Being Brahmin, Being Modern
For my parents,
Smt. Lakshmi S. Bairi
    and
Sri. T. Subbaraya Bairi.
    And,
University of Hyderabad.
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This work has stayed with me all along the last 13 years. Now thinking back and acknowledging individuals and institutions that sustained me, the emotion that is running through is, mostly, one of relief and immense gratitude.

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Then Sasheej Hegde came in to supervise this work and, as he once said, ‘held a mirror’ before me. I am still recovering from what I think I saw there. Sasheej, with his abundant energy, passion and rigour, made coherent what was a jumble of data and political pamphleteering. He tried heroically to teach me how I can remain committed to an anti-caste political conviction and the political activisms associated with it even while engaging ethically (and responsibly) with the Brahmin community. Above all, his care and affection for students is an embodiment of ethical practice. He is my superhero.

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Ramesh Bairy T. S.
Introduction: Seeking a Foothold

This study is about ‘caste’—about caste action and the survival of caste as an institution. Is caste what a people at any given historical moment make it out to be—that is to say, is it primarily a contextual construction, albeit whetted by its own structure and history? Or does caste demonstrate a stubbornly enduring structure that withstands the ever-renewing contexts that it finds itself in? What is one to make of the perceptual space of particular caste subjects and of caste action today? These formulations encapsulate the theoretical contours of this study, which also strings together a regional and contemporary historical matrix for its contextualisation. In a manner of speaking, the study may also be christened as the so-called ‘continuity and change’ thesis, albeit with its premises significantly changed or altered.

The study takes on the dynamics of Brahmin identity in contemporary Karnataka. The decision to focus on Brahmin identity is driven by two reasons. One, it is a paradox that while the figure of the Brahmin has forever haunted all our thinking on caste, sociological descriptions of this figure, as it gets configured in modern times, are the hardest to come by. Often we work with a straw figure of the Brahmin, and surprisingly it seems to satisfy the requirements of even academic inquiries on caste. This assertion (concerning the paucity of descriptive accounts of particular caste contexts) can be made while speaking of other castes too. Indeed, this is yet another point of departure for this study that even as we increasingly seem to be presented
with touching certainties and theses on contemporary caste, we have a receding preoccupation with the need to describe, and describe sociologically, specific contextually animated dimensions of being caste. This paucity is so evident that it is surprising that it has escaped serious reflection.

Yet, the political and scholarly investment that is made in the idea and identity of the Brahmin is without parallel. It is perhaps the only consistent and continuous entity in the nearly two centuries of modern debate and contests over caste, even as what it is coupled against has consistently witnessed shifts—from the ‘Depressed Castes’ to the ‘non-Brahmins’ to ‘Backward Classes’, ‘Bahujans’ and ‘Dalits’. It is as if the Brahmin has retained a coherence and unity of self, immune, well almost, to the demands of time, and therefore is so self-evident that the figure needs no explanation and analysis. In seeking to embody the Brahmin with flesh and blood, with power and vulnerability, with capital enabled by identity as well as illegitimacies of the self, with ethics of the time and pragmatics of survival, this study explores the effects such an embodiment will have on our certainties of caste. ‘What is to be a Brahmin today?’ is the question that will haunt these pages. The contemporaneity of the ‘today’ is understood historically, implicating thereby the entire course of the twentieth century, with the latter seen as in many ways framed by the non-Brahminical articulation of the question of caste. At this level of engagement with the Brahmin world, the goal is above all to forward a sociological description of caste today, as it gets configured in a specific locale. All the same, I seek to return to an engagement with the enterprise of theorising caste but in light of the ways in which the Brahmin story compels us to interrogate it.

In another but related sense situating this study in an ‘upper’ caste such as Brahmins is deliberate. I hope to redress through such a contextualisation the skewed focus of most efforts within caste studies, as well as the inability to open up the matrix of caste identity and identification today. Situating themselves almost exclusively in the contemporary theoretical and ideological interest in recuperating ‘social identities’ as being decisively a question of empowerment, these studies have unwittingly furthered the ghettoisation of caste studies into an almost exclusive focus on ‘lower’ caste articulations. The
primary, even exclusive, mode of contemporary investment in caste, this literature seems to suggest, is as a modality of assertion. When probed to offer a mode of understanding a community such as that of the Brahmins, which more often than not has sought to keep its caste self under erasure, such a field of argumentation fails substantively.

The point regarding this skewed focus is not merely about its inability to say something about the ‘upper’ castes, it is also about the very possibility of addressing other varied dimensions of the workings of caste in the contemporary moment—the compulsions of secularisation within caste, the attendant equivocations in relating to the subject positions offered by caste selves, the differential investments in one’s caste self and so on. Of course, these dimensions of being a caste self today might obtain even among the subaltern castes, but the registers of identity as assertion and embodiment have overdetermined the trajectories of the current literature so completely that it remains largely oblivious to these questions. My effort here, however, is by no means a repudiation of these trajectories or of the specific works that embody them; only an attempt to open out to the different dimensions of contemporary caste that have not received the scholarly attention they deserve.

Taking the Brahmin community in Karnataka as a case in point, the book is devoted to delineating the contours of an identity both marked by and marking caste. In focus are the differential investments that the Brahmins posit in being Brahmin, the negotiations that they bring vis-à-vis this identity and identification, the dimensions of the very process of inhabiting the space of ‘Brahminness’, and so on. In frontalising a history of what has proved to be a deeply successful non-Brahminical othering of the idea of the Brahmin and the constitutive sense of siege that the modern Brahmin self has experienced (or perceived), I have sought to attend to some of the closures that contemporary caste studies face.

The Field

The abundance of caste studies in Indian sociology has led to the generation of various perspectives. This has meant a
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contradictory state of existence for Indian sociology, marked both by an essentialisation of caste (and caste-mediated realities) and its marginalisation, the attempt to efface caste from an assumed centrality and its continued primacy. This contradictory state of existence can be—and has been—productive of a reorientation and recasting of caste studies. Over the last decade-and-a-half, many scholarly convictions concerning caste have been subjected to severe interrogation. This interrogation has coincided with and thereby drawn heavily from a profusion of interest in caste within disciplines other than sociology. This book is a product of these intellectual contexts.

In seeking to mark out a point of departure, this study pursues the question of the ‘presents’ of caste, for that after all is the defining concern: what is happening to the hierarchical principles of caste, the meanings and the kinds of legitimacy that actors inside the world of caste are according to their ‘caste-ness’, the objective and subjective forms that caste takes in contemporary society, and the ‘modernity’ of caste expressions.

At the cost of considerable violence to the rich and diverse field of caste studies, it could be suggested that the latter has framed, and increasingly vehemently so in the last two decades, the question of caste in the twin registers of legitimation–contestation and dominance–resistance. Indeed, it is striking that the many disparate and even contesting perspectives on caste can be summatively mapped within these two registers. It is in pointing to the inadequacy of these registers that we gesture towards a much neglected point of departure in making sense of the contemporaneity of caste.

M. N. Srinivas made an impassioned plea (1962a, 1962b) to foreground a ‘field view’ of Indian society as against the ‘book view’ which he thought had dominated works on Indian society. Accordingly, he argued that jati (the endogamous ‘caste’ unit) and not varna (the four-fold ‘caste’ classification) must remain the legitimate object of sociological/anthropological inquiries on caste. The proliferation of studies from the field (vigorous from the late 1950s and to which Srinivas and his students contributed greatly), primarily in the form of ethnographic monographs, indeed enriched and complicated the picture of an essentialised view of caste as produced by indologists.

