempted the cupidity of the Western nations, attracted the Aryans [...] The original inhabitants with whom these earth-born gods, the Brahmans, fought, were not inappropriately termed Rakshasas, that is the protectors of the land [...] The cruelties which the European settlers practised on the American Indians on their first settlement in the new world had certainly their parallel in India in the advent of the Aryans and their subjugation of the aborigines [...] They originally settled on the banks of the Ganges whence they spread gradually over the whole of India. In order, however, to keep a better hold on the people they devised that weird system of mythology, the ordination of caste, and the code of crude and inhuman laws to which we can find no parallel among the other nations[44].

Phule's endeavour had a pioneering dimension since he was probably the first low caste leader who avoided the traps of sanskritisation by endowing the low caste with an alternative value system. For the first time, the low castes were presented as ethnic groups which had inherited the legacy of an antiquarian golden age and whose culture was therefore

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The origins and development of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh, Cambridge, Cambridge University, 1990, p. 44.

[41] . For more details, see C. Jaffrelot, 'The Idea of the Hindu race in the writings of Hindu nationalist ideologues in the 1920s and 1930s: a concept between two cultures', in P. Robb (ed.), The Concept of Race in South Asia, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1995, pp. 327-354.

[42] . G. Omvedt, 'Jotirao Phule and the Ideology of Social Revolution in India', Economic and Political Weekly, 11 September 1971, p. 1971. Phule's 'non-Aryan' theory 'excluded Brahmans but did positively identify the peasant majority (that is the middle level castes of Kunbis, Malis, Dhangars etc) with untouchables and tribals as one community, native inhabitants of Maharashtra' (ibid., p. 1974).

[43]. Collected works of Mahatma Jotirao Phule. vol. II, Bombay, Government of Maharashtra, 1991, p. 8.

[44]. Cited in G. Omvedt, Dalit visions, New Delhi, Orient Longman, 1995, pp. 17-18.

distinct from that of the wider Hindu society ; secondly, his efforts in favour of the low castes were not confined to his castemen only: he wanted to unite the 'bahujan samaj', e.g. the Shudras and the Atishudras (dalits) and as early as 1853 he opened schools for Untouchables. He projected himself as the spokesman of the non-Brahmins at large and, indeed, kept targeting the Brahmins in vehement pamphlets where he presented them as rapacious money lenders, corrupt priests eager to extort as much as they could from poor and ignorant villagers[45]. He even tried to pressurise the British for reducing the number of Brahmins in the government services[46].

Phule was also the first low caste organiser. In 1875 he was attracted by the Arya Samaj[47], but he kept his distance from this movement because he did not trust the upper caste reformers[48] who pretended to fight against the social system even though they observed its rules[49]. He also remained aloof from the Congress which he regarded as a Brahmin movement[50]. Nationalism, according to him, was an illusion created by upper caste manipulation to conceal the inner divisions of Indian society[51]. He had founded the Satyashodak Samaj in 1873 in order to strengthen the sentiment of unity among the low castes and never diluted this agenda in party politics. He narrated pseudo-historical episodes bearing testimony of the traditional solidarity between the Mahars and Shudras[52] and protested against the Brahmins' stratagems for dividing the low castes[53]. In the late 19th century and early 20th century, the Satyashodak idiom embraced rich peasants as well as agricultural tenants who belonged to very different castes and in some places 'the Sathya Shodhak message seemed to have reached even the untouchable'[54]. A major spokesman of the non-Brahmin movement in Maharashtra in the 1910-1930, Mukundrao Patil, the son of Phule's colleague, Krishnarao Bhalekar, was for instance a radical defender of the Untouchables even though he was a rich

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[45] See, 'Priestcraft exposed' in J. Phule, Collected Works of Mahatma Jotirao Phule, vol. 2, op. cit., p. 67 and 'A poem about the crafty, cunning and spurious (religious) books of the Brahmins (A contrast between the comfortable lives of the Brahmins and the miserable lives of the Shudras)' in Slavery - Collected Works of Mahatma Jotirao Phule, vol. I, op. cit., p. 81.

[46]. R. O'Hanlon Caste, conflict and ideology, op. cit., p. 99.

[47]. Ibid., p. 223.

[48]. In 1885 Phule published a pamphlet implicitly directed against Ranade whom he criticised for his elitist conceptions and more especially for his despising attitude vis–à–vis the peasants (J. Phule, 'A warning' in Collected Works of Mahatma Jotirao Phule vol. II, op. cit. p. 48 et suiv.).

[49]. J. Phule, Slavery, op. cit., pp. 58-59.

[50]. J. Phule, Collected works, vol. 2, op. cit., p. 25.

[51]. Ibid. p. 29.

[52]. For instance he mentioned that Mahars once had to attack 'Brahmins for liberating their Shudra brothers' (Slavery, op. cit., p. 25).

[53]. Ibid., p. 49.

[54]. M.S. Gore, Non-Brahman Movement in Maharashtra, New Delhi, Segment Books, 1989, p. 26.

peasant. He advocated 'the general Satyashodak ideology, of opposition to Sanskritisation and assertion of the 'non-Aryan' unity of Maharashtrian natives'[55]. By that time, Phule's view of the non-brahmins as non-Aryas had also made an impact on the small dalit intelligentsia. In 1909, Kisan Faguji Bansode (1870-1946), a Mahar from Nagpur, warned the upper castes in the following terms:

The Aryans - your ancestors - conquered us and gave us unbearable harassment. At that time we were your conquest, you treated us even worse than slaves and subjected us to any torture you wanted. But now we are no longer your subjects, we have no service relationship with you, we are not your slaves or serfs...[56]

The Satyashodak Samaj eventually attracted even Marathas such as the Jedhe family from Poona emerged as the main defender of the caste interests. They realised 'the futility of a purely Maratha politics and the necessity of making the movement more broadbased. From this time on they shifted to a « Satyashodak » orientation, although neither had previously had any connection with the Satyashodak Samaj in Poona'[57]. The discourse of Keshavrao Jedhe was 'the long-held Satyashodak view of history: Brahmans were outsiders to the country and to the ethnic community of true « Hindus »; they desired only their own caste superiority and consolidated their power through treachery, through falsification of historical records, and by weaving a web of religious slavery which set up a social hierarchy of superiority and inferiority and divided the masses'[58].

Maratha princes such as the Maharajah of Baroda strongly approved of Phule's ideological commitments and donated large amounts of money to his movement[59]. A direct descendant of Shivaji, the Maharajah of Kolhapur, Shahu, who reigned between 1894 and 1922 and who was 'intensely proud of his Maratha lineage'[60], was even more supportive.[61]. He recruited Maratha Satya Shodhaks in his administration[62], reserved 50% of the vacancies in the state administration for 'the members of the backward communities'[63] and patronised the establishment of the Satyashodak Samaj in Kolhapur in 1911. He promoted inter-caste dining and introduced the Inter-caste Marriage Act in 1918[64]. In 1920 he appointed Maratha

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[55] . G. Omvedt, 'The Satyashodak Samaj and Peasant Agitation', Economic and Political Weekly, 3 November 1973, p. 1973.

[56] . G. Omvedt, Dalit visions, op. cit., p. 35.

[57] . G. Omvedt, 'Non-Brahmans and Nationalists in Poona', Economic and Political Weekly, Annual Number, February 1974, p. 207.

[58] . Ibid., p. 208.

[59]. Collected Works of Mahatma Jotirao Phule, vol. II, op. cit. p. 81 et 97.

[60]. I. Copland, 'The Maharaja of Kolhapur and the Non-Brahmin Movement 1902-10', Modern Asian Studies, 7(2), (1973), p. 214.

[61] . He had been educated by a former member of the ICS, S.M. Fraser who was also the tutor of Mysore and Bhavnagar, two other states where anti-Brahmin feelings developed early (Chandra Mudaliar, The Kolhapur Movement, Kolhapur, Shivaji Vidhyapith, n.d., p. 41).

[62] Ibid., p. 6.

[63] . Ibid., p. 21.

[64] . Ibid., p. 26.

priests to circumvent the Brahmins and soon after established the Kshatriya Vedic School to train Maratha priests.

However, he remained as much interested in promoting the Marathas as the Bahujan Samaj at large. On the one hand he tried to secure for the Marathas the status of Kshatriyas and in fact he broke with the local Brahmins in 1900 when they refused to recognise his family's claim to this status and accordingly refused to perform certain rituals. On the other hand, he wanted to 'kshatriyase' also Untouchables to whom he used to symbolically give swords and Maratha names and whom he called 'Suryavaunshi', pretending that way that they could trace their lineage to the sun God, Surya. Unlike Phule who had described the Kshatriyas as the original people of India, for Shahu they were the warrior castes, a social order to which the Untouchables and the Marathas belonged, and this was in keeping with the logic of the caste system. Shahu made strong efforts to federate the lower castes. In the communal representation scheme that he introduced in 1920 in Kolhapur municipality 85 castes were grouped into 20 'unions of castes'. The Marathas, the Rajputs and the Kunbis formed a constituency in themselves[65].

Yet, the Sathyashodak Samaj could not become a common platform for all the non-Brahmins on the basis of a non-Aryan identity because of the attitude of Marathas other than Shahu. Most of them refused to mix with lower castes and stuck to the sanskritisation process. For instance, even Bhaskarrao Jadhav, in Marathe ani Tyanci Bhasha, displayed much ambivalence: on the one hand he admits 'the prevalence of Dravidian customs and racial intermixture among Marathas, and on the other asserts, without any qualification, the Marathas are definitely « Aryan Kshatriyas »'[66]. Therefore, even those who had followed Phule's message for some time, eventually joined hands with the Brahmins-dominated Congress, or were co-opted by it. Congress leaders such as N.V. Gadgil, who was very much aware that the nationalist movement could only acquire a mass-basis if it attracted low caste people, contacted K. Jedhe and made an alliance with him in the early 1930s[67]. A Maratha-dominated Satyashodak Samaj, which had remained aloof from the Congress till then, decided to join the movement. Gradually, the Maratha rose to power within the party.

In spite of this ultimate failure, from Phule to Shahu, the low castes movement of Maharashtra was characterised by very distinctive features with long terms implications. For the first time, all non-Brahmin castes were invited to unite on the basis of a common ethnic background - as the original inhabitants of this land - endowed with a Kshatriya ethos and to fight the Brahmin domination. Even though the dominant idiom was imbued with the symbols of kshatriyahood, this movement escaped the sanskritisation process since the upper castes were not seen as role models but as invaders whose culture could be despised. Ambedkar – who regarded Phule as one of his mentors - elaborated on this basis.

Ambedkar was a thinker as much as a political leader, as one could expect from his training since he got degrees – including a Ph. D – in different subjects, ranging from economics to law. He was also most interested in anthropology, so much so that in 1916 he made a presentation entitled 'Castes in India. Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development' in

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[65] . Ibid., p. 27.

[66] . G. Omvedt, 'Jotirao Phule and the ideology of social revolution in India', ibid., pp. 1974-1975.

[67]. G. Omvedt, 'Non Brahmans and Nationalists in Poona', op. cit., p. 213.

Columbia University. In this paper he intends to 'advance a Theory of Caste'[68] that is different from that of the western students of Indian society who, according to him, tend to over emphasise the criterion of race. For Ambedkar caste is not a racial but a social phenomenon that emerged from the strategy of the Brahmins who adopted a strictly endogamous matrimonial regime, leading the other groups to do the same in order to emulate this self-proclaimed élite. In fact, Ambedkar, as early as 1916, has the intuition of practices that M.N. Srinivas will call 'sanskritisation' forty years later.

As a corollary, he perceives that caste is not 'a unit by itself' but 'one within a System of Caste'[69] : 'caste in the singular number is an unreality. Castes exist only in the plural member. There is no such thing as a caste : There are always castes. To illustrate my meaning: while making themselves into a caste, the Brahmins, by virtue of this created non-Brahmin caste; or, to express it in my own way, while closing themselves in they closed others out'[70]. This system is based on a peculiar kind of hierarchy and domination. The lower castes emulate the Brahmins because they believe in the same value system which they have designed along their own lines and therefore admit that the Brahmins are superior to the others: it is not possible 'to fashion society after one's own pattern'[71] but one can exert one's own domination by having the others believing in one's own superiority[72]. As early as 1916, at the age of 25, Ambedkar has understood the mechanisms of sanskritisation and their capacity for alienating the lower castes.

In his subsequent writings, Ambedkar gives a more elaborated and action-oriented interpretation of the caste system. In Who were the Shudras ?, he uses the Purusha Shakta as a departure point to highlight that, in contrast to the Christian Genesis, man is not the basic unit of the new humanity but the group, the varna: this cosmogony 'preaches a class-composed society as its ideal'[73]. More importantly, it encompasses a hierarchical view of social relations:

> The equation of the different classes to different parts of the body is not a matter of accident. It is deliberate. The idea behind this plan seems to be to discover a formula which will solve two problems, one of fixing the functions of the four classes and the other of fixing the gradation of the four classes after a preconceived plan. The formula of equating different classes to the different parts of the body of the Creator has this advantage. The part fixes the gradation of the class and the gradation in its turn fixes the function of the class […]. The Shudra is equated to the feet of the Creator. The feet form the lowest and the most ignoble part of the humane frame. Accordingly, the Shudra is placed last in the social order and is given the filthiest function, namely, to serve as a menial [74].

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[68]. B.R. Ambedkar, 'Castes in India. Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development', Indian Antiquary, May 1917, vol. XLI, reproduced in Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, vol. 1, Bombay, Government of Maharashtra, 1979, p. 22.

