

Caste Politics Through the Prism of Region

— SUHAS PALSHIKAR

This paper is about politics in India. It seeks to understand politics by looking at two important axes around which politics in India — and contemporary politics, more so — seems to be revolving: caste and region. Of the two, caste is more famous and has for long been recognized as a factor in explaining politics in India. 'Region' as a factor has only assumed significance in the nineties. Since after the disintegration of the 'Congress framework' of politics, observers have noted the 'regionalization' of politics (Nigam, 1996; Palshikar, 2000; Rangarajan, 1999). Rise of regional and State-based parties to prominence is an expression of this regionalization. But apart from the dramatic proliferation and rise of regional parties, less noticed and more interesting aspect of regionalization has been related to 'all-India' parties. The Congress, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI-M), have themselves become regionalized in terms of their strategies and practices.

Regionalization refers to five factors. (i) **Issues** are/have become region specific. Although the press may continue to project issues in 'all-India' terms, these make sense only when translated into regional contexts. This applies equally to 'secular-communal' divide or to 'globalization.' (ii) Secondly, **leadership** is structured regionally and ratified regionally. Parties may still project towering 'national' leaders but State level leadership is more relevant and only through this kind of leadership people relate to 'national' politics. (iii) Regionalization further means that **social forces** are constituted at the regional level. Therefore, the support base of parties can be identified only at State level. Whether one can describe the base of parties at the all-India level by adding up its base at state level is somewhat doubtful. (iv) Fourthly, in electoral and mobilizational context, the **set of choices** exists at the State level. People, as voters and as groups, have to choose from among the State level choices only. (v) Following from the above factors, political **competition** takes place at the level of region. Consequently, the outcome makes sense only at the regional level. It is in this sense that the 'theatre' of politics has shifted to States — away from the 'all India' theatre.

Before turning to the question how does this regionalization link up with caste,

let us briefly explore the elements conveyed by the term 'region.' Territoriality is the most obviously conveyed element. However, the territoriality expressed by the term 'region' often has a flexibility and indeterminacy with regards to its physical boundary. In this sense, region refers to a wide range of territorial configurations: locality, sub region, State, supra-State region etc. In our discussion of caste below, we shall be invoking these various territorial units. Secondly, 'region' can bypass territoriality and convey a broader and perhaps more fluid element of 'space'. Thus understood, region would refer to a non-territorial, non-physical 'sphere' just as it would refer to a physical territory. We bring this element of 'region' into the discussion because caste can be seen both as interacting with territory and as providing space for following certain kind of politics. It needs to be seen how caste as social space interacts with region as territorial space.

One more point may be raised at this introductory stage. How does 'region' as territory become politically sustainable? It is possible to think of many factors, which prop up region as a relevant factor in politics. But the point is that territoriality needs to be translated as a political factor. Language, culture, economy, etc. provide a base to territoriality in order to sustain in politics. It may be argued that caste is not only yet another base, but one, which potentially combines other factors — particularly economy — in providing a base to region to operate as a factor in politics. Thus, we can imagine a complex relationship between caste and region — a relationship of interdependence: caste expresses through region (as territoriality), region becomes politically sustainable on the basis of caste; caste is bound up by territoriality and in constituting the social space, caste takes the form of a region.

We hope to understand the politics in post-congress phase by exploring the tension and relation between caste and region. The post-congress politics is often characterized by coalitions. However, an alliance of regional parties does not seem to be a possibility. On the other hand, caste emerged in the 1990s as a possible framework within which politics would be organized. However, it now appears that politics of backward castes — or OBC politics as it is popularly known — seems to be stagnating. Thirdly, expressions of regionalism are vocal in some part but muted in others. Fourthly, apart from region and caste, another contending framework of politics has emerged — that of Hindutva. It has shown signs of accommodating both region and caste. In this background, we probe the meaning of regionalization and elaborate the link between caste and region

in contemporary Indian politics. In short, the paper deals with the overlap between the two axes — caste and region — and how this overlap affects the nature of these axes even when they are operating independently of each other.

I

Cast as a system of vertical division, sustains on the basis of localization. Caste hierarchy may invoke the ideologies of *chaturvarnya* and of purity-pollution. But the hierarchy makes sense operationally, only when it is concretized in a local situation. Studies concentrating on *Jati* by sociologists and social anthropologists, have always pointed out how hierarchical ranking of *Jati* makes sense in the context of village or small localities. Similarly, cultural, ritual life of members of *Jati* is organized around village or locality. It is only in comparison to some other caste within a locality that the higher or lower status of caste can be experienced. Anthropological studies, thus, look at the extent of intermixing among castes and the finer ethic followed in the course of such intermixing within a locality to assess the extent of separation and commensality among castes. A statement that 'carpenters dine with ironsmiths' does not carry any meaning unless it is specified as to where this interdining took place. In other words, *Jati* as a unit of social relations, ritual status and cultural universe is firmly based within the framework of well-defined territorial boundaries. As much as vertical, horizontal separateness of a caste, too, has a locality as a point of reference.

Often, we find distinct 'pockets' of various castes. Most castes are not only specific to a certain State but also specific to a particular area. This means that a caste, which has a concentrated existence in one area, may also constitute numerically large or significant group in that area. In a study of north India, Schwartzberg has shown how caste concentration takes place at village and district level. He shows that more than fifty percent of Ludhiana's population is Jat, and Chamars and Majahabis have separate pockets in Punjab. The same applies to UP, Bihar, Orissa, etc. He argues that both in the case of peasant castes and Dalits, exclusivity seems to be the rule. This means that if in one village, Jats are the largest group; other peasant castes would almost be non-existent. Similarly, in districts where Majahabis are numerous (e.g. Amritsar), other Dalit castes are rarely seen. (Schwartzberg, 1968; 99-106). This study gives an indication of the strong link between caste and localities or sub-