This enduring and perhaps the most dominant tradition of caste studies in Indian academia was marked by a complete reliance
on the ethnographic method, which meant that while a desirable diversity was generated and the significance of attending to caste in embedded locations was demonstrated, it also resulted in a general state of theoretical indeterminacy about the contemporary ‘avatars’ of caste and that has been largely only reactive and piecemeal. Srinivas (2002) himself worked at foregrounding caste’s modern transformations, and accordingly coined notions such as ‘sanskritisation’/westernisation (describing the ways in which change and mobility are possible in the caste world) and ‘dominant caste’ (in describing localised networks of caste power in a modernising situation). In this tradition there has been little explicit exposition of the nature of caste and its specificities. It is easy to see that, for this perspective, caste is essentially a system of stratification and inequality, legitimated around notions of purity and pollution, but one that is gradually and surely dying out. Caste is also, simultaneously, resurfacing in newer avatars, nowhere more strikingly than in the arena of politics (see Srinivas 1996). Srinivas, all through his career, worked with this two-avatar view of caste—a long past of a stable stratificatory principle in which nothing changed systemically, and the chaotic present in which the system as stratification has died, only to take form as a modern associational solidarity.

This unwillingness to recognise caste as a contemporarily significant system of inequality has agitated many recent commentators. Before going on to that, however, some comments on understanding caste as a form of stratification are in order. Broadly, this has meant a normative interest in the distribution of benefits and burdens within a population, as well as an explanatory interest in social inequality. Scholars operating from a ‘social stratification’ perspective tend to construct the ideological element of caste as an obfuscation of its exploitative content by the beneficiaries of the system (Bailey 1957; Berreman 1971; Beteille 1966; Gupta 2000; Mencher 1992). They prefer to focus on the practices and material interests that caste simultaneously inhabits

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1 For a forceful contestation of the usefulness of these ‘concepts’, see Carroll (1977).
2 For a critical reference to the concept, see Mukherjee (1979) passim and Mendelsohn (1993).
3 See Beteille (1969), a representative anthology on this subject.
and also makes possible (Beteille 1987, 1992). Refusing to impose a consensual ideological frame on caste (see Deliège 1997; Moffat 1979), the stratification perspective enables a foregrounding of the questions of context, agency and power. One form this has taken is to interrogate the vantage point from which the object is comprehended, thereby serving as a way of looking at caste from a ‘bottom up’ perspective (Mencher 1992). Looking at caste from below leads Joan Mencher to underscore two primary impulses of caste—one, that it is a very effective system of economic exploitation; and two, that by its very existence it prevents the formation of social classes ([*ibid.*]: 93–109). This tells her why the East is ‘Not-so-Mysterious’ (the title of her essay cited here). Similarly, for Gerald Berreman, the indological–anthropological obsession and romance with the distinctness of caste, and thus the non-deployability of the same as a comparative category, is simply untenable. For him, stratification is simply ‘the systematic ranking of categories of people’ (Berreman 1981: 4) and consequently there are ‘striking similarities in the structures, values, interactions, and consequences of the rigid systems of birth-ascribed inequality in [the] two societies [the USA and the Indian], in both material and experiential terms’ ([*ibid.*]: 5). In fact, he is willing to take a step further and designate any birth-ascribed stratification as ‘caste stratification’ ([*ibid.*]). Therefore he writes:

> I believe that there are fewer exceptions to be dealt with—that explanation of caste is simpler and more in accord with the facts of social life in India—if the basis of caste is regarded as lying in differential power which is expressed in ritual status terms, than if the reverse is assumed. ([*ibid.*]: 19)

This is the central understanding that perspectives from social stratification have yielded on caste.

All along, an impulse to ‘demystify’ (Mencher 1992) and ‘level’ (Gupta 2000) caste has driven this perspective. For Dipankar Gupta, the concepts of ‘hierarchy’ and ‘difference’ are central to understanding any form of social stratification, including caste. Not all systems of stratification are necessarily based on hierarchy, for such systems could be based on a valorising of differences as well. Hierarchy becomes applicable only when the system is based
on a criterion of differentiation that is quantitative or can be quantified. Says Gupta, difference ‘is salient when social stratification is understood in a “qualitative” sense’ (1992: 8), and he goes on to actively foreground a notion of differentiation or discrete categorisation. Thus, if such a system—and caste is primarily a system of the latter kind—has to be hierarchised, then ‘the criterion of hierarchy has to be imported from outside and can have no justifications from within’ (Gupta 2000: 24).

Positing a distinction between rules and ideologies, Gupta argues, ‘Rules are most nakedly an instrument of power hierarchy. Ideology, on the other hand, tries to mask this nakedness…. The caste rule in this sense, which holds that the subaltern castes must serve the privileged, is an expression of power and Brahman ideology attempts to cloak it’ (ibid.: 118). However, since separation is an active feature of caste entities, ideologies can be as multiple as castes. In effect, therefore, ‘the rule of caste is only obeyed when it is accompanied by the rule of power. Therefore…it is the hierarchy of power and economics where we believe that hierarchy is naked. Ideology, on the other hand, introduces it “shamefacedly” but only after effecting the separation between discrete categories of castes’ (ibid.: 67).

Gupta has only reasserted this position in his recent work. He argues, ‘ritual dominance in no way determines the nature of caste interactions in contemporary India’ (Gupta 2004: ix), for the new contexts caste finds itself in today (urbanisation, democratic politics, etc.) have allowed identity (‘discrete castes’ in the earlier formulation) to triumph over hierarchy. It is merely the differentials in power—of authority, of economy and of polity—that allowed the textual/Brahminical renditions of hierarchy to masquerade themselves as universal and accepted by all. Accordingly, as the Untouchable and Sudra communities are released by the socio-economic bondages that constrained them to the village economy and social organisation, their own hitherto less publicised articulations of caste hierarchy, which are marked by an unhinged expression of pride in one’s own caste and its exalted origins, are questioning textual elucidations and are even leaving these ‘unattended on the wayside’ (ibid.).

Gupta’s emphasis on the discrete nature of caste entities has already been contested (see Chatterjee 1994: 179–81). But perhaps more importantly, there is little here that will aid us in
understanding caste as an intersubjectively made reality. For intersubjectivity to exist, it is necessary that there exists a larger, shared universe of meanings and conceptions. This shared universe will have to necessarily involve something more than the will to legitimise and conversely to contest. Moreover, social conceptions, ideas and meanings have an autonomy of their own, and they too have a certain hold on the people. It is not as though it is always people who do things to their contexts but also the other way round. Gupta increasingly moves towards totally discounting the importance of values and ideas, to see them as merely a façade that remains true and loyal to the groups in question. These may either remain hidden or become visible, depending upon the circumstances of power and domination, but never change themselves nor work upon their carriers. The prism of stratification thus provides an easy conduit to get on with decoding the apparently universal thematic of inequality, of which caste is but a local form.

For Srinivas, Andre Beteille and Gupta, as we have indicated before, caste as system of stratification gradually fades out, losing its economic and cultural hold over people, only to be available as a ‘secular’ identity. For them, nowhere is this new avatar more prominent than in democratic politics. Beteille has only consolidated and hardened this view by suggesting repeatedly that caste has lost—well almost—all traces of its former moral–social legitimacy, only to survive rather fiercely and undesirably in politics and in matters of governance. Gupta (2005) too has echoed this sentiment regarding the collapse of the system, if only to buttress his ‘many ideologies’ thesis. Even as a wishful modernisation perspective, which fondly predicts the death of caste at the ruthless hands of urbanisation/secularisation/modernisation, intimates and writes itself into these proclamations (see, for an instance, Gupta 2004: xix–xx), this evaluation, in some strange ways, resonates with the postcolonial analysis of the caste question, in that the latter makes so much of questions concerning the ‘governmentalising’ of caste.

