

**The Analytics of Caste Power in Modern India**  
Discourse, Antagonism & Hegemony

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## **Abstract**

This essay argues for an analytics of caste power in modern India through an argument of the indeterminacy and fuzziness of its practice, symbolic forms, and modes of articulation in the discourses on caste offered by the synthetic theory of Louis Dumont; ethnographies of the dominant caste and king; and in the discourse of colonial governmentality. Secondly, this essay makes an intervention in the analysis of subalternity, showing that the lower-caste domain is constitutive of the hegemonic order of caste society by making present the negativity that inheres in the caste order and provides a ground for its criticism and transformation. In this regard, it describes the emergence of social antagonisms in the anti-caste polemics of modern non-Brahman ideologues, with analyses of the particular discourses of Mahatma Jotiba Phule and Kancha Ilaiah, arguing for an understanding of antagonisms as constitutive of the social in the plastic political world of modernity. Finally, this essay addresses the egalitarian imaginary of modern politics, its introduction in Indian society through nationalist politics, and the generalisation of this form of politics in the postcolonial era through the proliferation of caste antagonisms and the practices of hegemonic articulation in contemporary democracy. Throughout, there is a consistent theoretical concern with abandoning essentialist conceptions of the unitary subject agent and the sutured social totality, and with presenting the symbolic and discursive construction of subject

positions and social relations, affirming the open, politically negotiable character of the social.

## Preface & Acknowledgements

This essay marks a convergence between two rather distantly related concerns that have animated my thinking in the past year — the first with forms of caste domination in modern India, the awareness of which is somewhat bitterly inscribed in my own family’s history as South Indian Brahmins displaced from their places of origin. This subject formed the basis of my first serious readings of Indian history, on anti-Brahman movements in colonial Madras, several years ago, and also occupied me after I experienced the violent controversy over the desecration of a statue of Babasaheb Ambedkar in Bombay in July 1997, working as a journalist for the *Indian Express*. This essay develops themes I more recently explored in a paper submitted last winter to the Society and Culture of South Asia seminar in the SOAS Anthropology Department, titled “What is Caste Consciousness?”, for which David Mosse provided the initial readings and sponsored discussion. Saurabh Dube also engaged me in conversation on issues of caste, ethnography and historiography, at the Association of Asian Studies conference in Boston earlier this year.

The second, less personal, concern has been with subaltern studies, and various currents of poststructuralist thought and discourse analysis, and the question of articulating their many insights into political theory. In this regard I luckily stumbled upon the works of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe earlier in the summer, and this essay is largely an exercise in explaining, working over, and

hopefully making my own, the key concepts found in their work, particularly *Hegemony & Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. These concepts, addressed in separate chapters and sections here, are discourse — one of the most abused and carelessly thrown-about concepts in today's academic jargon — antagonism, and hegemony. If nothing else, my recent encounter with this body of work has been satisfying in further developing my own political and theoretical orientation, addressing contemporary issues of identity, culture, and democracy, and collecting together my readings in social theory and reflections on modern India in my work this year.

I want also to acknowledge and thank those people whose friendships have made this year intellectually vibrant for me: Omar Khan, Daud Ali, Charu Gupta, and Shruti Kapila — whose invitation to participate in the discussions for the upcoming SOAS workshop on Foucault and Colonial Governmentality stimulated my thinking on some issues addressed in this essay — and my supervisor Sudipta Kaviraj. Dr Kaviraj has been generous in sharing with me unpublished essays, guiding me through the thicket of social theory, and many of his ideas are peppered throughout this essay. Whether while lecturing, engaging in long, meandering conversations, or giving subjective advice and counsel, he has been a source of great encouragement and inspiration in the past year.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Axes of Dominance: Three Discourses on Caste

In order to arrive at an understanding of the discourses on caste and the analytics of caste power<sup>1</sup>, one must begin in the indeterminate, half-thought, and fuzzy world of practices. The enormity of the literature on caste relations drawn from disciplines ranging from sociology and anthropology to history and political studies point to the manifold nature of caste practices and the concepts implicit in these practices, in their fuzzy and often incoherent logic as well as in more conceptually explicit discursive renderings — most notoriously, the synthetic theory of caste offered up by Louis Dumont, which forms the starting point for any critical exploration. The very teemingness of caste practices<sup>2</sup>, their resistance to a consistent and final explanation of their logic, underscores the point I shall try to make throughout this essay. Every social practice, whether based in ritual norms reinforcing hierarchical relations; transactional strategies arranged around a central and dominant caste or king; governmental technologies and disciplinary power fabricating subjects; or productive relations and economic practices, are all *discursive* practices, constituted symbolically<sup>3</sup>, determining the subject positions and constructing an agent

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<sup>1</sup> The important distinction between “theories” and “analytics” of power is made by Michel Foucault in *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality, Volume I*, trans. Alan Sheridan, London: Random House, 1978, especially pp.81-91.

<sup>2</sup> I have borrowed this expression from Sudipta Kaviraj.

<sup>3</sup> See Louis Althusser, “On Contradiction and Overdetermination” in *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster, London: Verso Books, 1990; and Ernesto Laclau’s discussion of Althusser in Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony &*

which is the locus and inscription of many discourses, within an overall discursive formation. The caste subject is sutured at the intersection of these manifold — sometimes reinforcing, at other times antagonistic — discourses on caste, and inscribed within their relations. The caste subject cannot be reduced to a single, totalising discourse on caste and his positioning within — though it is the tendency for most observers to reduce the phenomenon of caste to this or that aspect of its discursive effects — explainable by a set of coherent principles or axioms. Moreover, no subject is constituted prior to his insertion in these discursive relations and his inscription as a subject through these discourses and their practices of reproduction of the relations of caste power. To assume so would be to establish a fixity and coherence to practices, or to privilege or encompass one discourse over others, when in actuality caste relations are marked by their profound contextuality, their fuzzy logics and multiple positionings of the caste subject. Caste relations are thus not reducible to ritual, prestatinal, governmental, or productive relations and the practices that maintain their discursive conditions of existence; caste practices are manifestly the work of the discursive structurations of caste in its many social forms, articulated in contingent historical circumstances.<sup>4</sup>

Jacques Derrida, in a well-noted essay, has elaborated a conception of discourse in which the absence of a transcendental signified, a centred structure, shows us the nonfixity, the constant sliding of difference and

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*Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, London: Verso Books, 1985, pp.97-105.

<sup>4</sup> See Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990; and Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall, London: University of California Press, 1984.



signification, of anything existing in society.<sup>5</sup> In his famous deconstruction of the metaphysics of presence, we move from a vision of the *positivity of the social*, to one of the *infinitude of the social*, towards a recognition of the boundless field of discursivity and signification. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe have persuasively argued this vision in their political theory, that “if the system is not closed, then the meaning of each element of the system and of the system as such is constantly threatened from the outside. Both relations and identity are always in a precarious state because there are no signified that can be ultimately fixed. In other words, relations never succeed in totally absorbing the identity of every element. Each element has a surplus of meaning because it cannot be located in a closed system of difference. And at the same time, no identity is definitively acquired. Such a situation, in which there is a constant movement of the elements to the system but no ultimate systems or elements — these are finally metaphoric expressions — a structure in which meaning is constantly negotiated and constructed, is [called] ‘discourse.’”<sup>6</sup> Discourse thus refers to any signifying relation, to the moment of nonfixity.

But more importantly for us, the recognition of the impossibility of fixing meaning or constituting the identity of the subject is accompanied by another movement, which consists in the attempt to effect this ultimately impossible closure. If the advantage of structuralism consisted in its move from the

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<sup>5</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” in *Writing & Difference*, trans. Alan Bass, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978, pp.278-293.

<sup>6</sup> Ernesto Laclau, “Metaphor and Social Antagonisms” in Lawrence Grossberg and Cary Nelson, eds. *Marxism & The Interpretation of Culture*, New York: Macmillan Education, 1986, p.254.

substantialist to the relational mode of thought, its drawback was in its constitution of this contextuality and unfixity into a totality, a closed system of differences, an intelligible object called “society.” The structure, as Derrida asserts, itself escapes structuration. “But if we maintain the relational character of any identity and if, at the same time, we renounce the *fixation* of those identities in a system, then the social must be identified with the infinite play of differences,” the inexhaustibly rich field of discursivity in which are played out attempts to “to limit that play, to domesticate infinitude, to embrace it within the finitude of an order. This order — or structure — no longer takes the form of an underlying essence of the social; rather, it is an attempt — by definition, unstable and precarious — to act over that ‘social’, to *hegemonize* it.”<sup>7</sup> In these hegemonic attempts to relatively fix the order of the social, to embrace differences as moments in a stable articulatory structure — and where the social always exceeds the limits of these attempts to fix its meaning — we find the modern form of politics, that of *articulations*.

We can refer to these relative fixations of the social, the contingent articulations of the impossible object of society, as hegemonic formations. Hegemonic formations are only validated by a constant struggle to reproduce their conditions of existence through various political, cultural, ideological and economic practices, in which are sustained their respective ensembles of “relatively stable social forms, the materialization of a social articulation in

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<sup>7</sup> Laclau, “The Impossibility of Society” in *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*, London: Verso Books, 1990, pp.90-91.

which different social relations react reciprocally either to provide each other with mutual conditions of existence, or at least to neutralize the potentially destructive effects of certain social relations on the reproduction of other social relations.”<sup>8</sup> Abandoning the mutually supporting conceptions of a sutured, intelligible social totality and fixed identity for the social agent or subject, a poststructuralist approach on subject positions and discourse offers us a significantly sophisticated way in which to understand the changing nature of caste relations, discourses and practices within the modern period, their transformations, disarticulations and rearticulations. In this chapter, we will explore these various attempts at discursive closure, the ideologies of caste in whose unifications and sutures of the social whole of “caste society” are presented various theories and practices of caste, articulated in different discursive arenas and contingent historical circumstances.