regions. In the case of peasant castes, the regional base is considerably expansive while non-peasant castes are often confined to smaller pockets. This pattern is evident in State after State: In Tamil Nadu (TN), Vanniyars belong to North and South Arcot, Salem and Chingleput (Hardgrave, 1965:40); Thevars in Ramnad (Betteille, 1992: 105-6); Nadars earlier belonged to Tirunelveli (Hardgrave, 1970: 105-106). Similarly, Izhava sub castes belonged to different parts of Kerala – Tiyyars to North, Izhavas to central parts and Tandans to south (Mencher-Unni, 1976: 122). The Vokkaligas of Karnataka are concentrated in the Mysore region, Constituting around 29 percent of the population of Mysore State (Srinivas, 1962: 32). In Maharashtra Agris are concentrated in one district of Konkan-Raigad, Leva Patils in Jalgaon district of North Maharashtra, Vanjaris in Nasik, Ahmednagar and Beed district. Iravati Karve and Dandekar have given a detailed sketch of the residential pockets of different castes of Maharashtra (Karve-Dandekar, 1951:19-42). The Malis of Rajasthan belong to Jodhpur region (Jenkins, 1993: 640), and most smaller castes are concentrated in specific areas (Lodha, 1999: 3346). The case of Jats of Western UP is too famous to require a mention. In Bihar, Bhumihars have a concentrated strength in the south while Rajputs have in the western parts (Frankel, 1989:53). Kammas belong to Andhra region and Reddis to Rayalseema (Elliott, 1970:149). One can keep multiplying this list of examples. M.N. Srinivas observed in 1957 “this kind of relationship between a caste and a region is widespread in India...” (Srinivas, 1962:72). More specifically, as Washbrook observes in the context of TN, most endogamous Jatis extended over no more than a few adjacent villages (Washbrook, 1989: 223).

This association of many castes with specific territorial ‘pockets’ has produced two political results. One is the rise of ‘locally dominant’ castes. Srinivas’ early use of the term ‘dominant caste’ was specifically with reference to a small locality or village or group of villages: In his 1955 essay ‘The social system of a Mysore Village’ Srinivas mentions that “The concept of the dominant caste is important for understanding intercaste relations in any **local area.**” (Srinivas, 1987: 77, emphasis added). Elaborating on the concept in 1957, he uses the phrase ‘locally’ dominant and then adds, “Occasionally a caste is dominant in a group of neighboring villages if not over a district or two, and in such cases, local dominance is linked with regional dominance.” (Srinivas, 1987: 96). As far as ‘local dominance’ is concerned, there seems to be a direct link between domination and numerical preponderance. Large size of population, though, has

one other implication. Often, a caste has numerical advantage when it also has a high degree of control over resources - at the village level, land. Thus, economic power and size combine to produce patterns of local domination. If one carefully follows Srinivas' account of locally dominant caste in Mysore, two things can be drawn from it: a) this political effect of caste-region interface is an outcome of local hierarchy based on caste and b) Just as dominance of one caste the subordination of other castes is a result of 'localization'. Castes, which are 'trapped' by circumstances into that locality, face subordination. For some castes, localization produced opportunities and experience of domination whereas, for others, localization portends the fate of subordination.

The other, more commonly noted political result of caste pockets relates to electoral politics. Localized pockets of castes have come to mean that candidates of a particular caste will always get elected from certain areas. Our study of Maharashtra gives ample evidence of this: The Maratha-Kunbi caste cluster, which is spread almost over the State, manages to send largest number of MLAs to State legislature irrespective of political upheavals. In 51 constituencies, the elected candidate has always been a Maratha, consecutively for six elections since 1978. In other 19 constituencies also, a candidate of the same caste has been elected since 1978 (these exclude SC constituencies). Thus, in one-fourth constituencies, the caste of the MLA has been the same since 1978. More specifically, Agris always get elected from Raigad district, Leva Patils from Jalgaon district, Telis from Wardha and Bhandara districts, Lingayats from Solapur and Kolhapur districts, Malis from Amravati district, etc. (Data collected by the Dept of Politics, University of Pune; Thite, 1996; I am also grateful to Prof. Vora for allowing me access to his draft paper on social composition of Maharashtra MLAs.) It is clear that there exists a tendency among parties to match caste by caste in selection of candidates. But the case of Maharashtra suggests that local pockets of castes have an important implication for the phenomenon of regionally dominant castes. It is only through such localized pockets that smaller and non-dominant castes get an opportunity to stake their claims to power. If smaller, non-dominant castes are not concentrated in one area, they are not likely to get any representation on their own strength. In other words, localized concentration facilitates a space for contesting the domination of State-level dominant caste. In Uttar Pradesh (UP), the Kurmis and Bindis have formed their separate parties, Apna Dal and Pragatisheel Manavsamaj Party respectively and it has been observed that in

1999 Apna Dal did get large number of votes in five Lok Sabha (LS) constituencies although no candidate of the party was elected. The Binds, one of the more backward castes, rallied behind their caste candidates and made their presence felt in seven LS constituencies (SG, 1999: 2912). This clearly shows that the Kurmis and Binds can draw upon their localized demographic 'resource' to at least protest against the domination of Yadavs; just as Maratha domination in Maharashtra can be contested through localized pockets of other non-Maratha castes.

Construction of Regionally Dominant Castes

Localized concentration leads to localized domination and possibilities of some representation. On the other hand, throughout the twentieth century, certain Jatis evolved into castes spread over a large territory. This gave rise to the regionally dominant castes. From mid-fifties onwards, politics in most states centered around one (or two) regionally dominant caste(s). In most cases, middle level (often peasant) castes sought to contest the ritual superiority, material ascendance and political domination of 'upper' castes - mostly Brahmans, and in the north, Kayasthas and Thakurs. In the first half of twentieth century, the middle-caste protests took the form of non-Brahman movements in Maharashtra and in the south. In the second half of twentieth century, the middle castes extended their claims to state power at the regional level. In both these phases, the middle castes sought to transcend the localized nature and assume a 'regional' identity.