Srinivas was among the first to urge scholars to attend to the theme of caste as a political mobilisational tool.4 His essay ‘Caste

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4 Srinivas was preceded by G. S. Ghurye (1969) in proposing a similar evaluation of this dimension of caste.
in Modern India’ (1962c) is the frame which structured the debate, and is still customarily visited by its adherents. This view concreteises the consolidation of caste in politics as the revival of what is thought to be an outmoded primitive institution. Caste is seen to represent an extremely damaging threat to the development of more ‘modern’ political identities—either of a liberal citizenship or of class consciousness and identity, depending upon the ideological persuasion of the scholars concerned (Sharma 2002: 65).

Unsurprisingly, such a perception often gathers itself under the rubric ‘resurgence of caste’. The presumption here is that caste, which would have died a natural death because of society progressing from a traditional to a modern one, is being given a new lease of life by the machinations of the polity and is being kept alive for petty and sectarian ‘votebank’ interests. While political scientists have worked since the 1950s with a more open-ended and processual framework (pioneered by Rudolph and Rudolph 1967 and Kothari 1970), the first wave of such studies (till about the end of the 1980s) were premised on the apparently contradictory nature of caste and politics, animating thus a version of the then dominant modernisation perspectives.

In the last two decades—the 1990s in particular—the debate on caste and politics has overseen a decisive turn, which reflects not merely the pronounced shifts in the Indian polity and its relationship with caste but also the grids of theoretical perception and evaluation. Generating extensive data on elections, voting patterns and the composition of legislative bodies, as well as querying what democracy means to caste articulations from below, this scholarship convincingly charts a picture of the Indian polity as a democracy from below. It argues that in the post-Independence period the lower castes have used their franchise as a tool of empowerment to rally against discrimination and denial and have successfully wrested the state legislatures from the hands of the upper castes (see Alam 1999a; Jaffrelot 2003; Michelutti 2004; Shah 2002; Varshney 2000; Yadav 1996).

Notwithstanding such differences between the two moments, this trend exhibits certain predilections. Castes are here given, corporatised and yet primordial entities—with natural senses of identity and consciousness, and consequently of loyalty—readily available for political harnessing. There is also the
presumption that caste groups are like any other ethnic groups and identities, and that, once fully incorporated into the political logic, they remain as no more than mere ‘names of groups and interests of other kinds’ (Hawthorn 1982: 213). There is little attention paid to the fuzzier areas of caste mobilisation and more nuanced questions about caste negotiation. Indeed, in the context of this latter development, ‘caste’ loses all analytical bite and comes to be replaced by a descriptive discourse of identities and identifications.

Almost concurrently, sharing a great deal with the stratification perspectives, a concern to describe and analyse caste communities that are ranked low in both local and textual proclamations has emerged as an important approach. However, what starkly marks them apart from the troika of Srinivas–Beteille–Gupta is a recognition of caste’s continued resilience in determining the life chances of individuals. The pioneering instances of this scholarship were primarily studies in social stratification and mobility, cast largely in terms of the effects of the ameliorative practices of the modern state, formation of a middle class (or an elite) among them and the mobilisational efforts (Abbasayulu 1978; Ram 1988; Sachchidananda 1977). The perspective of ‘social movements’ became prominent in the last two decades, in the context of the study of the Dalit and Other Backward Class (OBC) movements, wherein the focus was no longer on individual caste groups but on larger, internally heterogeneous categories like Dalits and OBCs. The first wave of such studies constructed these movements as animated by the impulse of relative deprivation and thereby as staking claim to a share in modern resources.  

These works have come to be increasingly replaced in the last decade or so by studies which represent the issue of consciousness (and thus of an assertive identity) as being central in such articulations. They attempt to concretise the disjunctive or contradictory consciousness that such articulations and/or movements from below are supposedly animated with. This consciousness emanates not merely from the lived injustice and inequalities of the constituencies they claim to speak on behalf of, but also involve a rereading of history itself. Without doubt, it

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is a history both marked by the injustice and oppression unleashed by the upper castes, as well as testifying to a history of endemic resistance and a refusal to surrender self-respect and pride on the part of the exploited. While Kancha Ilaiah (1996) is indisputably the most voluble in this regard, Gopal Guru (2000 [with V. Geetha], 2002) has consistently foregrounded a concern about attributing an epistemic privilege to the experience of being Dalit/Sudra/Bahujan. What is perhaps at stake here is an argument about authenticity, i.e., of an authentic self that can represent not only itself truthfully but also the larger reality (of caste, here). Yet, clearly the very question of who bears this authentic identity remains contested—Dalit, Bahujan, abrahmani, etc.—even by the proponents themselves.6

They also set the question of caste as one exclusively of domination and in this they are one with the stratification theorists. Caste, for them, is overdetermined by the imageries of identity, leaving little space to questions of internal structuring of caste consciousness and change (cf. Khare 1984). The result is that even as they reinforce and over-visibilise the presence and the success of caste-based movements and articulations, they seem to add very little to our knowledge about the lifeworlds and worldviews of the communities themselves. It is as though the ‘movements’ narrative pervades and exhausts the lives of these communities.

This is not really surprising, in that its categories are not castes in any available sense but are blocks that oversee and/or seek a ‘substantialisation’.7 Besides, these categorisations themselves

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7 This could also be the reason why the Dalit movement and its intellectuals differed so sharply from other sociologists on the caste–race question that was debated during the UN’s Durban conference on racism (2001). See Visvanathan (2001) for details. The debate continues till date (see Natarajan 2007; Gupta 2007). How irrevocably linked these articulations and movements are to the issue of modern—or more precisely modern governmental—framing of the caste question is a very significant question but it will not be pursued here. Nonetheless, such instances of ‘muddling up’ categories are on the rise and increasingly it is participants in the caste world who are indulging in that. Scholars like Beteille and Gupta have fought hard to protect the purity of their categories, but apparently theirs is a losing battle.
are alien to the ‘traditional’ logic of caste, deriving as they do from a very modern mode of self-assertion and which this framework seeks to foreground and circumscribe. The category ‘OBC’ is a case in point, in that even as it is proposed by the state, the subject position announced by this labelling is taken on by discrete caste groups as their own. This is true as well of the category ‘Dalit’, albeit not always resonating state-defined imperatives. That is why categories like ‘upper castes’ and ‘lower castes’ assume here—as in much of recent scholarship—an a priori conceptual and even historical coherence and validity, which indeed is a much bigger problem than their assumed complicity in the ideology of an inegalitarian system.

The specific ways in which the notion of identity gets to be constituted in projects that seek to recover dominated voices—whether Dalit or Dalit woman (see Rao 2003; Rege 2006), whether scholarly or political—render recourse to a construction, in some form or the other, of authenticity and/or experience inevitable. This makes it almost impossible to escape the chronic particularisation and thereby a definitional inability to articulate a notion of the universal. Yet implicated as they are within the parameters of a project of liberation, they cannot get away from an enunciation of some notion of universal. This constitutive tension animates such projects and ultimately could well be irresolvable.

