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Subaltern alternatives on caste, class and ethnicity

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The challenges to the dominant hegemony in this land have focused on the key issues of equity and justice that underlie the quest for identity and dignity. Setting these in a more integrated and holistic context we focus on three crucial issues: caste and hierarchy, caste and class, and caste and ethnicity. We conclude with some more important leads which could be further pursued: a sub-altern hermeneutic, a new understanding of the fragmentation and shift in our present electoral politics, and the dilemmas of intervention by the state, social movements and market mechanisms. In sum, subaltern alternatives do represent a horizon of revolt and revolution, which can fuse with others to construct the identities and ideologies for a brave new world.

I
Introducing the problematique

To speak of a crisis in the context of contemporary Indian society has become a tired, unhelpful cliché. We have been in a continuing and deepening multi-dimensional crisis for so long that we might easily slip into mistaking it for a normal situation. This will not, however, help us cope with a reality that is impinging on us with ever increasing urgency. Today there is no gainsaying the failure of the social revolution envisaged by our nationalist movement, at least for the subalterns, for whom we have not yet kept our tryst with destiny.

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The 'truth' we seek here is not just the object of a subtle or ephemeral intellectual quest, nor merely a pragmatic technique, but rather truth as a reality, a *satya*, authenticated by its humanist and liberative potential. Indeed, 'Gandhi, like Marx, felt that the criteria of truth lies in the meeting of human needs;' it is not defined *a priori* by 'an accepted philosophy of history' but 'as the relative truth of a situation [that] emerged in social struggle' (Toscano 1979 : 75).

The mainstream hegemony has not as yet been able to completely pre-empt the 'imagined communities' (Anderson 1983) or the 'invented traditions' (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) of minorities and marginal groups for, corresponding to the 'culture of oppression', there has also been a 'culture of protest' that evolved its own methods of resistance. Not that 'the weapons of the weak' (Scott 1990) were ever completely adequate to the violence of the strong, but they did keep alive a memory and a voice that had the potential of evolving into an alternative ideology and a new identity.

There has been a long history of contestation between these protagonists. The dominant hegemony has not gone unchallenged, though it is still not deposed. Rather, with its 'Hindu method of tribal absorption' (Bose 1994: 168–81) and its 'Brahminical way of acculturation' (ibid.: 179) it shows an uncanny capacity to contain and marginalise any alien influence or threat to its survival within 'a Hindu rate of growth'! Eventually, however, the continuing crisis will threaten to engulf the hegemonic elites and vested interests, sharpening and bringing into the open their contradictions and conflicts with subordinate groups. Then again, the latter could very well be co-opted once more, their concerns subverted in the rush and tumble of a perverse and petty politics.

II
Contextualising the issues

To our mind, the most pervasive inspiration motivating the subaltern movements is the quest for equity and justice, and the most crucial themes underpinning this quest are those of identity and dignity. The first is a matter of positive self-image, the second of positive self-worth. Both these are socio-culturally constructed, but they are also politico-economically founded and intrinsically interconnected. It would be unhelpfully reductionist to exclude one or the other. Traditional anthropology might overemphasise the socio-cultural dimension, classical Marxism the political-economic one.

Our discussion on the subaltern alternatives presented here points to the need for an integrated and holistic approach, if these movements are to successfully confront the issues they attempt to address. Thus, in our concrete context, when justice for an individual is affirmed, but human dignity for the group denied by ingrained cultural prejudice, then the 'construction of equality through difference has an unmistakable brahmanic accent, not least in its paternalistic monopolisation of the true Hindu culture' (Hansen 1996: 612). When equity is promised, but the collective identity of a people homogenised by a militant and chauvinist nationalism, then the social identity of the weaker sections is easily suppressed in a dangerously fascist manner. In other words, the subaltern quest for equity and justice must not sacrifice social identity or human dignity, lest it be coopted and subverted. This is precisely what the dominant groups attempt in order to retain their hegemony.

The issues we now discuss will, we hope, make for a deeper and broader understanding of this quest and a more comprehensive and convincing grasp of the related imperatives of subaltern dignity and identity. All these issues impinge on each other crucially and critically; they are centred here on caste and the interrelationships between caste, class and ethnicity.

III
Caste and hierarchy

The subaltern caste-based movements have attempted to mobilise caste to overcome caste hierarchy. However, over and again the fault-lines in the system, between the forward and backward castes, the Kshatriya and others, the *savarna* and the *avarna*, have willy-nilly facilitated a co-option of these non-Brahmin movements and their eventual sanskritisation. Caste divisions also divide caste group interests, which will differ according to their varying locations in the hierarchical system. 'Thus just as the caste system made it difficult to achieve "unity at the bottom" in the form of large-scale peasant revolts, so it made unity from the top almost equally impossible' (Omvedt 1976: 43).

While an upper caste movement to reinforce dominance can be more consistent in its caste-based ideology, within non-dominant castes, not all have the same interests in overturning the hierarchical system. Thus, caste mobilisation at the middle levels has often improved these castes' own position in the system and changed that of others. It has not, however, undermined the system itself. Sanskritisation, or other versions of this process of upward mobility, does precisely this.

The fractures in the non-Brahmin movement and its inability to forge a unity across various subcastes raise the strategic issue of how effectively caste can be used against itself; 'was it possible, in terms of caste identity, to transcend caste?' (Omvedt 1976: 134). This is inextricably bound up with the more analytical question of how to comprehend caste: whether as hierarchy, or in terms of its material history of production relations, or as an aggregate of discrete groups. In other words, what is the relationship of the socio-cultural dimension to the political-economic one with regard to caste?