The non-Brahman movements in Maharashtra and south were concerned with creating 'regional' non-Brahman identities. In Maharashtra, the invocation of Shivaji and Maratha rule by the non-Brahman movement was crucial in bringing various peasant castes together. The movement also facilitated the emergence of Maratha politics on a larger scale geographically (Omvedt, 1976:184-206). In Tamil Nadu, the non-Brahman movement was built upon the collapse of caste and region. The Brahmans were excluded from Dravid identity (Hardgrave, 1965). In Karnataka, the Vokkaliga 'Caste' came into being by the fusion of various peasant Jatis such as Morasui, Hallikar, Halu, Nonabad, and so on (Srinivas, 1962:5). In Gujarat, Kanabis of different areas came together in 1931 to constitute themselves as 'Patidars', although, Saurashtra Kanabis are still looked down upon by Gujarat Patidars. Also, the Leva and Kadvi divisions of

Patidars are supposed to refer to sub-regional differences. Yet, from 1931 onwards, the 'Patidar' identity has evolved as a regional or State level identity (Pocock, 1972). Similarly, despite internal tensions, Kshatriyas of Gujarat have been organizing themselves as one group. Rajputs, who are in the forefront of the Kshatriya mobilization, are regionally differentiated. Gujarat Rajputs being mostly tenants or landless, sought to align with Kolis and Bariyas (also landless) as Kshatriyas. Saurashtra Rajputs being landowners resisted the claims of non-Rajputs to Kshatriya status. However, over the years, the Kshatriya group of castes in Gujarat as a whole has provided a counterpoint to Patidar politics. The Kshatriya Sabha took an initiative in bringing together Rajputs and Kolis and shaping their politics (Kothari-Marui, 1970). The Jats are probably the most regionally structured caste. Various Khaps of Jats span specified villages and a meeting of all Khaps, the Sarvakhap meets to discuss common matters. But alongside Khaps, Jats of western UP as well as adjoining Haryana are also organized through the all India Jat Mahasabha, which always extended support to Charan Singh (Pradhan, 1966; Gupta, 1997: 49-58; Hasan, 1998: 131).

It can be argued that both the rise of non-Brahman movement and rise of middle caste as dominant caste in many States follow a similar pattern. A protest against castes ranking high in the hierarchy gives an impetus to these processes. But these processes gain momentum when small, localized, endogamous Jatis overcome their localization by seeking either in mythology or history a link with a larger territorial unit. They ignore or underplay the details about ritual separation and instead amalgamate large groups into their new boundaries, often expanding traditional identities. This development is accompanied by formation of territorial or even 'all-India' associations - Mahasabhas or Mahasanghas - of the newly evolved caste group. A moderately reformist posture follows vis-à-vis intra-caste practices, particularly marriage practices. Since the process is ideologically rooted in opposition to upper castes, the claims of such 'castes' relate to share in power, opportunities for material uplift and amelioration of tradition-inflicted disabilities. Central to this whole process is the journey from locality to region (mostly State). Once a caste crosses the threshold of locality, the possibilities of realizing political claims become very real. A geographical expanse allows the concerned caste to make claims on representational basis besides the basis of caste injustice. Besides, association with a larger region allows access to other strategies like regional ideology, cultural-historical claims, etc. In fact, most dominant castes, as also

proponents of non-Brahman movement, claim that the heritage of that region belongs to them; they are the true and authentic bearers of symbols associated with the particular region; they represent the culture of that region; the non-Brahmans are true Dravids, the Marathas are bearers of the symbol of Shivaji, Patidars exemplify the essence of Gujarati culture or Jats represent the true Kisans.

II

Linguistic States

If a caste claims that it represents the regional culture better than others, it follows that there will be a strong connection between such dominant castes and regionalist movements. Today we can talk about dominant castes in the context of States because in most cases, States have been linguistic States. These States constitute a region not only in just a geographical-administrative sense, but in socio-cultural and political sense also. Hence the link between dominant castes and States.

One can come across many examples of different patterns of relations between caste and regional identity. These include assertions by upper castes, convenient collaboration between upper and middle castes, the rise of contending middle castes, exclusion of upper castes, etc. Probably the latest example would be Uttaranchal where caste played an indirect role. When the union government decided to implement the policy of reservations for OBCs, stiff opposition came from upper castes of Uttaranchal. It was argued that this region did not have OBCs – at least not in large numbers. From the point of anti-reservation movement, the issues of separate identity of hill people distinct from plains people, came to the forefront (Pradeep Kumar, 2000). Without much exaggeration, it could be said that formation of Uttaranchal is an instance of upper caste assertion where ‘regional’ distinctiveness was indirectly claimed on the basis of different caste composition of the population. Historically, such upper caste assertion may be detected in the regional nationalism of Orissa. When the Oriya speaking territory was part of Bengal, Brahmans and Karans came together to shape Oriya opposition to Bengali domination. In 1912, this same social force invoked Oriya nationalism to protest against Orissa’s annexation to Bihar (Mohanty, 1990: 336-337). Since the creation of Orissa

State, the upper castes have generally retained their hold over the State's politics, culture and economy.

As far as collaboration between upper and middle castes is concerned, Maharashtra can serve as a very good example. Although the non-Brahman movement had considerably villainized Brahmans, the Samyukta Maharashtra Movement (SMM, Movement for united Maharashtra State) saw the Brahmans and sections of Marathas collaborating and mobilizing the masses on the basis of regionalist sentiments. This collaboration had a major long-term effect. While formation of Maharashtra State ushered the Marathas into position of power, the sharpness of non-Brahmanism was almost lost. The Brahmans, of course, were not in a position to make a comeback to politics, but nor were they hounded out of politics in particular or the public domain in general. On the contrary, Brahmans continued to dominate culture, education, media, under the benign auspices of 'Maharashtra Dharma' (Vora-Palshikar, 1990; Vora, 1999). More tangentially, the regional assertion led by Brahmans and Marathas displaced the main focus of non-Brahman movement, considerably weakening anti-caste discourse. Instead, Maratha domination became legitimized in the name of non-Maratha lower castes, identified in the sixties (in Maharashtra) as Bahujan Samaj (majority of masses) – the contemporary OBCs. Caste-Region nexus in Maharashtra, thus, exemplifies the process of one caste legitimating its claims by usurping the claims of other smaller castes of that linguistic region.

Just as the Gujarati-Marwari baniya was the cause of Marathi Brahmans and Marathas coming together, the prominence of Tamil Brahmans resulted into the unity of Telugu Brahmans and non-Brahman castes of Andhra. Although initially the non-Brahman Telugus joined Justice Party, they were not enamored by the anti-Brahman rhetoric. Instead, their anti-Brahman sentiment got directed against Tamil Brahmans, allowing cooperation among Telugu speaking people on regional-linguistic basis. This weakened the non-Brahman movement in Andhra. It has also been argued that cooption of elite Reddys into the congress facilitated a less acrimonious relationship between Brahmans and Reddys. (Elliott, 1970; 150-153). The examples of Maharashtra and Andhra show that regionalism can intervene in the competition between upper castes and middle castes. Secondly, these examples suggest that regionalism can help a smooth transfer of State level political apparatus to middle castes. Often, in this 'smooth' transfer, radicalism as a basis of political claims is lost and claims of lower castes get a short shrift through symbolic gestures and tokenism.