It would be no exaggeration to assert that there has been a great recession in the area of caste studies in sociology. The only significant area that has gathered and retained some momentum in the recent years within sociology is the study of (lower) caste movements and the study of social mobility among the lower castes. Perhaps paradoxically, these studies, even while

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8 One affirmation of this assertion comes from the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) Survey Reports. ‘Caste’ was a theme only in the first round (early 1970s) and not in the subsequent surveys. After the first round, caste makes a ‘shamefaced’ entry in terms of ‘stratification’, ‘SCs’ and ‘social movements’. While surely it is legitimate to argue that this is an appropriate reflection of the transformations underway in caste currently, it is also a reflection of our increasing denial to engage with the totality of caste, on its own weight, as an analytical tool. Also see the flow of the discussion below.
resisting the dominant scholarly impulse of relegating caste to the past, themselves unwittingly ghettoise caste studies into an almost exclusive and unrelenting focus on ‘lower’ castes. In doing so they buttress another dominant scholarly refrain that argues that caste is increasingly ceasing to be a significant cultural–economic resource for the ‘upper’ castes. Contesting the latter strain, over the last decade some scholars have insistently drawn attention to the ways in which caste persists as a system of economic inequality (see Thorat and Newman 2007, and the four accompanying articles). Satish Deshpande (2003) insists that we need to recognise that caste continues to be a fundamental determinant of life chances in contemporary India.

This receding interest among Indian sociologists in caste has coincided with an abundance of studies on caste in other social sciences, particularly history. Works such as Lucy Carroll (1978), Rashmi Pant (1987), Nicholas Dirks (2002, 1989), Ronald Inden (1986, 1990), Carol A. Breckenridge and Peter van der Veer (1994), Arjun Appadurai (1986a, 1986b, 1988), and C. J. Fuller (1996), taking the lead from Bernard Cohn (1968), have demonstrated the far-reaching effects of the colonial configuration of caste (see also Fuller 1977). The demand here is to historicise the phenomenon of caste and, more crucially, to make our understandings of caste contextually sensitive. Srinivas himself had recognised both the existence of mobility within the caste system (1968; contributions in Silverberg 1968) and the effects of colonialism on caste (1987). Frank Conlon, in charting the formation of a caste (the Chitrapur Saraswat Brahmins) over a period of more than two centuries, had argued convincingly that ‘the classical definitions of caste do not necessarily accommodate the full range of possible fission and fusion processes which lie in the background of what at a given moment may be seen as a unified and clearly bounded group’ (1977: 8). Nonetheless, the feature that distinguishes the Cohn-inspired ‘post-colonial’ studies of caste is the claim that caste (or at least the ways in which we have come to recognise it today) actually gets invented in the colonial moment, responding to the pragmatics of colonial governance. It is argued that the tendency to reduce the logic of societies to a single theoretical and substantive lever as ‘caste’ is problematic. For one, as has been noted, ‘the discussion of the theoretical issues tends (surreptitiously) to take on a local cast, while on the other
hand the study of other issues in the place in question is retarded, and thus the overall nature of the...interpretation of the particular society runs the risk of serious distortion' (Appadurai 1986a: 358).

In perspective is the 'gate-keeping function' that the concept of caste has served vis-à-vis Indian society. Consistent with this function, it has been postulated that 'the ghost of colonial sociology' still haunts Indian studies, even that the '(a)nthropologists of India have themselves remained so firmly wedded to a Dumontian position (even in dissent) that India has become marginalized as the land of castes' (Dirks 1997: 123).

Yet, through some curious modes of argumentation, these works, invigorated and charged by a moral–political desire to re-vest the caste-d subject with agency, which they allege is denied by such totalising, exoticising and essentialising discourses (of which Louis Dumont is taken to be the most articulate explicator; cf. Parkin 2003: 115–26), themselves end up denying agency to all excepting the colonial authority. Once it acquires the magical brush—of either Orientalism or colonial governmentality—it has little patience or even the need to attend to the seemingly useless yet endless finer distinctions between a Weber and a Dumont, a Dumont and a Srinivas, an Ambedkar and a Gandhi. Further, it is the suggestion of a radical break in the moment of colonialism, vis-à-vis both Indian society as a whole and caste in particular, that is perplexing. If 'caste today' is indeed an 'invention' of colonialism, guided primarily by the imperatives of governmentality, then the most interesting and important (if not the only) aspect of the 'presents' of caste is the question of the modern requirements of governmentality and, therefore, the entire realm of the anthropologically interesting questions of community formation, identities and identifications, horizons of meaning, ethics and rules of behaviour vis-à-vis the self and the other, patterns of action and innovation, etc., either become suspect at worst or at best useless. Setting limits to this 'invention' thesis is an urgent task for at least two reasons: it could decry the need to attend to the very many ways in which the very many differently situated actors responded to the making of caste by the (post)colonial authority; it could even deny consideration of the possibility that governmental imperatives barely touched many significant aspects of caste.
Notwithstanding their differences with one another, what appears to characterise much of the dominant diagnoses of contemporary caste is a will to partialise and particularise caste to certain spaces and people. Contrary to Fuller’s reading that ‘on the subject of caste…anthropologists and sociologists have generally been more confident about structural continuity than contemporary change’ (1996: 1), it appears that the scholarship is increasingly driven to posit structural breaks. The anointment and strict circumscription of caste in politics, ‘lower castes’ and their movements and assertions, governmentality, villages, private/domestic realms, ‘tradition’ and so on, and consequently its erasure from the converse—urban, secular, modern, ‘upper caste’, etc.—is clearly problematic. The most significant corrective to such invisibilisations has not only come from the lower-caste movements and intellectuals (Phule, Periyar and Ambedkar being the early articulators, but it continues in various hues) but also from traditions of scholarship sympathetic to these articulations (studies of the non-Brahmin movement in Tamil Nadu is a particularly rich instance). These have insistently drawn attention to the ability of caste (and caste-regulated resources and practices) to reinvent in newer, even antithetical circumstances. They have pointed to the myriad subtleties with which elite castes present themselves as secularised modern subjects, supposedly shorn completely of the ‘abhorring’ traces of caste and thereby arrogating themselves with the role of spokesperson of the new nation, modernity, etc. (see Geetha and Rajadurai 1998: esp. Ch. 1).

These are important correctives to the growing blindness to caste and this work on the Brahmin identity seeks to further this trajectory. Yet, the present proposal for a reorientation sees even this call to attend to dimensions of distributive justice in terms of caste as again being too restrictive. What is at stake here really is the question: what are the ways in which we can think of caste in contemporary circumstances that are, of course, intimated by caste’s ability to discriminate and oppress but still not subsume everything else that happens in the world of castes in the rubric of legitimation–contestation and domination–resistance?

To be sure, any such recuperation of the caste question will have to begin with acknowledging the very modernity of caste—
of the fact that caste can and has reinvented itself throughout its history and especially in modernity. Yet, such an acknowledgement must not blind us to both issues of continuity and mere renovation. By far the only conceptual lever that has sought to grasp the diverse and contradictory changes that caste has undergone in the modern period is Dumont’s thesis on ‘substantialisation’.

Seeking to account for the changes that have occurred in the world of castes, Dumont ventures to suggest that we look at it as a transition from ‘structure’ to ‘substance’.

[There is] a transition from a fluid, structural universe in which the emphasis is on interdependence and in which there is no privileged level, no firm units, to a universe of impenetrable blocks, self-sufficient, essentially identical and in competition with one another, a universe in which the caste appears as a collective individual...as a substance. (Dumont 1980: 222, emphasis in original)

Along the contours of this transition, caste entities are no longer relational and therefore interdependent, but, as Dumont puts it, ‘each caste [has become] an individual confronting other individuals’, seemingly accepting equality (ibid.: 227), if only in the secondary domains of economy and politics. A large body of scholarship that either feeds off or into the ‘presents’ of caste seems to validate the thesis of the substantialisation of caste in the modern condition. This is so even if individual scholars have sought to distance themselves from Dumont’s obsessions, whether it be his classification of ‘primary’ (religious) and ‘secondary’ (economics and politics) levels or his rendering of the temporal dimension of caste (the latter as a matter of ‘structure’ in the past and of ‘substance’ in the present) (see Fuller 1996; Hawthorn 1982).