[69] Ibid., p. 20

[70] Ibid.

[71] Ibid., p.16

[72] Ibid., p.17 et 19

[73] B.R. Ambedkar, 'Who were the shudras ? How they came to be the fourth varna in the indu-Aryan society ?', in. Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar writings and speeches, vol.7, Bombay, Government of Maharashtra, 1990, p.25.

[74] Ibid., pp. 32-33.

For Ambedkar the varna system establishes a unique social structure since no other society has such 'an official gradation laid down, fixed and permanent, with an ascending scale of reverence and a descending scale of contempt'[75]. The specificity of the system lays in this 'graded inequality' which is a cause for permanent anger for Ambedkar. In a latter book he will mention 'an ascending scale of hatred and a descending scale of contempt […] [which] might be a source of perpetual conflict'[76]. The substitution of the pair 'reverence/contempt' by the pair 'hatred/contempt' suggests a kind of radicalisation: the remaining part of the holistic rationale of the system – the respect for the higher castes which found expression in sanskritisation – is definitely forgotten and transformed into pure resentment against the oppressor[77].

The question, then, for Ambedkar, is: why don't the lower castes revolt against the oppressors? The inhibiting effect of the traditional reverence, inherited from the sanskritisation logic can be dissipated and transmuted into hatred. But social revolt is signed away by another factor that is the notion of 'graded inequality'. Ambedkar believes in equality more than in any other social value. He has learnt and experienced it during his sojourns in the West and continuously put it first:

Fraternity and liberty are really derivative notions. The basic and fundamental conceptions are equality and respect for human personality. Fraternity and liberty take their roots in these two fundamental conceptions. Digging further it may be said that equality is the original notion and respect for human personality is a reflection of it. So that where equality is denied, everything else may be taken to be denied[78].

Yet, Ambedkar does not content himself with the opposition between the individualistic and the holistic societies. Among the latter, he very pertinently distinguishes two types of society because 'in addition to equality and inequality there is such a thing as graded inequality. Yet inequality is not half so dangerous as graded inequality'[79]. In a situation of inequality, groups of a similar size oppose each other. In industrial societies, the labour class can revolt against the bourgeoisie; in the aristocratic regimes, the bourgeois can fight the aristocrats. But in a caste system, the dominated groups are too deeply divided for joining hands against their oppressors:

In a system of graded inequality, the aggrieved parties are not on a common level […]. In a system of graded inequality there are the highest (the Brahmins). Below the highest are the higher (the Kshatryas). Below the higher are those who are high (Vaishya). Below the high are the low (Shudra) and the low are those who are lower (the Untouchables). All have a grievance against the highest and would like to bring about their downfall. But they will not

[75] Ibid., p. 26. Underlined by me.

[76] B.R. Ambedkar, 'The Buddha and his Dhamma', in Babasaheb Ambedkar writings and speeches vol.11, Bombay, Government of Maharashtra, p. 91.

[77] . For a remarkable analysis of these notions, see, O. Herrenschmidt, '"L'inégalité graduée"' ou la pire des inégalités. L'analyse de la société hindoue par Ambedkar', Archives Européennes de Sociologie, 37 (1), 1996, pp. 16-17.

[78] B.R. Ambedkar, 'Philosophy of Hinduism', in Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar writings and speeches vol.3, Bombay, Government of Maharashtra, p. 66.

[79] B.R. Ambedkar, 'Revolution', in ibid., p. 320.

combine. The higher is anxious to get rid of the highest but does not wish to combine with the high, the low and the lower lest they should reach his level and be his equal. The high wants to over-throw the higher who is above him but does not want to join hands with the low and the lower, lest they should rise to his status and become equal to him in rank. The low is anxious to pull down the highest, the higher and the high but he would not make a common cause with the lower for fear of the lower gaining a higher status and becoming his equal. In the system of graded inequality there is no such class as completely unprivileged class except the one which is at the base of the social pyramid. The privileges of the rest are graded. Even the low is a privileged class as compared with the lower. Each class being privileged, every class is interested in maintaining the system [80].

Ambedkar could go even further because the mechanisms he is describing here are at work within each varna where they oppose different jatis. Otherwise, the Shudras would form a bloc which would be in a majority in the Hindu community. Anyway, Ambedkar is the first low caste politician to offer such an elaborated view of the caste system to deplore the division of the lower 'a disunited body […], infested with the caste system in which they believe as much as does the caste Hindu. This caste system among the untouchables has given rise to mutual rivalry and jealousy and it has made common action impossible'[81]. For Olivier Herrenschmidt the very notion of 'graded inequality' makes a revolution almost impossible in India. Yet, Ambedkar, on the basis of his sociological analysis will endeavour to reshape the identity of the lower castes for enabling them to assert themselves.

He first tried to give a new sense of dignity to the Shudras. In Who were the Shudras ? he maintains that they were Aryas, and therefore belonged to the 'twice born' varnas. He argues that in the Laws of Manu (one of the Dharmashastras), that Shudras took part in the coronation ceremonies of the kings[82], that the Shudras were often presented as rich men in old sanskrit books[83] and that a Shudra was eligible to the status of a Brahmin after seven generations having married Brahmins[84]. Yet, Ambedkar does not describe the Shudras as former Brahmins but as former Kshatriyas. According to him they formed a very substantial sub-group of the warrior castes to which they even gave some of the most eminent and powerful kings of the solar dynasty[85]. They lost their 'twice-born' status when Brahmins retrograded them to avenge some vexation[86].

Such a theory contrasts with Ambedkar's usual views in the sense that it is articulated in the framework of sanskritisation or kshatriyaisation: the Shudras are supposed to regain the ethos of the second varna to which they used to belong, not of being proud of their own values and life style. He looks at the Untouchables in a very different way.

In The untouchables. Who were they and why they became untouchables? (1948) he rejects once again the racial theory of some western authors for whom the Untouchables

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[80] B.R. Ambedkar, « Untouchables or The Children of India's Ghetto » in Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Bombay, Government of Maharashtra, 1989, pp. 101-102.

[81] B.R. Ambedkar, « Held at Bay », in Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches vol. 5, Bombay, Government of Maharashtra, 1989, p. 266.

[82] Ibid., p.111.

[83] Ibid., p.112.

[84] Ibid., p.110.

[85] Ibid., p.114.

[86] Ibid, p.156

would descend from a group of indigenous people subjugated by the Aryan invaders[87]. He dismisses also the interpretations explaining the low status of the Untouchables because of their professional activities by simply asking: 'The filthy and unclean occupations which the Untouchables perform are common to all human societies […]why are such people not treated as Untouchables in other parts of the world ? [88]'. His interpretation is much more complicated. He explains that each and every society is subjected to invasions by tribes which appear to be more powerful than the local ones. Suffering from a process of dislocation, the latter, give birth to new groups that Ambedkar call the 'Broken Men': 'In a tribal war it often happened that a tribe instead of being completely annihilated was defeated and routed. In many cases a defeated tribe became broken into bits. As a consequence of this there always existed in Primitive times a floating population consisting of groups of Broken tribesmen roaming in all directions[89]'.

After the conquering tribes became sedentary, they used the services of the Broken Men against the still unsettled tribes to guard the villages. Therefore, they established themselves at the periphery of clusters of habitations, also because the villagers did not want them as neighbours.

These Broken Men became the first and most fervent adepts of Buddha and they remained so when most of the other converts returned to the mainstream of Hinduism. For Ambedkar, 'It explains why the Untouchables regard the Brahmins as inauspicious, do not employ them as their priest and do not even allow them to enter into their quarters. It also explains why the Broken Men came to be regarded as Untouchables. The Broken Men hated the Brahmins because the Brahmins were the enemies of Buddhism and the Brahmins imposed untouchability upon the Broken Men because they would not leave Buddhism'[90] .

Yet, Ambedkar does not consider that the Buddhist affiliation of the Broken Men is sufficient for explaining the way the Brahmins have retrograded them. Another reason laid in the fact that the Untouchables refused to become vegetarians and continued to eat beef when the 'Brahmins made the cow a sacred animal' [91] .

In contrast to Ambedkar's interpretation regarding the Shudras, in which one could find remnants of sanskritisation, his – rather complicated – reading of the Untouchable's story reflects his quest for equality. He endows the Untouchables with a separate, prestigious identity deriving from the special status of Buddhism in India. They have a strong ideological basis for questioning their subordinate rank in the caste system, all the more so as Buddhism offer them an egalitarian doctrine. Ambedkar, therefore, did not content himself with elaborating a quasi scientific theory of caste which culminates in the notion of graded inequality, he has also imagined new identities for promoting the emancipation of the Untouchables. Once the latter look at themselves as former Buddhists, they could overcome their divisions and mobilise against the caste hierarchies. However, he did not apply the same line of reasoning to the Shudras who, therefore, appear as depending on the sanskritisation process.

Maharashtra gave to India her first Shudra leader with Phule and her first Untouchable leader with Ambedkar. While the first one insisted on the common pre-Aryan identity of the

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[87] B.R.Ambedkar, 'The untouchables. Who were they and why they became untouchables ?' in Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and speeches, vol.7 op.cit. ;p.p 290-303

[88] Ibid, p.305

[89] Ibid, p.275

[90] Ibid, p.317

[91] Ibid, p.350

'bahujan samaj' he could not really uniting it and while the second endowed the Dalit with a separate identity, he did not do the same with the Shudras and rejected the racial theory on which a pre-Aryan origin could be attributed to the lower castes. While a similar pattern developed in the South with the Dravidian movement, this movement was precisely established on the solid ground of ethnicity.

The Dravidian movement as a low caste movement

In Madras Presidency, the Non_Brahmin movement was instrumental in engineering forms of caste fusion and succeeded in endowing the lower castes with an ethnic identity that relied on two grounds: not only its architects presented them as former Buddhists, as Ambedkar was to argue subsequently, but they also claimed that they were the original inhabitants of India, as Phule had already argued, in the wake of the Orientalist vulgate. This twofold argument was first articulated by Iyothee Thass, a Pariah converted to Buddhism who maintained that 'More than 2400 years ago the Buddhist reformation sought to unify all classes but the influence of the varnashrama dharma was too strong'[92]. Thass foreshadowed Ambedkar in his reinterpretation of Indian history since he considered that ancient India had been prosperous and most humanly governed under Buddhist kings who were to be eliminated by Brahmin invaders who imposed the caste system. The Buddhists were then marginalised and considered as unclean and low[93]. Buddhism had endowed the people with a specific culture that eschewed violence, forbade the taking of alcohol etc.[94] Thass even maintained that in the past India was called Indirar Desam, the land of Indirar, Indirar being the Buddha after he succeeded in controlling his five senses (indiriyams)[95]. This original civilisation is none other than the Dravidian civilisation and Thass therefore chose to call its castemates, the Pariahs, 'Dravidas'[96]. As early as the late nineteenth century, the Non-Brahmin movement therefore claimed that the lower castes were the original inhabitants of India[97].

Again, British Orientalism had prepared the ground for this development. As early as the 19th century, the Reverend Caldwell (1819-1891) had suggested that Sanskrit had been brought to South India by Aryan Brahmin colonists and that the original inhabitants were Dravidians speaking Tamil, Telugu etc[98]. Gradually, the non-Brahmin South Indian associations adopted the suffix 'Adi' - initial, primordial - in their titles. The Pariah Mahajan Sabha, which had been founded in 1890, became the Adi-Dravida Mahajan Sabha which, in 1918 appealed to the government to replace the pejorative word Pariah by Adi-Dravida, denoting the original inhabitants of Dravida land[99]. In 1917 an Adi-Andhra Mahajan Sabha

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92 . Cited in V. Geetha and S.V. Rajadurai, Towards a non-brahmin millenium. From Iyothee Thass to Periyar, Calcutta, Samya, 1998, p. 43.

93 . Ibid., p. 72.

94 . Ibid., p. 92.

95 . Ibid., p. 96.

96 . Ibid., p. 108.

97 . M. Ross Barnett, The Politics of Cultural Nationalism, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1976, pp. 315-316.

98 . N. Ram, 'Dravidian Movement in its Pre-Independence Phases', Economic and Political Weekly, Annual Number, February 1979, p. 381.

99 . R.K. Kshirsagar, Dalit Movement in India, op. cit., p. 72.

had come into existence the same way. In fact, this association was initially called Andhra Panchama Conference but the chairman of its 1917 session, M.V. Bhagya Reddy (1888-1939), in his presidential address, declared that the so-called Panchamas were the original sons of the soil and they were the rulers of the country'[100]. Hence the change of name of the Sabha. Varma was a Mala and in the 1931 census about one third of the Malas and Madhigas gave their identity as Adi-Andhras[101].

One of the most influential proponents of the low caste leaders of South India was M.C. Rajah (1883-1947), a Pariah who became secretary of the Adi-Dravida Mahajan Sabha in 1916 and who presided over the All India Depressed Classes Association since its inception in 1928. As a nominated member of the Madras Legislative Council since 1920, in 1922, Rajah moved a resolution recommending that the terms 'Panchama' and 'Parya' be deleted from the Government records and the terms Adi-Dravida and Adi-Andhra substituted instead[102].