Starting off from limited collaboration between upper and middle castes, Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh witnessed the rise and assertion of middle castes. A similar assertion was witnessed in UP once the Jats of western UP became politically organized. As we mentioned earlier, the Jat assertion took the form of a demand for 'backward' status. From this, Charan Singh also attempted to project himself (and therefore, Jats) as representative of backwards. However, following Jats' association with land, their leaders, Charan Singh earlier and Tikait later, harped on a farmer identity as the identity of Jats in particular but of Gujjars as well (Byres, 1988; Gupta, 1997: 89-98; Hasan 1998: 131-138). Interestingly, during Takait's farmers' agitations, at one stage, activists of Bharatiya Kisan Union proposed that they should ask for a separate state for western UP (quoted in Gupta, 1997: 74). Thus, the caste of Jats is an example of middle caste assertion at the regional level. Politics of Haryana is another instance of Jat assertion at State level while in Rajasthan; the Jat assertion took the form of a concerted effort to claim backward status. The Jats of Rajasthan deviated from pro-congress politics to vote for BJP in 1999 for the sole purpose of getting their backward status recognized. The Jat Mahasabha decided to vote for BJP once Vajpayee promised to concede their demand. (Accordingly, Jats of Rajasthan except Bharatpur and Dholpur have been included in the list of OBCS) (Lodha, 1999: 3347).

Many States have witnessed keen competition between two castes or caste clusters. In instances of such competition, the contending castes usually belong to a middle status. In Rajasthan, the competition between the Jats and Rajputs has been rather neatly transformed into a bipolar party situation. Gujarat and Karnataka are the other two examples of contending middle castes but politics there is not organized so neatly. The Patidars of Gujarat rose to prominence in the course of nationalist movement. The Patidar caste also gained control over resources and sought to displace the Brahmans and baniyas from political power. However, Gujarat politics is characterized by congress efforts to attract Kshatriyas, Swatantra Party's efforts to forge an alliance of Patidars and kshatriyas, Patidar alliance with Brahmans and Baniyas in opposition to reservation and growing affection among Kshatriyas towards the congress (Shah, 1990). These developments have led to the emergence of BJP as a Patidar force in the nineties. Karnataka witnessed a tussle between Vokkaligas and Lingayats right from the time of creation of a Kannada speaking State. Vokkaligas dominated Mysore area but they felt that if the other Kannada

speaking areas were brought together, Lingayats would get an upper edge. Therefore, two Kannada speaking States were demanded. This has been recorded by the State Reorganization commission (Srinivas, 1962: 32-33). Thus, here is an example of a large caste cluster opposing a unified linguistic State for fear of losing its numerical advantage. Vokkaligas dominated Mysore politics between 1947 and 1956 (when one Kannada speaking State came into being). Since 1956, although Lingayats did get an upper hand, political dominance was shared by these two contending caste clusters till 1972 (Manor, 1989: 338-348). It was noted by Ambedkar that linguistic States would only lead to consolidation of the 'upper' castes, jeopardizing the interests of scheduled castes. In Punjab, for instance, the scheduled castes were not very supportive of the demand for a separate State of Punjab by reorganizing the State on linguistic communal lines. Even Sikh untouchables kept away from that demand fearing that a reorganized Punjab would facilitate domination of Jat Sikhs (Nayar, 1966: 50-51).

Tamil Nadu manifests a pattern of caste region relationship, which is distinct from other States in many respects. It did not throw up any single dominant caste although Vellalas and Nadars benefited the most from the Dravid non-Brahman movement. Secondly, the non-Brahman movement dealt with the issue of regional identity right from the beginning in the second decade of twentieth century. Non-Brahmanism was identified with Dravidianism. While attempting to unite all non-Brahman castes on the Dravid platform, the Dravid movement refused to recognize Brahmans as part of Dravid society. Just as this movement sought to effect a fusion of many non-Brahman castes, it also aspired to build a 'Southern' identity opposed to 'north'. In 1937 the movement led by Periyar waged an anti-Hindi agitation. The logical culmination of anti-Hindi, anti-north Dravidian non-Brahmanism was reached in 1939 when Justice Party demanded 'independent' Dravidstan. (Hardgrave, 1965: 10-35). Thus, caste-region interaction in Tamil Nadu strengthened an exclusionary regional nationalism. Further, it also sought to delegitimize Brahmans not only from their superior caste position but also from the scope of regional identity. However, this exclusion did not last long. Once the regional claims were realized through formation of Madras (now Tamil Nadu) State and non-Brahman claims were translated into an extensive policy of reservations, Brahmans were incorporated as members into the Tamil society. Brahmans are accommodated as ideologues and legitimizers of the regional legacy of Dravid movement. It is

indeed ironical that a strong non-Brahman movement, through its regionalism allowed a reentry of the Brahman caste both into the elite and into the political arena in general (Washbrook, 1989: 207-208, 253-255). In the nineties, the political assertion of the Vanniyars marked the political scene in Tamil Nadu. However, Vanniyars have a long history of separate political organization. In spite of the efforts of non-Brahman movement to bring together all non-Brahman castes, Vanniyars were organized through Tamilnad Toilers' Party and Commonweal party. Although DMK supported the latter in 1952 with a view to defeating Congress, Kamraj was successful in bringing both Vanniyar parties into congress fold (Hardgrave, 1965: 40-45). Another backward caste, the Thevars, backed the forward bloc for a long time (Betteille, 1992:107). These details suggest that in spite of very vocal non-Brahman movement, Tamil politics did not throw up any single middle caste around which State politics could be organized. Even the large and dominant castes in a given district, do not account for more than one fourth of the population of that district. Probably, this peculiar situation led to sustained recourse to militant regional nationalism, particularly by the Dravid parties. However, as Washbrook observes, this Dravidianism 'neutralized many of the caste based issues of conflict that dominated Tamil Nadu politics in the first half of the twentieth century' (Washbrook, 1989: 207-208). Perhaps, those contradictions, which Dravidianism sought to push under the carpet of regionalism, have resurfaced in Tamil Nadu with Dalit – OBC conflicts and Hinduization of some backward castes. In the absence of any particular caste group as central to politics, Tamil politics took on an exclusionary character: exclusion of Brahmans, Aryans, North Indians and less explicitly, exclusion of even Adi Dravids.