Clearly, community and village studies (even by the 1950s) were testifying to a weakening of the hierarchical values of commensal restrictions and those of touchability (Mayer 1996; Sharma 2002: 60–62). In urban areas, the studies ventured to suggest, maintenance of caste rules had been rendered pretty much impossible. Likewise, the dynamic that obtains between caste and politics, as well as the recrudescence of caste-based movements,
have called attention to the decreasing visibility and legitimacy of caste as a hierarchical structure in such spaces. Gupta (2005) recently has analysed some of the foundational effects of the ongoing changes in the Indian village structure on caste, none more arresting for him than the assertion of caste patriotisms. Beteille (1991, 1996; also 2002) has sought to thematise a growing irrelevance of caste—both as a substantive and relational entity—among what is variously described as the ‘urban middle classes’, the ‘intelligentsia’, the ‘professionals’, or the ‘service class’. While most of his recent proclamations on caste have arrived with little evidence, the certainty marking them is startling. It is worth quoting him at some length.

Caste has ceased to play an active role in the reproduction of inequality, at least at the upper levels of social hierarchy where it is no longer an important agent of either social placement or social control….The recent attack on caste by egalitarians of both radical and liberal persuasions is misdirected even where it appears well-meaning. Caste should be attacked for its divisive role in electoral politics rather than its active role in the reproduction of inequality which is relatively small and clearly declining. The role of caste in politics is neither small nor declining. Caste is no longer an institution of any great strength among the influential urban intelligentsia; but it is an instrument of great force in mobilising political support in the country as a whole….Equality, at least at the higher levels of society, can no longer be significantly advanced by attacking caste. (Beteille 1991: 25)

Many scholars (Beteille 1996; Gould 1990; van der Burg 1991; Jain 1996) understand ethnicisation as the contemporary form that caste assumes. Some (Barnett 1977; van der Burg 1991; Dirks 2002; Fuller 1996) even suggest that substantialisation is in fact the ethnicisation of caste. Thus, Steve Barnett (1977), asserting that substantialisation can ‘also be understood as the transition from caste to ethniclike regional caste blocs’, suggests:

‘Ethniclike’ because each such unit is potentially independent of other such units, defined and characterized by a heritable substance internal to the unit itself and not affected, in terms of membership in the unit, by transactions with others outside
the unit. In an ethniclike situation, transactional ranking no longer orders the parts of the whole, and caste interdependence is replaced by regional caste bloc independence. (Ibid.: 402)

Yet, summing this scholarship within the language of substantialisation demands that the burdens of the larger Dumontian framework be addressed. Evidently, the scholarship would struggle—and even refuse—to bear such a load. Thus encoding the existing body of work on the contemporary avatars of caste as post facto authorising, the thesis of substantialisation remains problematic. Further, it appears that conceptualising substantialisation as ethnicisation does not help much, primarily because it strips the former of any distinctness, especially in explaining the particular transformations caste as an ideological system is undergoing but also because the term ethnic/ethnicity has been rendered too vague and imprecise.

While Dumont might himself be faulted for this conceptual indistinctness, the thesis of ‘substantialisation’ seems yet valuable in furthering engagement with the contemporaneity of caste. In his introduction to the edited volume Caste Today (1996), Fuller renders this formulation as a gradualist one. He seems to believe that the trope of caste is no more meaningful than as an obfuscation of more secular concerns—of class, for instance—and increasingly so. He also accepts Beteille’s thesis that among the so-called urban middle classes even the fructified form of the substantialisation of caste—as signifying cultural difference—has lost its significance. It is as though they inhabit a space outside caste. Fuller renders the dynamic even more complex, viewing substantialisation as a ‘self-contradictory process, because as it develops castes actually become more internally heterogeneous’ (1996: 13) and imploring that while relational hierarchical values might be expressed in the language of ‘cultural difference’, their operative significance is restricted to the private realm (for, caste and its morality cannot be defended publicly). Thus, the emphasis that ‘substantialisation is an ideological shift that simultaneously sharpens the divide between public and private behaviour and expression’ (Ibid.: 14). Further, caste actors’ ‘understandings of caste—what it is and what it means—are above all a denial, most explicitly in the
public domain, of the existence or continuing significance of caste in its “traditional” form (ibid.: 21); it is ‘remembered or imagined as their own past, a social and ideological reality that is now on the wane’ (ibid.). Fuller sees caste identity as cohabiting a space in which there are other identities that are in competition with each other for the allegiance of individuals and groups.

To be sure, these are crucial points of evaluation for this study of the dynamics of Brahmin identity in Karnataka. There could be more at stake in this formulation of substantialisation though. Gupta has recently remarked, ‘what made Dumont’s admission [in terms of the substantialisation thesis] less appealing is that he provided no analytical reason as to how and why a pure hierarchy could become parcellised into competing substantialised units’ (2004: xi). This criticism is perhaps mistaken, for one could argue that the influence of the modern ideological sources of self-making is so defining at certain levels in modern caste society that it enables caste to get substantialised at those levels. The key aspect here is the levels or spaces vis-à-vis which this is true. Even if one were to disagree with Dumont’s hierarchisation of primary and secondary/interstitial levels, the thesis itself keeps open the problem of which aspects of caste get substantialised and which escape this. If this is not treated carefully, then substantialisation gets to be conflated with ethnicisation, which is a less useful line of investigation; but, what is more, it also can lead one to overstate the impact of modernity—or colonialism or egalitarian ideology in some versions—on the structures of caste.

This still leaves out the question: does the adoption of this frame commit one to the instituting protocols of Dumont’s theory of caste—that is, would mapping the presents of caste within the rubric of substantialisation require us to validate the Dumontian framework in its entirety? Particularly, what becomes of the language and the identity of caste as Dumont comes to inscribe, as indeed the meanings he associates it with? Answering this question might not be a precondition for taking on ‘substantialisation’ if one were to take the latter to be just a heuristic device to make sense of the present. As far as my own purpose here is to present the problem of caste today as an open-ended question, Dumont’s thesis works as a point of departure—a useful one nonetheless, as long as it allows the dynamics of this process
to emerge from the field itself and thereby renders it as an empirical question, unfettered to a large extent by the very many predeter-
mained agendas available for approaching caste. While the thesis is open to acknowledging and accounting for the far-reaching effects that colonialism/modernity has had on caste, it can take on the Dalit perspectives that animate a historical sense of oppres-
sion and domination and not reduce these to a mere reactive (to colonial remaking) stance. It is also capable of addressing aspects of continuity, and of the everyday-ness of caste. Sub-
stantialisation also enables an analysis of the dynamic in terms of a collapse—or more precisely, a severe interrogation—of the meaningful universe of caste, its language and practices, and how individuals and communities respond to it.

So my starting point then for a rethink on the current certitudes on caste is to escape the particularisation of caste to specific times, places and people. This should not be taken to mean that caste claims the status of a gatekeeper in relation to Indian society, in that it mediates and permeates every social phenomenon that is worthy of our attention. Indeed as my own engagement with the Brahmin community will show, even studies that foreground the theme of casteness will have to encounter and then account for the ways in which casteness is at many levels sidelined, even if not transcended. The insistence to rethink particularisation is merely to, for one, remain alert to the many furtive ways in which caste gets to be articulated today. And more importantly to point to the necessity of a certain return to the much trodden path of crafting sociological descriptions of caste embedded in particular locales and moments.