Such an identity crystallised with Ramaswami Naicker, alias Periyar, a religious mendicant who had been completely disillusioned by the Congress and Gandhi while he was taking part in the Vaikom satyagraha[103]. If Phule had drawn some of his egalitarian inspiration from Thomas Paine, Periyar was much impressed by Robert Ingersoll. Like Phule and Ambedkar, he was egalitarian in a western, individualist vein. He said, for instance, 'A sense of self-respect and fraternity must arise within human society. Notions of high and low amongst men should disappear'[104]. The notion of self-respect was so central to his thinking that after quitting Congress in the mid-1920s, he launched the Self-Respect Movement which immediately endeavoured to pressurise the Justice Party in order to make it the true advocate of the lower castes. Another of his key words was Samadharma that referred to the general principle of equality. But Periyar regarded it as a Buddhist notion[105]. Like Thass, Periyar presented the lower castes as descending from the first Buddhists and like him he also endowed them with a Dravidian identity, especially after his mobilisation of the late 1930s against the attempt of the Congress government of Madras at promoting Hindi in the schools of the Presidency. The Dravidar Kazhagam (DK) that he founded in 1944, though its mouthpiece, Viduthalai, considered that the Congress was behind 'the exploitation of of the northern bania and his Aryan [brahmin] mentor'[106]. Thus, 'samardharma came to stand in for a civilizational and cultural alternative: a social order based on radically different principles from the present, which needed to rest on premises derived from a non-Aryan, non-Sanskritic ethos'[107]. Periyar had an explicitly ethnic conception of the low castes' identity since he

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[100] . Cited in G. Omvedt, Dalit visions, op. cit., p ; 36.

[101]. Census of India, 1931, vol. 23, Hyderabad State, Part 1, Hyderabad, Government Central Press, 1933.

[102] . S.K. Gupta, The Scheduled Castes in Modern Indian Politics - Their emergence as a political power, Delhi, Munshiram Manoharlal, 1985, p. 5.

[103] . Mohan Ram, 'Ramaswami Naicker and the Dravidian Movement', Economic and Political Weekly, Annual Number, February 1974, p. 219.

[104] . Cited in V. Geetha and S.V. Rajadurai, Towards a non-brahmin millenium, op. cit., p. 283.

[105] . Ibid., p. 421.

[106] . Cited in ibid., p. 481.

[107] . Ibid., p. 352.

compared their situation to that of the blacks in South Africa[108]. A direct implication from this viewpoint laid in the unity of the Non-Brahmins who all shared a Dravidian identity. As a result, Periyar advocated the coming together of the Christians, Muslims and low castes Hindus[109], and, within the latter, of the Untouchables and the Shudras[110]. Such a rapprochement took place indeed since Nadars and Adi Dravidas (Untouchables) were the mainstays of the Self-Respect movement and then of the DK but there were also Vellalas, Mukkulathavar and even Chettis among the lieutenants of Periyar[111]. The scope and strength of this social coalition must not be exaggerated since old lines of cleavages persisted. As in Maharashtra, the 'non-Aryans' did not form a solid block at all. M.C. Rajah criticised the 'natural animosity' of the Justice Party towards the Untouchables and in 1922-23 his South India Adi-Dravida Congress broke ranks with the party[112]. However, the ethnic ground of the Non-Brahmin discourse which, from Thass to Periyar combined Buddhist and Dravidian references had enabled its leaders to unify low caste people and mobilise them against the 'twice borns'. As early as 1920, 'a non-brahmin constituency with its own distinctive political claims had emerged in Madras' and enabled the Justice Party to win the elections[113].

This ethnicisation process was fostered by the political reforms since the British were much willing to recognise ethnic and/or caste groups as legitimate units for representation in the political arena.

The impact of compensatory discrimination

The formation of caste federations and the ethnicisation of caste, two inter related processes, were fostered by the British policy of compensatory discrimination based on the reservation of seats in the bureaucracy and in the assemblies. The very decision to grant such or such statutory representation to such and such group in these assemblies contributed to the crystallisation of new groups which resented their non- (or their under-) representation. The State was therefore indirectly reshaping society. Caste groups, often with low status, were prominent among those which mobilised against the state's arbitrary decisions.

The Non-Brahmin movement of Madras Presidency was especially active[114]. In April 1920, Lord Chelmsford received a Memorandum protesting against the reservation of only 28 seats out of 65 for the Non-Brahmins in the Legislative Council of Madras. Interestingly, the signatories emphasised their caste and ethnic differences for justifying their claim:

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[108] . Ibid., p. 297.

[109] . Ibid., p. 501.

[110] . Ibid., p. 367.

[111] . Ibid., pp. 373-374.

[112] . N. Ram , 'Dravidian Movement in its pre-independence phases', op. cit., p. 389.

[113]. V. Geetha and S.V. Rajadurai, Towards a non-brahmin millenium, op. cit.,, p. 164.

[114]. The Madava Thyagaraja Sabha even claimed that three-fourths of the seats in the Legislative Council should be reserved to Non-Brahmins (India Office Library and Records, Letter dated 19 Jan. 1920, L/P&J/924F).

The Brahmins differ from the non-Brahmins in caste, manners, customs and interests and even in personal law in some respects. The former are Aryans and the latter are Dravidians and thus they differ in race. In the past the Brahmins have practically monopolised all or almost all the seats in the Local and Imperial Legislative Councils. The disabilities under which the Non-Brahmins have been suffering were fully set out in the Memorandum which Rai Bahadur K.V. Reddi prepared and submitted to the joint Select Committee on Government of India Bill[115].

The Non-Brahmins asked for more seats in Madras assembly because they were 'different'. During the 1920 election campaign, they requested 'all non-Brahmins in this presidency to immediately organise, combine and carry on an active propaganda so as to ensure the return to the reformed Council of as many non-Brahmin as possible'[116]. This tactic yielded dividends since the Justice Party came first in the elections. In their plea to the British, the Non-Brahmins also emphasised their marginality in the state services and the 'disabilities' from which they were suffering. This discourse fitted well too in the British approach since the Government regarded also political representation as a means for compensatory discrimination.

This policy made a similar impact on the low caste movement in Western India. In Bombay Legislative Council the Marathas showed the way in the 1920s. Their principal patron, the Maharajah of Kolhapur, had circulated a memorandum 'on the necessity of separate Communal electorates for the Marathas, etc., for electing members to the new Councils under the Reforms scheme', where he wrote:

The Marathas have distinguished themselves in the [first world] war certainly not less, if not more, than the Sikhs or the Mohammedans who have been given separate electorates. They are almost given to agriculture, military service or employment as mil-hands. Being thus not a commercial or educated community, they are poor, and without resources, influence and organisation. In this respect they are even worse of than Telis, Tilaris, Goldsmiths, Sutas, Lohars and even Mahars, Mangs and other Untouchables, to whom many a business line and handicraft are open [...] Five great monsters do a lot of mischief to the village agricultural community which mostly consists of the Marathas. The Kulkarni is the biggest of them all [...] The next to the Kulkarni is the Brahmin Sawkar who has appropriated to himself a very large portion of the village lands. The third in this order is the school-master and his brother the college-professor in big cities [...] [The fourth] is the Brahmin bureaucracy watered and nourished by Government themselves [...] The village priest, securely and permanently installed by Hindu religious puranas invented and developed to maintain the Brahmanic supremacy is the fifth monster[117].

The Maharajah of Kolhapur demanded separate electorates instead of reserved seats on which, he said, he was 'sure that weak, unprincipled undesirable Marathas will be elected who would be used by Brahmins as cat's paw for them to draw the apples out of the fire'[118], the

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[115] . The Humble memorial of the non-Brahmins of Madras (23 April 1920); IOLR, L/P&J/9/14.

[116] . Justice, 29 March 1920 in IOR, L/P&J/9/14.

[117]. 'Note by H.H. the Maharajah of Kolhapur on the necessity of separate Communal electorates for the Marathas, etc., for electing members to the new Councils under the Reforms scheme', IOLR, L/P&J/9/14.

[118]. Ibid.

same kind of argument was used by Ambedkar before the Poona pact. However, the British were not prepared to grant a separate electorate to the Marathas. Some of them therefore focussed their demand on larger quotas and to pressurise the British more efficiently they tried to appear as representing more than one caste. They held, under the auspices of the People's Union, whose patron was the Maharajah of Kolhapur, a Conference of the Hindu Backward Classes in June 1920. Since the British, so far, designated the Marathas by their caste name, the conference advocated that 'the term "Maratha and allied classes" should include all the Backward communities'[119]. Maratha leaders obviously aspired to play a pivotal role in the shaping of a caste federation which would adopt the official designation 'Backward classes'. Therefore, the conference made 'an emphatic protest against the misleading statement made in public to the effect that the Marathas, Malis etc. do not belong to the Backward Classes when their percentage of education is very low'[120]. The main demand of the conference was that the 8 seats reserved to the Marathas and allied castes in the Montagu-Chelmsford report should be extended to 15. Simultaneously, the Secretary of the Poona-based All India Maratha Mali Union made a similar representation to the British:

The word 'Maratta' [sic] means all the backward classes. As a matter of fact not only the Marattas but all other allied communities have fought in the last world war for the Empire and all such communities are anxious to get the privilege of reserved seats in the council to be hereafter elected[121].

The Yadav Gavlis then opportunely discovered that they had strong affinities with the Marathas. R.V. Khedekar, the President of the Yadav Gavli Association was an exceptional personality whom we shall meet again in North India. Born in Bombay in 1873, his father had been Private secretary of the Maharajah of Bhavnagar, one of the most progressive states regarding the backward castes. After studying medicine in the United Kingdom, he started practising in 1902 in Bhavnagar and Kolhapur, where he met Shahu Maharaj[122]. The first Yadav association had been founded in 1903 by a relative of his father[123]. In the early 1920s, Khedekar protested against the fact that the Southborough Committee did not consider the Yadav Gavlis as Marathas :

The Yadav Gavli community claims descent from the Great Yadav families to one which Shri Krishna the 8th incarnation of Vishnu belonged. The whole of the North India, Gujarat and Deccan were only ruled by the Kings of the Yadav families [...] They have kept up their Kshatriya caste traditions, customs and occupations [...] They have given considerable recruits to the government and have been regarded as Marathas and included in the Maratha regiments[124].

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[119]. 'Resolutions of the Conference of the Hindu Backward Classes', L/P&J/9/14.

[120] . Ibid.

[121]. Letter without any date from the Secretary of the All India Maratha Mali Union to the President of the Joint Committee (L/P&J/9/14).

[122]. For biographical details see, M.S.A. Rao, Social Movements and Social Transformation - A study of two backward classes, Delhi, Manohar, 1987, p. 139.

[123]. Ibid., p. 176.

[124]. Letter from R.V. Khedekar, without any date, (L/P&J/9/14). Subsequently, Yadav leaders claimed that Shivaji's mother was a Yadav (M.S.A. Rao, Social Movements and Social

In the end, the Yadav-Gavli association demanded the 'inclusion [of this caste] in the list of the Marathas and allied communities of the Deccan for franchise purpose'. Access to political power was of course the main reason for this social rapprochement. Eventually, Khedekar was deputed by the People's Union, the Deccan Ryots Association and the Yadav Gavli Association for making a representation to the Joint Select Committee. He explained:

If the term 'Maratha' be defined as meaning 'anti-Brahmin' in the regulation to be framed under the Indian Act, it will remove all misunderstandings and ill feelings in the Maratha castes and it will allow Jains and Lingayat castes to share the benefit of the reserved seats[125].

Marathas, who had already forged a 'backward' front with the Malis and the Yadavs were striving for shaping an even larger coalition including the Lingayats and the Jains under the all-encompassing label of 'non-Brahmins'. The loose structure of the Marathas lent itself to this kind of aggregative strategy. They have no clear cut sub-castes, they are so 'amorphous' that 'it is hard to tell in some cases, whether a group is Maratha or of another affiliation called Kunbi'[126]. This arrangement naturally 'facilitates incorporation into Maratha caste'[127] of other peasant castes.

In spite of the Marathas' specificity, there is much to learn from this brief case-study on the way state policies can indirectly refashion social groupings. The British approach of political representation - namely their recognition of communities as eligible to a statutory representation - and their sense of compensatory discrimination - through quotas in the assemblies for instance - have accelerated the transformation of castes into interest groups and have fostered a process of amalgamation among the low castes; hence the emergence of groupings such as the Non Brahmins and the Maratha-Kunbis whose aim was purely political. The rules were those of the game of numbers which, alone could enhance institutional representation in the State. In Maharashtra this strategy was rather successful. Its architects could rely on the legacy of Jyotirao Phule's Satya Shodak Samaj[128] which had established an idiom - the Bahujan idiom - encompassing all the Non-Brahmins. Another important factor laid in the pivotal situation of the Marathas who represented 20% of the population. They were certainly not able to federate all the Non-Brahmin castes but the mere fact that the British designed a category called 'Marathas and allied' showed that they had been successful to a certain extent. Among these allies were the Kunbis, who have always been regarded as more backward than the Marathas[129] but who appeared in the same category. Now, the Kunbis

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Transformation, op. cit., p. 148 and R.V. Khedekar, The Divine Heritage of the Yadavas, Allahabad, Parmanad, 1959).

[125] Letter from R.V. Khedekar, dated 18 May 1920, to the Joint Select Committee (L/P&J/9/14).

[126]. H. Orenstein, 'Caste and the concept of "Maratha" in Maharashtra', The Eastern Anthropologist, 16(1), Jan.-Apr. 1963, p. 3.

[127]. Ibid., p. 8.

[128]. The Maharajah of Kolhapur claimed that he was inherited his views from the movement ('Note by H.H. the Maharajah of Kolhapur on the necessity of separate Communal electorates for the Marathas, etc., for electing members to the new Councils under the Reforms scheme', IOLR, L/P&J/9/14)

[129]. The Kunbis have been regarded as OBCs by the Mandal Commission.

accounted for 10% of the population of Maharashtra and contributed, therefore, to the irresistible rise to power of the Marathas from the late colonial period onwards.

In Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu, the ethnicisation of caste and the formation of caste federations, helped the non-Brahmins to get organised and to gradually assert themselves in the political arena. However, the most illustrative caste federations took shape in another state of western India, Gujarat.

Caste federations and the rise to power of the Kshatriyas in Gujarat

On the basis of their study of Gujarat politics, Kothari and Maru have defined caste federations in terms which would have suited well the Maharashtrian situation since they emphasise the role of individual caste associations in the shaping of such coalitions and put a stress on political motivations:

The concept of caste federation refers to a grouping together of a number of distinct endogamous groups into a single organisation for common objectives, the realisation of which calls for a pooling together of resources or numbers or both. By and large, the objectives pursued are secular and associational, although the employment of traditional symbols for evoking a sense of solidarity and loyalty towards the new form is not uncommon. The traditional distinctions between the federating groups are on the whole retained, but the search for a new organisational identity and the pursuit of political objectives gradually lead to a shift in group orientations[130].

This definition was evolved in the course of a study of the 'Kshatriyas', a caste federation phenomenon of Gujarat which, indeed exemplified this phenomenon. Right from the 1910s the state Rajput leaders had constituted caste associations for promoting education.[131] In the late 1930s, the descendant of one of its leaders, Natvarsingh Solanki, wanted to extend these associations to other castes which he considered as Kshatriyas[132]. He tried to refashion the social identity of those groups in order to allow others to join hands with the Rajputs and in this way, to acquire more weight.

Gujarat's largest caste was the Kolis. They had been classified by the British as a 'criminal caste' but claimed that they were Kshatriyas and resorted to genealogists for being recognised aristocratic ancestors. In this, they purely imitated the Rajputs. Some Koli clans had been able to establish matrimonial alliances with Rajputs, as those castes practised

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[130]. R. Kothari and R. Maru, 'Federating of political interests : the Kshatriyas of Gujarat', in R. Kothari (ed.), Caste in Indian Politics, New Delhi, Orient Longman, 1970, p. 72.

[131]. G. Shah, Caste association and political process in Gujarat. Bombay, Popular Prakashan, 1975, p. 33.

[132]. '…I wondered why I had to work exclusively for the Rajputs. Why not work for all the members of the Kshatriya class. The Kshatriyas are a class, not a caste'. (Interview cited in M. Weiner, Party building in a new nation: the Indian National Congress, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1967, p. 97). Solanki obviously plays on the relative ambiguity of the varna system since by contrast with jatis (of whom the translation is usually "castes"), varnas are generally presented as being more flexible and based on the criterion of socio-economic functions.

hypergamy[133] and/or had established small principalities before the British took over. Yet, they had retained some control over land under the Raj as landowners or rather big tenants. Many of them met the necessary conditions for being enfranchised when the British established provincial legislative councils. The right to vote therefore enabled the Kolis to use their main asset, their number : in 1931 they represented about 20% of the population, almost the double of the Patidars (12.16%), the dominant caste, the main rival of the Rajputs, who represented only 4.85% of the population. Solanki opened his caste association to the Kolis for this very reason: for transforming it into a mass organisation.

In 1947, the Kutch, Kathiawar, Gujarat Kshatriya Sabha was created after years of preparatory work. The word 'Kshatriya' was a useful umbrella label to bracket the Rajputs and the Kolis together. The Kshatriya Sabha is a good example of the way castes, with very different ritual status can coalesce – and even merge to a certain extent - for defending common interests. In this case, the Kolis and the Rajputs had the same enemies, viz., the Patidars. Certainly, this alliance has been legitimised in the idiom of 'tradition', by pretending that its components belonged to the same varna, but the use of the word Kshatriya was purely strategic and the original caste identity was seriously diluted. The Rajput leaders of the Kshatriya Sabha emphasised that a Kshatriya is not to be defined by descent but by martial values. Political calculations had therefore social implications. Several taboos were abolished. Rajputs and Kolis of the Kshatriya Sabha shared meals[134] and the Kolis elite married their daughters to lower Rajputs – who practised hypergamy anyway – and this process fostered the rajputisation of the upper Kolis. Kshatriyas tended to form a new caste.

The use of terms like Koli Kshatriyas and Rajput Kshatriyas certainly show that the merger was far from complete.[135] But important dimensions of the caste system were eroded by the after-effects of basically socio-economic and political strategies. In fact, the main demands of the Kshatriya Sabha after independence reflected a relative indifference to ritual issues in comparison to material objectives. For instance, the association claimed that the Kshatriyas were part of the 'Backward Classes' and therefore should benefit from reservations in the educational system and in the administration. This claim was the exact opposite of sanskritisation.[136] The Kolis benefited more than the Rajputs from the Sabha, which created boarding schools, grants, loan systems etc. in favour of the poorest of their community. This development contributed to the emergence of an intelligentsia of Kolis which, even though it remained small gave the Koli masses a new confidence and self-esteem as a caste[137]. The members of this elite 'interact[ed] frequently and chart[ed] out common political strategies'.[138]

Right from the 1950s, the Kshatriya Sabha tended to capitalise its electoral support to the Congress in exchange of tickets for a number of its members as party candidates. The party was not fully responsive, especially because of the Patidars who were very influential in

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[133]. L. Lobo, 'Koli Kshatriyas of North Gujarat: a shift from sanskritised mobility to politised mobility', The Eastern Anthropologist. 42 (2). April-June 1989, pp. 176-177.

[134] R. Kothari and R. Maru, 'Federating for political interests: the Kshatriyas of Gujarat', op. cit., p. 73.

[135] L. Lobo, 'Koli Kshatriyas of North Gujarat', op. cit., p. 188.

[136] G. Shah, Caste Association, op. cit.., p. 78.

[137] L. Lobo, 'Koli Kshatriyas of North Gujarat', op. cit., p. 188.

[138] Ibid., p. 187.

the Congress. The Patidars disapproved of the Kshatriyas demand regarding land reform[139]. The Kshatriya Sabha therefore kept its distance with the Congress before the 1962 elections and the party underwent a setback. Instead, the association gave its support, against large concessions, to the Swatantra Party which became the leading opposition party in the state. This situation persuaded the Congress to change its strategy and to give tickets to Kshatriya candidates before the 1967 elections. The Kshatriya Sabha then supported the Congress which regained a more comfortable majority than in 1962[140].

Caste federations turned out to be political interest groups with more leverage than caste associations, simply because they represented more people. In Gujarat, after the Congress split of 1969, a majority of the party conservative notables remained with the Congress (O) while a larger number of Kshatriyas joined the Congress (R). They gradually gained control over the state Congress. Madhavsingh Solanki, a Kshatriya of low birth, became Chief minister in 1976 and appointed a majority of ministers with the same background[141]. During the electoral campaign of 1977 he initiated a new caste alliance regrouping the Kshatriyas, the Harijans (Untouchables), the Adivasis (tribals) and the Muslims (hence the acronym "KHAM"). This KHAM alliance was largely responsible for the Congress success during the 1980 elections. Between 1957 and 1990 the number of upper caste Congress MLAs decreased from 33 to 6%, while those with a Patidar background remained stable at about one fourth of the total, whereas the Kshatriyas increased from 12 to 25% and the KHAM MLAs at large from 39 to 55%.[142]

While the 'Kshatriyas' of Gujarat represent the best example of caste federation, other instances occurred in South India. In the early 1960s, the Kallan, the Maravar and the Agamudiar, three lower castes who had already close ties with each other (especially ritual ones since they claimed that they descended from the same ancestors), decided to adopt the same name, Mukkulator (lit. three castes), in order to merge and to influence local politics.[143]

The above case studies suggest a western and southern pattern of lower castes' mobilisation. In these areas, two major developments occurred in succession, namely the ethnicisation of castes, of which the ideology of the 'bahujan samaj' evolved by Phule, that of the buddhist Dalits initiated by Ambedkar and the Dravidian movement were the best examples, and, secondly, the federation of castes which was epitomised by the 'Kshatriyas' of Gujarat. Both phenomena were influenced by the orientalist discourse and were responses to

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[139]. In addition, Congress leadership feared 'communalisation' of the party, and therefore declared that dual membership to a caste-association and to Congress were incompatible. (Ibid., p. 89).

[140] G. Shah, Caste Association, op. cit.., p. 127.

[141] One third were Kshatriyas, one was tribal and two were Scheduled Castes. (G. Shah, 'Gujarat Politics in the Post-Emergency Period', The Indian Journal of Political Science, 55(3), July-Sept. 1994, p. 237).

[142] Ibid., p. 237. See also S. Mitra, 'The perils of promoting equality: the latent significance of the anti-reservation movement in India', The Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics 25 (3), November 1987, pp. 298-301 and J. R. Wood, 'Reservations in doubt: the backlash against affirmative action in Gujarat, India', Pacific Affairs 60 (3), Autumn 1987, pp. 418-419.

[143] L. I. Rudolph, 'The modernity of tradition: the democratic incarnation of caste in India', The American Political Science Review , LIX (4), Dec. 1965, p. 984.

the British policy of compensatory discrimination. They were intended to help the low castes to reach power and they were successful to a large extent.

In North India, none of these processes reached their logical conclusion. Caste associations often followed the sanskritisation path and very few of them prepared the group for an ethnic discourse or developed into caste federations.

What low caste movement in the Hindi belt ?

In North India also British policies had changed the social and political context in such a way as castes could have felt the same strong incentive to get organised. Efforts were made in this direction but they did not bear the same fruits as in the South and in the West. While caste associations took shape at an early date, they did not join hands into federations and they operated within the logic sanskritisation. For instance, in 1928, the Indian Statutory Commission received an avalanche of petitions and memoranda from caste associations which demanded larger quotas in the assembly. The Government was petitioned by the All India Kushwaha Kshatriya Mahasabha, 'on behalf of the kori, kachchi and murao castes'[144]. The fact that the Kushwaha label stood for three sub_castes of castes of market gardeners shows that this caste association promoted the fusion process, but not to a very large extent : this process cannot be compared with caste federations in Gujarat. Secondly, the Kushwahas claimed the rank of Kshatriya, and another association of middle caste of peasants, which sent also a petition, the Kurmi Kshatriya Parishad Sabha, did the same. This is revealing of the fact that sanskritisation continued to play a major role among the low caste associations.

In the following pages we shall examine this issue through the case of the Yadavs and the Kurmis on the one hand and among the untouchables on the other.

Sankritisation and lack of unity among the Yadavs and the Kurmis

The 'Yadav' label covers a great number of castes which, initially, had different names: Ahir in the Hindi belt, Punjab and Gujarat, Gavli in Maharashtra, Gola in Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka etc. However, traditionally their common function, all over India, was to take care of bovines as herdsmen, cowherds and milksellers.[145] In practice, the Yadavs today spend most of their time tilling land. They are more specially concentrated in the Ganges plain - they represent one of the largest castes in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh with respectively 11 and 8.7% of the population. But the Yadavs are not a dominant caste, as pastoral activity did not go usually hand in hand with land possession. From the ritual as well as the economic point of view, the Yadavs are traditionally regarded as low caste peasants:

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[144]. Report on the working of the system of government - United Provinces, op. cit., p. 160.

[145] M. S. A. Rao, Social Movements and Social Transformation, New Delhi, Manohar, 1987, p. 130.

The very mention of the community invokes, in Bihar, the image of dull, miserly and loud-mouthed people lacking in grace and culture. Besides, the Yadavs are considered as to be unusually prone to casteism and violence[146].

The Yadavs reportedly descend from immigrants from Central Asia, the Abhiras, who established kingdoms in North India, the most recent of which was built in Rewari, in Haryana in the XVIIth century[147]. And one of the first Yadav associations was founded by the heir of a North Indian ruling family since the scion of the dynasty, Rao Bahadur Balbir Singh, established the Ahir Yadav Kshatriya Mahasabha in 1910. This association claimed that the Ahirs descended from the Yadu dynasty (hence the term Yadav) to which Krishna - the cowherd god - belonged, and that, therefore, they were Kshatriyas. To promote a warrior ethos and the caste's unity, the association leaders could rely on the caste history since Ahirs were easily presented as coming from the same ethnic stock and were known for their martial valour - the prince of Rewari took part in the 1857 Mutiny for instance. This is probably why M.S.A. Rao considers that the 'term Yadava refers to both an ethnic category and an ideology'[148]. Indeed, the Yadav leaders succeeded in their fusion project since they persuaded their caste fellows to downplay the endogamous units into which they were divided. There have even been some inter-regional marriages. Fusion was made easier from the 1930s onwards when North Indian Yadavs started to migrate from their villages to towns and especially to Delhi. But this project did not incorporate a more ambitious ethnicisation process through which other Kshatriya castes would have been merged. So far as ideology is concerned, it was dominated by sanskritisation, something one can partly attribute to the influence of the Arya Samaj.

The Arya Samaj has been too often regarded as purely Punjabi and confined to the urban middle class[149]. In fact, it made inroads in the adjacent states at a quite early date and attracted then large numbers of low caste people. Dayananda even started his 'campaign against heresy and orthodoxy' - to use the words of an Arya Samajist - in the Kumbha Mela held in Haridwar[150]. Subsequently, he toured in the United Provinces, in particular in the western part of the province. He stayed eight times in Meerut, for instance, between 1866 and 1880 - the Meerut City Arya Samaj was established as early as 1877 and others followed in Farrukabad (1879), Kanpur (1879), Benares (1880), Lucknow (1880). Eventually, the Srimati Arya Pratinidhi Sabha for the United Provinces of Agra and Awadh was founded in 1886[151]. These local branches gradually extended their influence in the countryside. The anti-Brahmin stance of the Arya Samaj was especially appreciated by the low castes of the United Provinces.