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<sup>8</sup> Chantal Mouffe, “Hegemony and New Political Subjects: Towards a New Concept of Democracy” in Grossberg and Nelson, *op.cit.*, p.90.

## **Louis Dumont's Synthetic Theory of Caste**

Any explanation of caste must begin with the work of Louis Dumont, whose monumental *Homo Hierarchicus* has set the tenor of the debate on caste, the axioms and principles underlying caste practices, and the discursive structure of ritual hierarchy in Indian society. Dumont's synthetic theory of caste is so well-known as to not require extensive summary here, though we must take note of the nodal points of his discourse on caste, one which continues to inform common-sense understandings of caste practices both within academic debates and contemporary middle-class discourse. And while itself a landmark which marks a point of departure for debate, Dumont's theory is not so novel, partaking of an understanding of caste whose history reaches back to Brahmanical ritual practices and textual knowledges, Orientalist constructions of traditional Indian or Hindu society, and postwar structuralist anthropology, in which intellectual context Dumont constructed his theories.<sup>9</sup>

Building on the work of C. Bouglé, who had identified the three essential features of the peculiarly Indian institution of the caste system as hereditary occupational specialisation, hierarchical ordering of privileges and social values, and the mutual repulsion of endogamous and separate caste groups,<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> See Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System & Its Implications* (completely revised English edition), trans. Mark Sainsbury, Louis Dumont, Basia Gulati. London: The University of Chicago Press, 1980. For good summaries of Dumont's theories and critiques, see T.N. Madan, "Louis Dumont and the Study of Society in India" in *Pathways: Approaches to the Study of Society in India*, Delhi: OUP India, 1995, pp.52-85; Declan Quigley, *The Interpretation of Caste*, Delhi: OUP India, 1993.

<sup>10</sup> C. Bouglé, "The Essence and Reality of the Caste System" in Dipankar Gupta, ed. *Social Stratification*, Delhi: OUP India, 1991, pp.64-73.

Dumont proceeded to elaborate an overarching structure to these three cardinal features, which he inscribes as the opposition between the pure and impure, “the principle by which the elements of a whole are ranked in relation to the whole, it being understood that in the majority of societies it is religion which provides the view of the whole, and that the ranking will thus be religious in nature.”<sup>11</sup> The religious ideology of dharma hierarchically structures the elements into a closed system of differences, hegemonically articulating a relationship between “that which encompasses and that which is encompassed.”<sup>12</sup> It is this cardinal axiom, the explanatory principle of ritual hierarchy, that unites the social totality of the caste system and on which Dumont erects his theoretical model of caste relations. He assures that ritual hierarchy precedes all other forms and relations of power through his totalising discourse on purity and pollution, in which is embraced and subsumed political and economic power, subordinate to the demands of ritual power or “status.” Through this peculiar sublation, which flies in the face of the actuality of caste practices and much ethnographic evidence, Dumont preserves the consistency of his model, reflected in the abstruse statement that “hierarchy cannot give a place to power as such, without contradicting its own principle. Therefore, it must give a place to power without saying so, and it is obliged to close its eyes to this point on pain of destroying itself.”<sup>13</sup> Facts to the contrary are of little relevance for his theory of values, merely epiphenomenal of the deep structure

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<sup>11</sup> Dumont, p.66 in Madan, op.cit.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*, p.xii and p.39.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, p.77.

of ritual hierarchy, which positions the caste subject along its structural axis of dominance. That Dumont valorises the classical position of the Brahman and his encompassing supremacy over the Kshatriya and his material values is shown in his dismissal of ethnographic evidence of political and economic dominance as “a misconception of Indian civilisation: it amounts to assimilating dharma to artha.”<sup>14</sup> The moral force of dharma is all-encompassing, hegemonising the order of caste society regardless of historical contingency, social antagonisms, or material factors.<sup>15</sup>

Thinking and writing in the wake of postcolonial criticism, it is easy for one to accept the many charges levelled at Dumont by anthropologists seeking a more accurate and sensitive portrayal of caste practices beyond his totalising discourse. Namely that Dumont’s larger project of a comparative anthropology of egalitarian and hierarchical values — structural principles strictly identified with Western and Indian societies respectively — is a notorious example of “the Orientalist tendency to make one place or society grist for the conceptual mill of another,” making caste the central problematic of Indian society and hierarchy its discursive trope, an effort which “represents the extremes of the human capability to fetishise inequality.”<sup>16</sup>

Arjun Appadurai’s critique of Dumont here is part of a larger argument against the holistic approach of structuralist anthropology, a “methodological

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<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*, p.308.

<sup>15</sup> See Gerald Berreman “The Brahmanical View of Caste” in Gupta, *op.cit.*, pp.84-92.

<sup>16</sup> Arjun Appadurai, “Is Homo Hierarchicus?” in *American Ethnologist*, vol.13, no.4, 1986, pp.745-761.

fetish” and the linchpin of a disciplinary perspective which subsumes the fragility and indeterminacy of social practices in coherent and logically explicable principles that order this ideologically self-sustaining whole, in which the parts are subordinated and subsumed. It is Dumont’s conception of the stability and systematicity of caste, in which the order of the system of differences is enclosed by the principle of hierarchy, that allows this discursive structure to maintain the whole of “caste society” as an intelligible object fully present to itself.

The difficulty with this methodological critique is that while one can readily accept the emphasis on the multifarious nature of practices, and the characterisation of Dumont’s synthetic theory as a totalising and holistic — unable to account for the play of difference and the antagonistic relations of any discursive formation — Appadurai’s discarding of foundational structures leaves us only an open-ended field of discursivity and play. Unable to account for the relative fixations of the social and the dimension of power, he is left to advocate a new sociological agenda in the investigation of indigenous conceptions of person and selfhood. This seems an unwelcome regression into substantial modes of thinking that structuralism banished with its emphasis on the relational character of meaning and identity. If we permit that the ritual practices of caste, their attendant norms of purity and pollution, and their hierarchical social order described by Dumont are not total, but only one, albeit hegemonic, attempt at the closure or suturing of the social totality, we can

avoid the essentialism of Dumont's structural method while retaining his theory's important characterisation of the Brahmanical discourse on caste, the hegemonic formation traditionally referred to as dharma. We thereby arrive at an understanding of the classical Hindu discourse on caste which unites "society" not on the level of self-consciousness of the pious Hindu or through ritual encompassment of economic or political power, but through the historical contingencies of power relations.<sup>17</sup>

### **The Discourse of the King & the Dominant Caste**

The most persuasive explanation of the systematicity and unity of caste relations, Dumont's synthetic theory has been objected to by a loose grouping of scholars inspired by the ethnosociology school of South Asian anthropology, describing another discourse on caste which displaces the figure of the Brahman and ritual hierarchy with the ritual centrality of the dominant caste, and organising principles of kingship and sovereignty. Addressing Dumont's cavalier attitude to evidence contrary to his theory with sensitive ethnographic portrayals of regional caste relations, and supplementing his narrowly religious focus with their attention to factors of power, the literature on caste, dominance and kingship goes beyond the Orientalist obsession with hierarchy

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<sup>17</sup> See Partha Chatterjee, "Caste and Subaltern Consciousness" in Ranajit Guha, ed. *Subaltern Studies VI: Writings on South Asian History & Society*, Delhi: OUP India, 1989, p.178-186.



and the thesis of encompassment which is based in the spurious disjunction between religious status and material power.

Following Ronald Inden and McKim Marriott's investigations of the logic and values of transactional strategies and intercaste relations<sup>18</sup>, and the literature on village productive organisation, the *jajmaani* system and the relations of service and exchange constitutive of local power relations, this discourse on caste draws our attention to practices of prestation and their significance in reproducing a social order which for Gloria Raheja is based on a model of centrality, not hierarchy.<sup>19</sup> Developing the ideas of A.M. Hocart<sup>20</sup> which placed the king and *jajmaan* at the centre of the productive and ritual life of the village community, Raheja has argued for the importance of the practices of gift-giving for the cultural construction of dominance, rejected by Dumont as not "a principle informing a system", but as a "non-ideological residuum."<sup>21</sup> Her ethnography of the dominant Gujar caste in Pahansu challenges the obsession with hierarchy and concerns of status and rank, and

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<sup>18</sup> See Ronald Inden and McKim Marriott, "Towards an Ethnosociology of South Asian Caste Systems" in Kenneth David, ed. *The New Wind: Changing Identities in South Asia*, The Hague: Mouton, 1977; and Marriott, ed. *India Through Hindu Categories*, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1990.

<sup>19</sup> See for instance William H. Wiser. *The Hindi Jajmani System: A Socio-Economic System Interrelating Members of a Hindu Village Community in Services* (third edition), New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1988; C.J. Fuller, "Misconceiving the Grain Heap: A Critique of the Concept of the 'Indian Jajmani System'" In Jonathan Parry and M. Bloch, *Money & The Morality of Exchange*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989; and P. Mayer, "Inventing Village Tradition: The Late Nineteenth Century Origins of the North Indian 'Jajmani System'" in *Modern Asian Studies* 27, pp.357-395. An excellent review of the literature assessed here is Gloria Goodwin Raheja, "India: Caste, Kingship, and Dominance Reconsidered" in *Annual Review of Anthropology*, no.17, 1988, pp.497-522.

<sup>20</sup> See A.M. Hocart. *Caste: A Comparative Study*, London: Methuen, 1950.