Caste has traditionally been conceptualised in terms of hierarchy. The classic statement on this has been Dumont's *Homo hierarchius* (1972) which, in spite of much discussion and critique, still remains a key reference point in the discourse on caste. Counterposing the 'homo equalis' of the Christian West to the 'homo hierarchicus' of Hindu India as two ideal types, Dumont proposed a grand design of a single purity–pollution hierarchical continuum, encompassing the whole spectrum of castes from the highest Brahmin to the lowest untouchable, wherein 'the elements of the whole are ranked in relation to the whole' (Dumont 1972: 104).

Much painstaking and thorough fieldwork has gone into establishing the inadequacy of a single, uni-dimensional continuum on which castes can be located. Rather, we are compelled to concede multiple hierarchies (Gupta 1991b: 12) in three different zones of operations: (*a*) the zone of the village community and its directly connected part of the countryside; (*b*) the zone of the recognised cultural or linguistic region; and (*c*) the zone of the whole civilisation (Marriott 1991: 54). Only in the tangle of such overlapping, multi-dimensional social spaces can the complexity and diversity of inter-caste relationships be contained and comprehended.

Thus, 'purity and pollution are not universally employed to effect the diacritical marks separating different *jatis*' (Gupta 1991c: 139). In actuality, 'any notion of hierarchy is arbitrary and is valid from the perspective of certain individual castes' (ibid.: 130). What is critically significant is that these jatis do not exist in isolation. For, 'a *jati* is able to sustain itself only in the presence of other *jatis* in a clearly delimited referential context which gives meaning to symbols,' and indeed to 'hypersymbolism' as well (ibid.: 141). Moreover, these symbols and the associated rituals and beliefs are historical accretions and therefore fairly widespread across different castes.

IV
Caste and ideology

If multiple hierarchies are accepted, then it is theoretically possible to have 'as many hierarchies as there are *jatis*. But very often in practice we find one hierarchical order more in effect,' obviously because it is 'an expression of politico-economic power' which lends efficacy to caste ideology as 'a believed in and conscious structure', that translates 'pure values into empirical categories in order to provide definite guidelines on the ground' (Gupta 1991c: 138, 136, 120). Certainly the four varnas impose an overarching pattern on inter-caste relationships, sustained by the ideology of the *varnashrama dharma*, which condenses the diverse ideologies of numerous subcastes into some recognisable order around widely accepted points of reference.

Subaltern contestations of caste ideology have persistently critiqued and challenged this overarching hierarchy of Brahminism, but not always successfully. Indeed, 'their failure to construct an alternative universal to the dominant dharma', as Partha Chatterjee perceptively proposes, 'is thus the mark of their subalternity; the object of our project must be to develop, make explicit and unify these fragmented oppositions in order to construct a critique of Indian tradition which is at the same time a critique of bourgeois equality' (Chatterjee 1989: 185).

Besides 'endogamy on the basis of putative biological differences' and 'the ritualization of multiple social practices' (Gupta 1991c: 137), Gupta stresses two crucial characteristics of the caste system: hierarchy and hypersymbolism (ibid.: 138). Some would go even further, proposing that 'the difference in *jatis* is not ... one of degree but of quality' (Das 1982: 69). To view caste 'as discrete classes or groups' (Gupta 1991c: 121), aggregated into 'a social differentiation that separates without implying inequality' (Gupta 1991b: 9), would, however, suggest a vertical segmentation rather than a horizonal stratification. This certainly is very far from a down–up view of caste. It comes awkwardly close to the kind of justifications made of caste as a harmonious social order, by reputed elite scholars, in their elaboration of *The Hindu view of life* (Radhakrishnan 1960: 104–5). 'Separate but equal' is conceptually speaking not contradictory, but all too often it has been used to legitimise various forms of 'institutional inequality'.

This may not be the intention of the purveyors of such a point of view, but their kind of understanding leans dangerously towards, and lends support to, upper caste/class, prejudice. It is true that 'difference'

logically does not imply 'inequality', when the differences are in qualities that are unrelated and therefore non-comparable. Such qualities and differences can be classified; they cannot be graded. In practice, however, differences, qualitative or otherwise, are not unrelated. Certainly this is the case with jatis: once they are valued, or rather evaluated, with regard to some common reference, the differences inevitably become graded, whether they are based on cultural and/or aesthetic preference, or political and/or economic power.

Groups like jatis, interacting and accessing similar resources in the same social system, will eventually be graded on a continuum, if these are differences of degree; if they are differences in kind, they would be ranked on an ordinal, even if discontinuous, scale. Thus, whether from within or without, by consensus or by coercion, inequality will be introduced.

If these rankings are value-premised and based on ascribed status, that is precisely what we are conceptualising as hierarchy. If, on the contrary, the gradation and consequent inequality arise from, and are enforced by, political and/or economic power, then we have another kind of institutionalised inequality or social stratification. Thus even a vertically segmented society begins to be differentiated by horizontal strata in terms of unequal status. Therefore, conceptualising difference without inequality in our comprehension of caste would seem to betray a theoretical understanding that is innocent of the empirical reality, certainly the one experienced by the subalterns. For in the cruel world of caste, 'differences' are often constructed on apparently 'indifferent' qualities precisely to enforce inequality!

Hence, even though there may be no 'true hierarchy' in Dumont's sense, the principle of hierarchy in our society cannot be easily discounted. Certainly it has not been effectively displaced, though it has been overlaid by class stratification, in which the political economy and relationships of production are primary. We shall return to class later, but for now we underline how hierarchy implies an ordering of castes into super- and sub-ordinate groups on the basis of internalised values, socialised through symbols and rituals—not necessarily religious ones—rather than being externally imposed through political or economic power. It is a system in which 'rights and obligations are inextricably tied' (Bose 1994: 187).