In Sathyarth Prakash (The Light of Truth), Dayananda has very strong words against 'the sectarian and selfish Brahmins' who 'often dissuade persons from learning and ensnare

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[146] Tilak D. Gupta, 'Yadav ascendancy in Bihar politics', Economic and Political Weekly, 27 June 1992, p. 1304.

[147] M.S.A. Rao, Social movements, op. cit., pp. 124-125.

[148] . Ibid., p. 123.

[149] . This is the main limitation of the other wise path breaking book by Kenneth Jones, Arya Dharm - Hindu Consciousness in Nineteenth Century Punjab, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1976.

[150] . The Arya Samaj: A Renaissance - Svami Satya Prakash Sarasvati Speeches and Addresses, vol. 2, Delhi, Vijay Kumar, 1987, p. 103.

[151] . Ibid., pp. 105-106.

them into their evil ways with the result that they lose health, peace of mind and wealth[152], 'these ignorant, sensual, hypocritical, irresponsible and vicious people'[153]. Dayananda was so critical because he reproached the Brahmans with exploiting the superstition of the Hindus by projecting themselves as the only intermediary between man and god, a monopoly he compares to that of the Catholic Pope and which is evident from the brahminical invention of idol worship: 'These Popes fill their pockets by playing fraud upon you. In the Vedas there is not even a word to sanction idol-worship or invoking invitation and dismissals'[154].

Dayananda eulogised the Jats for forcefully resisting the Brahmins' 'popish' attitudes. He narrates the story of a Jat whose father was dying and who was asked to give his only cow to the priest as a 'dying gift'[155], allegedly for helping the dying man to cross the river. The Jat had to agree since the priest had already talked to his relatives who put pressure on him. But he went to the priest's house soon after and boldly accused him of being 'a great liar' since he had not taken the cow to the river bank but was milking it[156]. He then contested the authority of the Garuda Purana, the book the priest mentioned as dictating his conduct: 'This book has been written by your forefathers to secure livelihood for you...'[157]. The Jat took the cow back to his home and Dayananda concludes, 'If other persons also behave like the Jat, then alone can the popish fraud be stopped'[158]. Jats were very pleased by the way Dayananda praised one of them and they naturally shared his indictment of the Brahmins.

However, Dayananda's indictment of the Brahmins did not amount to a complete rejection of the caste system. What he condemned was the hereditary caste. He contended that in the initial varna vyavastha children were placed in each varna according to their individual 'merits, actions and temperaments'[159]. He specifically recommended that the 'fixture of the varnas according to merits and actions should take place at the sixteenth year of girls and twenty-fifth year of boys'[160]. Like Gandhi later on, Dayananda was not against caste as such since according to him provided it was not an hereditary system, the castes endowed society with a virtually harmonious structure - which is hierarchical. Moreover, he considered that marriages should 'take place in the same varnas (classes) and the varna should be based on merits, profession and temperament'[161]. It means that not only Dayananda adds one more criterion to the definition of castes - the profession - but also that endogamy, which is a pillar of the caste system, needed to be enforced. Dayananda did not fight caste taboos either. For instance, he considered that a Brahmin needed only to eat food prepared by caste fellows because 'The nature of genital fluids made in a Brahman's body due to special kind of

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[152] Swami Dayananda, The Light of Truth, Allahabad, Dr. Ratna Kumari Svadhyaya Sansthana, 1981, p. 98.

[153] . Ibid., p. 346.

[154] . Ibid., p. 389.

[155] .Ibid., p. 436.

[156] . Ibid ;, p. 438.

[157] . Ibid., p. 439.

[158] . Ibid.

[159] . Ibid., p. 114.

[160][160] . Ibid., p. 115. He adds that this task should be handled by 'a syndicate of learned persons' who would 'decide after examination as to which is Brahman, which Kshatriya, which Vaishya and Which Shudra'. (Ibid., p. 483).

[161] . Ibid., p. 110.

fooding is different from that made in chandalas' body on account of bad diet. The body of the chandalas is full of rotten particles due to rotten diet'[162]. For all these reasons - and at least one more, the need to protect the cow [163]- Dayananda was a clear proponent of sanskritisation.

Logically enough, the most obvious implication of the Arya Samaj in the North Indian countryside lay in the sanskritisation of the Jats, as evident from the ideology of the All India Jat Mahasabha which was founded in 1905 as 'an offshoot of the Arya Samaj'[164]. On the one hand this caste association, as so many others, asked for a special treatment from the Government[165]; on the other hand it claimed that Jats were Kshatriyas. Arya Samajists exhorted the Jats to give up the consumption of alcohol and meat and recommended that severe restriction should be 'imposed on the movement of women'[166]. The schools established with the association's support had often telling names - such as the Jat Vedic School founded in Rohtak in 1913 - and generally taught Sanskrit in order to enable the Jats to teach Sanskrit and therefore occupy 'a profession which for centuries was the exclusive monopoly of the Brahmin'[167]. The Arya Samajists propagated the same kind of ideology among the Yadavs. As early as 1895, the ruler of Rewari, Rao Yudhishter Singh (the father of Rao Bahadur Balbir Singh) invited Swami Dayananda in his State. Branches of the Arya Samaj flourished soon after and Rewari provided a base from which Arya Samaj updeshaks (itinerant preachers) operated in neighbouring areas. These updeshaks continuously canvassed for the adoption of the sacred thread by the Yadavs. Their campaigns were especially successful in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar[168].

One strong indication of the sanskritisation of the Yadavs was their implication in the cow protection movement inspired by the Arya Samaj. This movement, initiated in 1893 and relaunched at different points of time in the first two decades of the century attracted many Yadavs who were anxious to emulate the upper castes. In the Bhojpuri region, Gyan Pandey, who emphasised 'the special role of the Ahirs' in this movement points out that 'we have evidence here of a relatively independent force that added a good deal of power to cow-protection activities [...] - marginally « clean » castes who aspired to full « cleanliness » by emphasising the purity of their faith and the strictness of ritual adherence to it on the issue of cow-slaughter'[169].

Such an interpretation reopens the debate on sanskritisation. How can one present such process as 'a relatively independent force' when the Ahirs were not able to develop an alternative value system because of their keenness to imitate the upper castes? Both phenomena may not be mutually exclusive. The same Ahirs who took part in the cow-protection movement and petition the Bihar Census Commissioner for being recognised a

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[162] . Ibid., p. 334.

[163] . Ibid., p. 331.

[164] . N. Datta, 'Arya Samaj and the Making of Jat Identity', Studies in History, 13(1), 1997, p. 107.

[165] . In 1916 it sent a memorandum to the Lieutenant Governor of the Punjab asking for the employment of more Hindu Jats in the administration (ibid., p. 108).

[166] . Ibid., pp. 112-113.

[167] . Cited in ibid., p. 117.

[168] Some of them did it ostensibly and Rajputs as well as Bhumihars retaliated violently in these states (Census of India, 1921).

[169] . G. Pandey, 'Rallying round the cow - Sectarian Strife in the Bhojpuri Region, c. 1888-1917', in R. Guha (ed.), Subaltern Studies II, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1983, p. 104.

Kshatriya origin also refused to do begari (forced labour) for the upper castes[170]. Revisiting the notion of sanskritisation, Srinivas himself points out that it 'embodies a strong element of protest against the high castes: "We dare you to stop us emulating you" seems to be the spirit underlying emulation'[171]. M.S.A. Rao also questions the opposition between sanskritised movements and egalitarian movements:

Against this it may be noted that the backward classes attempt to acquire, simultaneously goods and services belonging to religious, educational , economic and political fields. That is, they claim higher ritual status, right of entry into caste Hindu temples, or establish a set of institutions parallel to the Brahmanical ones. They claim higher educational benefits, employment opportunities and political representation. From the point of view of the social movement approach all these demands belong to the same structural (conceptual) plane as expressions of egalitarianism[172].

While the difference between sanskritisation and more egalitarian low castes' attitudes needs not to be exaggerated, there are still differences and it is very difficult to follow Rao when he pretends that 'the Yadavs were not imitating the "twice-born castes" when they were donning the sacred thread, but were challenging their monopoly over this privilege'[173]. It means that they tried to be upgraded in the sanskritisation perspective. This approach does not necessarily imply a sense of equality since the caste in question may try to be recognised as higher to look down at the others which were on the same level.

More importantly, the predominant role of sanskritisation in North India stands in strong contrast with the strategies of the low caste in southern and western India in terms of ethnicisation of castes and the shaping of caste federations. In contrast to the Marathas, Kunbis and Gwalis who regarded themselves as belonging to the same milieu, or to the Kshatriyas of Gujarat, the Yadavs did not try to forge a caste front but to uplift themselves. They were not willing or able to evolve an alternative value system like the 'bahujans' in Maharashtra and the Dravidians in South India. Yadav leaders in fact tried hard to prove that their caste had an Aryan background, against Bhandarkar who doubted this origin[174] - one more indication of the Yadavs' obsession with sanskritisation. W.R. Pinch cites one of the 'Yadav-kshatriya historians' who, in the 1930s, held that Yadavs were 'the ancient citizens of the land of the Aryans' - they did not pre-date the Aryan invasions. On the contrary, they were described as having 'their origins in the main Chandravamsh [lunar line] branch of kshatriyas'[175] .

Interestingly, in 1924, the architect of the All India Yadav Mahasabha, which federated regional associations based in Punjab, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar was Khedekar, whom we have already met in Bombay Presidency, as if the North Indian Yadavs needed someone acquainted with the Maharashtrian pattern for unifying their movement. But the

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[170] . Bihar Census 1921. H. Jha, 'Lower-Caste Peasants and Upper-Caste Zamindars in Bihar 1921-25', Indian Economic and Social History Review, 14(4), 1977.

[171] . M.N. Srinivas, 'Introduction', in M.N. Srinivas (ed.), Caste - Its twentieth century avatar, Delhi, Viking, 1996, p. XV.

[172] . M.S.A. Rao, Social Movements and Social Transformation, op. cit., p. 236.

[173] . Ibid., p. 249.

[174] .Ibid., p. 127.

[175] . W.R. Pinch, Peasants and Monks in British India, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 91.

AIYM, whose main activities consisted in its annual sessions, followed the sanskritisation path under the guidance of Rao Balbir Singh, the ruler of Rewari who still played a prominent role in the Yadav movement. Interestingly, he was elected to the Punjab assembly in 1937 on a Hindu Mahasabha ticket[176]. The AIYM advocated vegetarianism and teetotalism. It militated in favour of the adoption of the name 'Yadav' all over India[177] and so far as material interests were concerned, it incited the Yadavs to embrace new professional careers and put pressure on the British to make the army recruit Yadavs as officers and not simply as soldiers.[178] While the AIYM helped the Yadavs to get united, in 1945 dissidents founded a rival caste association, the All India Yadav Sangh whose activities were even more sanskritised _ it took part in the anti-cow slaughter movement for instance[179].

The main weakness of the Yadavs was their incapacity to make alliances with other castes of similar rank, like the Kurmis, who suffered from the same problem themselves! The Kurmis are also concentrated in Bihar and UP where they represented respectively 3.6 and 3.5% of the population in 1931. The Kurmis generally work as cultivators and are looked at as middle caste peasants but they claim to be Kshatriyas[180]. The ground for this 'kshatriyaisation' process was prepared by the Ramanandi sampradaya which, as other sectarian movements, 'welcomed shudras as equal members of the monastic equality'[181]. The Ramanandis exerted a strong ideological influence over the Kurmis. Monks codified caste myths, established for them 'genealogical ties to either Ram or Krishna' and inculcate them 'a pure lifestyle' based on vegetarianism, teetotalism etc.[182]. By the last decades of the XIXth century, Kurmi leaders were the first among the low castes to fashion caste stories emphasising 'an ancient past of kshatriya distinction that had long since deteriorated into present-day shudra dishonour'[183]. These stories, which were gradually propagated by printed bulletins, relied on the Vaishnava mythology as spelled out by the Ramandi order. Kurmis were presented as descending from Ram's two sons, Kush and Lav - the Kushwahas (Koeris, Kachhis and Muraos) also claim that Kush was their ancestor but interestingly not attempt at merging these two groups ever took shape[184].

The first Kurmi caste association was founded in 1894 in Lucknow to protest against the British decision to reduce the recruitment of Kurmis in the police. The Kurmis of Awadh then created a Kurmi Sabha and declared that other castes like the Patidars (from Gujarat), the Kapus (from Andhra Pradesh), the Vokkaligas (from Karnataka), the Reddys, the Naidus

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[176] . K.C. Yadav, Elections in Punjab - 1920-1947, Delhi, Manohar, 1987, p. 85.

[177] . M.S.A. Rao, Social Movements and Social Transformation, op. cit., p. 141.

[178] Ibid., p. 142.

[179] . Ibid., p. 146.

[180] . William Pinch emphasises that the Kurmis 'thought of themselves not as cosmically created servants (shudra) devoid of any history, but as the descendants of divine warrior clans (kshatriya) firmly rooted in the Indian past' (W.R. Pinch, Peasants and Monks in British India, op. cit., p. 6).

[181] . Ibid., p. 139.

[182] . Ibid., p. 82.

[183] . Ibid., p. 89.

[184] . Ibid., pp. 90-91.

(from Madras Presidency) and the Marathas (from Maharashtra), were also Kurmis.[185] The association gained momentum in 1901, during the census operations when it claimed that Kurmis were Kshatriyas. The All India Kurmi Kshatriya Mahasabha, which was officially registered in Patna in 1910, combined the defence of the caste secular interests and sanskritisation. On the one hand it canvassed for the use of the sacred thread among Kurmis[186]. On the other hand, it started to ask for quotas in the administration as 'backward classes'[187] but its action met a faint response.