My engagement with the Brahmin question, it must be admitted, began as an endeavour to re-cast(e) the Brahmin, seeking to deconstruct his/her will/pretension to masquerade as the modern secular self. I, quite effortlessly, found much to validate this line of enquiry (more on this in the next section). Yet, as I moved along looking at the varied registers of Brahmin self-making, many aspects of contemporary caste that have almost completely missed scholarly engagement began to take shape foregrounding both the necessity to study the single-caste contexts and study them in an ethno-historical mould. Susan Bayly, back in 1983, had noted that studies of single caste groups ’are beginning to outlive their usefulness’ and that ‘the future lies with studies which seek to
portray the evolution of relations between a variety of castes in
the context of the wider field of economic, religious and political
organization’ (Bayly 1983: 527). While the insistence is important
and is even authenticated by the recent trajectories of caste studies,
the need for a certain return (of course, on grounds that are majorly
reformulated) to studies of single caste groups is urgent. It enables
us to foreground the dynamics of practice, identification and of
becoming rather than being caste. This is important because,
notwithstanding recent preoccupations with contextualisation and
with ‘process’ as against ‘product’, most recent works have tended
to treat castes as finished, available products/identities that are
then deployed by people in various ways and for different
purposes. They have, in their anxiety to posit structural breaks,
largely ignored the often contradictory pulls that a ‘traditional’
entity such as caste faces in a secularising situation. The burdens
of the past engage critically and innovatively with the demands
of the present, both of which bind but also enable the caste-d
actors to re-make identities and identifications. It is this consistent
oscillation between senses of community and association that
characterises contemporary caste, as I hope to show in the case of
the Brahmins.

But, clearly, these questions and the processes I analyse in
the Brahmin instance might perhaps obtain in all caste contexts,
including the ‘lower castes’, if in different consistencies. As
suggested earlier, constituting the subaltern caste space as one
exhausted by the logic of domination–resistance, animated
exclusively in terms of assertion and collective mobilisation,
appears to have led to a near-complete negation of this line of
enquiry. Studies of the kind presented here can be conducted in
any caste context. The Brahmin case though facilitates this line
of inquiry, even if the specificities of this case are itself important
and demands critical engagement. These specificities are
outlined in the next section.

Representing the Contemporary Brahmin

This book seeks to disclose aspects of the world of caste by taking
recourse to what may be putatively described as the study of caste
in an ‘upper caste’ context, namely, the Brahmin community in
Being Brahmin, Being Modern

contemporary Karnataka. The categories ‘upper caste’ and ‘lower caste’, even as they are handy and ready-to-use, are ambiguous and slippery. They enter sociology (or the formal academic disciplines) from the ‘field’—where, being objects of contextual usage, they present some intractable problems to academics before they can serve as useful conceptual categories. For instance, the category of ‘upper caste’ may be used to signify any caste which is above one’s own, in which case the usage fixes on a certain systemic and relational notion of the ‘upper’. Most of the times, however, they constitute substantive definitions—some castes are ‘upper’ castes and some others are ‘lower’, and they are held to remain that way over time and across contexts. Even as these categorisations invoke the ritual orderings of purity and pollution, they are increasingly vested with connotations of the secular inequalities of power and economy. Besides, since they are substantive, they vary across regions.

Of course, within a polity or a region, one encounters a relatively stable and unambiguous understanding of who constitutes the ‘upper castes’ as well as the ‘lower castes’. In the specific context of Karnataka, only the Brahmin community is seen to constitute the space of the upper castes, particularly when ritual hierarchy is the issue. But if one brings economic and political factors into reckoning, then the category of upper caste would have to be expanded to include the Lingayats and the Vokkaligas (Srinivas’ ‘dominant caste’). What is significant is that the Brahmin community is represented as ‘upper’ on either or both of these counts, although, paradoxically enough, its visibility as commensurate with its status of being ‘upper caste’ has been diminishing in contemporary Karnataka.

My intention to focus on the dynamics of Brahmin identity does not derive exclusively from such shifting contexts. For one, the mode of contextualisation on offer seeks to rid the sociology of caste of an excessive (and even obsessive) concern with castes and communities from below. It is almost as if the lower castes come marked out as embodiments of an entrenched (and traditional) system, while the upper castes and the profiles

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9 The case of the Lingayats is a more contested one. They have been insistent that their community is treated on par if not better than the Brahmins. Some of these contests are discussed in Chapter 4.
attached to them represent a changing present, one whose contours must await a delineation of the traditional system. Even more ironically, the choice of a focus on the Brahmin community need not—and indeed does not—entail the possibility of a perspective from above. Given a now-long history of the non-Brahminical othering of Brahmins, the latter feels even more as a community under siege. It would be interesting to capture aspects of this sense of siege—as indeed the Brahmin response to this condition—as a window into the dynamics of Brahmin identity in contemporary Karnataka, something that this study sets out to do.

In a more constitutive sense, objectifying the Brahmin subject emanates also from the peculiar state of existence that the figure of the Brahmin has come to occupy in contemporary debates on caste. Although the figure of the Brahmin permeates all invocations and examinations of the structural and relational aspects of caste, the figure is conspicuous by its absence when the substantive aspects of caste are being either recalled or debated. The ‘Brahmin’ thus, in most debates on caste, is omnipresent, but the form of his/her presence is more as an idea or ideal than as an entity (an embodied person or even community). Indeed, T. N. Madan (1965), R. S. Khare (1970) and, more recently, Gilles Chuyen (2004) are arguably the only full-length studies that deal with the contemporariness of the Brahmin community, apart from the studies of Brahmin priests like the ones by K. Subramaniam (1974), Fuller (1984) and Jonathan Parry (1994).

While the ethnographic profiling of Brahmin contexts has remained a non-starter, summative evaluations of the Brahmin present have been attempted sporadically and in a piecemeal fashion, wherein two distinct lines of understanding can be noticed. Beteille, as we have seen, avoids recognising the caste locations of the ‘urban middle classes’ and the ‘intelligentsia’ that he speaks of, although a fair guess, at least with reference to the context of Karnataka as we will demonstrate in Chapter 3, would be that a determining number of individuals making up that category would come from the Brahmin fold. If this deduction is defensible, then the contours of Beteille’s diagnosis would have us believe that it is merely a matter of time before Brahmins would have very little to do with caste or, more accurately, with caste as a system. Caste would have lost a great deal
of legitimacy and influence, and could thereafter obtain as a form of ethnic or ethnicised identity, one that the ‘de-casted’ Brahmin individuals perceive to be significant in choosing life partners. My study will severely interrogate this prognosis. More recently, Fuller (1999) has proffered a formulation which understands contemporary Tamil Nadu as a situation wherein the Brahmin community faces decline and invisibility even as Brahminical cultural values themselves find greater acceptance. Again, this study of the Brahmans of Karnataka will critically engage with that representation.

At the other end as it were of the evaluative spectrum concerning the Brahmin figure are studies that frame the Brahmin question exclusively in terms of domination, as indeed of hegemony. A ‘will-to-dominance’ is seen as driving the contemporary Brahmin self that seeks, often successfully, to portray what really is its caste-propelled enunciation as secular. Some recent scholarship devoted to making sense of the non-Brahmin articulation in the Tamil-speaking region constructs the modern Brahmin in these terms. A particularly forceful instance of framing the Brahmin along such an axis is V. Geetha and S. V. Rajadurai’s work on the Tamil non-Brahmin movement (1998). More recently, M. S. S. Pandian, in his attempt to ‘plot the genealogies of the opposition between Brahmin and non-Brahmin’ in the Tamil context (2007: 6), has closely followed the script that the former work had outlined. While this is a useful point of entry into the dynamics of the Brahmin problem, it is inadequate in that it exhibits little patience with the rich ‘internal’ differentiations of the Brahmin. Neither does it accord integrity to the many enunciations of the Brahmin self. Before getting on to disclosing the methodological protocols of this study of the Brahmin community, it is useful here to articulate a position on these extant works.