Of course, these values and the consequent caste status have been contested and challenged, especially in times of change when the political economy has had a more significant role to play. However, the final

legitimation of a hierarchy, multiple or otherwise, comes from the value system. Thus, Dumont rightly observes: 'man does not only think, he acts. He has not only ideas, but values. To adopt a value is to introduce hierarchy' (Dumont 1972: 54). The wider and deeper the acceptance of these values, the more stable and binding will this legitimation be. In other words, the principle of hierarchy gives priority to the socio-cultural dimension in a society, and this will be reflected in the extent to which hierarchy is operative there.

V
Ambiguities and mobilisation

This is why the articulation and use of symbols are so crucial to caste mobilisation. However, when such symbolic articulation becomes exclusive to a group, it may gain in intensity but lose in broad-based appeal. This is precisely the problem with caste-based ideologies—their ambiguity in being both specific and general in their appeal (Gore 1993: 60).

While caste is indeed an effective group mobiliser, it has inherent constraints in broadening into a movement to include other similarly disadvantaged and oppressed castes with common interests. There are real limitations in deepening the issues to be addressed, issues that are common to, and affect similarly placed groups across the system. Acceptance of hierarchy as an organising principle in a society may in fact allow contestation between groups for higher status within the system. However, it disallows a challenge to depose the system itself. This is what sanskritisation is all about. Whether it is further refined as 'Kshatriyaisation', or even broadened to 'Hinduisation', in the final analysis such processes promote positional change in the caste hierarchy but do not pose an institutional challenge to the system itself.

However, the hierarchical principle still allows a multiplicity of hierarchies in practice. This precipitates internal contradictions in a caste system, which in turn makes contestation possible, since the various statuses of groups in these multiple hierarchies will not be congruent. Whether or not such contestation will precipitate conflict and change will depend on the resources of the group and the concrete context of their life-situation. It does, however, point to the very real possibilities of endogenous change from within the system. If a single hierarchical structure were accepted by all the players in the system, then only

exogenous change would be possible. Dumont's 'substantialisation' of caste (Dumont 1972: 269) and Srinivas's sanskritisation (Srinivas 1962: 8) both envisage such change from without. Since they do not allow for multiple contending hierarchies, this does not add up to change of the hierarchical structure itself.

However, it is precisely in the interstices of these multiple hierarchies, and in the contradictions they imply, that endogenous change of the system becomes possible. Multiple hierarchies allow groups to challenge the superiority claimed by other groups from a non-inferiorised and more equal position within their own system, even though these others may in turn contest this claim. It is precisely such contestation that could potentially result in structural change in the system of prescriptive statuses and exclusive identities. Whether this will finally undermine the hierarchical structure would depend on whether these multiple hierarchies neutralise each other, or whether one dominant hierarchy will eventually establish its hegemony over the rest.

Our aim is here to show how the initial advantage of mobilising a group on the basis of caste can eventually become a constraint in using such caste consciousness against the caste system itself. In spite of its multiple hierarchies and internal contradictions, the hold of the caste ideology on our society should not be underestimated. Indeed, it has permeated non-Hindu communities as well, whether Christian, Muslim or Sikh (Singh 1977). Reform movements have often been absorbed, and reformist sects in Hinduism, like the Lingayats, have often ended up as other castes.

The essential ambiguities of caste mobilisation cannot be wished away. They must be faced. For today, as in the past, in our society, 'turn in any direction you like, caste is the monster that crosses your path. You cannot have political reform, you cannot have economic reform, unless you kill this monster' (Ambedkar 1968: 37). And yet,

> caste can be oppressive but it can also provide a basis for struggle against oppression. It can at once be a traditionaliser and a moderniser. It has the potentiality of being a two-pronged catalyst: as a purveyor of collective identity and annihilator of the same hierarchical order from where collective identity is drawn (Kothari 1994: 1590).

To our mind, it is only when caste mobilisation takes into account class analysis and identifies class interests that such a movement will be a progressive rather than a reactionary force.

VI
Caste and class

There are two divergent conceptualisations of caste that are often confused: 'As an ethnographic category [caste] refers exclusively to a system of social organisation peculiar to Hindu India, but as a sociological category it may denote almost any kind of class structure of exceptional rigidity' (Leach 1960: 1). When people talk of caste changing to class, they are using caste in the second sense. This places the two types of social stratification along a continuum, 'from mutually exclusive to cross-cutting status-sets' (Lynch 1969: 12). However, in this essay where we refer to caste as an ethnographic category rather than a mere grab bag of attributes, we stress hierarchy as constitutive of this system (as in Hocart [1950] and Dumont [1972]). That is, caste is here considered as the socio-cultural aspect of our institutionalised inequality in which religious, ritual and cultural values are prominent.

Class, on the other hand, is most often used to 'refer to a system of stratification that is economic in character' (Gupta 1991b: 14). Marxist analysis has been the classic statement on this, but the failure of Marx's precipitate prediction in 1853 of the imminent collapse of the caste system in India before the juggernaut of industrialisation should caution us to the limitations of his analysis for this country. However, class analysis rightly stresses the political-economic dimension of social stratification, where economic status and political power are crucial. To confuse caste and class really amounts to conflating these two dimensions, the socio-cultural and political-economic or, more commonly, collapsing one into the other. It is not that the two are unrelated, but any reductionism becomes very misleading.