Kurmis and Yadavs, even though they occupied similar social positions failed to get united. The Yadavas 'consider themselves to be natural leaders of backward classes'[188]; their leaders even argued that their caste fought against injustice during the Dwapara Yug under the leadership of Krishna and that they should now show the way in the battle against the upper castes exploitation. This approach did not enable them to forge stable caste federations. The first attempt was made in Bihar in the 1930s. It involved the Yadavs, the Kurmis and the Koeris, a caste of agriculturists representing 4.1% of the state population[189]. Members of those three castes joined hands in 1930 to contest the local district board elections. They lost badly but in 1934 formed the Triveni Sangh, a political party named after the confluence of three rivers, (the Ganges, the Yamuna and the Saraswati, now disappeared) in Allahabad. In 1936 about one million members had allegedly paid the four-anna (one-quarter of a rupee) fee[190]. However, at the same time, in 1935, the Congress formed the Backward Class Federation 'to counter what they viewed as the dangerous class features of the Triveni Sangh and Kisan Sabha movements'[191]. Congressmen deprived the low caste movement from some of its leaders by co-opting Kurmi leaders (such as Birchand Patel) and Yadavs (such as Ram Lakhan Singh Yadav). And then they refused to give tickets to Triveni Sangh candidates[192]. The party suffered from a serious setback during the 1937 elections but in the few places where it won - like Arrah and Piro - Shahabad district _ upper caste landlords retaliated violently[193]. The Triveni Sangh and the Kisan Sabha also failed to make an alliance because of the traditional antagonism between the low castes represented by the former and the Bhumihars who dominated the latter[194].

Many years later, the Kurmis tried to play a pivotal role in a similar arrangement. During the 30th session of the All India Kurmi Kshatriya Sabha, some of the delegates suggested that the word "Kshatriya" should be removed from the name of the association and

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[185] K.K. Verma, Changing role of caste associations, New Delhi, National, 1979, p. 14.

[186] Ibid., p. 30.

[187] Ibid., p. 35.

[188] . M.S.A. Rao, Social Movements and Social Transformation, op. cit., p. 158.

[189]. According to a pre-independence official account, 'Amongst all the cultivating classes in Bihar, the most advanced are the Koeries or Kushwaha Kshatriyas. Simple in habits, thrifty to a degree and a master in the art of market-gardening, the Koeri is amongst the best of the tillers of the soil to be found anywhere in India' (D. R. Sethi, "The Bihar cultivator" in W. Burns (ed.) Sons of the soil, Delhi, Government of India, 1944 [1941], pp. 72-73).

[190] . W. Pinch, Peasants and Monks in British India, op. cit., p. 134.

[191] . Ibid., p. 134.

[192] . Ibid., p. 135.

[193] . Ibid.

[194] . Ibid.

a resolution was passed to discourage the sanskritisation process. In the same way, it was decided to constitute a caste federation with the Koeris. The Kurmis leaders were not planning to create a new caste through intermarriages, but a union they called « Raghav Samaj » - after one of the names of the Lord Ram -, a choice they justified by presenting the Kurmis and the Koeris as descending respectively from Lav and Kush, two sons of Ram. This attempt reflected the weight of the Biharis within the association. While the sessions of the Sabha were often presided over by Marathas, Patidars etc., in the 1970s about 30% of the executive bureau members were from Bihar (and 17-18% from Uttar Pradesh). The attempt to federate the Koeris and Kurmis was rather inconclusive, no doubt because of difference in their status and economic activities; the Kurmis were cultivators who produced staples like cereals whereas the Koeris were traditionally market gardeners.

In North India, the lower castes really started to get united after the state evolved the notion of Other Backward Classes and promised them quotas in the bureaucracy.

The AIBCF and the quotas: an ephemeral low-castes front

Even so the report of the first Backward Classes Commission was not taken into consideration by Nehru government – to whom it was submitted in 1953 -, it made an impact on the lower castes because of its method of investigation. In order to determine the needs of the OBCs, the Commission had sent a detailed questionnaire to different representative organisations; it received 3,344 memoranda, in addition to the 5,636 persons interviewed[195] and its chairman concluded from these figures that:

the ferment has reached the masses. They have, for the first time in thousands of years, shed their traditional resignation to fate and started hoping that their condition can be improved, that they will be able to take their rightful place in the social structure of to-morrow and that they will have their due share in all schemes of national advancement.

The immediate effect of this ferment was marked in the form of uneasiness and impatience, and some measures of bitterness also, in the minds of the people. These symptoms cannot be ignored because they are indicative of the birth of a new energy which must be canalised into creative effort and constructive activity. There remains no longer any belief in the sanctity of the caste-hierarchy having been established by the will of God.[196]

Such comments not only acknowledged the decline of a hierarchical social order but implicitly admits that his Commission has contributed to this development in bringing new hopes to castes which, at once, acquired a new assertiveness. The first Backward Classes Commission thus illustrates how the State not only invented new social categories by mentioning the OBCs in the Constitution, but also, subsequently gave it a concrete shape by soliciting from their ranks representatives who were able to re-design the group's identity. In 1954 there were 88 organisations 'working for the Backward Classes in 15 states, of which 74 represented individual communities, and 14, Backward Classes in general on a local or state basis'[197]. The UP Backward Classes Federation had been founded in 1929 and the Bihar State

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[195] . M. Galanter, Competing Equalities – Law and the Backward Classes in India, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1984, p.170.

[196] Report of the [First] Backward Classes Commission, vol. 1, Delhi, Ministry of Home Affairs, [no date], pp. 6-7.

[197] . M. Galanter, Competing Equalities, op. cit., p. 162 .

Backward Classes Federation in 1947. The All India Backward Classes Federation emerged from these state organisations.

The AIBCF was created the same day as the Constitution was proclaimed, on January 26, 1950 in order to protest against the little interest it paid to the OBCs. Its architect, and president, was Punjabrao Deshmukh, a Marashtrian Member of Parliament who had thoroughly supported the backward castes within the Constituent Assembly, even though he was not one of them – he was a Maratha - and even belonged to the establishment. A graduate from Oxford with an LLB from Lincoln's Inn, he had started practising as an advocate before joining politics to become a Congress notable: from Chairman of Amraoti District Council he became member of the Legislative Council and the Minister in the government of Central Provinces and Berar in 1930[198]. He first advocated the cause of the farmers. He founded in 1926 the Berar Shetkari Sangh (translated as Farmer's Association in English) and then the Bharat Krishak Samaj (Farmers' Forum). But he had also been the president of the Kurma [Kurmi] Kshatriya Mahasabha in 1944[199], set up in 1949 the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes Scholarship Board and then the AIBCF in 1950. Once again, a low caste movement that was to take root in North India only, had been shaped by a leader from Maharashtra, as if the 'locals' needed the experience of this province.

As President of the AIBCF Deshmukh submitted a memorandum to the Kalelkar Commission in which he 'pleaded for a reservation of 60% of the vacancies for the Other Backward Classes'[200]. The way the Kalelkar Report was dismissed in 1956 offended many members of the AIBCF. However, Deshmukh, who had been appointed Minister of Agriculture by Nehru in 1952 kept his portfolio till 1962 and refused to break with the Congress. In 1958 the AIBCF even conveyed its thanks to the Government for extending the benefits of various welfare schemes to the OBC and requesting the state governments to fill unused vacancies in seats reserved in educational institutions for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes with OBC students[201]. The Congress, once again, had successfully co-opted a leader of the low castes and circumvented his erstwhile militancy.

The AIBCF split up in 1957 and Deshmukh's opponents created the Indian National Backward Federation[202] under the leadership of R. L. Chandapuri. This organisation formed a political party but merged a few months later (November 10, 1957) with the Socialist Party. The AIBCF, weakened by the scission of 1957 and by the ageing character of P.S. Deshmukh, remobilised itself after his death in 1965. His successor, Brahma Prakash Chaudhury was also a Congressman - the former Chief Minister from Delhi - but a Yadav. Henceforth, the AIBCF could benefit from the political activism and the structures of the Yadav Mahasabha and other associations which supported caste-based quotas[203]. This issue, in the wake of the Kalelkar Commission, had already aroused a new kind of solidarity amongst low castes in order to promote their socio-economic interests. In Bihar, where the Yadavs dominated the OBC

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[198] Who's who in Lok Sabha, 1962, p. 117-119 and S.P. Singh Sud and A. Singh Sud, Indian Elections and legislators, Ludhiana, All India Publications, 1953, p. 125.

[199] The Indian and Pakistan Year book and Who's Who – 1949 Bombay, The Times of India, 1949, p. 719.

[200] . Report of the [First] Backward Classes Commission, vol. 1, op. cit., p. 139.

[201] M. Galanter, Competing Equalities, op. cit., p. 174.

[202] Letter of R. L. Chandapuri à R. M. Lohia, of June 15, 1957, in R. M. Lohia, The Caste System, Hyderabad, Rammanohar Lohia Samata Vidyalaya Nyas, 1978 (1964], p. 38.

[203] M. S. A. Rao, Social Movements and Social Transformation, op. cit., p. 156

movement, F. Frankel regards it as a real turning point, at least for the new generation, which was emancipating itself from the logic of Sanskritisation:

Instead of the 'old fantasy' of emulating Brahmans and Kshatriyas to achieve 'Twice born' status, they turned their attention to secular goals, particularly the promised reservations in professional and technical institutions and the higher ranks of the government services. Very quickly, in an effort to push implementation of the reservation policy, they shifted their reference group from the upper castes to that of the 'Backward Classes'. They also changed their emphasis from social activities to political mobilization, underlining the need to overcome sub-caste division in order to maximize the power of the 'backward' vote.[204]

During its March 1966 annual meeting in New Delhi the AIBCF mobilised one thousand activists and number of speakers exhorted them to overthrow the 'Brahmin-Banya Raj'. The resolutions which were passed requested the government to establish lists of OBC as well as to increase the grants for OBC students and to introduce in the educational system as well as in the administration quotas on a population basis.[205] One of the resolutions specified that this reservation policy had to rely on caste criteria:

The Federation is of the firm opinion that even though ultimately a class of people are to be judged by the economic well-being, in the transition period when large sections suffer from social disabilities in addition to economic poverty it would not be in the national interest to determine backwardness in terms of economic criteria alone. Social backwardness - as laid down in the Constitution - can only be determined in terms of castes and communities to which the stigma applies as a whole...[206]

For the AIBCF, which asked for the implementation of the Kalelkar report, caste had to be used for measuring backwardness and for distributing the benefits of the compensatory policies, as a basic unit, but caste had also to be considered because the stigma affecting the lower castes was 'a serious handicap' and even 'the root-cause of economic backwardness'[207]. In the late 1960s, in the wake of the Kalelkar report and its humiliating dismissal in the 1965 Lok Sabha debate, but more importantly in the context of the post 1967 elections which enabled several low caste leaders to become Chief Ministers in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, the stronghold of the AIBCF, the organisation developed its activities - it started publishing the Backward Classes Review in 1968 for instance[208]. The 1968 conference of the Yadava Mahasabha was also dominated by discussions about the implementation of the Kalelkar Report and the need for caste-based reservations[209]. Caste associations obviously found in the notion of quotas for the OBCs to down play their narrow identity and merge it in a broader

[204] F. Frankel, 'Caste, Land and Dominance', op. cit., p.86.

[205] K. C. Yadav, India's Unequal Citizens – A study of the Other Backward Classes, Delhi, Manohar, 1994, pp. 65-66.

[206] .See 'Resolutions of the BackwardClasses Federation Conference, 12 March 1966', Appendix 2 to M.S.A. Rao, Social Movements and Social Transformation, op. cit., p. 262.

[207] . Backward Classes Review 1(4-5), p. 10, cited in M. Galanter, Competing equalities, op. cit., p. 210.

[208] . Ibid.

[209] . M.S.A. Rao, 'Political Elite and Caste Association: A Report of a Caste Conference', Economic and Political Weekly, n° 3, 1968, pp. 779-782.

front which could pressurise the State more efficiently and make it giving shape to the administrative category he had created.

In the early 1970s, the All India Kurmi Mahasabha abandoning further the Sanskritisation logic, made an alliance with the Koeris and favoured a merger of all the 'backward classes'. At its 1972 session, the main slogan was 'Pichara Jagao Desh Bachao' ("'Backwards', wake-up and rescue the country"). One of the resolutions allowed others than Kurmis to belong to the association and another one asked for the appointment of a Public Service Commission for Backward Classes.

However, the trend was short-lived. First of all, other low castes probably resented the Yadav domination over the AIBCF. Jai Narayan Singh Yadav had become its General Secretary in 1959 and when Brahm Prakash Chaudhury took over from Deshmukh, 'the Yadavs gained control of the All India Backward Classes Federation'[210]. Such an influence was all the more problematic as the Yadavs were especially mobilised all over the 1960s. During the 1962 Indo-China war, Yadav soldiers accomplished heroic deeds in Ladakh and some of them won awards. This episode fostered the Yadavs' Kshatriyahood and their proud in their martial traditions. They immediately asked the Government to established a Yadav regiment in the army, along the same lines as the Rajput or the Sikh regiments. Pant rejected this claim but in 1965 the Yadavs again 'exhibited their bravery on several occasions'[211]. In 1966, the AIYM held its annual conference in Ettawa, with Mulayam Singh Yadav as Chairman of the Reception Committee and Rao Birendra Singh - the scion of the Rewari dynasty - as President, two names epitomising the contradiction between radical demand and sanskritisation within the Yadav movement.