<sup>21</sup> Dumont, p.213; see also David Pocock, "Notes on Jajmani Relationships" in *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 6, 1962, pp.78-95.

the overarching opposition of pure and impure informing this discursive structure, arguing for a less functionalistic rendering of economic and political factors that themselves have ritual significance. “The proper presentation and acceptance of *daan*, which ensures the well-being of the entire community, is far more important than hierarchical considerations in structuring intercaste relationships in the village. Gujars give *daan* (the most important prestation in the framework of *jajmaani* relationships) to Brahmans and *kamins* alike, and it is this ritual centrality, as I will call it, and this similarity of function among Brahmans, Barbers, and Sweepers in particular that provides the conceptual focus of *jajmaani* relationships as they exist today in Pahansu.”<sup>22</sup>

Raheja’s model opposes what she claims are ritual norms of auspiciousness and inauspiciousness organised within strategies of transaction between castes, to the ritual norms of purity and pollution which reinforce a hierarchical ordering in Dumont’s theory. Underlying these norms are a concern for the preservation of auspiciousness by the dominant caste, a contextually and relationally invoked normative order that positions the caste subject along a different axis of dominance. In a similar vein, Nicholas Dirks has offered the model of kingship and royal honour as an explanatory principle of the regional caste order in his ethnohistory of colonial Pudukottai.<sup>23</sup> According to Dirks, Dumont’s theory of caste only elaborates a Orientalist view of caste, incestuous

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<sup>22</sup> Raheja, *The Poison in the Gift: Ritual, Prestation & the Dominant Caste in a North Indian Village*, London: University of Chicago Press, 1988, p.28.

<sup>23</sup> See Nicholas Dirks. *The Hollow Crown: Ethnohistory of an Indian Kingdom*, Bombay: Orient Longman in association with Cambridge University Press, 1989.

with the administrative strategies of the colonial state, which delinked religion from politics, separating the caste system from its imbrication with the social and political order articulated by royal authority, and the village as a unit isolated from larger regional and territorial networks of power. He argues that “the royal gift was basic to statecraft in all the kingdoms of the old order in southern India”, systems in which “honour was ultimately tied up with rank through interpenetrating forms of political and ritual action”<sup>24</sup> centred on the figure of the king and his symbols of sovereignty and hegemony. Colonialism “decapitated” the order of caste by removing the king, and froze caste into in the ethnographic reality that Dumont and others theorised into a timeless and rigid system.

Raheja has claimed, quite correctly, that “to reconceptualise the royal function is to reconceptualise caste itself.”<sup>25</sup> Indeed the work of Dirks and other such as Richard Burghart — whose ethnography of Nepal offers three conflicting hierarchical models with norms inscribing different orders of caste according to the respective superiority of the Brahman, the king and the ascetic<sup>26</sup> — has problematised our understanding of caste relations on the basis of the complexity of caste practices and the concepts implicit in them. While a welcome contribution to the analytics of caste power, the discourses of kingship

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<sup>24</sup> Dirks, “The Original Caste: Power, History and Hierarchy in South Asia” in *Contributions to Indian Sociology* vol.23, 1989, p.67.

<sup>25</sup> Raheja, “India: Caste, Kingship, and Dominance Reconsidered”, p.519.

<sup>26</sup> Richard Burghart, “Hierarchical Models of the Hindu Social System” in *Man* vol.13, no.4, 1978, pp.519-536.

and dominance as models of caste relations are further attempts at a systematic explanation of caste, their underlying axioms and practices of maintenance, offering another (though perhaps less totalising) synthetic theory. Saurabh Dube has asserted that both of these synthetic theories are “mirror images” in his recent ethnographic history of an Untouchable community, the Satnamis of Chhattisgarh: “an exclusive emphasis on the ritual hierarchy of purity and pollution as ultimately a matter of religious values, or a sole preoccupation with the ritual centrality of kingship, or, indeed, the judicious construction of a bipolar model where, depending on the context, the Brahman or the dominant caste can reign supreme — all efforts towards the construction of a synthetic theory of caste in South Asia — tend to obscure the intermeshing of different axes of dominance, elaborated over time, in the constitution of power in caste society.” Hence both discursive structures of ritual hierarchy, or of dominance or kingship, are attempts to hegemonise the unstable field of the social, transform its elements into fully constituted caste subjects, though neither can complete this suture of society or subject. In Dube’s ethnographic history, it is evident that the interplay and overlap of these discourses constituted caste relations in a context of power. “The ritual hierarchy of purity and pollution and the ritual centrality of kingship and dominant caste(s) were both symbolic schemes that elaborated modes of domination and power. Defined by meanings and practices that articulated and were articulated by relations of authority, they worked together to secure the subordination of the Satnamis and other

untouchable communities in Chhattisgarh. These symbolic schemes were further intertwined with the signs and metaphors of colonial power.”<sup>27</sup>

More than in competing principles which underlay the structures of a social totality called the “caste system”, what we instead require is a critique of synthetic theories of caste grounded in the practices whose logic these models seek to explain. While Raheja and Dirks have taken a step in this direction through their emphasis on practices of prestation and the contextual specificity of intercaste relations, they and others have also elaborated the concepts implicit in these practices into overall schemes. Such explanatory models “become false and dangerous”, according to Pierre Bourdieu, “as soon as they are treated as the real principles of practices, which amounts to simultaneously overestimating the logic of practices and losing sight of what constitutes their real principle,” that is, their “uncertainty and ‘fuzziness’ resulting from the fact that they have as their principle not a set of conscious, constant rules, but practical schemes, opaque to their possessors, varying according to the logic of the situation, the almost invariably partial viewpoint which it possesses.”<sup>28</sup> Real mastery of this logic is grounded neither in an explicitly theoretical perspective — the metaphysical self-presence of the social totality which facilitates analysis — nor entirely in the domain of practices, but in their contingent unity, achieved through a hegemonic articulation of the dominant dharma, the centrality of the dominant caste, or the sovereignty of the king. The explanation

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<sup>27</sup> Saurabh Dube, *Untouchable Pasts: Religion, Identity & Power among a Central Indian Community, 1780-1950*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998, pp.214-215. See also pp.9-11.

<sup>28</sup> Bourdieu, pp.11-12.

of this practical logic thereby serves as an implicit critique of the models and generative principles the structure the social whole, and the relations of force that preserve this hegemony, accounting for the dimension of power while also explaining the conceptual and symbolic schemes that inscribe the relations of caste domination.<sup>29</sup> But we are getting ahead of ourselves. We must now turn to an exploration of the most modern of the discourses on caste, formed in the wake of the colonial-national regime of disciplinary power.

### **Colonial Governmentality & the Disciplining of the Caste Subject**

By the late nineteenth century, well into the colonial period, the normative legitimacy of caste as an institution was eroded, or at least was inadmissible in elite discourse as a means of ordering social relations. This is not to say that its authority and practice did not persist, strategically recast in liberal or nationalist languages by elite groups. However, there was a significant rearticulation of the discourse on caste, achieved through the agency of the colonial state, Orientalist knowledges and administrative strategies. Most notable among these was the introduction of the decennial census in 1872 and the subsequent demarcation of a political field in which religious and caste communities became enumerable, bounded objects of statistical inquiry and governmental control by colonial ethnographer-administrators.<sup>30</sup> Establishing

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<sup>29</sup> See Chatterjee, 1989, pp.182-186.

<sup>30</sup> See Rashmi Pant, "The Cognitive Status of Caste in Colonial Ethnography: A Review of Some Literature in the North West Provinces and Oudh" in *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol.24, no.2, 1987, pp.145-

the discursive conditions for the “substantialisation” of caste as a modern political identity and as a relay for forms of disciplinary power, the census and similar technologies of population would continue into contemporary times as a valuable instrument of regulating the social body and disciplining the collective subject. Selecting certain aspects of the fluid, fuzzy forms of caste identity by which to classify the groups for administrative purposes, caste became both standardised and hierarchised under the colonial disciplinary regime, occurring “as a space in which certain attributes of the Indian people are made to configure in unities that must have been intelligible or useful to administrators in some way.”<sup>31</sup> Made subject to bureaucratic, cultural and natural manipulation through the ascription of social and cultural “values” to these corporate entities, volumes of data were produced on the “Castes and Tribes of India” in a demographic effort which also encompassed factors of territory, environment, and climate as subjects of governmental classification and control. “A definition of caste as itself ‘being’, bearing a substantial identity, was effected. Its substantiality was made up of a name, a number of members, physical characteristics, cultural practices, territory occupied, in short, by the

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162; Bernard S. Cohn, “The Census, Social Structure, and Objectification in South Asia” and “The Changing Status of a Depressed Caste” in *An Anthropologist Among the Historians*, Delhi: Oxford University Press India, 1996; Appadurai, “Number in the Colonial Imagination” in *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996, pp.114-135; and Sudipta Kaviraj, “The Imaginary Institution of India”, in Chatterjee and Gyanendra Pandey, eds., *Subaltern Studies VII*, Delhi: Oxford University Press India, 1992, pp.1-39. See also Michel Foucault, *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979; “Governmentality” in Graham Burcell, Colin Gordon and Peter Mills, eds. *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992, pp.87-104; “The Politics of Health in the Eighteenth Century”, in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews & Other Writings*, trans. Colin Gordon, et al.