Thus, the attempt to suppress hierarchy without a more encompassing ideology would lead to group competition and conflict. In Dumont's terms this is the 'substantialisation of caste', i.e., its emergence as a 'collective individual' (Dumont 1972: 269). In spite of the much vaunted rejection of caste, even by its upper caste promoters, the caste communalism we witness today is very much the consequence of the challenge posed to the caste hierarchy by the subalterns and the processes of social change overtaking us. The Hindutva of the Sangh Parivar is an ideology attempting to contain this, and re-establish the earlier hegemony of the upper castes, even as it scapegoats other minority communities.

The cultural revolt of the subalterns was directed precisely at 'caste as a cultural system' (Omvedt 1976: 36) in an attempt to overthrow

upper caste hegemony. Indeed, the non-Brahmin movements have attempted not just to displace caste ideology, but to replace it with a more rationalist, egalitarian and democratic one. However, non-Brahmin movements have to develop a strong enough identity and ideology to resist co-option and absorption, as well as fragmentation and disintegration. Such an identity and ideology would then have to transcend caste, even though these movements were first mobilised on the basis of caste. Certainly their cultural revolt is open to and encouraging of social change, and it has a greater potential for a more inclusive, universalist quest than a narrower, more exclusive ethnicity or nationalism (Omvedt 1976: 302).

VII
Analysis and struggle

If it is not to falter at this stage of developing a broader, mass-based appeal, as has in fact happened all too often in the past and seems to be happening again in the present, the movement must be open to a class analysis, by including the political economy dimension in its quest for socio-cultural change. Unfortunately, dogmatic Marxists and party hacks have tended to see such anti-caste agitations as diversionary and divisive (Omvedt 1994: 14), though since the 1980s at least the Marxist-Leninist groups have begun to acknowledge the importance of caste (ibid.: 25).

It is therefore imperative to see the relationship of caste and class as two systems of stratification in terms of the interaction between the two distinct but interdependent dimensions from which each derives. Since both are systems of institutionalised inequality, both can be considered as exploitative. 'The basic issue is to analyze the processes of exploitation' (Omvedt 1994: 57), and the crucial question is not just who exploits and who is exploited, but also how this comes about.

As jatis are connected to hereditary occupations, they become the units of production in the system (Patil 1979), and caste hierarchy legitimises the relations of production that allow the expropriation of the unpaid-for surplus. In this context, then, 'the anti-caste struggle is inherently also a "class struggle", that is a struggle against economic exploitation' (Omvedt 1994: 31). However, caste fragments and retards this struggle, because it has 'institutionalised divisions among the exploited' (ibid.: 49). These can be overcome only by an overarching identity and ideology. The appeal to class consciousness is critical to both.

Unfortunately, the caste consciousness that might mobilise the group initially, later militates against this broader and deeper class consciousness. This is especially so when, as often happens, 'the more elite members of the disadvantaged cultural sections are motivated to rebel' (Omvedt 1976: 302) and mobilise group consciousness. Once this happens, the same group elite easily co-opts the rest to its partisan class interests, which do not necessarily coincide with those of the other members. Moreover, common interests across similarly disadvantaged different groups are prevented from coming together in a broader unity by the divide-and-rule manipulation of the dominant castes and ruling classes. Thus, the struggle against exploitation becomes divided from without by the exploiters, and from within by the exploited themselves.

VIII
Reciprocal relationships

The relationships we have been exploring can now be focused more specifically. There are clearly limits to the use of power, economic and/or political, in changing or neutralising hierarchy, just as there are constraints on how much a cultural revolt against hierarchy can achieve without the support of such power. Moreover, there is also a role for an ideology—an egalitarian, not a hierarchic one—to stabilise the results of structural change wrought by the use of such power against caste exploitation, just as an ideology can precipitate a change in consciousness that could precede structural change.

The reciprocity between caste hierarchy and class dominance is thus a reflection and consequence of the interrelationship of the socio-cultural and political-economic structures of a society. The more firmly a new change or old structure is grounded in both, the more stable and lasting it is likely to be. The stability of caste in our society is best explained by this double grounding. The void in our socio-cultural awareness can best explain why class-in-itself has not become class-for-itself here.

In sum, then, this discussion on the relationship of caste and class has underlined a twofold imperative for an integrated response to their systems of inequality and exploitation: (*a*) there is the pressing need for a cogent ideological challenge in socio-cultural terms to caste hierarchy; and (*b*) there is a corresponding urgency for an effective structural alternative in political-economic terms to class dominance.

IX
Caste and ethnicity

There is a further dimension in which caste phenomena can be conceptualised, besides hierarchy and dominance, and that is *ethnicity*. Here Max Weber gives us the lead. In the classic Weberian model of social stratification—of class as an economic category, status as a cultural category, and power as a political one—caste is interpreted as a special kind of status group based on the principle of inherited 'class charisma'. The proliferation of castes is accounted for by 'caste schism' (Eisenstadt 1968: 183) that may be precipitated by migration, occupational differentiation, sect formation, etc. In so far as such status groups have a distinct culture, or at least a distinctive subculture, we can consider them to be 'ethnicised', which is most likely to happen as status groups become politicised (Jain 1996: 220). Indeed, group distinctiveness in terms of some common characteristics is definitive for both caste and ethnic groups, but there are also differences between these—differences of emphasis or of substance.

In India, tribes are readily considered ethnic groups, but not castes (Heredia and Srivastava 1994). Yet most understandings of ethnic groups would be applicable to castes. For instance, Barth defines the term 'ethnic group' to designate a population which: (*a*) is largely biologically self-perpetuating; (*b*) shares fundamental cultural values, realised in overt unity in cultural forces; (*c*) makes up a field of communication and interaction; and (*d*) has a membership which identifies itself, and is identified by others, as constituting a category distinguishable from other categories of the same order (Barth 1969: 10). He therefore readily concludes: '[F]rom this perspective, the Indian caste system would appear to be a special case of a stratified poly-ethnic system. The boundaries of caste are defined by ethnic criteria' (ibid.: 27).