One of the resolutions of the Subject Committee asked for the implementation of the Kalelkar report. Ram Lakhan Singh Yadav said that they 'were leading the 90% of the population which was backward'[212] and B.P. Mandal, who was then Chief Minister of Bihar declared that the Yadavs 'should lead the revolution'[213]. The last day of the conference being devoted to the backward classes, other low castes and Scheduled Castes speakers admitted the Yadav leadership but there was apparently no Kurmi leader to do so. Not only the Yadav leadership was not very well accepted by the Kurmis, but within the Yadav fold itself, some influential leaders did not approve of the backward identity that the socialists such as Mulayam Singh Yadav and B.P. Mandal tried to promote.

The President himself, Birendra Singh Rao, true to its sanskritisation inclination, stressed in his address that it was 'a sign of weakness on the part of the Yadavas to consider themselves a backward community and urged that they should become politically awakened and integrated'[214], as if asking for reservations was a sign of separatism - something Gandhi had already said about the separate electorate for the Scheduled Castes. Instead, he emphasised the Yadav regiment issue in a very typical vein. In a memorandum, signed by him and submitted in November 1968 to the government, Rao Birendra Singh stressed that Yadavs, 'like the Rajputs, Jats, Sikhs and Marathas, are a martial race'. It further read that the

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[210] . M.S.A. Rao, Social Movements and Social Transformation, op. cit., p. 156. In Uttar Pradesh also, in 1961, a Yadav, Bachan Ram Yadav (MLA) became the Vice President of the U.P. Backward Classes Association (ibid., p. 157).

[211] Ibid., pp. 150-151.

[212] . Ibid.

[213] . M.S.A. Rao, 'Political élite and caste associaiton - A report of a caste conference', Economic and Political Weekly, 18 May 1968, p. 781.

[214] . Ibid..

'Yadav community is not a caste but a race'[215]. In Ettawa, Rao BirendraSingh also regarded the Yadavs as peasants (kisans). He advocated the formation of Vishal Haryana 'so that kisan could seize political power'[216]. Such an approach was close to that of Charan Singh, a Jat, and after the carving out of the new state of Haryana in 1966, power indeed went to the Jat peasantry. The Rewari family have always oscillated between sanskritisation and kisan politics. Rao Balbir Singh, even tough he had links with the Hindu Mahasabha joined the Zamindar party soon after he was established by Chhotu Ram, the Jat peasant leader of Rohtak. The party then represented the agrarian interests of the four major cultivating castes of Punjab, the Jats, the Yadavs, the Gujjars and the Rajputs[217]. The affinities the Yadav dynasty and a Jat-led party are not so difficult to understand since in Punjab, Delhi and part of Uttar Pradesh the former 'occupied a rank equal to that of Jats and Gujjars with commensal relationsincluding smoking from the same hukka'[218]. After the demise of Chotu Ram in 1945, the Zamindar Party the scion of the Rewari dynasty, Rao Virendra Singh, took over from him. He became Chief Minister of Haryana in 1967 and founded a new party, Vishal Haryana soon after, and was elected MP in 1971. The political approaches of the Rewari family based on sanskritisation and kisan politics could only weaken the 'backward front'. Birendra Singh was perhaps an old fashioned Yadav but he was reelected as President of the AIYS in the Ettawa conference. In a very perceptive rejoinder to M.S.A. Rao's analysis of the Ettawa conference, D.N. Dhanagare emphasised the division, within the Yadavs, between the advocates of reservations and the Birendra Rao Singh from an economic point of view - the former, according to him, were 'the economically underprivileged Yadavs' whereas the latter represented 'the class consisting of well-off Yadavs'[219]. This cleavage can also be seen as opposing the proponents of compensatory discrimination in caste terms - there were not so poor socialists among them - and those who stuck to sanskritisation and 'integration'.

The AIBCF failed to sustain the mobilisation of the 1960s when the implementation of caste-based quotas gradually became a remote perspective – it was a defunct body by the early 1970s. A lesson deserves to be drawn from this episode anyway. The first mobilisation involving more than one of the lower castes in North India concerned the quota issue. This movement contributed to the crystallisation of a low caste front more loose than caste federations but much wider and responding to similar motivations since one its chief aims was still to increase the weight of its caste components in the electoral competition. This mobilisation was imperfect and short-lived but in a way it foreshadowed what was to happen during the Mandal affair.

So far as the comparison with western and southern India is concerned, the career of the low caste movement in the Hindi belt before the 1980s reconfirms that it suffered from two specific weaknesses: first, the resilience of sanskritisation, a sociological pattern which inhibited the egalitarian agenda to a large extent and second, a (partly correlative) inability to coalesce within caste federations or even caste fronts, as the loose and ephemere crystallisation of the OBC coalition testified in the 1950s-1960s. Interestingly, the Dalit

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[215] . 'All India Yadava Mahsabha - Memorandum', Appendix 1 to M.S.A. Rao, Social Movements and Social Transformation, op. cit., pp. 258-259.

[216] . Ibid.

[217] . Ibid., p. 159.

[218] . Ibid., p. 131.

[219] . D.N. Dhanagare, 'Political Elite and Caste Association - A Comment', Economic and Political Weekly, 30 November 1968, p. 1852.

movement was affected by similar shortcomings in the larger state of the Hindi belt, that is Uttar Pradesh.

The Uttar Pradesh Untouchables and the limited ethnicisation of caste

Like the low castes, the Untouchables first mobilised in U.P. in reaction to the State's reservation policy. The way the British classified castes was in itself a factor of mobilisation. It was especially evident from the impact of the 1935 Government of India Act, in which there was a lot at stake since it enfranchised a larger number of Untouchables and granted quotas for the Scheduled Castes. In the United Provinces some castes had strong objections to their classifications as Scheduled Castes. The Bundelkhand Prantia Kori Sabha, which claimed 20,000 members passed a resolution in 1936 to support the view that 'the Koris of India have always been classified amongst the touchable castes with the right to Samskaras' and that in the Manusmriti they are 'held to be born of a Kshatriya in a Vaishya mother'. Interestingly, the association referred to resolutions passed by caste panchayats in a dozen of districts distributed between Lahore and Jhansi, its headquarters[220].

However, most of the castes which submitted memoranda to the British asked them to classify their group in the category of the Scheduled Castes in order to benefit from the reservation policy. Paradoxically, this demand was not always incompatible with a sanskritisation discourse. The Jatavs are a case in point. Their name, in itself is very revealing. Jatavs are Chamars, untouchable leather workers, who claim descent from the Yadu race which, allegedly, entitled them to be known as Kshatriyas.

This sanskritic leaning can be attributed to the influence of the Arya Samaj which started to be felt by 1910 among the Chamars at large. Briggs emphasises that 'During 1911, preceding the Census enumeration, both the Arya Samaj and the Mohammedan communities made special efforts to enrol Chamars, especially those who were Christians'[221]. This competition was part of the politics of numbers. It only concerned a small minority since in 1911 there were only 1,551 Arya Samajist Chamars in the United Provinces, but most of the Jatav leaders were exposed to it. The Arya Samaj missions were especially successful through their schools among the sons of Agra Chamars who had become rich thanks to leather trade[222]. Manikchand Jatavaveer (1897-1956), one of the founders of the Jatav Mahasabha in 1917 was a teacher in a school of Agra run by the Arya Samaj[223]. Sunderlal Sagar (1886-1952), another co-founder of the Sabha in Agra was even versed in Sanskrit - so much so that he was called Pandit[224]. A third co-founder of the caste association, Swami Prabhutanand Vyas (1877-1950) was an Arya Samaj monk[225]. They all preached moral reform,

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[220]. Memorandum to the Secretary of State for India, through the Reforms Commissioner U.P., Naini Tal, 10 Oct. 1936, IOR. L/P&J/9/108.

[221] . Geo. W. Briggs, The Chamars, Calcutta, Association Press, 1920, p. 238.

[222] . O. Lynch, The Politics of Untouchability - Social Mobility and Social Change in a city of India, New York, Columbia University Press, 1969, pp. 68-69.

[223] . R.K. Kshirsagar, Dalit Movement in India and Its Leaders, New Delhi, MD Publications, 1994, p. 230.

[224] . Ibid., p. 321.

[225] . Ibid., p. 347.

vegetarianism, teetotalism and temperance for achieving a cleaner status[226]. That was also the first inclination of Swami Achhutanand (1879-1933) who was to become the most important Scheduled Caste leader of the United Provinces in the 1920s-1930s.

Born in Mainpuri district, he had been brought up at a military cantonment where his father worked and had been taught by missionaries[227]. He became a sadhu at the young age of 14 and then joined the Arya Samaj in which he assumed a new name, Swami Hariharanand. However, he soon realised that this organisation was primarily concerned with salvaging Hinduism and was not prepared to really reform it. He made this point in a shastrarth (philosophical debate) on 22 October 1921 in Delhi and left the Arya Samaj. He then changed his name into Swami Acchutanand - which reflected his new claim of being an Untouchable - and launched the Adi-Hindu movement. As evident from its very name, Acchutanand's movement, whose centre was in his home place, Kanpur, asserted that Dalits were the original inhabitants of India[228]. He argued :

The untouchables, the so-called harijans, are in fact adi-Hindu, the original or autochthonous Nagas or Dasas of the north and the Dravidas of the south of the subcontinent, and they are the undisputed, heavenly owners of Bharat. All others are immigrants to the land, including the Aryans, who conquered the original populations not by valour but by deceit and manipulation...by usurping others' rights, subjugating the peace-loving and rendering the self-sufficient people indigents and slaves. Those who ardently believed in equality were ranked lowest. The Hindus and untouchables have since always remained poles apart'[229].

Nandiri Gooptu convincingly argues that 'the theory of a separate racial origin of the untouchables in the various simultaneous "Adi" movements were derived from British ethnographic classifications of Indians into ethnic groups, and from a related notion that the caste system originated through encounters between Dravidian and Aryan races'[230].

However, the ethnicisation process did not go so far as in the South. The Adi Hindu movement certainly argued that the Untouchables used to be the ruling race in India before the coming of the Aryans; that they had kingdoms, capital cities and that they bad been converted the same way Hindus had been converted to Islam by Muslims invaders _ Swami Acchutanad, here, was using arya samajist arguments _; but Acchutanand looked as the Untouchables as the first … Hindus and considers that their original religion was bhakti, a form of Hinduism. In fact the Adi Hindu movement arose in the wake of the resurgence of bhakti cults among the Untouchables in the late XIXth century _ early XXth century.

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[226] . Kshirsagar mentions many other Jatav leaders with Arya Samajist background such as Pandit Patramsingh (1900-1972) in Delhi (ibid., p. 290), Puranchand (1900-1970) in Agra (ibid., p. 301) and Ramnarayan Yadavendu (1909-1951) also from Agra (ibid., p. 374).

[227] Chandrika Prasad Jynasu, Adi Hindu Andolan ka Prabartak Sri Swami Acchutanand Harihar, Lucknow, 1968, cited in Nandini Gooptu, 'Caste and Labour : Untouchable Social Movments in Urban Uttar Pradesh in the Early Twenthieth Century', in P. Robb (ed.), Dalit Movements and the Meanings of Labour in India, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1993, p. 285.

[228] . R.K. Kshirsagar, Dalit Movement in India, op.cit., p. 344.

[229] . Cited in R.S. Khare, The Untouchable as himself: ideology, identity and pragmatism among the Lucknow Chamars, London, Cambridge University Press, 1984, p. 85.

[230] N. Gooptu, 'Caste and Labour', op.cit., p. 288. For a good illustration of this argument see G.W. Briggs, The Chamars, op.cit., p. 11_15 (check).

Worshipping Kabir and Ravidas then became widespread among urban untouchables migrants in U.P, and ceased to be practised only by insular religious orders[231] : new temples and statues were built, festivals and pilgrimages organised. However, such a promotion of what was after all a form of Hinduism was not likely to imbue the Untouchables with a separate identity like the Dravidians in South India. If 'bhakti was resurrected as a caste - based religious expression solely of the untouchables', how can it be practised 'as a form of denial of caste distinctions'[232]?

Indeed, N. Gooptu admits that 'the criticism of the caste system by the Adi Hindu leaders was rather limited and had a narrow focus on the lack of rights or opportunities for the untouchables. The leaders did jettison the notions of 'low' or 'impure', but concentrated on proving that such stigma and disabilities should not be attached to them due to caste status. Nor did they attempt to question the concept that work was inherited. Instead they claimed that 'low' work was not the true inheritance of the Untouchables. It was largely to buttress this claim that they asserted their pre_Aryan ancestry as the original rulers of India, for it enabled them to argue that they should re_inherit the ancient rights of which they had been deprived'[233].

Far from establishing a separate identity that would situate the Untouchables out of the caste system, the Adi Hindu movement used their so-called original identity as a means for promoting their status within the system. And correlatively, the bhakti resurgence did not imply a radical questioning of their belonging to Hinduism. Certainly, they opposed Brahminism by adhering to a rather popular tradition, but their practise of this religious cult recalls the modus operandi of the Hindfu sects _ which precisely derived from bhakti _ whose egalitarian impact has always been otherworldly. While in Pundjab the Ad_Dharm movement was projected as a quaum, or independent community, rather than a panth, or religious path[234], in the Hindi belt _ the Adi Hindu movement could not achieve so much.