<sup>31</sup> Pant, p.147.

sum of all the information about a social group, that had been collected over a number of surveys, and from a variety of respondents, whose social points of view were not necessarily common. The theoretical question of ‘what is caste’ was increasingly hidden by the substantiality of caste beings.”<sup>32</sup>

Under this modern regime, with its caste subject constituted through disciplinary processes, the conditions were established for the emergence of a subjective consciousness to social groupings unavailable to previous configurations of caste identity. Before, castes had been contextually and relationally structured along the axes of dominance described above, and were playfully recalcitrant to the taxonomic impulses of modern power, a situation best illustrated in the frustration of colonial ethnographers and statisticians in conducting consistent surveys of caste groups and their characteristics. This was, as Dumont has described in his elaboration of the process of substantialisation, “a fluid structural universe in which the emphasis is on interdependence and in which there is no privileged level, no firm units”<sup>33</sup>. Shifting from this relational, or context-sensitive universe of premodern identities to the substantial, contextually absolute forms of modern self-recognising identity and subjective consciousness, we can understand what middle-class common-sense now crudely refers to as “casteism”. The phenomenon of competition among castes for status and mobility within a narrowed and homogenised ranking system is a result of the new

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<sup>32</sup> *ibid.*, p.161.

<sup>33</sup> Dumont, p.222; see also A.K. Ramanujan. “Is There an Indian Way of Thinking? An Informal Essay” in *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, vol.23, no.1, 1989, pp.41-58.



governmentality, and the technological intensification of its administrative strategies in the nation-state's discourse of development, its increasing power to transform the social relations of its subject population in the postcolonial era. It is on the basis of this new substantialised conception of caste that, from the late nineteenth century onwards, we witness the formation of caste associations as movements for social reform and uplift, represented in the institutional avenues opened by the devolution of state power, interpenetrating the forms and symbols of governance with those of the community in the constitution of political modernity.<sup>34</sup>

These new inscriptions of the caste subject within the modern discursive formation would continue with greatly expanded scope into the present day conditions of popular democracy, a subject we will take up in the last chapter. We should attend here to how this simplification of the political field has activated long sedimented forms of political agency and proliferated social antagonisms, articulated on the terrain of the colonial and postcolonial state in the identities and symbols of communities. These attempts to hegemonise the agonistic field first demarcated by colonial power are a response to the modern political imaginary which effected "a displacement of the unifying force of dharma but replaced it with the unifying concept of 'nation' as concretely embodied in the state."<sup>35</sup> We have now set the stage for a further exploration of the analytics of caste power in the radicalisation of what the new disciplinary

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<sup>34</sup> Dube, pp.16-22

<sup>35</sup> Chatterjee, 1989, p.207

regime at various times identified as the Backward or Depressed Classes, Harijans or Scheduled Castes.

## CHAPTER TWO

### The Plasticity of the Social: Discourses of Lower-Caste Protest

In the previous section, we have developed an approach to the analytics of caste power which accounts for the one-sidedness of the various discourses on caste, seeing them as a cunning synthesis of the practices of caste and the objectivity of their structural norms, and presenting this unity not as the unfolding of the timeless principles of an eternal dharma, but as a hegemonic articulation composing its elements into an order of differences and identities. “A discursive structure is not a merely ‘cognitive’ or ‘contemplative’ entity; it is an *articulatory practice* which constitutes and organises social relations.”<sup>36</sup> We have also noted our concern with rendering the discursive relations of caste as power relations, emerging out of complex processes of relative autonomy and overdetermination in the suturing of the social whole, while grounding our critique of these synthetic theories of caste in the practices that secure the conditions of existence of the relations of caste power. A concern with domination, however, must also be informed by attention to resistance, for otherwise we could not speak of power as a *relation*. It is worthwhile to recall Partha Chatterjee’s response to one of the early debates of the Subaltern Studies collective, in which he argues for a theoretical assumption of subaltern autonomy and consciousness: “Domination must exist within a relation. The dominant groups, in the exercise of their domination, do not consume and

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<sup>36</sup> Laclau and Mouffe, p.96

destroy the dominated classes, for then there would be no *relation of power*, and hence no domination. For domination to exist, the subaltern classes must necessarily inhabit a domain that is their own, which gives them their identity, where they exist as a distinct social form, where they can resist at the same time as they are dominated. It is only then that one can talk about domination as a relation, as a process, as a movement that emerges out of an *opposition*.<sup>37</sup>

It is through such attention to an oppositional subaltern presence that we can embark on a critique of historical and contemporary forms of caste domination — ideologies foregrounded by the metaphysical unities of synthetic caste theories — thus arriving at a new critical analytics of caste. In this vein, Ranajit Guha, the founding editor of *Subaltern Studies*, has advised that an “emphasis on the subaltern functions both as a measure of objective assessment of the role of the elite and as a critique of elitist interpretations of that role.”<sup>38</sup> The theoretical assumption of an autonomous subaltern presence is required to subvert the totalising claims of ideologies of caste domination, and to theorise the resistances and antagonisms which disarticulate these closed systems and render visible their limits. Antagonisms mark the precarious and contingent character of these discourses, their symbolic orders, and the caste identities they inscribe, pointing to the surplus of meaning in the field of discursivity. By

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<sup>37</sup> Chatterjee, “Peasants, Politics and Historiography: A Response” in *Social Scientist* 120, vol. 11, no. 5, May 1983, p.60

<sup>38</sup> Ranajit Guha, “Preface” and “On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India”, *Subaltern Studies I: Writings on South Asian History & Society*, Delhi: Oxford University Press India, 1982; see also Rosalind O’Hanlon, “Recovering the Subject: *Subaltern Studies* & Histories of Resistance in Colonial South Asia” in *Modern Asian Studies* vol.22, no.1,1988, pp. 189-224.

affirming the play of difference in the symbolic order of the social, an emphasis on antagonisms in the subaltern domain deconstructs the dominant discourses on caste, and opens the way to the plastic, politically negotiable character of the social.

The advantage of this “affirmative deconstruction”<sup>39</sup> can be demonstrated with reference to a well-known debate in anthropology, on whether lower-caste groups live in harmony with the system of caste relations. Denying “the possible existence of a distinctive Untouchable subculture” opposed in principle to the hierarchical structures of ranking and ritual norms of the hegemonic dharma, Michael Moffatt’s ethnography of a Tamil village concluded that his Untouchable informants live in “complementarity” with the caste system in their relations with Hindu society, and “replicate” the principles of this system in their own social life, exterior to caste society. They are therefore in overall “consensus” with dharma, its social forms and practices, and have no autonomy, even within their separate domain, from the structuring of its principles and positionings of the caste subject.<sup>40</sup> Unable to incorporate the dimension of power, Moffatt’s analysis homogenises the social whole and can only conclude that subaltern groups “participate willingly in what might be called their own oppression.”<sup>41</sup> Noting that the idea of “replication” implies the

<sup>39</sup> This is how Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has characterised the strategic import of the Subaltern Studies project in Spivak, “Deconstructing Historiography” in Guha, ed. *Subaltern Studies IV: Writings on South Asian History & Society*, Delhi: Oxford University Press India, 1985.

<sup>40</sup> Michael Moffatt, “Untouchables and the Caste System: A Tamil Case Study” in *Contributions to Indian Sociology* vol.9, no.1, 1975, pp.111-122

<sup>41</sup> Moffat, *An Untouchable Community in South India: Structure & Consensus*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979, p.303, quoted in Robert Deliège, “Replication and Consensus: Untouchability, Caste and Ideology

exteriority of Untouchable groups to the caste order and their liminal presence, Robert Deliège and others have challenged the idea that the social forms of this subaltern domain are hierarchically organised and informed by ritual norms, as practised in the elite domain of caste society.<sup>42</sup> Though they might adopt the same forms and speak in the same idioms as the hegemonic discourse to explain their own distinct practices — apart from situations of displacement, in which the discursive conditions emerge for the expression of their own voices and ideas — this does not indicate a replication of dharmic principles. Rather, lower-caste discourses are a reworking of the floating signifiers drawn from the symbolic resources of various traditions within the matrix of subaltern identity, overturning and resignifying these elements for their own ends. The cognitive failure of Moffatt and other proponents of synthetic caste theories lie in their conclusion of a consensus on the acceptability of upper-caste domination from the structural replication of its principles which encompass all social practices, from top to bottom. Dube has similarly faulted the thesis of “sanskritisation”, conceived by M.N. Srinivas to explain instances of mobility within the caste order, for its lack of attention to these complex processes of symbolic construction which rework elements of the dominant order and situate them in a new context.<sup>43</sup> These distinctive symbolic forms and discursive practices

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in India” in *Man* 27, 1992, p.160

<sup>42</sup> Deliège, pp.160-172; see also David Mosse, “Idioms of Subordination and Styles of Protest among Christian and Hindu Harijan Castes in Tamil Nadu” in *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, vol.28, no.1, 1994, pp.67-106; and Ramesh Kamble, “Dalit Interpretations of Society” in *Seminar* 471, “Dalit: A Symposium on the Voices, Visions and Political Assertion of Dalits”, New Delhi: Seminar Publications, November 1998, pp.19-23.

<sup>43</sup> Dube, pp.11-12 on Moffatt, and p.128 on sanskritisation; see also M.N. Srinivas, “Mobility in the Caste System” and “The Cohesive Role of Sanskritization” in *Village, Caste, Gender & Method: Essays in Indian Social*

signify the limits of the hegemonic caste order as a closed system of differences, since lower-caste groups are not part of this society except as its Other, whose exteriority is a reproach to the objectivity of the cosmic order of dharma or kingship. “Antagonism, as a witness of the impossibility of a final suture, is the ‘experience’ of the limit of the social. Strictly speaking, antagonisms are not *internal* but *external* to society; or rather, they constitute the limits of society, the latter’s impossibility of fully constituting itself.”<sup>44</sup>

### **Constructing Antagonisms: Mahatma Jotiba Phule in Maharashtra**

While every discursive formation is penetrated by antagonisms and indeed cannot reproduce itself without such negativity — for every identity is constituted by the repression of its antagonistic exterior, and every contingent suture of the social is an order of domination — it would be hasty to conclude from this that subordination necessarily results in an open struggle against inequality or injustice. That would be too mechanical, ignoring the specificity of the political, as “antagonisms are always discursively constructed; the forms they take depend on existing discourses and their hegemonic role at a given moment.”<sup>45</sup> The new colonial regime of representation brought about such a situation which simplified the social space and opened the possibility for the

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*Anthropology*, Delhi: Oxford University Press India, 1998, pp.73-101.