X
Similarities and differences

Thus, what is significant about ethnicity is a sense of collective awareness and identity; it is a group-for-itself. Caste can remain so passively socialised that the group's self-affirmation may remain quiescent, as long as it is not mobilised socially or politically into a movement. This is more a difference of emphasis. More substantively, caste is essentially defined around hierarchical values, while ethnicity is primarily

concerned with cultural rights. Both can be, and often are, extended to include other interests and concerns of the group—economic and political, or otherwise. However, neither group is ever completely identified with these to the exclusion of value options or cultural identity. Hence the inevitable overlap and disjunction between caste status and ethnic identity.

Perhaps the most critical difference between caste and ethnicity is that ethnic identities can be multiple and inclusive, especially when boundaries are permeable. 'This produces a "layering" of ethnic identities which combines with the ascriptive character of ethnicity to reveal the negotiated, problematic nature of ethnic identity' (Nagel 1994: 154). Caste identity, however, tends to be more exclusive and singular. Thus, one can be a Malayali Muslim, or a Jharkhandi tribal, but not a Maratha Brahmin or a Mahar Mang.

Ethnic groups are vertically segmented and often the segments overlap. Given permeable boundaries, membership can be 'attained' and multiple group identities are possible, based on various characteristics of religion, region, language, even race. Castes, on the other hand, are horizontally stratified, with broader, more inclusive categories like varna containing smaller, more exclusive ones like jatis. Caste membership is singular and ascribed and, where boundaries are less rigid, it is the subcaste itself that is subsumed into a larger caste or varna. For instance in Maharashtra, Vanjaras as a group have claimed higher status as Maratha Vanjaras, a good example of 'Kshatriyaisation'.

Both caste and ethnic communities have multiple group histories and oral traditions, folktales and folklore to sustain and perpetuate their distinctiveness, whether cultural or subcultural. Often, they also have myths of election and uniqueness, and mythometeurs of origins and foundation (Smith 1994: 710). If there are multiple hierarchies and a proliferation of caste ideologies as argued earlier, here too we find a similar pluralism. For 'there is no practical limit to the multiplication of cultural differentiae, or the rediscovery of ethno-histories and myths of ethnic descent, which can be used to mobilize populations and inspire them into political action' (ibid.: 725).

Thus, both ethnicity and caste are socially constructed, but they also have a foundation in the material history and circumstances of the community. It is this dialectic between a constructionist and a foundationalist understanding of the two that accounts for the substantive and contingent similarities and differences between them. Both imply negotiated and problematic identities, as well as composite and delimited cultures. Of the

two, ethnicity is the less stable, more dynamic phenomenon. Indeed, 'ethnicity should be conceived as a process evolving through time' (Devalle 1992: 18), and 'ethnic identity then is the result of a dialectic process involving internal and external opinions and processes' (Nagel 1994: 154).

XI
Ethnicisation of caste

Coming now to our concrete context, the Hindu nationalist revival with the Sangh Parivar has variously been categorised as religiously fundamentalist, politically fascist and socially casteist, but overall it has mostly been perceived as an ethnic movement. Its strident confrontation with other religious groups and its earlier linguistic polarisations seemed to justify this conceptualisation. However, non-Brahmin movements, even when politically mobilised, have been perceived as based on common interests, not a distinctive culture. Yet their ideologies, particularly with Phule and Ambedkar, have constructed new identities, and the traditions they 'invented' have affirmed a distinctive culture.

If caste communities had been conceptualised thus, it could have been a basis for separate electorates in the colonial period, as was the case with other distinct minorities who were granted this concession. It was perhaps for this very reason that caste was placed within the ambit of the Hindu social system by the nationalist movement. Gandhi's insistence on this is very illuminating. However, if indeed these movements have political as well as cultural dimensions, might they be conceived of primarily in ethnic terms? If so, what advantage would this have today? Would the neo-Buddhists qualify to be considered as a distinctive ethnic group like other religious minorities, as the Sikhs are now demanding? And would the other dalits and backward castes qualify too?

We must of course resist the temptation to collapse caste into ethnicity, just as we have rejected the attempt to reduce caste to class, for even as we distinguish these two dimensions, we must be sensitive to the greater significance and impact one or the other may have in a specific situation. Thus, rather than caste changing to class, it could be argued, as in fact it has been by some scholars, that the consensual hegemony of caste has a lesser role as the primary principle of social organisation than the coercive dominance of class in our contemporary situation (Jain 1996: 221).

Can this be argued with regard to caste and ethnicity? Is the politicisation of caste leading to its ethnicisation, that is, to more permeable

inter-caste boundaries, to less ascription and more option in group membership, to multiple and less rigid identifies, to more composite and complex cultures?

XII
Mandalisation and dalitisation

Sanskritisation and its variants represented a certain flexibility and an opening to change, but within a 'hierarchy-based model of social mobility in the caste system' (Jain 1996: 221). Today we have counter-models to this in Mandalisation and dalitisation, which are forging new and wider unities across jatis within varnas. These processes could well 'become the mainsprings of a counter hegemony-based model of socio-political mobility in the emergent system of ethnicised status group' (ibid.).

It would be counter-productive, however, to attempt ethnic mobilisation without considering class influences. For the inequalities and oppressions of class stratification in the larger society are easily reproduced in a community within it, whether caste or ethnic, especially if it is of some scale and density. Thus, in the struggle for social liberation and human fulfilment, we would see ethnic mobilisation as focusing primarily on collective identity, caste movements as mainly a quest for community dignity, and class struggle as chiefly concerned with social justice. Obviously, these are distinct, not separable, aspects of an overall struggle of disadvantaged subaltern peoples in our society but, while specific strategies will be dependent on concrete situations, an adequate response must integrate all three.