These works place the crux of Brahmin domination in the Madras Presidency of the late colonial period in ‘the brahmin’s assumption of the status of a spokesperson for [the native] society, his appropriation of the voice of the people and his substitution of his resonant voice for that of the commonweal’ (Geetha and Rajadurai 1998: xiv–xv). In emphasising this rather than the Brahmin predomination of the colonial officialdom, they offer an important corrective to the earlier ‘intra-elite heartburn’ thesis of
David Washbrook (1976) and Christopher Baker (1976) (for a critique of Baker, see Pandian 1995). Evoking the multivocality of this Brahmin enunciation through an analysis of the discourses of nationalism and caste, they insistently draw attention to the ‘practice of a highly sophisticated art of self-representation’ (ibid.: 19) by the Brahmans seeking to ‘secure for [themselves] a universality’ (ibid.: 41). But the problems are many in such a construction of the modern Brahmin. Most importantly, a corporateness around the idea, identity and identification of Brahmin is attributed pre factol in their analysis. Of course, they strive to demonstrate the many-sidness of this persona, for instance, in terms of a reformist as against an ‘orthodoxy’; yet, the range of Brahmin self-recuperation and articulation that they bring forth are insistently and consistently understood as a stable ‘will’ to dominate, to mediate the newer reality and its demands for preserving its ‘own privileges’ (ibid.: 29). What is more, they even gesture towards the ‘flexible and accommodative’ nature of the ‘discursive energy’ of the Brahmin (ibid.: 37). Yet, this flexibility and accommodation does nothing fundamental to the stability of the Brahmin will, which remains unreflexive, unchanging and impervious to the force of both ‘external’ contexts (collapse of a meaningful universe, availability of new tools for self-crafting, non-Brahmin interrogation of its pretensions, etc.) and internal flux (resulting from being privy to processes and demands of secularisation, urbanisation, enlargement of boundaries of the habitus, etc.). Brahmin, in this understanding, is an already done entity, cocky about what his/her ‘interests’ are (Pandian 2007: 68) and with a finished and unitary consciousness privy to the powers, privileges and status of both the traditional dispensation and the emergent reality. Contrast this with the non-Brahmin who has to cobble together a self out of its myriadness and contradictory consciousnesses, privileged neither by cultural and symbolic nor by economic capitals. This one-dimensional imagination of the Brahmin figure and consciousness is simply untenable, as I hope to demonstrate.

Pandian begins with the assertion that in tracing the genealogies of the categories of the Brahmin and non-Brahmin in the Tamil region, ‘the Tamil Brahmin is the central figure around whom [his] book revolves. The very term “non-Brahmin”, in its lexicalisation, makes the Brahmin central’ (2007: 6). For
him the Brahmin trajectory is one marked by dominance but not hegemony, for ultimately the Brahmin is unable to effect a national–popular historic bloc ending in an enduring state of ‘self-imposed isolation’ (ibid.: 94). Yet, if anything, Pandian is only more unequivocal in constructing a unidimensional Brahmin figure. He attempts to demonstrate the seamless unity that obtains in the Brahmin self, which at once can speak as and on behalf of the nationalist, the Hindu, the modern, and the secular, which can be historically authentic and yet be modern (which he calls Brahmin hybridity). This enables the Brahmin to interchange his material dominance into cultural dominance and vice versa. Pandian vests with the Brahmin self the Herculean task of being all these at once, and simultaneously, also unitary and stable. The predetermined construction is then illustrated with convenient instances from what evidently is a rich spectrum, which is then validated across all such instances as the Brahmin self. He does not ask what this simultaneity does to the making of the Brahmin self, notwithstanding the passing admission:

The twin roles—being authentic and being modern—which this Brahmin tried to balance in his everyday life was his inheritance from the contradictory demands of colonialism. It was this balancing act which both opened up as well as limited new possibilities for the Brahmin in this period. (Ibid.: 37)

For it is the supposed will to dominance that directs all such evidently contradictory pulls into one stable, if ultimately unsuccessful trajectory. It is almost impossible to see the Brahmin in this scheme of things as a product of the times. The deliberateness and conscious patterns of action that are attributed to the Brahmin are difficult to sustain. The very real possibility—as I hope to show in the case of the Karnataka Brahmin—that the structural demands of becoming modern exceeded the Brahmin will to domination becomes an impossible question here. Pandian also erects distinctly different and autonomous domains of feeling, consciousness and action for the Brahmin and the non-Brahmin. This allows him—like many others—to simply deny the need and possibility to talk of a shared lifeworld of casteness. In challenging earlier orthodoxies of consent,
interdependency, unity, etc., of culture through notions of contestations, divergences, pluralities, contradictions, etc., yet another orthodoxy emerges which renders any understanding of shared ‘doing culture’ not only difficult but also morally suspect. Further, the non-Brahmin recuperation of the idea, identity and even the ideal of Brahmin was not characterised by an unequivocal rejection and antipathy. There are instances of non-Brahmin investment of positiveness in the idea of Brahmin and thereby usually a charge that those who are Brahmins merely ‘by birth’ are betraying the ideality of the same. This then further complicates the ‘burden’ of being Brahmin.

To say all this, of course, is not to deny the existence, as indeed the limited explanatory efficacy, of the Brahmin as the secular self and thereby his/her reinvention of a certain power and dominance over caste society. As I have emphasised before as well, the ‘field’ that is encountered and recuperated in the course of this work affirms this thesis in many important ways. It also, for one, greatly nuances the construction by gesturing towards the possibility of a disjunction between legitimation and domination. For, even as the idea and the attendant legitimacy attached to Brahmin identity has come to be increasingly delegitimated over the last century or so, Brahmin dominance over caste society has been harder to contest. More significantly though, my work seeks primarily to set limits to this claim and chronicle the process through which the modern Brahmin engages with his/her Brahminness as indeed to account for all the attendant contextual and historical equations.

All along, ‘Brahminness’ has almost always been spoken of in the singular; some clarifications are in order here. Clearly, as will be evident from the subsequent chapters, there indeed are many formations of the self that speak in the name of the Brahmin and it is primary that we retain a sensitivity to this field of possibilities and the instability therein. For instance, even as a significant number of Brahmin individuals and families now are ambivalent about their own status in terms of the dominant, overly ritualised construction of the Brahmin,10 newer signifiers

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10 Interestingly, an overwhelming number of Brahmin families and individuals contacted during fieldwork for interviews and
and significations utilise the sign of the Brahmin. This field of variation needs description and explication. Nevertheless, this attention to the field of variation opens out the important question of how and why this field of variation is called Brahmin. What justifies according a coherence to this field? A fundamental characteristic of the coherence is the rhetorical and enunciative deployment—in various consistencies of desiring to inhabit as well as distance oneself from—of the idea and identity of being Brahmin. It is also a question of the materiality of the practices of this identity that allows us to call it Brahmin. As shall be demonstrated in the course of this book, invocation of one’s Brahmin identity was the only necessary and sufficient condition for a great number of individuals in the last century to gain access to crucial material resources. This enabled the Brahmin community to become an overwhelmingly urban and middle-class group, which in turn made possible a series of invocations of transcendence of caste-ness/secularisation/of becoming ‘modern’. And, these networks continue to be resilient in many ways to the present. Accordingly, in seeking to address issues of variation as well as coherence that constitute the field of Brahmin identity, I will explore many registers (detailed in the next chapter) and in turn problematise caste action and even query specific modalities of the survival of caste as an institution in the present.

