

POLITICS OF CASTEISM IN INDIA: A THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

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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.

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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.

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 inter-dining 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 nonexistent.

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 – Tiyysars 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 Mysor 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.

Regionally Dominant Caste Construction:

Localized concentration leads to localized domination and possibilities of some representation. One 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 up to 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-Maru, 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).

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 links 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.

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).

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.)

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- Brahmins of Maharashtra were claiming separate representation in early twentieth century, the Brahmins derided them by asking what business ordinary agriculturists had in the legislature. All the same, Brahmins 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 sometimes even lower castes see 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 any 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 selfrespect.

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 superceded 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 Brahman cal Hinduism become relevant only in the Kannada speaking region. The ideology of 'Maharashtra Dharma' justifying the Brahman-Maratha leadership or the Bhadrlok 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 argument. 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. If 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 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.

Doubt on 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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