XIII
A holistic approach

In stressing the need for a holistic and non-reductionist approach, we are well aware of the opposite error, of over-generalising and broadening the perspective to the point of blunting its cutting edge, and descending into a diluted and unfocused analysis. Granted that the approach to the multiple, interdependent dimensions of a given social situation must make a beginning at some specific place, this should be decided in terms of the exigencies of the situation, and not *a priori* in terms of any prior predilections. A holistic approach to caste, class and ethnicity must not analyse one in terms of the other. This is reductionist, and to our mind has

limited explanatory power. We need to begin at the point that allows our analysis to include other dimensions as well.

Too often a given discourse prejudices us *a priori* to emphasising one dimension over another. This happens in the case of both Marxists and non-Marxists in the caste–class controversy, where community and class are set off against each other. The same is the case with ethnicity and class, and we may now see a similar debate about ethnicity and caste. Our suspicion is that the socio-cultural dimension of analysis, in which caste and ethnicity are best located, has not been given the importance and space it deserves by those who make the political economy their analytical axis. Of course, to plead the urgency of holism is not as yet to have achieved it in our analysis. The contribution of this study, we hope, is a step in this direction, though it surely has not arrived at its goal as yet.

XIV
Recapitulating the discussion

Caste-based movements have a long history in our society, though they have come into greater prominence with the multi-dimensional crisis we are now undergoing. From the earliest times there have been alternative and heterodox understandings and responses that have challenged the dominant hegemony in this land, with more or with less success. Thus, from the ancient Buddhist 'revolution' and the medieval bhakti of the *sant-kavis*, to the modern non-Brahmin and dalit revolts, to the contemporary women's and ecological movements, there has always been a contestation for the ideological space once claimed by Brahminic Hinduism and later by nationalists of various hues.

The key issues of equity and justice underlie a people's quest for identity, dignity and a collective self-image of self-worth. In setting these in a more integrated and holistic context, we have focused in this essay on three crucial issues. The first concerns caste and hierarchy. If caste is both an ethnographic category as well as a political ideology, how do we conceptualise castes: as hierarchical, discrete groups, or in terms of their material history and culture? In the end, how effectively can caste be used against the system itself? If we accept the ideological dimension of caste, then we must face the ambiguities involved in its mobilisation for systemic change. The second involves caste and class. Is caste a more effective mobiliser than class for most oppressed groups? How do we conceptualise caste/class differences so that we can address the caste–class

dilemma? Once we accept the reciprocal relationship between caste and class, we must commit ourselves to a more integrated response. The third issue is with regard to caste and ethnicity. If indeed these movements have both politico-economic as well as socio-cultural dimensions, should they then be conceived of in ethnic terms? If so, of what advantage would this be today? The similarities and differences between caste and ethnic groups should alert us to the possibilities and potential of ethnicisation of caste and Mandalisation-dalitisation, involving fundamental changes in our society.

This resumé of the argument is meant to help map the main contours of the terrain covered, and to lay bare also the loose ends still to be tied up and, more importantly, the leads which could be pursued. We do not pretend to trace every promising lead to its originating discourse, to follow it to its last practical conclusion, or to indicate every pertinent implication but, rather more modestly, our object is to make explicit a few suggestive and challenging leads which could be pursued in due course, perhaps by others as well.

XV
Toward a subaltern hermeneutic

A critical appropriation of subaltern perspectives must avoid any uncritical romanticising of the subalterns. Making a pre-judgement in their favour must not imply blind, unquestioning faith but positioning ourselves in a more empathetic down–up perspective. That is, making a pre-option for their cause should not be an ethno-centric and chauvinistic choice, but an open and liberating hope.

In this we are distancing ourselves from the kind of postmodernism that listens with *The ear of the other* (Derrida 1985). Derrida's 'ear-splitting' discourse inscribes 'the difference in the ear', and allows to a concept 'no possibility of deciding from among its competing meanings, one that is true or authentic' (Michelfelder and Palmer 1989: 1), even if it is expressed by the same voice. Too easily this becomes a relativistic dead end that leads to the kind of nihilism which turns a good ear to voices one wants to hear and a deaf one to those one would rather not!

What the subaltern perspective needs is a hermeneutic that will not suppress any of these voices or refuse to give them a hearing, but listen to them all against the horizon of our own conceptual presumptions and value commitments, and still be open to the possibilities of a fusion beyond these. Perhaps the polyphony will eventually make a harmony,

but till then we can only struggle with the cacophony without losing our sensitivity or going deaf. Such a hermeneutic is necessary to prevent what has come to be 'an uncritical cult of the "popular" or "subaltern", particularly when combined with the rejection of the Enlightenment rationalism as irremediably tainted in all its forms by colonial power-knowledge' (Sarkar 1993: 165).