<sup>44</sup> Laclau and Mouffe, p.125; see also Laclau, 1988

<sup>45</sup> Mouffe, p.95

displacement of previous caste formations by the modern politics of hegemonic articulation. We must now ask how this subversive presence is discursively constructed, and what distinct forms and practices this presence has taken, by exploring the emergence of antagonisms in the reactivation of the Other of caste society — the groups variously identified as Untouchables, Harijans, Backwards Classes, Scheduled Castes, or most recently and radically, Dalits — in the era of modern politics.<sup>46</sup>

In the last chapter we discussed the governmental technologies installed by the colonial administration in the nineteenth century — and continued and intensified under the regime of the nation-state — activating struggles for the recognition of identities and the distribution of the material and symbolic resources of the modern state. This intermeshing of the symbols of state and community in the political field opened by the percolation of colonial governmentality in the social body — the formation of the associational life of civil society and public representation, and hegemonic movements for education, social uplift and reform — have been well-documented in studies of nationalism and the genealogy of colonial modernity.<sup>47</sup> Recently this body of literature has been enriched by investigations of the movements that arose

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<sup>46</sup> See Gopal Guru, "The Politics of Naming" in *Seminar*, op.cit., pp.14-18; and Oliver Mendelsohn and Marika Vicziány, "Who are the Untouchables?" in *The Untouchables: Subordination, Poverty and the State in Modern India*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp.1-43.

<sup>47</sup> Most recently and elegantly in Chatterjee, *The Nation & Its Fragments: Colonial & Postcolonial Histories*, Delhi: Oxford University Press India, 1995; see also Gyanendra Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India*, Delhi: Oxford University Press India, 1992.



among lower-caste and other subaltern groups who did not participate in elite nationalist politics, or who resisted its hegemonic sway with their own initiatives that often were opposed to the grand historiographic narratives of anti-imperialism, articulating alternative imaginations around the symbols of nation and community.<sup>48</sup> It is to these discourses that we should attend in explaining antagonisms, which emerge in a situation of contradictory interpellation of subjects constructed as subordinate by one set of existing discourses, and equal by other discourses or practices.<sup>49</sup> Here we will analyse two responses to such displacement, one historical, the other contemporary: the discourse of the lower-caste reformer Mahatma Jotiba Phule in colonial Maharashtra, and the more recent articulation of Hindutva-Dalitbahujan antagonism in the polemical tracts of Kancha Ilaiah.<sup>50</sup>

But first a more general point about historical semantics. In the history of ideas or discourses — especially in colonial and postcolonial settings — we should avoid the tendency of grand narratives of modernisation or nation-making to presuppose the outcome of movements for political autonomy on the basis of some irresistible *telos* or the historical ontology of similar ideas in other

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<sup>48</sup> See for instance Ranajit Guha, Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*, Delhi: Oxford University Press India, 1983; Shahid Amin, "Gandhi as Mahatma: Gorakhpur District, Eastern UP, 1921-2" in *Subaltern Studies III: Writings on South Asian History & Society*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984; Pandey, "Peasant Revolt and Indian Nationalism: The Peasant Movement in Awadh, 1919-22" in Guha, ed., *Subaltern Studies I: Writings on South Asian History & Society*, Delhi: Oxford University Press India, 1982.

<sup>49</sup> Mouffe, p.94

<sup>50</sup> My choices of examples here are rather arbitrary and reflect what I was able to read in my research, though a more complete rendering of lower-caste discourse would also explore of the works of Ambedkar, Periyar, and the other diverse traditions of non-Brahman protest.

contexts — whether in dominant Eurocentric representations or their elite cousins in other regions.<sup>51</sup> If we accept that modern ideas of freedom are irreducibly polysemic, our attention should be drawn more to the modes of discursive articulation and the intellectual content of the anti-caste movements and their polemics, which articulated specific symbolic forms and practices in their construction of caste antagonisms, ideas of freedom, and fashionings of modernity.<sup>52</sup> This specificity is neglected in much of the literature on modern caste movements, stuck either in primordialist understandings of caste identity as the natural bearer of modern forms of associational public life<sup>53</sup>; economic portrayals of the role of improved communications and transportation, administrative centralisation and market forces in constituting supra-local communities; representations of the manipulation of elite groups and vested interests<sup>54</sup>; or state-centric narratives of the opportunities opened by colonial

<sup>51</sup> See Sudipta Kaviraj, "Filth and the Public Sphere: Concepts and Practices about Space in Calcutta" in *Public Culture* vol.10, no.1, 1997, pp.83-113; Kaviraj, "Ideas of Freedom in Modern India: A Preliminary Outline", unpublished paper; Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: The Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe, Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1985.

<sup>52</sup> See Dube, pp.21-22; and Rosalind O'Hanlon, *Caste, Conflict, and Ideology: Mahatma Jotirao Phule and Low Caste Protest in Nineteenth-Century Western India*, London: Cambridge University Press, 1985, pp.303-308; see also Gail Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution: Dr Ambedkar & the Dalit Movement in Colonial India*, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1994; Omvedt, *Dalit Visions: The Anti-Caste Movement the Construction of Indian Identity* (Tracts for the Times 8), Delhi: Orient Longman, 1995; Mark Juergensmeyer, *Religion as Social Vision: The Movement Against Untouchability in Twentieth Century Punjab*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982.

<sup>53</sup> See Robert Hardgrave, *The Nadars of Tamilnad: The Political Culture of a Community in Change*, London: University of California Press, 1969; Owen Lynch, *The Politics of Untouchability: Social Mobility & Social Change in a City of India*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1969.

<sup>54</sup> See David Washbrook, "The Development of Caste Organizations in South India, 1880-1925" in C. Baker and Washbrook, eds., *South India: Political Institutions & Political Change, 1880-1940*, Meerut: Macmillan, 1975, pp.150-203; and Nandini Gooptu, "Caste and Labour: Untouchable Social Movements in Urban Uttar Pradesh in the Early Twentieth Century" in Peter Robb, ed. *Dalit Movements & the Meanings of Labour in India*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993, pp.277-298.

administration.<sup>55</sup> Indeed caste movements are the outcome of the displacements effected by these processes, but to reduce their symbols and politics to larger movements of History or elite machinations, or dismiss them as merely superstructural, would be yet another clever way of silencing the subaltern voice.

Colonial Maharashtra provides us with an unique instance of how caste subordination became inextricably linked to modern ideas of freedom in India, as the questions of religion and reform became central to the new intellectual life of the Presidency towns.<sup>56</sup> Rosalind O'Hanlon's history of the lower-caste movements led by Mahatma Jotiba Phule provides an excellent study in the specificity of his ideas. Phule, one of the first non-Brahman radicals to lead a movement for uplift and reform, was a student educated in mission schools in colonial Bombay Presidency, and his intellectual formation was an admixture of missionary polemic against the depredations of traditional Hindu society, evangelical Christianity, free-thinking radical rationalism, and the subaltern culture of low-caste agricultural labour in rural Maharashtra. His education in liberal individualism and belief in natural rights, assimilated to the Orientalist critique of Hinduism, an egalitarian zeal, and belief in a world constructed according to the principles of scientific reason and not ascriptive values or

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<sup>55</sup> See Eugene Irschick, *Politics and Social Conflict in South India: The Non-Brahman Movement and Tamil Separatism, 1916-1929* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969.

<sup>56</sup> The intellectual history of modern India is unfortunately weighted towards eastern India and the debates of the bhadralok elites of Calcutta, where caste did not figure as centrally as in south India, or in western India and particularly Maharashtra. I am grateful to Sudipta Kaviraj for making this observation to me.

hierarchies, disarticulated the old order of things for Phule. His is a typical story of the displacements experienced by the first generation of nationalist reformers and intellectuals, who came to embrace a new conception of politics which presumes the plasticity of the social world<sup>57</sup>, making practices of hegemonic articulation — and not the laws of divine necessity — central to the constitution of the social and symbolic order. But his discursive response was truly original, presaging the type of skill in the deployment of symbols and the construction of modern identities out of the patchwork of subaltern traditions in Maharashtra, only later evinced in Mahatma Gandhi's political practice. Phule's discourse combined anti-clerical polemic, radical rationalism, and the symbolic resources of popular culture, in an overall construction of the antagonism between the Brahmans and what he variously identified as Shudhras, Ati-Shudhras, or Marathas. Phule wielded the symbol "Maratha" as a polemical instrument in his discourse, articulating this popular identity with the notions of "rulership, identification with the land, and martial prowess" as the authentic, original Maharasthrian culture — whose meaning and identities had been hegemonised by Brahmanical discourse under Peshwa and colonial rule, but must be wrested back to the cause of its historical victims, the lower-caste communities.<sup>58</sup>

His ballads, plays, and social critique invoked many powerful cultural symbols, such as the popular deity Khandoba and Chhatrapati Shivaji — the

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<sup>57</sup> I have borrowed this expression from Sudipta Kaviraj.