III

Two Ruptures

Demography, agrarian relations, political economy of post-independence period combined to produce the strong linkages between region and caste. In particular, the different patterns of caste relations gave substance to region as a political category in States like Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. These developments established the feature of region specific dominant castes in most parts of India. This feature came under stress at two stages when certain types of caste politics attempted to cross the regional boundaries. Both

these ruptures in the established pattern of caste-region equation came as opposition to upper as well as newly dominant castes in various regions. In the interplay of caste and region, Dalits and OBCs were / are often excluded or marginalized. Therefore these sections attempted to breach the happy coincidence of caste and region by pursuing the project of all-India 'Dalit politics' and all India ' OBC politics'.

At the intellectual level, Ambedkar was the first to grasp the implications of 'linguistic States' in terms of the consequent marginalization of Dalits. But even before the issue of linguistic States came up, Ambedkar had realized the need to mobilize Dalits at an all-India level if they were to stake claims to political power. Thus, in the 1940s, abandoning the Independent labor party, he formed the Scheduled Castes Federation (SCF). On the one hand, through SCF, he sought to intervene in the negotiations for India's freedom and wrest minimum share in power. On the other hand, the SCF was also visualized as a major opposition (of SCs) to the upper caste dominated Congress in the period immediately after independence. The failure of the SCF notwithstanding, it is important to note that Ambedkar saw the unfolding of a process of conflict between SCs and upper castes and also believed that a united all-India instrument of SCs can alone take on the task of contesting upper caste claims. Although he once again veered to a more broad based party in the form of Republican party of India (RPI), this party came to be identified as Dalit party and could not sustain the all-India claims which Ambedkar had always insisted upon. In the mid-eighties, Kanshi Ram formed the Bahujan Samaj Party. This party is seen primarily as the party of Dalits. The BSP has made its presence felt outside of UP, in Punjab, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, etc. and hopes to spread to Maharashtra and Karnataka also. In this sense, BSP manifests an all-India ambition and an awareness that upper caste domination has to be fought at the all-India level. Thus, initial lead by Ambedkar and more contemporarily the formation of BSP, challenge the caste-region nexus. They seek to problematize the caste question at the national level and force a solution through intervention in national politics. The approach of BSP is more instrumentalist than Ambedkar's approach. The former believes that only in a period of instability can Dalits force their entry into the network that controls national state apparatus. Therefore, unity of Dalits at all-India level and unity between Dalits and other disadvantaged castes are seen as strategies for shifting power away from Brahmanical (Manuvadi) sections of society towards

the Bahujan Samaj (the masses).

In the mid-sixties, Lohia argued that 'backward castes' constitute a majority and they should be given a fair share in power. This was reminiscent of the arguments of non-Brahman movement in the south and in Maharashtra. Although backward caste politics gradually emerged in UP and Bihar, it was only in the nineties that it became an issue at an all-India level. After the agitations against reservations in Gujarat and Bihar in the late seventies and early eighties, the agitation in many north Indian States on the issue of reservations for backward castes underlined the simmering conflict between what Lohia had described as forwards and backwards. Since the controversy over recommendations of the Mandal commission, sections of backward castes showed awareness about reservations and share in power. This resulted into large-scale mobilization of backward castes dramatically catapulting protagonists of backward castes into positions of power.

These developments had two effects. Firstly, the political discourse in the country as a whole, changed considerably. 'Social justice' became the central term around which this discourse was constructed. Such a construction facilitated the entry of caste question onto the all-India political scene rather than remaining State-specific. Backwardness of certain castes and consequent political disadvantage was no more seen in State-specific contexts; instead it was conceived as a phenomenon following from Brahmanical Hindutva and domination of national politics by upper castes. As such, taking over power at Delhi was seen as the remedy. Secondly, 'OBC' (as the backward castes came to be known) claims were quickly recognized by the various political parties. In particular, the BJP exhibited remarkable adaptability by introducing changes in the social composition of its key workers in Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and UP. Most other parties, too, underwent the process of 'Mandalization', the Congress probably being the slowest and most reluctant. However, even the Congress manifested awareness of this factor in Rajasthan, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, etc. In other words, OBC politics did not throw up any all-India instrument - any party claiming to be representative of OBC interests - instead; it forced certain changes in political parties and in politics in general. Social composition of many legislatures changed during the decade of 1990 to 2000. Reservations for OBCs became less controversial and also became part of the policies adopted by various parties. At least at the formal level, parties conceded the claims of OBCs in terms of share in power. Politics of backward

castes became an all-India phenomenon.

But did Dalit politics and OBC politics actually break the caste-region association?

In the case of Dalit politics, one can witness a steady fragmentation in the post-Ambedkar period. This fragmentation takes place at three levels: party factionalism, State-specific distinction and intra-Dalit fragmentation. The RPI could never project itself as a united party of Dalits. Various rival RPI parties emerged competing with each other. The absence of a single effective political instrument resulted into the fragmentation of Dalit votes also. On the other hand, concrete political issues faced by Dalits took a State specific turn. In Maharashtra, for instance, the issue of 'renaming' a university after Dr. Ambedkar remained an emotive issue for Dalits for over a decade (1979-1991). In States like Bihar, atrocities by various middle castes became the main concern of Dalits. In Tamil Nadu, frustration with Dravid politics, non-accommodation in the regional identity and conflicts with lower OBC (Thevars and Vanniyars) has been shaping Dalit politics at State level. The long history of Marxist-Leninist agrarian struggles in Andhra Pradesh has produced Dalit radicalism in that State. Such State-specific situations are inevitable because of differences of levels of Dalit consciousness and differences in the political economy at State level. This means that the arena of conflict and the response by Dalits varies from State to State. The main adversaries of Dalits are also not necessarily common across States. The voting preferences of Dalits are also likewise shaped at State level. Dalits of Rajasthan, Gujarat, MP, Maharashtra tend to vote in favor of Congress (including congress factions) Dalits of W. Bengal and Kerala prefer the left fronts in those States. In UP, the BSP has established itself as the main party of Dalits. In Bihar the BJP led alliance gets more Dalit votes than RJD of Laloo Yadav, probably because of the JD faction led by Ramvilas Paswan who allied with BJP. Similarly, in Karnataka also, the BJP alliance gets more Dalit votes than the Congress. (These observations are based on voter survey statistics. The surveys were nationally conducted by CSDS, Delhi in 1996, 1998 and 1999. Source: CSDS Data unit. The author has been associated with these surveys as part of research team and coordinator for Maharashtra.)