A balanced hermeneutic approach would also have to contain and exercise aggressive rationalism, such as is evident at times in Phule and Ambedkar, particularly in their criticism of traditional religious practices and beliefs. The case against this religiosity is often argued within the perspective of Western rationalism and its empiricist assumptions. This shows little regard for the limitations of such reasoning and less sensitivity to symbol and sign, or myth and metaphor, as ways of communicating beyond a closed empiricist rationale. Chatterjee's 'requirements for an immanent critique of caste ideology' (Chatterjee 1989: 185) offer a promising start to such a subaltern venture:

> [W]hereas Dumont treats the series of oppositions—life in the world/life of the renouncer, group religion/disciplines of salvation, caste/individual—as having been unified within the whole of Hinduism by integration at the level of doctrinal Brahmanism and by toleration at the level of the sects (ibid.: 186),

they remain 'fundamentally unresolved—unified if at all, not at the level of the self-consciousness of "the Hindu" but only within the historical contingencies of the social relations of power' (ibid.). Unfortunately,

> we have allowed ourselves to be taken in by the abstract negativity in the autonomous domain of subaltern beliefs and practices and have missed those marks, faint as they are, of an immanent process of criticism and learning, of selective appropriation, of making sense of and using on one's own terms the elements of a more powerful cultural order.... Surely it would be wholly contrary to our project to go about as though only the dominant culture has a life history and subaltern consciousness eternally frozen in its structure of negation (ibid.: 206–7).

The subaltern hermeneutic, then, must be able to problematise both the modernist's grand design of rationality, as well as the postmodernist's multiple fragmentation of polysemy, and seek a fusion beyond the horizon of both. Such a hermeneutic will have to be a further pursuit much beyond the agenda of this study.

XVI
Fragmentation and shift

The mainstream press characterised the 1996 election as a 'fractured verdict' and warned of the dire consequences of unstable coalition politics. The mid-term election precipitated in 1998 was more the result of a miscalculated power play by a few misguided Congress politicians, than of any really substantive issues. What is quite unambiguous at this point is the bankruptcy of the Congress model and its politics. However, beyond the failures and fractures that mark the limits of 'dominant caste democracy', some would begin to see the faint outlines of a 'second republic'! What its more explicit contours will be is hard to discuss at this stage, but already we need a paradigmatic shift in our understanding if we are to be able to comprehend the significance of the changes taking place beyond the 'fragmentation and shift' in our present electorate.

With the collapse of the Congress, new possibilities have emerged today but the dangers of reiterating our past failures in an accelerating downward spiral are as great as the opportunities that challenge us to reverse this in a 'virtuous circle' by a more creative and constructive response. Thus, the Sangh Parivar has seized on the present ambiguities to moderate or perhaps mask their once aggressive Hindu nationalism. However, even this change of strategy, which does not add up to a change of heart, is no indication that their quest to establish a new hegemony to replace the old one has in any way been jettisoned. Yet the inability of their opponents to come together in a united opposition is an even greater disaster. A negative coalition, like the once United Front, can only be a transitory phenomenon.

For if the opposition to the Sangh Parivar does not hang together, they will surely hang apart! The underlying contradictions between leftists and liberals and between bahujans and dalits, the dissensions in the Congress and the tensions in the Janata Dal, the soul-destroying power of party fragmentation in a self-destructive process—all this adds up to a grim prognosis, where the Sangh Parivar could prevail by default and impose itself on a divided opposition. The present scenario in Uttar Pradesh is a good illustration of this. However, as exemplified in Gujarat and the precarious balance of the ruling coalition in Maharashtra, the Hindutvawadis, too, are themselves plagued with divisions. While they do have the advantage of a consistently articulated ideology and an aggressively projected identity, these have proven inadequate to submerge

or subsume their inherent caste and class contradictions, to overcome ingrained ethnic and other rivalries, or to displace their own internal individual and group differences.

However, the growth of regional political parties, the acceptance of the need for a common minimum programme, the growing isolation of openly communal and fundamentalist appeals, the increasing accountability and transparency demanded by people from public representatives and servants, the support of an activist judiciary—all this and more augurs well for positive change and for the resilience of Indian democracy against authoritarian and fascist forces. Now, after the collapse of the Nehruvian consensus, the marginalisation of Gandhi and the demise of the Congress model, the urgency and inevitability of a 'politics of coalition and consent' are inescapable for the foreseeable future. On the other hand, the opposition to Hindu nationalism has still to articulate an acceptable ideology and sketch an inclusive identity.

Our study of the subaltern alternative is a beginning. We now need a further discussion on how it can make a more significant contribution to the emerging new paradigm. Our challenge today is to put together a positive and not merely a negative unity against the vested interests that had been represented by a now fragmenting Congress and that are once again coalescing in a Hinduistic, Brahminic hegemony. Regrettably, the caste divide between the bahujan non-Brahmin samaj and the dalits has not until now been overcome by the obvious interests they have in common to resist the vested interests that continue to displace and subdue them. Nor has communal harmony been able to bridge the divide between religious communities to bring the concerns of all the poor on to a common platform. A further analysis with a new paradigm is needed to help us learn from our tragic history, rather than be condemned to a farcical repetition of it.

XVII
Dilemmas of intervention

As indicated at the beginning of this article, a critical study is meant to clear and prepare the ground for a committed response and hopefully some ground has now been covered in this regard. In the section on 'A holistic approach' with regard to analysis, we have seen how holistic intervention, too, must somehow impact on more than a single dimension of a particular social situation; it cannot do this in the abstract. Thus, the choice of a point of entry for an intervention strategy must not be

locked into a particular dimension but must make for openings into other dimensions as well. This option can be as crucial as the strategy itself.

Though it is beyond our purpose in this essay to describe the various alternative strategies of intervention that an action response might take, it would be appropriate now to at least caution against the dilemmas arising when some of the more common intervening agencies—the state, social movements and the market—are involved.

The state

The most obvious of these agencies is the state, and the nationalism it mobilises for its ends and means. It has been among the most significant and successful agencies of modernisation and even democracy, specially in the West. In the multi-ethnic context of the Third World, however, the state and nationalism have been ambiguous forces, particularly where 'the political form of a plural society was a "despotism" of one cultural group, usually a minority, over others' (van de Berge 1969: 67). This perception of the pluralists, 'of the state as an instrument of domination by privileged ethnic groups' (Brass 1991: 252), is also shared by neo-Marxists, following the older Marxist logic of the state as an instrument of the ruling classes.