<sup>58</sup> O'Hanlon, *op.cit.*, p.48

prized sign of Maratha rulership and independence, around whom were articulated various elite and subaltern historic narratives and constructions of the modern political community, most notably by Lokmanya Tilak. In his construction of the lower-caste community as historically oppressed by Brahmans from the time of the Aryan conquest to the present-day situation, in which Brahmans had nearly monopolised the opportunities offered by colonial administration, he telescoped his contemporary critique into the past. Phule's subaltern history was constructed as essentially a narrative of Brahmanical tyranny, preparing an historical agency for the lower-caste groups through a revised reading of Hindu scripture and epics which inscribed their presence as a peaceable and egalitarian kingdom of Bali Raja, conquered and hierarchised by the "tribes of Parashuram" — the Aryan Brahmans — and incorporated into their hegemony through the imposition of caste hierarchy and ritual ordination as untouchable and exterior.<sup>59</sup>

Phule's interventions in the politics of identity and history point to a salient feature of his discourse — which it shares with later articulations of lower-caste collective identity such as the discourses of Periyar Ramaswamy and Babasaheb Ambedkar<sup>60</sup>, and diverges from elite nationalisms — in its depiction of the

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<sup>59</sup> On myths of origin and the historical self-representations of Dalits, see Robert Miller, "Button, Button...Great Tradition, Little Tradition, Whose Tradition?" in *Anthropological Quarterly* no.39, pp.26-42; M.S.S. Pandian, "Stepping Outside History? New Dalit Writings from Tamil Nadu" in Chatterjee, 1998, pp.292-309; and Dube, "A Contested Past: The Myths of Satnampanth", pp.115-144, "Contending Histories: Old Stories and New Pasts", pp.183-206 in Dube, op.cit.

<sup>60</sup> On Periyar, see Irschick, op.cit; on Ambedkar, see Eleanor Zelliot. *From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar Movement*, Delhi: Manohar Publishers & Distributors, 1996; Dhananjay Keer, *Dr Ambedkar: Life & Mission*, Bombay: Popula Prakashan; and Omvedt, 1994 and 1995, op.cit.

colonial encounter as a providential intervention, offering salvation to the lower-castes from the clutches of Brahmanism. It is, according to Phule, the duty of the Marathas, the original inhabitants of the land and the sons of Maharashtra, to throw off the chains of Brahmanical Hindu discourse and the cultural and material subordination it constructs for its outcasted subjects, organise their numbers and ally themselves to the colonial state, which had fallen into the hands of the upper-castes, thus reinforcing their supremacy. To this end Phule founded the Satyashodhak Samaj in 1873, to challenge the claims of the Brahman-dominated Pune Sarvajanik Sabha — a nationalist civic association organised to press for reforms and represent the subject population to the colonial power — to speak for the nation. The uncompromising radicalism of Phule and other more moderate lower-caste organisations were united in their hostility to the domination of upper-castes in their campaigns for education, administrative recruitment, the reform of social practices, and the conduct of rituals without Brahman priests. This anti-Brahmanism — forging the diverse lower-caste groups into a chain of equivalence which negated the objective representative claims of Brahman and elite nationalist groups — gave their discourse a coherence and force which continued in their unanimous opposition to the elite politics of Indian National Congress in the 1880s. By interpellating the collective lower-caste subject in a manner contradictory to the constructions of traditionally dominant discourses — Brahmanical, kingly, and the more recent colonial discourse which only

rearticulated the old order in new language — the new political imaginary enlarged the scope for antagonisms and their increasing proliferation in nationalist politics of identification, organisation and mobilisation of the masses. In Phule’s discourse, the community was constructed as “Marathas” or “Ati-Shudhras”, floating signifiers made meaningful by their discursive relation to the other elements of western Indian popular culture, rigidly opposed to the Aryan Brahmins, and articulated in the new arenas of representation. By giving a discursive presence to antagonism, Phule and other colonial non-Brahmin ideologues affirmed antagonisms as constitutive of the social.

### **Hindus & Dalitbahujans in Kancha Ilaiah’s Discourse**

A more contemporary example of anti-Brahmin discourse provides a useful parallel to these early stirrings of protest. In a recent essay, Andre Béteille has identified an ambivalence towards the contemporary legitimacy of caste, asserting that “the social world created by education, occupation and income, the office, the firm, the law court and the laboratory cuts across the social world of caste”<sup>61</sup> and undermines its traditional moral basis and normative order. Béteille, in this essay and elsewhere, has claimed that the new professional and occupational structures of modern India have overtaken caste

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<sup>61</sup> Andre Béteille, “Caste in Contemporary India” in C.J. Fuller, ed. *Caste Today*, Delhi: Oxford University Press India, 1997, p.174

as the prime indicators of status differentiation. In this new legal and political order of things, the reproduction of inequality is no longer sited in caste, but in the typically bourgeois institutions of the nuclear family, the school and in service professions common to most modern societies.<sup>62</sup> Caste, if it has any importance, is only gaining ground at the ballot box, and class has overtaken it as the primary analytical category of unequal social relations. This is perhaps a common view, echoed in the drawing-rooms and privileged fortresses of middle-class India, and reflected in such paradoxical statements as “caste as an institution is in decline, but casteism is on the rise.”<sup>63</sup> But surely if, because of bourgeois life and its productive apparatuses, the individual had been as fully emancipated from caste as Bêteille describes, how do we account for the overwhelming preponderance of upper-caste persons in the new professions, and in the middle-class in general? And how does one explain the subliminal Brahmanism of this hegemony, recognisable in the elite disgust with the rush for reservations and the resources of modern state power, or the scorn heaped and the new lower-caste politicians like Laloo Prasad Yadav? Could his reduction of caste as secondary to the status distinctions of modern professional life be a convenient guise for a rearticulated, bourgeois Brahmanism? While Bêteille argues against the “unreflective switch from the literal use of the term

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<sup>62</sup> Bêteille, “The reproduction of inequality: occupation, caste and family” in *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, vol.25, no.1, 1991, pp.3-28. This argument of this essay seems particularly short-sighted, coming as it did in the immediate aftermath of the controversy over the implementation of the Mandal Report by the V.P Singh Government in 1990.

<sup>63</sup> This was the brilliant remark of one of my family friends, responding to my description of an earlier essay on Dalit consciousness that I was researching and writing in Bombay in December 1998.



caste to its metaphorical use”<sup>64</sup> in explaining inequalities, our above discussion of the indeterminacy and fuzziness of caste practices and their subtle invasion of rigid logical models and structures forces us to ask how caste has been metaphorically refigured, in the supposedly liberal languages and practices of the contemporary discursive formation.

One furious answer to these and other questions, arising from the new lower-caste political ferment, and written by one of its organic intellectuals, comes to us in Kancha Ilaiah’s manifesto *Why I am Not a Hindu*, a small volume published in 1996 in the wake of the Mandal and Ayodhya controversies.<sup>65</sup> A text of lucid anger, it shows us the modern caste structure of Indian society and narrates a new historiography of Dalitbahujan identity; criticises the modern political economy of caste-ised capitalism in India; and describes a new model for understanding the future shape of Indian modernity in Dalit, as opposed to Hindu, terms. Constructing an antagonism through the history of colonial and independent India based in the simple opposition between “Dalitbahujans” and “Hindus” (read Brahmans, Baniyas, their Kshatriya guardians and co-opted, “Brahmanised” neo-Kshatriya groups from the lower caste “creamy layers”), Ilaiah’s tract holds forth on the revolutionary possibilities of modern life if given proper symbolic and political content — that is, “Dalitised” and not “Hinduised”.

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<sup>64</sup> Bêteille, “Caste in Contemporary India”, op.cit.

<sup>65</sup> See Kancha Ilaiah, *Why I Am Not a Hindu*, Calcutta: Samya, 1996; “Productive Labour, Consciousness and History: The Dalitbahujan Alternative” in Dipesh Chakrabarty and Shahid Amin, eds. *Subaltern Studies IX*, Delhi: Oxford University Press India, 1996, pp.165-200; “Towards the Dalitization of the Nation” in Chatterjee, 1998, pp.267-291.

In the late nineteenth century the discursive conditions were set for the later contests around the categories of religious and caste communities, represented in colonial characterisations as the primordial essence of Indian society and later becoming the symbols of political struggle and hegemonic articulation in elite nationalist culture and politics.<sup>66</sup> Ilaiah's opening salvo thus sets forth to disaggregate that most monolithic of categories, the social totality called Hinduism. Beginning with a narrative of his childhood formation and the distinctiveness of the Dalitbahujan domain and mode of production — egalitarian and democratic, not patriarchal and hierarchical; based in productive work and not in speculative, leisured activities — from that of upper-caste Hindus, Ilaiah unmask a Dalitbahujan Other to the collective Hindu Self. Thus Dalitbahujan social practices are opposed in every way to Hindus and Hinduism: in rituals of marriage and death, food consumption and sexual mores; in their economy, markets, and productive relations; their life philosophies and deities which are based in secular, rational beliefs and egalitarian values. Ilaiah claims for Dalitbahujans a truly revolutionary, collective subjectivity, arrogating to them the secular, materialist and rational values contradicted by the religious dogmas and lazy spiritualism of Hindus. Echoing Karl Marx's description of the contradictions of bourgeois society, and the absolute antagonisms portrayed in earlier non-Brahman discourses, Ilaiah narrates the confrontation between the two opposed caste groupings that have

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<sup>66</sup> See David Ludden, "Orientalist Empiricism: Transformations of Colonial Knowledge" in Carol Breckenridge and Peter van der Veer, eds. *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament: Perspectives on South Asia*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993, pp.250-278.