A further complication regarding the Dalit situation needs to be noted. While ideologues of Dalit politics prefer to project 'Dalit' as one social force, even at

State level, Dalits do not constitute a unified social force. For various reasons, the State-specific reasons not the least, internal stratification among Dalits of different States in a reality. In Maharashtra, the (ex) Mahar Dalits are seen as politically advanced, the Matang and Chamar Dalits resist the 'Mahar domination'. The Mala-Madiga dispute in Andhra Pradesh reached such a proportion that the State government decided to divide reservation between these two communities (Balgopal, 2000). The Dalits of Bihar other than the Paswans do not look upon Ramvilas Paswan as their leader (Louis, 2000: 980). In Karnataka, the large group of Madigas (who are more radical and left-oriented) demand that the reservations for Dalits should be split; giving a fixed quota to Holeyas and other Dalits which will allow Madigas to enjoy 90 percent of the reservations. (Assadi-Rajendran, 2000:1612) Further, in one instance of violent conflict between Holeyas (a Dalit community) and the dominant land owning groups, other Dalits did not come forward in support of the Holeyas (ibid: 1610). In UP, Jatavs are seen as politically powerful and getting all advantages. The Balmikis and Pasis feel deprived (Pradeep Kumar, 2001:3507) In West Bengal, the Namsudras and Rajbanshis have their 'pockets' in Faridpur, Khulna, Jessore and in north Bengal districts of Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, Dinajpur, respectively (Bandyopadhyay et al, 1994:51-75.) These two communities are seen as taking advantage of the reservations. All these details suggest the difficulty in organizing an all India Dalit politics, Only by intervening in the State level political process; Dalits stand any chance of affecting politics.

The case of OBCs is not very different. To begin with, the 'OBC' category, though a convenient short hand for a large mass, is not very definitive. It includes, formally, castes included by governments in the State lists of other backward classes. As such, the question, 'Who are the OBCs?' is itself a controversial one. Inclusion or exclusion in the OBC list is often a matter of politics for those castes who have attained enough political skills. It is a common experience that castes would press for inclusion in the list of OBCs – Jats in Rajasthan, Vokkaligas and Lingayats in Karnataka are two famous examples. This gives the mass called OBCs an amorphous character but moreover, produces tensions within the OBCs between more backward and less backward sections. Needless to say, all these factors develop in the backdrop of State specific situations. Except on general issue of reservations (for OBCs), all OBCs cannot be mobilized on an all-India level. Therefore, in the nineties, on the heels of Mandal controversy, many OBC organizations rallied

round the issues of reservations. However, when it came to organizing the nuts and bolts of OBC politics, the State specific situations asserted themselves. Thus, Janata Dal, which sought to bask in the glory of its pro-Mandal stand, witnessed internal bickering: the Orissa unit under Biju Patnaik distanced itself from the Mandal platform while the Karnataka unit under Hegde made its displeasure about 'Mandalization' known to national leadership. Both State units felt it unnecessary to have V.P. Singh as a campaigner.

Much mobilization on the Mandal platform took place in UP and Bihar. The politics of backward castes did not articulate in a substantial manner in Orissa and Andhra Pradesh. It did not have much relevance to Tamil Nadu since that State has had a long history of non-Brahman politics. In Karnataka, Congress under Devraj Urs had earlier mobilized the OBCs. Therefore, in the nineties, the Mandal platform did not evoke much enthusiasm there. In Maharashtra, the small OBC castes cannot match the strength of the Maratha-Kunbi caste cluster. This leaves the States of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar as the main theatre of OBC politics. In a sense, the so-called all-India claims on behalf of OBC politics are based on politics in north India where the caste issue has emerged onto the political scene rather late. Thus the phenomenon of OBC politics is much more relevant to UP and Bihar than to other States.

The internal stratification among 'OBCs' is another matter where State specific issues come to the forefront. As noted above, identification of certain castes as OBCs, is itself State specific. This is borne out by the case of Jats and more effectively, by the case of Lingayats of Karnataka. The State government went on appointing commission after commission in order to resolve the issue of whether Lingayats are backward or not (Natraj, 1990: 182-185). Even when the issue of identification is resolved, the question of share of different castes / caste groups continues to pose a challenge. In the field of reservations, most States seem to be veering to the strategy of classifying OBCs into two or three groups and assuring them separate 'quotas' of reserved seats. This classification, again, takes place in the context of State politics as has been exemplified by the decision of BJP-led UP government (Pradeep Kumar, 2001). Besides reservations, the question of 'share' involves claims over power. Various backward castes not only want to be 'included' in the apparatus of power, they hope to use power to their advantage and if possible, gain controlling share in power. Negatively put, backward castes push for exclusion of the upper castes so that complexion and content of power would change

substantively. These claims bring a double conflict into focus. On the one hand there is a conflict between the already established dominant caste and the aspiring caste / caste group. The constellations of these conflicts are again State specific because the ideological battle line of upper vs. backward translates differently in each state. In Maharashtra, for example, when Maratha domination is sought to be challenged, Kunbis, who are included in the list of OBCs, would pose a problem. The 'Maratha' caste cluster includes Kunbis. Thus, the battle is between the dominant caste and a section of OBCs vs. other OBCs. In Karnataka, the OBCs compete with Lingayats who themselves have been claiming inclusion in the list of OBCs. Political economy of each State produces patterns of dominance in accordance to which these battle lines get defined. The other conflict involves the aspiring castes themselves. When the Brahmanical castes were displaced, on the whole, only one caste (or mega-caste bloc) sought to replace them at the State level. With democratization penetrating larger sections in the contemporary period, a peculiar development has taken place. Just as the established dominant caste is about to be displaced, more than one claimants emerge to stake claims over power. This does not allow any single caste to stabilize in power. The recent history of UP and Bihar shows that among the OBCs, when one caste surges ahead 'on behalf' of OBCs, its representational claims are delegitimized by competitors from within the OBC fold. The Yadavs of UP and Bihar, who claimed in the nineties that they were leading the OBC revolution, have been challenged by non-Yadavs in both the States. Both these conflicts are reflected in the party preferences of OBCs. Backward castes in different States vote differently and within a State, they are often divided among different parties.