However, the real dilemma of the state cuts deeper than merely the dominance of ideology or the exercise of power. For even when the state sets out to be 'ostentatiously egalitarian', it must choose, as Rae has pointed out, between different types of 'egalitarian' policies that inevitably favour some groups or categories in the population and discriminate against others, thus leading 'to a host of contradictions and confusions in which *equality is set against equality*' (Rae 1979: 38). Even effective political will for any policy of 'affirmative action' or 'protective discrimination' creates new interests and identities which, however superficial at first, can and do lead to effective mobilisation against larger egalitarian concerns. In other words, as we have urged earlier in this article, any such policy must integrate the caste–class–ethnic considerations for equity, equality and identity.

This is but one illustration of the dilemmas the state must face between policy intentions and political practicalities, all deriving from tensions that the state must constructively resolve between delegitimising older state institutions to capture power and relegitimising newer ones to implement change: in other words, the basic dilemma between the state as an instrument of the status quo and oppression and as one of change and liberation, which is only resolved for some when the state finally withers away.

Social movements

To further complicate these dilemmas of selective and effective political will, the state must respond to social movements. These can be creative and constructive 'mechanisms', to use Merton's phrase, to challenge a social system and precipitate change. Their capacity for mobilisation will depend on the intensity and extent of their appeal. To be intensely gripping, a movement must articulate an ideology that is specifically targeted and concretely expressed, but this may restrict the extent of its appeal. To extend its appeal to a wider field, it must be flexible enough to admit a favourable reinterpretation by, and allow for the accommodation of, diverse groups.

There is here a built-in dilemma, between an intensive and an extensive appeal, which a social movement cannot escape. This is particularly sharp when 'issues of equity and justice also need to be informed by ethnicity' (David and Kadirgama 1989: 42) and/or caste.

The market

Social movements and state politics have often been seen locked in interaction, sometimes collaborative, mostly conflictual and even confrontational. Yet both operate in the broader context of a market that is a more impersonal and less voluntaristic agency, but far more real than the illusory 'free lunch' into which popularist politics and ideologies are tempted to escape. Moreover, as Furnivall suggested in 1944, the economy of the marketplace can, with some political help, be an effective integrator for a society, especially a culturally plural one (Barth 1969: 16).

Market mechanisms can of course be politically manipulated. This is what monopoly capitalism is all about. But the economic realities of the marketplace cannot be negated by sheer political will even in command economies, as state socialisms have belatedly realised. Visioning a market with 'socialist characteristics' or with a 'safety net', or other such suggestions, are all compromises that still do not really resolve the dilemmas of the marketplace.

Thus, the market as 'facilitator of exchange' has played a critically integrative role in society from the earliest days of barter; the more complex the social order, the more intricate are its interdependencies, and the more crucial is this role. As 'the arenas where those who seek profits realise them' (Kurien 1994: 7), markets also invite manipulation and monopoly, and eventually the exploitation and oppression of the weak by the strong. This intrinsic duality of the market, for profit and for exchange,

complicates the dilemma between the convenience of its impersonal economic efficiency and the demands of a humane ethical equity.

The prevailing perceptions of failed state interventions in the Second and Third World, as also the exhaustion of social movements, have had no small part in bringing into prominence once again the role of the market. However, the crises in the First World and in global capitalism that the market is imposing on us all does not address, let alone resolve, this dilemma between a market-friendly economy and a people-friendly market. And it certainly cannot be wished away any more.

There are surely other social agencies of change with their own dilemmas and dualities that could be listed here. But enough has been said to establish the need for a fine-tuned sensitivity in our strategies for intervention to the issues and concerns that the subaltern alternatives indicated here have been trying to redress.

XVIII
A concluding peroration

The argument in this essay is perhaps too broad to be convincing on every point raised. However, our intention has not been to conclude the discussion, but rather to arouse some 'hermeneutical suspicions' with regard to dominant understandings so as to open them to a fusion of horizons with subaltern ones. Though the mainstream, hegemonic perspectives and ideologies may have the political capacity to assert dominance, they have neither the cultural credibility nor the moral legitimacy to impose it on subalterns of diverse caste, religious and ethnic groups, for any prolonged period of time. Here, we could take a cue from our South Asian experience of linguistic nationalism where any hint of imposing linguistic dominance has been counter-productive, and even violently resisted. Pluralism has proven better at regional integration. It would be tragically misplaced to try and contain the contemporary crisis with a new dominant caste/class hegemony, whether in the name of national integration, or cultural nationalism, or some other misconceived even if well-intentioned agenda.

What we need now is a more effective and real equity that will allow for diversity without inequality, whether socio-cultural or political-economic. This would imply a negation of the idea of a unilinear social evolution within a single national tradition in our civilisation. Popularist nationalism, religiously or otherwise inspired, advocates precisely such a collective destiny for a people. There are dangerously authoritarian

and even fascist connotations in such a perspective, that too easily go unsuspected and uninterrogated.

We might seem to be urging a 'utopia', a 'nowhere' society, but perhaps we may some day be able to collectively remake our own mythometeur, our founding myth, into one more adequate to our new worldview, knowing that for liberation seekers, history can be made to follow myth (Nandy 1983: 63). For this we first need to break out of the prison of our present consciousness and to transcend the categories that constrain us in order to imagine another kind of community and invent a newer set of traditions. We do not claim that subaltern alternatives have all the answers for such an enterprise, but they do represent a challenging horizon of revolt and revolution, which can fuse with others to construct the identities and the ideologies we need for this brave new world.

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