assumed centre-stage in contemporary Indian politics. “Whichever institutions the Dalitbahujans entered, either through reservation...or through other ways, such institutions became the centres of conflict between Hindu irrationality and Dalitbahujan rationality, Hindu closedness and Dalitbahujan openness, Hindu silent violence and Dalitbahujan loud self-defence. Out of this very conflict there seems to emerge a new hope of a rational future for this country.”<sup>67</sup>

In contrast to Bêteille’s stand that modern bourgeois life and its social and economic practices no longer support the reproduction of caste relations, Ilaiah proposes a theory of the “caste-isation of capital”, claiming that “Hinduism runs as a thread in a garland in shaping all institutions as upper-caste preserves”, and that caste is now configured through the symbols and discursive forms of modern political economy.<sup>68</sup> In the cities, Brahman-Baniya-neo-Kshatriya capital has monopolised the managerial posts and upper ranks of the new professions and through such “manipulative hierarchisation” have retained their hegemony. As a result, “there is a caste alienation of workers from capital”, and the upper-caste manager, though dressed in suit and trousers, struts about his factory much like his priestly cousins of previous generations. Banks, government offices, and universities, the hallmarks of modern associational life, are similarly sites for construction of the new Hindu hegemony. “Indian capitalism has been converted into caste capitalism. We had hoped that the decolonized Indian capital would make caste dysfunctional by

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<sup>67</sup> Ilaiah, *Why I Am Not a Hindu*, p.65

<sup>68</sup> *ibid.*, p.48

giving us equal rights in politics, in economic institutions, cultural institutions, educational [and] administrative institutions. But that has not happened. The migration from rural areas to urban centres has not changed our socio-economic relations as *caste discrimination has been built into every structure.*<sup>69</sup>

The forces of urban Brahmanism, in collusion with colonial and postcolonial capital, can only admit those who bow to the dictates of Hindu hegemony, as the Dalit Hanuman bowed before Rama at his court in ancient times. Additionally, Ilaiah analyses the other major deities of the pantheon of modern Hinduism to highlight their caste bases, and their roles in articulating the unequal social relations of caste-ised capitalism.<sup>70</sup>

Similar to Phule's historiography of Brahman-Maratha struggle, Ilaiah describes a unique historiography based in the Hindu-Dalitbahun caste antagonism. "The Brahmanical bhadrakok and the colonial rulers both wished the preserve the status quo" and collaborated in the construction of postcolonial upper-caste hegemony after Independence.<sup>71</sup> "In the name of Congress democratic rule, the Hindus came to power...Parliamentary democracy in essence became Brahmanical democracy. With no time the colonial bureaucracy was transformed into Brahmanical bureaucracy. The same Brahmanical forces transformed themselves to suit an emerging global capitalism...Their anglicization did not undermine their casteized

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<sup>69</sup> *ibid.*, p.68 (emphasis mine)

<sup>70</sup> *ibid.*, "Hindu Gods and Us: Our Goddesses and Hindus"

<sup>71</sup> *ibid.*, pp.48-49

authoritarianism.”<sup>72</sup> Within the discursive formation of postcolonial, nationalist India, Dalitbahujans have only found voice through the interventions of Ambedkar and Periyar, whose liberal and constitutionalist methods were often in conflict with that of mainstream, upper-caste nationalism and its hegemonic dictates while in pursuit of enfranchisement and emancipation for Dalits and non-Brahmans.<sup>73</sup>

Reading Ilaiah, one is taken aback by the simplicity of the Hindu-Dalitbahujan antagonism, and some have found it too simple, too Manichean, unfair to the subtleties of what is after all a complex unity of social forces in contemporary India.<sup>74</sup> One might fault his objectivity in the valorising the struggle of Dalits and Bahujans against Brahmanism, Hinduism, and elite nationalism, or his essentialising portrayal of the autonomous Dalitbahujan collective subject. But to do so would miss the strategic point about antagonisms and their discursive representation, which undermine any notions of objectivity and leave us in the politically animated world of battling perspectives and a constant war of position. We must identify the autonomy of subaltern groups in order to introduce a *relation of power* and understand

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<sup>72</sup> *ibid.*, p.51

<sup>73</sup> The hegemonic interpretation of the freedom struggle as an anti-imperialist crusade thus makes it possible for a leading ideologue and journalist — now a sitting Rajya Sabha MP, nominated by the BJP — to attempt to delegitimise B.R. Ambedkar as “anti-national”, on the basis of his collusion with British authorities in order to further the cause of Dalit enfranchisement, to the opposition of the Brahman-Baniya dominated Indian “National” Congress. See Arun Shourie, *Worshipping False Gods: Ambedkar, and the Facts Which Have Been Erased*, New Delhi: ASA Publications, 1997; and a rejoinder by Ilaiah, “Upholders of Untouchability” in *The Modern Rationalist*, Chennai: The Periyar Self-Respect Propaganda Institution, September 1997.

<sup>74</sup> See Susie Tharu, “A Critique of Hindutva-Brahmanism” in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Mumbai: Sameeksha Trust, 27 July 1996, pp.2019–2021

contemporary India as an elite, upper-caste hegemony, and not a closed system of differences, and also in order to provide a domain for resistance and transformation of the modern plastic world.

The demarcation of the political and social field by the colonial-national disciplinary regime, and the displacements effected by the equivalential logic of the modern political imaginary, provided the discursive surface of inscription for the increasing demands for recognition that we recognise in the cacophony of modern political life in India, its agonistic politics of identities. We shall further explore these demands in the last chapter on democracy. What we should note here is that antagonisms — the discursive response to displacement — are inextricably linked to modern politics. Antagonisms are constitutive of any attempt to fix or close the social within the infinite field of discursivity. Their eruption signifies the instability of any ensemble of differential positions in a system of social relations, and gesture towards the constitutive outside of that discourse, and the infinite play of signification that allows for the plasticity of the social world. Modern anti-Brahman discourses forged a chain of equivalence between the diverse excluded elements of the lower-caste, Dalitbahujan traditions, subverting the dominant Brahmanical-colonial-national order of things and dissolving the differential ensemble of its elements into a simple conspiracy of the upper-castes.<sup>75</sup> This process indicates that all social and discursive identities are constituted through the reciprocal support and

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<sup>75</sup> See O'Hanlon, pp.206-208, 274-277

subversion of the logics of difference and equivalence in a discursive formation, the tension between the positivity and negativity of the social. The temporary fixing of the relation between these differential and equivalential logics, the predominance of one over the other, is concretely articulated as moments of a hegemonic discourse — here, the elite ideologies of nationalism, Brahmanism and Hinduism, and their modern combinations.<sup>76</sup> No identities are ever fully present, no discourse can ever effect an ultimate closure on the social, and both are always-already negated by antagonism in their constitution.<sup>77</sup> Thus we can begin to think elite histories of nationalism — where the national-colonial antagonism has been valorised to the exclusion of other struggles whose discourses did not assume the hegemonic ascendancy of the anti-imperialist agenda — as a precarious and contingent representation, and break down their arrogant historical and cognitive claims. Seen from the subaltern perspective of those excluded from this grand narrative of a nation-in-the-making, and from within discourses which constructed caste antagonisms as central to the ideas of modernity and freedom, we can begin to theorise the limits of nationalist discourse and see its languages as expressing a refigured idiom of caste domination.

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<sup>76</sup> See Jacob Torfing, *New Theories of Discourse: Laclau, Mouffe and Zizek*, London: Blackwell Publishers, 1999, pp.120–131

<sup>77</sup> See Slavoj Zizek, “Beyond Discourse Analysis” in Laclau, 1990, pp.249–260.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Democracy & the Politics of Hegemonic Articulation

*It is impossible to believe that equality will not eventually find its way into the political world, as it does everywhere else. To conceive of men remaining forever unequal upon a single point, yet equal upon all others, is impossible; they must come in the end to be equal upon all.*

Alexis de Tocqueville<sup>78</sup>

In the previous two chapters we examined the concepts of discourse and antagonism, deconstructing the structural and synthetic theories of caste and their metaphysical self-presence, seeing how caste practices invade and decentre them, and the subaltern, lower-caste presence at their limits signifies the surplus of meaning of the social and its plasticity. For without such unfixity of the social and its subject positions, we would not have any space for political struggle or articulation. We also drew attention to the agonistic play of interiority and exteriority, positivity and negativity, limitation and openness in the social — a dialectic whose tension marks the specificity of the political conjuncture, and relatively fixes the social through discursive practices of articulation of social relations. From the first stirrings of nationalist culture and politics in the late nineteenth century, we see the beginnings of the hegemonic form of politics which would expand and generalise into present-day Indian democracy, as articulatory practices determine the principle of social division

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<sup>78</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans., eds., Henry Reeve, Francis Bowen and Phillips Bradley (volume I), New York: Vintage Books, 1990, p.53



and the formation of a collective will.<sup>79</sup> In this peculiarly modern situation of symbolic condensation,<sup>80</sup> where the signified of such symbols as “freedom” and the “nation” overflow their signifiers, the egalitarian political imaginary effects displacements through its subversive logic of equivalence which renders signs as floating — made meaningful only by their discursive articulation to other signs — and thus open to the processes of political struggle and ideological creation, as we have seen in non-Brahman discourses.