These claims and counterclaims have, in fact, further regionalized politics during the nineties. The unprecedented rise of regional parties in the nineties has been singularly unassociated with 'regionalism.' Caste occupied the center stage of political discourse and regional parties became the vehicle of this often incoherent and fractured discourse.

The discussion so far suggests that the two 'ruptures' have been in fact, ideological formulations, which seek to challenge upper and middle caste domination by unifying all lower castes. This formulation has not been able to assert itself as a concrete principle around which politics is organized. The objective caste situation varies from the presupposition that all 'lower' castes have same experience of political exclusion / marginalization. Also, the

subjective identification of various castes with politics of 'lower' castes varies both caste wise and State wise. As a result, instead of being able to rupture caste-region nexus, both Dalit politics and OBC politics have themselves yielded to this nexus and become regionalized.

IV

Our review of the operation of caste shows that State as a socio-linguistic region is a very convenient unit for caste to operate. Although many instances can be shown where small castes intervene in local political process, effective role of caste can be detected at the State level only. At the same time, castes cannot assume all-India identities and caste alliances cannot be easily forged at the all-India level. The political salience of caste increased only after castes transcended the 'local' identities and by forging new 'mega' caste identities became significant players at 'regional' level. However, this process probably stops at the regional level. Efforts of Kurmis to forge an alliance with Kanbis and Kunbis did not succeed. The Yadavs of UP and Bihar follow separate politics from each other. Even in the case of Jats, though the Jat Mahasabha exists, Jat politics in Punjab, Rajasthan, Haryana and western UP cannot be clubbed together. Thus, patterns of caste politics cannot be replicated in different regions nor can they become all-India in their reach or spread. In this sense, caste as a factor in modern politics, has become well entrenched or rooted at the regional / State level. As we shall see below, it retains its existence and relevance at local level while as the preceding section argued, existence of caste at all-India level or across States is more ideological than concrete.

The relevance of caste at the regional level flows from the following four factors:

a) Social relations of hierarchy are identifiable at the regional level, some times even sub-regional level. The fact that somebody is a Brahman simply places that person in an ambiguous position of superiority outside the region where that person belongs; but in the region where s/he belongs, a fine tuning will be made depending upon whether that person is a Chitpavan or not. To take a concrete example, being a 'Maratha' carries meaning only in the context of Maharashtrian society. The Marathas will be simultaneously seen as farmers, warriors, ex-land lords, etc. Rather than their ritual status either as Kshatriyas or

shudras, the historically constructed and materially experienced identity as 'powerful' will be quickly brought into focus. Regional associations also allow myths and prejudices / stereotypes operate as markers of ranking. These do not make sense outside of that region. Therefore for most castes, a hierarchical ranking is relevant only in specific region. Social relations based on these assumptions of hierarchy shape social attitudes about claims of power by different castes, giving way to competition or caste conflict. Thus, when non-Brahmans of Maharashtra were claiming separate representation in early twentieth century, the Brahmans derided them by asking what business ordinary agriculturists had in the legislature. All the same, Brahmans accepted - though unwillingly - Maratha entry into the political arena. In contrast, the claims of Dalits are not so silently accepted. Conflicts at the village level take place when Dalits in a village try to capture the village panchayat.

b) Historically, many middle castes and some times even lower castes seek upward mobility in their ritual / social status. Studies of caste point out that this happens when a caste achieves material strength. It must be noted that the process of gaining upward mobility is strictly region-based. It is not so merely because one particular caste in one region attains material strength. It is also because, the claims are made regionally and accepted / legitimized regionally. Such 'mobile' castes even change their caste names and this is accepted in the given region. Transformations from Kunbi to Maratha or Kanabi to Patidar are of course famous. Similarly, the mobility of Nadars (erstwhile shanars) of Tamil Nadu has been well documented (Hardgrave, 1969). Other examples include the awadhias, mahatos, jhanuks taking up Kurmi identity, gwalas, gopes, becoming Yadavs, Padayachis of Tamil Nadu becoming Vanniyar Kshatriyas, etc. (Pradeep Kumar, 2001: 3505-3506). Such mobility facilitates horizontal unity among castes. These developments are 'internal' matter of the concerned regions and often indicate the emergence of regionally powerful caste groups. Thus, changing 'definitions' of caste status give rise to patterns of competition in each region.

c) As noted earlier, in the course of competition among castes, regionalism or sub-regionalism can be very easily invoked. Regionalism serves either of the two purposes. It can project one caste/ caste group as inheritor, protector or representative of regional identity and pride. This way, an assault on that caste or caste group is easily seen / shown as assault on regional pride and self-respect. Implicitly, this also means that advancement of the interests of that

caste constitutes regional advancement and therefore, the demands of the caste group can be transformed into demands for regional development. To be sure, regionalist politics is shaped by many factors. What we are suggesting here is that once caste and region are identified, the interests of caste can be projected as regional interests. Alternately, regionalism can be invoked to construct a broad social alliance of different castes. In this second formulation, distinct caste identities are superseded by the ideology of regionalism. This often helps the already dominant castes.

d) Apart from the ideology of Regionalism, region can provide yet another advantage to the 'dominant' castes. Every dominant caste seeks to legitimize its dominant position on the basis of some ideological argument. Region as the social unit having a common cultural-linguistic context automatically forms a basis from which justification of domination can be adduced. Alternatively, arguments by the dominant caste make sense within the region. Thus, Jats' claim of being Kisans or Haryana Jats' claims for a martial tradition appeal the people in those respective regions rather than outside the regions. Similarly, Lingayats' claims of reformism in the orthodox Brahmanical Hinduism become relevant only in the Kannada speaking region. The ideology of 'Maharashtra Dharma' justifying the Brahman-Maratha leadership or the Bhadrakal ideology of elite domination also has similar region-specific appeals. Thus, region is the unit at which caste domination is sought to be legitimated. In the 'dominant caste thesis', the emphasis on numerical strength has deflected attention from both the contents of domination and the ways of attaining domination. Mere numerical strength would not lead to domination; claims of 'high' status usually accompany numerical strength. But a high ritual status is not the only 'ideological' component. 'Dominant' castes employ a more complex set of ideological arguments in order to win the 'dominant' position and we argue that region provides a helpful playground for working out these arguments.