The movement also suffered from organisational weaknesses. While the 'informal nature of links between apex Adi Hindu organisations in the towns and local caste_groups in neighbourhoods contributed to the strength and breadth of the movement'[235], by 1924 local Adi Hindu Sabhas had been set up in only four cities of U.P. (Kanpur, Lucknow, Benares and Allahabad). In fact the Adi-Hindu movement remained chiefly confined to Agra and Kanpur. Out of the 23 main Dalit leaders of the United Provinces in the first half of the century, almost 50% were from these two cities (eight from Agra and two from Kanpur)[236]. In both places, the social reform work had been prepared by sectarian movements such as the Radha Soami Satsang established by Radha Soami (1818-1878) in Agra and the Dev Samaj, founded in 1887 by Siva Narayan Agnihotri of Kanpur.

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[231] N. Gooptu, 'Caste and Labour', op.cit., p. 278.

[232] Ibid. p.284.

[233] Ibid., p. 291. In her conclusion, N. Gooptu further argues that 'The Adi Hindu leaders thus did not pose a direct threat to the caste system, even though their conception of it as an instrument for imposing social inequalities implied a critique of ritual hierarchy' (Ibid., p. 298).

[234] M. Jurgensmeyer, Religious as Social Vision : the Movement against Untouchability in 20_th century Punjab, Berkeley, 1982, pp. 45_55 (check).

[235] Ibid., p. 296.

[236] . S.K. Gupta, The Scheduled Castes in Modern Indian Politics. Their emergence as a political power, Delhi, Munshiram Manoharlal, 1985, p. 403.

In addition to these limitations, the movement also failed to overcome the traditional cleavages opposing the untouchable caste groups. Its leaders tried to organise inter_dining ceremonies but did not meet very enthusiastic responses[237]. All these shortcomings were precisely in evidence in the case of one of these individual castes, that of the Chamars and more especially of the Jatavs who got organised around the same time as the Adi_Hindu movement.

In the late 1920s, the All India Shri Jatav Mahasabha submitted a very telling memorandum to the Simon Commission:

Our Mahasabha is fully alive to the fact that there can be no advancement so long as there is no real improvement in the political status of a community. It is idle to attribute the depression of the depressed classes to the religious and social system of the Hindus. If Government were to improve their political status by giving them honorary offices, adequate representation on local bodies and legislatures and in public services commensurate with their numerical strength, their social position would automatically improve and social injustice would become a thing of the past. For social position of the depressed classes would rise pari passu with the rise in their economic condition - a thing which is inconceivable in the case of any community without advancement of its political status[238].

Such a discourse foreshadows – or echoes - one of Ambedkar's main intuitions, namely that only power could enable his caste-mates to emancipate themselves[239]. However, all the Jatavs did not share these views. For instance, a special meeting of the United Provinces Depressed Classes Conference was held on 14-15 April 1928 at Agra to protest against the participation of the Adi-Hindu movement to the work of the Simon Commission[240]. In fact this movement was impeded by the activism of the Dalit leaders who stuck to the sanskritisation approach. It was especially affected by the competition of the Depressed Classes League that was founded at Lucknow in 1935 by R.L. Biswas with Jagjivan Ram as General Secretary and P.N. Rajbhoj as Secretary. The moving spirit behind this association - at least one of its chief architects - Dharam Prakash, was a staunch arya samajist who opposed Ambedkar's moves in favour of conversion and was elected to the Constituent Assembly, and then to the Rajya Sabha, on a Congress ticket[241].

In the 1930s, a similar division opposed the proponents of joint electorates with reserved seats, such as Bohre Khem Chand the president of the All India Shri Jatava Mahasabha (and the vice president of the All India Depressed Classes Association) and those who supported Ambedkar's demand regarding separate electorates, such as the United Provinces Adi-Hindu (Depressed Classes) Association[242]. This cleavage more or less coincided with the one opposing the proponents of sankritisation and those who were more favourably inclined towards an egalitarian, ambedkarite strategy, the important point being

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[237] Ibid., p. 290.

[238] . Cited in S.K. Gupta, The Scheduled Castes in Modern Indian Politics, op. cit., p. 243.

[239] . Ambedkar once even said that 'the problem of the Depressed Classes will never be solved unless they get political power in their own hands' (R.K. Kshirsagar, Dalit Movement in India, op. cit., p. 403).

[240] . R.K. Kshirsagar, Dalit Movement in India, op. cit., p. 144.

[241] . Ibid., pp. 208-209.

[242] . S.K. Gupta, The Scheduled Castes in Modern Indian Politics - Their emergence as a political power, Delhi, Munshiram Manoharlal, 1985, p. 280.

here that the former tended to dominate the Jatav movement till the 1930s. After the publication of the White Paper which was to be the basis of the 1935 Government of India Act, the Agra based Jatav Conference sent a memorandum to the Deputy Secretary to the Government of India where it was said :

The Jatavs are the descendants of Yadu, the founder of Jadav [sic] tribe, from which the great Hero of Maha Bharat, Lord Krishna, came. But this position of superiority could not remain intact. Our community fell down from that great height to this degraded status in the Hindu fold [...] our present position is the outcome of the age-long inhumane oppressions of Brahminism or the Kshatriyas. We, Kshatriyas of the past, are labouring under various sorts of disabilities, restrictions and religious injunctions imposed on us by the Orthodox Hindus [...] But we are at loss to understand the exclusion of our (Yadav) Jatav community from the list of the Scheduled Castes given in the White Paper. The result of this horrible negligence would, no doubt, be the sacrifice of the interests of our community.[243]

Such a discourse suggests that the Jatav movement was still under the influence of sanskritisation in the mid-1930s. Owen Lynch points out that 'The Jatavs were not attempting to destroy the caste system; rather they were attempting to rise within it in a valid, though not licit, way'[244].

The influence of Ambedkar made a strong impact on the Jatav movement in the 1940s so much so that the Maharashtrian scenario _ with Dalit acquiring a separate Buddhist identity could be used to avoid the trap of sanskritisation. Even those who did not convert themselves to Buddhism regarded the Untouchables as descending from the original Buddhists and, therefore, prided themselves of being the original Indians: O. Lynch could then conclude that 'Buddhist identity has replaced Sanskritic Kshatriya identity'[245]. The Jatav movement could therefore rely on the same solid - ethnic - ground as the Bahujan movement in Maharashtra and the Dravidian movement in Tamil Nadu. Also, for the Jatavs, 'political participation' became a 'functional alternative' to sanskritisation[246], in the sense that they tried to achieve social mobility through access to power. This empowerment process was fostered by the British policies of positive discrimination and gradual democratisation since they both incited the caste to transform itself into a pressure group and to assert itself as a collective body. However, such a change was rather exceptional in Northern India. It was almost confined to the Jatavs of Agra. Even though the president of the Scheduled Caste Federation of the United Provinces, Piarelall Kureel (1916-1984) was a Kureel from Unnao district, most of the supporters of Ambedkar were confined in the Agra Jatav movement.

Sanskritisation - on the basis of arya samajist influences or not – continued to prevail in many other Untouchable castes. In the 1911 and 1921 censuses, some 26 low castes claimed the status of the twice-born castes[247]. Certainly, sanskritisation and social mobility were not mutually exclusive but the former reflected the domination of the value of the caste system anyway. In 1935, the All India Dhobi [washermen, launder] Association protested against the exclusion their caste from the Scheduled Castes which had been decided under pressures from other associations such as the Arya Samaj oriented United Provinces Razak

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[243]. Memorandum of Jatav Conference of Agra, in IOR. L/P&J/9/108.

[244] . O. Lynch, The Politics of Untouchability, op. cit., p. 75.

[245] . Ibid., p. 206. See also p. 93.

[246] . Ibid., p. 7.

[247] . S.K. Gupta, The Scheduled Castes in Modern Indian Politics, op. cit., p. 4.

(Dhobi) Association which pursued the sanskritisation path. The President of the latter organisation, for whom Dhobis were Kshatriyas, considered that giving his caste fellows the status of Untouchables would be 'a stigma on character and ability, an obstruction to self-advancement and improvement'[248]. Similar conflicts happened in the case of the Khatiks, an Untouchable caste of meat cutters[249]. The Dusadh Mahasabha also claimed that Dusadhs were Kshatriyas[250].

In contrast to the Untouchables' movements which developed in the Presidencies of Madras and Bombay, those of U.P.. did not articulate a vigorous ethnic discourse. The Adi-Hindu movement certainly presented the Untouchables as the original habitants of India but as Hindus and the proponents of sanskritisation remained quite strong. The Dalit movement therefore faced the same difficulty as the OBCs in the Hindi belt, whereas things appeared to be easier in southern India and even in the West – though the differences must not be exaggerated.

Conclusion: Ethnicisation versus sanskritisation

In his typology of the low caste movements, M.S.A. Rao distinguish five categories[251]. The first one is characterised by 'withdrawal and self-organisation'. It is epitomised by the Izhavas movement which has many common features with the traditional bhakti way of contesting caste by resorting to sectarian arrangements (a Guru inculcates a new ethos to his group to promote self-esteem). The second one, illustrated by the Yadavs is based on the claim of 'higher varna status' and in fact fits in the sanskritisation pattern. The third one extols 'the virtues of the non-Aryan (Dravidian) culture'. It took shape in South India and in Maharashtra to a lesser extent. The fourth one negates Hinduism for embracing Buddhism - this is the Ambedkar movement. The last one relies on the Marxist ideology. For Rao, except in the latter, in all these movements 'the religious element forms an essential part of protest ideology'[252]. I would argue that religion is not an essential feature of the Dravidian movement, compared to ethnicity and that the same thing can be said about the Maharashtrian movements, not only the Satyashodak Samaj, that Rao ignores, but also, to a large extent, the Ambedkar movement.

More importantly, I would suggest that the low caste movements can be regrouped in two broad categories, besides the Marxist one that has its own logic. On the one hand, the reform movements using basic notions of the caste system such as a sense of sanskritisation which reflects a resilience of hierarchy. On the other hand those which rely on an ethnic or a western ideology with a strong egalitarian overtone. The Yadav movement - and the Izhavas to a lesser extent - can be classified in the first group whereas all the others belong to the second category. Interestingly, none of them has a North Indian origin.

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[248]. Letter from the President of the United Provinces Razak (Dhobi) Association, 22 June 1936, IOR. L/P&J/9/108.

[249]. Letter from the Government the United Provinces, dated 3 July 1934, IOR. L/P&J/9/108.

[250] . R.K. Kshirsagar, Dalit Movement in India, op. cit., p. 84.

[251] . M.S.A. Rao, Social Movements and Social Transformation, op. cit., p. 211ff.

[252] . Ibid.., p. 217

M.S.A Rao acknowledges the difference between the Hindi belt movements and those which emerged beyond the Deccan and he explains it by emphasising that in North India Brahmins were 'generally backward with regard to modern education and government employment'[253], compared to the Kayasths and the Banyas and that a non-Brahmin movement could not crystallise like in the South where the Brahmins monopolised the élite function. This is probably not the only reason. The influence that the varna ideology continued to exert over North India is certainly a key factor of the persisting pattern of sanskritisation. The resilience of this hierarchical mindset is well illustrated by the attitude of the North Indian princes. Whereas the rulers of Kolhapur, Baroda, Bhavnagar and Mysore gave a determining support to the non-Brahmin movements, those of Rewari, Bharatpur, Gwalior and Dholpur - to cite only some of them - tended to support the caste system. All of them entertained close links with the Hindu nationalist movement at one stage or another in spite of the fact that they belonged to the low castes: Rewari was a Yadav state, Bharatpur and Dholpur, Jat and Gwalior, Maratha. As noticed above, the ruler of Rewari joined the Hindu Mahasabha in the 1930s. The Maharajah of Dholpur presided over the Jat Mahasabha, whose sanskritising Hinduism has been noticed above[254]. The Maharajah of Bharatpur supported the RSS[255]. In Gwalior, the Maharajah Jivaji Rao - who got married with a Rajput - supported the Hindu Sabha and his main lieutenant, the Sardar C.S. Angre - also a Maratha - became one of its 'zonal organiser' for the 1951-52 elections[256].

The resilience of the sanskritisation pattern in North India was also largely due to the fact that the upper castes were in large numbers and had a strong grasp over land and government services. But in addition to all these factors, I have tried to put a stress on two other inter-related elements which contrasted with developments which took place in the South and in the West. First, the difficulty met by the lower caste movements of the Hindi belt for evolving a separate identity relying on some ethnic ground. Second, their incapacity to coalesce within caste federations or OBC fronts. They mostly remained prisoners of sanskritisation which prevented them from establishing their claim on ethnic grounds and from shaping large coalitions like the non-Brahmin groupings or at least from forging caste federations. They started to move towards the formation of larger fronts when the State extended its compensatory discrimination policy to what became known as the 'Other Backward Classes'. The OBC front was short-lived, however, in the 1950s-1960s. This broad identity was only reactivated in the 1990s with the Mandal affairs which has probably been a turning point in the rise to power of the lower castes of the Hindi belt, a development already prevalent in the South and in the West, even if we must not over emphasise it: while the 'upper-Shudras' have taken over in these regions (the Maratha in Maharashtra and the .Lingayats in Karnataka, for instance), the lower Shudras and the Dalits are still kept at bay and oppressed.

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[253] . Ibid., p. 11.

[254] . N. Datta, 'Arya samaj and the Making of Jat Identity', op. cit., p. 115.

[255] . S. Mayaram, Resisting regimes. Myth, Memory and the Shaping of a Muslim Identity, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 171.

[256] . For more details, see C. Jaffrelot, The Hindu Nationalist Movement and Indian Politics, London, Hurst, 1996, p. 109-110.