This logic of equivalence thus becomes, in modern times, the instrument for the production of the social, shattering the unity of society and subject by multiplying subject positions, turning discursive limits into the frontiers for political struggle, and interrupting discourses of subordination — such as those of caste hierarchy — by constructing them as antagonistic. The egalitarian imaginary of modern political life, operating as a discursive surface of inscription for these demands for equality, ineluctably spread to all spheres of social life, resulting in what Laclau and Mouffe have termed “equivalential displacement”, and what de Tocqueville described as an “equalization of conditions.” This accounts for the revolutionary character of the democratic imaginary, its principle of radical equality — once the egalitarian imaginary becomes a part of the common sense of a social formation through its lodging in the hegemonic discourse, its logic spreads inexorably and irreversibly, heralding the plasticity and transformability of all the spheres of a hierarchised

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<sup>79</sup> See Laclau and Mouffe, p.151

<sup>80</sup> See Laclau, 1988, p.250

society.<sup>81</sup> Throughout the years of nationalist struggle and well into the postcolonial era, we have witnessed the irradiation of this logic and the proliferation of points of rupture in discourses opposing caste exploitation, in a profusion of demands for freedom and autonomy which exceed the particular form of nationhood achieved on that memorable stroke of midnight.

The single most important fact of India's political history as an independent nation-state has been its institution of this democratic revolution in the 1950 Constitution, a document presided over by the figure of B.R. Ambedkar, and informed by a legacy of nationalist mass politics stretching over half a century of the freedom struggle. But when the forefathers of the Indian Republic committed themselves to a broad-ranging programme of economic, political and social transformation informed by an encounter with the West, and a long struggle to retool and domesticate the modernity into which India had been forcibly recruited by colonialism, they could never have imagined what shape this democratic revolution would take. The political culture formed in the crucible of contest against the British Empire was consolidated into a modern state which, like modern disciplinary regimes almost everywhere, promised emancipation for all its citizens in accordance with a bourgeois philosophy of liberalism, fashioned in colonial civil society by reformist elites. This discourse of equal rights and citizenship — the domain of sovereignty — however, was

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<sup>81</sup> See Laclau and Mouffe, pp.149-170; Laclau, "New Reflections on the Revolution of our Time" in *New Reflections on the Revolution of our Time*, London: Verso Books, 1990, pp.3-85; on de Tocqueville in India, see Kaviraj, "The Culture of Representative Democracy" in Chatterjee, 1998, pp.147-175.

proclaimed along with a commitment of the new state to the advancement of its lower-caste and disprivileged groups, cultures brought under the sway of the modern power less by the processes of filtration and discipline of the elite institutions of nationalist civil society, than through the technologies of population, and rationalised by the postcolonial regime through the ideology of development. Enumerated in the Constitution as the objects of state policy and targets of modern power, as “Backward Classes” and “Scheduled Castes and Tribes”, this discourse of ameliorative legislation, statistical inquiry, indicators of relative backwardness in productive, educational, and cultural criteria, was more empirical than normative — a domain of governmentality.<sup>82</sup>

The imbrication of these two domains, and the explosive results of their appropriation of and negotiation with each other has shaken Indian society to its roots in the past three decades, and proliferated in demands of every sort by the country’s diverse population for recognition and equality. And this enfranchisement of lower-caste, politically excluded and culturally peripheral communities has brought with it attacks on the ideological unity of the nationalism through which the state was captured from its colonial masters — attacks on a selfish elite’s spurious claim to speak for radically divided numbers anxious for emancipation.<sup>83</sup> Thus with the twilight of the idols of the strand of

<sup>82</sup> See Chatterjee, “Introduction” in Chatterjee, 1998, pp.1-20. This argument is developed further in Chatterjee’s contribution to the forthcoming volume on civil society edited by Kaviraj and Sunil Khilnani, which Sudipta Kaviraj kindly shared with me.

<sup>83</sup> See Rajni Kothari, “The Democratic Experiment” in Chatterjee, 1998, pp.23-36; “Masses, Classes and the State” in Ponna Wigaraj, ed. *New Social Movements in the South*, London: Zed Books, 1993, pp.59-75; and Gail Omvedt, “Peasants, Dalits and Women: Democracy and India’s New Social Movements” in *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, vol.24, no.1, 1994, pp.34-48.

nationalism that guided the first half-century of Independence, we are now witnessing the emergence of new symbols of freedom — the decline of the traditions of Gandhi and Nehru and the more frequent and assertive invocations of Ambedkar.<sup>84</sup>

The polemical — some would say revolutionary — potential of the new emphasis on caste since such landmark events as the implementation of Mandal Commission Report, the experiments in governance by the “Third Force” in 1990 and 1996–8, and other instances of the rise of Dalitbahujan and other subaltern forces into public life, offers a glimmer of the future of Indian democracy.<sup>85</sup> Dalit movements are often characterised — in yet another subliminal working of elite Brahmanism — as simply moves to secure proportional representation in jobs and education in the name of historical reparation, or positive discrimination. In this connection, the movements are tarred as violating “meritocracy”, as destructive of institutional integrity and efficiency by the smug and secure upper-caste bourgeoisie.<sup>86</sup> Ilaiah has wryly

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<sup>84</sup> Upendra Baxi, “Emancipation as Justice: Babasaheb Ambedkar’s Legacy and Vision” in Baxi and Bhikhu Parekh, eds. *Crisis and Change in Contemporary India*, New Delhi: Sage Publications in association with The Book Review Literary Trust, 1995, pp.122–149.

<sup>85</sup> See Rajni Kothari, “Rise of the Dalits and the Renewed Debate on Caste” and Yogendra Yadav, “Reconfigurations in Indian Politics: State Assembly Elections 1993–1995” and Rajni Kothari, in Chatterjee, ed. *State & Politics in India*, Delhi: Oxford University Press India, 1996, pp.439–458 and pp.177–207, respectively; Christophe Jaffrelot, “The Sangh Parivar Between Sanskritization and Social Engineering” in Thomas Blom Hansen and Jaffrelot, eds. *The BJP & The Compulsions of Politics in India*, Delhi: Oxford University Press India, 1998, pp.22–71.

<sup>86</sup> For a post-Mandal critique of the notion of meritocracy with ample statistical evidence to prove the caste-inflected nature of such language, see Mihir Desai, “A Justification of Reservations and Affirmative Action for Backward Castes in India” in *South Asia Bulletin*, vol.11, nos.1–2, 1991, pp.110–130

commented that “the discourse has been changed from dharma to merit. The state and the civil society are moulded to suit ‘merit’ in modern times just as it was moulded to suit dharma in ancient times.”<sup>87</sup> D.R. Nagaraj asks us to consider “the noble and ignoble faces of [Dalit] movements. Usually, one is moved by the lofty philosophical talk against caste, and is equally horrified by the mean and ignoble faces of the movement...the beauty and the horror stem from the source of defying the caste system. The caste system in India is not only a structure of cultural values but also a certain pattern of inequitable distribution of power and wealth of different kinds along the lines of caste hierarchy. One who appreciates the spiritual beauty of the revolt against the caste system should also accept the horror of the materialist demands.”<sup>88</sup>

Middle-class discourse — that is, the hegemonic discursive formation of upper-caste India — seems unable to understand the two faces of the movement as a singular force for change: “the transcendental aspect of fighting the caste-ego and the mundane reality of fighting for real opportunities in education and jobs.”<sup>89</sup> But in view of the growing importance of bourgeois life in contemporary India — especially in the retreat of the state from the commanding heights of the national economy and other processes of economic liberalisation — critical reflection on the rearticulation of inequalities is in order. Social theorising about caste has too often been restricted to the

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<sup>87</sup> Ilaiah, p.106

<sup>88</sup> D.R. Nagaraj, *The Flaming Feet: A Study of the Dalit Movement in India*, Bangalore: The South Forum Press and Institute for Cultural Research and Action, 1993.p.7

<sup>89</sup> *ibid.*

reflections of anthropologists and sociologists — where in many cases it has been classicised and fetishised to great extremes — while other disciplines have remained insulated from its insights, dismissing them either as either superstructural or epiphenomenal<sup>90</sup>, thus remaining blind to the way in which caste has structured our ways of knowing and relating to the modern world. Hence the recent academic efforts to use the anthropologists' tools in the writing of history and other forms of social inquiry, and the new preoccupation with culture and symbolic forms and practices in the study of Indian societies.<sup>91</sup> However, coeval with the post-Marxist preoccupation with culture has been a new turn towards non- or anti-foundational ways of studying societies which seek to discard the essentialist or holistic methods of structuralism and classical Marxism.<sup>92</sup> Anti-Brahman discourses show us that essentialising analyses have a strategic value as hegemonic articulations, and we can see how the recent obsession with poststructuralism by elite intellectuals could be yet another rearguard move to deny the legitimacy of foundational categories — here, caste practices in their myriad idioms and symbolic forms — in the study of Indian society. Indeed we must simultaneously be on guard against the essentialising

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<sup>90</sup> See Chatterjee, 1989, pp.174-178; and Aswini K. Ray. "Towards the Concept of a Post-Colonial Democracy: A Schematic View" in Zoya Hasan, S.N. Jha, Rasheeduddin Khan, eds. *The State, Political Processes and Identity: Reflections on Modern India*, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1989, pp.127-149.

<sup>91</sup> Sudipta Kaviraj has made this point in endorsement of the Subaltern Studies project in Kaviraj, "The Imaginary Institution of India", op.cit.

<sup>92</sup> See Appadurai, op.cit.; Gyan Prakash, "Writing Post-Orientalist Histories of the Third World: Perspectives from Indian Historiography" in *Comparative Studies in Society and History* vol.32, no.2, April 1990, pp. 383-408; and a rejoinder to Prakash, Rosalind O'Hanlon and David Washbrook, "After Orientalism: Culture, Criticism, and Politics in the Third World" in *Comparative Studies in Society and History* vol.34, no.1, January 1992, pp. 141-167

aspects of ideologies while maintaining due respect to their emancipatory potential; we must question the objectivity of grand narratives while heeding their ability to bring communities together in the fight against injustice, and understand how they point to a greater freedom — the ever-expanding hegemony of democratic politics.

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