It follows from this that any counter hegemonic assaults on the dominant caste would emanate from a similarly regionally situated arguments. In Tamil Nadu, the non-Brahman movement sought to delegitimize the Brahmans by suggesting that Brahmans are not true Dravids. In Maharashtra, too, Phuley's argument turns to this point when he argues that Brahmans-Aryabhats-came from outside-Iran. But more forcefully, Phuley brings in the imagery of non-Brahmans as 'natives' by virtue of their association with agricultural activity. In both, the claims of domination and challenges to them, are regionally situated,

region becomes a theatre of caste conflicts and configuring caste with political and economic dimensions.

Given the mutually reinforcing relationship of caste and region in contemporary Indian politics, it is argued here that challenges to concrete instances of caste domination (as distinct from notions of caste superiority) can meaningfully rise at the regional level. This would further strengthen the links between caste and region. These links produce region/State-specific configurations of caste, which fit the region's political economy. In the light of this argument certain trends may be noticed. These trends indicate the possible ways in which caste is likely to be constructed in Indian politics. In a way the following discussion engages caste itself as a 'region' or sphere.

In his introduction to 'Caste in Indian Politics', Rajni Kothari, long ago, pointed out the process of caste polarization (Kothari, 1970: 14). He further said, '... as one polarization is resolved in favor of one caste or caste category, new polarizations emerge...' (Ibid. 24). In many parts of the country, instead of neat polarization, 'more complicated and fragmented constellations of power' emerged (ibid). Thus, in the arena of caste politics, on the one hand new 'dominant castes' have emerged on the scene; at least many new 'ascendant' castes have come to the forefront (Kshatriyas in Gujarat or Khandayat in Orissa, etc). On the other hand new equations have emerged. The most noted one is the BJP led equation of upper castes and lower OBCs in Uttar Pradesh. In Maharashtra, the Charmakars and Matangs have been veering away from Congress and RPI, preferring the Shiv Sena and BJP. The Bahujan Mahasangh in Maharashtra has been trying to forge an alliance of Dalits and OBCs. These new equations do not necessarily follow a similar pattern across the States. But one common factor needs to be noted. In the emerging alliances traditional boundaries of ritual status are seldom followed. Alliances would be formed depending upon the perceptions about which caste / caste group monopolizes resources (including reservations). Beside, the choice of allies is often ad hoc, contingent upon who are perceived as adversaries. Underneath this contingent nature of alliances, there seems to be a consideration of two factors. One is consideration of material factors. Castes/caste groups tend to ally when their material interests do not clash - or in fact compliment - each other. The other consideration is share in power. When an alliance is likely to obtain some power for the caste (its elites), such an alliance becomes acceptable. Both these considerations go beyond simple alliances based on ritual status - alliances are

not made simply because castes occupy a common status as Shudras or Dalits.

Secondly, and partly following from the above, there is a disintegration of caste 'blocs' of Dalits and OBCs. We have discussed (in section III) this point. Not only such blocs do not materialize at all-India level, they seem to be disintegrating even at the level of States. The trend seems to be moving in the direction of 'ethnicization' of caste (Fuller, 1997:12-27). One factor contributing to this process seems to be the pressure of modern reformist discourse delegitimizing vertical structure of caste hierarchy. In this background, caste survives, if not as upper-lower then, as 'different' groups having different culture, ritual, 'histories', etc. Thus, caste becomes a 'community' (ibid: 13-14) But ethnicization of caste has other reasons as well. One is that small castes still find no place in calculations for electoral purposes. They may be relevant in constructing caste 'blocs' but do not receive the benefits either politically or materially. In such situation, organizing a single caste as one community becomes useful for gaining some access to power and resources. It is not necessary for us here to accept this logic but that seems to be a factor influencing the process of formation of single caste organizations. Such organizations function simultaneously as socio-cultural associations, pressure groups pursuing immediate material concerns of the caste and vehicles of caste elites for riding into the power structure (Palshikar, 2000a: 241-244). Although it is tempting to look at such caste organizations as a political resource, they imply localization of caste. Such localized ethnicization is bound to entrap castes both into local boundaries and issues of culture, identity, history rather than of material advance and structures of domination.

Thirdly, after reaching a high point through 'Mandlization', caste appears to be reaching a dead end in terms of its mobilizational potential. At one stage (in the fifties) caste interests were advanced through regional mobilization. In the next phase, (late seventies onwards) mobilization took place on the issues of reservations for OBCs (in Bihar, Gujarat) followed up by the Mandal issues and claims of the leaders of OBCs for power sharing. The nineties have witnessed acceptance of OBC reservations as State policy. During the same period, various parties incorporated OBCs resulting in the changed composition of representatives. These developments have meant that the space to be occupied by caste issue is bound to shrink except for further competition among OBCs for greater share in power. At the local level, provision enabling reservations to SCs, STs and OBCs in local government bodies, has ensured

that no effective mobilization can take place and no party will take interest in such mobilization. This does not imply that caste has lost relevance but that as an organizing principle of politics, caste may have reached its limits. Like region earlier, caste may have to search for catalysts that will revitalize the emotive and mobilization capacity of caste as a sphere of politics. In other words, the capacity of caste to construct new social forces and make politics revolve around them has become rather suspect.

This obviously raises doubt about the democratizing potential of caste as a sphere. The caste-region nexus meant that just as domination of a caste or caste group would get established, it will be challenged by rival groups or by newly emerging lower sections. However, if our assessment that caste alliances are ad hoc and less mobilizational is correct, then the arena of caste politics is likely to lose the potential to democratize Indian polity. Further, throughout the nineties, the emphasis seemed to be on the 'presence' (of Dalits, OBCs, etc.) in positions of power. The twin thrust of controlling state power and diverting it to an agenda favoring the 'Dalit-Bahujans' was lost in the nineties. Also, the need to construct a party as an instrument of Dalit-Bahujan interests was not felt because of the emphasis on 'presence'. These developments have deprived the arena of caste politics of democratizing possibilities. These issues obviously go much beyond the question of caste-region nexus. But they also point towards the challenges faced by a core sphere of Indian politics: the sphere of caste politics. The paper must stop at only pointing to the possible shrinkage of the space, which caste politics can occupy.

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