In keeping with the protocols for a renewed sociology of caste and working against their grain, this study attempts to combine a focus on both the synchronic and diachronic realities of the contemporary Brahmin community. By means of such a grafting of the historical onto the space of the present, I seek to resist the conversations said: ‘But we are not adequate/complete Brahmins; you must interview that man [some individual they know of or even merely heard or read about]’. This discomfiture is important and needs attention; but it should not lead one to then conclude that it is a transcendence, so to say, of being caste-d on the part of these subjects, and further by implication, it is an ‘external’ (viz., the researcher’s) imposition of this identity on the individuals and families in question. What is at stake is actually the remakings of what is to be Brahmin that are in creative but binding tension with an ‘originary’ and dominant idea of what is to be Brahmin.
contemporary impulse both to ‘substantialise caste’ as well as to announce a radical break with its past. Clearly, the thesis of substantialisation is not the last word on the contemporaneity of caste, and indeed the process itself is self-contradictory. What it entails is a more empirical and perceptual engagement with the world of contemporary caste(s), something that I seek to do in the course of investigating the dynamics of Brahmin identity in contemporary Karnataka.

Positioning the Brahmin problematic in these ways surely calls for a delineation of protocols concerning method. But before that, there are two issues that need reiteration, even if a fuller treatment would have to await the flow of this study, and ideally need to be taken up in the concluding chapter.

First, is a plea for a reconstitution of scholarly interest in caste mere revisionism? Am I plainly suggesting that we get back to the earlier preoccupation of anthropological field studies of caste, which focussed on single ‘castes’? By that is the implication that the more recent trends are being discarded? That certainly is not the case. Indeed, as will be evident, the specific ways in which the Brahmin dynamics is constituted in this study owes a great deal to what have been called the post-Dumontian trajectories (Searle-Chatterjee and Sharma 1994)—the urge to historicise the phenomenon, to attend to contexts of caste, to take on the larger fields of forces in which caste is irretrievably implicated and is reproduced, if in startlingly different ways, to see caste as a field of relations of power, and so on. Thus, even as the study seems to be innovating from within the anthropological understanding of caste, it is not mere revisionism that is in perspective here.

It is not even just a plea to attend to details obtaining in a single-caste context. The argument then is not simply that the ways in which the Brahmin is constructed in recent scholarship needs refinement or texturing. At stake here are the ways the recent pathways have come to constitute the phenomenon of caste—almost singularly in terms of domination–resistance and legitimation–contestation. Admittedly, the Brahmin case, particularly in the context of south India, is an opportune one in illustrating the deficits of such an engagement. However, I wish to emphasise that the processes this study describes and analyses in the instance of Brahmins is available in other caste contexts too, including the
subaltern ones, and that focusing on them will enable us to interrogate the closures and the fate of replication that caste studies increasingly face.

The second issue concerns the Brahmin case itself. In complicating both the available modes of retrieving the contemporary Brahmin subjectivity—viz., viewing the Brahmin as a subject position that has (i) transcended its casteness, with the traces that still remain being mere vestiges of the past or those that provide the comforts of the familiar; or (ii) remained obdurately caste-d, if in different ways, to merely reinvent and reproduce its dominance over the caste order, I do not want my overtures to be misread as a project that is blind to the violence that caste as a system continues to unleash. Some may even suspect a status quoist position here. I can only ask for some patience from the reader and assert that even as I argue for rethinking our current certainties on caste, it leads neither to a simple case of revisionism nor an argument for and on behalf of the dominant. In focus is an effort to combine a plurality of methods, attentive at once to the perceptual space of Brahmins, with theoretical abstractions issuing off a conception of caste in/and/as identity. The next section details the chapter schema.

A Note on the Chapterisation

The book is sequenced as follows. The present chapter contextualised the study within the trends and perspectives that have dominated the sociology of caste. In the course of this summation, I have also given a glimpse of the object and concerns configuring the present study. The second chapter incorporates concerns that are primarily about method. The axis of a ‘movement’ framework is actively repudiated, and a perspective on caste in/and/as identity is explored. A note on the research materials used and the sampling strategies adopted is also included.

Following this chapter, the next four go on to describe the dynamics of Brahmin identity across three prominent registers. Chapter 3 maps a contemporary history—that is, over the twentieth century—of the Brahmin community. This exercise, I seek to show, is not merely one of contextualising the study.
The trajectories that the community undertook are constitutively enmeshed in the ways the modern Brahmin identity recuperates itself. The dominance of Brahmins in the emerging spaces of the modern, the secularising experience that its individuals undergo, the consolidation of social and symbolic capital—all these are elaborated in this chapter. The Brahmin identity begins to posit itself increasingly in secularised terms—as a self whose identity is perceived to be outside or beyond the realms of caste. Such secularised imaginations of the self stand in sharp contrast to the non-Brahmin recuperation of the Brahmin persona, which insists on seeing the Brahmin as primarily a caste-self. It is this contestation that in many enduring ways structures the parameters of action within which the modern Brahmin identity begins to play itself out (while also reinforcing the sense of siege that the community experiences).

Accordingly, Chapter 4 encounters aspects of the non-Brahminical othering of the Brahmin identity and community. It examines the responses and negotiations with that othering on the part of Brahmins in the late colonial period in the region that subsequently comes to be identified as the state of Karnataka, particularly the Princely State of Mysore. This chapter also describes the other intersecting voices, such as that of the Lingayats and the contending imaginations of the self obtaining within the Brahmin fold, in order to map the shifting identifications that the Brahmin self foregrounds. The descriptions that get encoded in these two chapters—3 and 4—demonstrate that merely recounting these trajectories will not exhaust the space of the making of the modern Brahmin identity. The latter is also shaped by self-interpretations and self-representations that are made possible by the modern conditions in which the community found itself being overwhelmed.

Chapter 5 covers the ground of the ‘associational’. At once a conceptual and historical mapping of the efforts to bring Brahmins together under the umbrella of organisations and modern caste associations, the chapter encounters the scale of corporatisation achieved by the Brahmin community as a whole, while going on to detail the efforts to form associations at the level of individual Brahmin jatis as well. We will see how cases of Brahmin mobilisation raise some very crucial questions for the extant literature on the rise of caste associations in the colonial and post-
colonial periods. The terms of this appraisal also encounter the ground of Brahmin associations in the present. It addresses the contemporary initiatives to form both corporate and individual jati associations and examines the differential recuperation of the Brahmin category that obtains in such enterprises.

Chapter 6 is based on extensive interviews conducted among various Brahmin families in different locations of Karnataka. They seek to describe and complicate the parameters of the contemporary state of the Brahmin community and identity.

The concluding chapter revisits the critical premises and points of departure marking the study as a whole in an effort to arrive at a probable approach to understand caste especially in its contemporaneity and regional specificity.
Any methodological move which seeks to foreground ‘caste’ as a central axis in spaces that are not marked out as such will have to encounter questions about the casteness of caste (as indeed the bases of caste action) today. In this chapter, I lend some concreteness to my study of caste action by outlining a framework of appraisal (and justification) that is at some remove from the perspective of a social movement’s vocabulary and revolves around the contemporary fashion of theorising identities.

This chapter attends, in the first two sections, to the dimensions attached to a conception of caste in/and/as identity. The last section lays out the specific operative contours of this study more substantively, notes the research materials used and the strategies adopted in the field, and presents a general profile of the respondents.

Caste in/and/as Identity

An excessive preoccupation with the substantive avatars of caste—as constituting a mobilisational resource, a collective identity and a movement of self-assertion—has contributed to a commitment to what can be grossly termed as a ‘social movements’ framework and to its methodological demands. This framework as extended to the reality of caste would entail the following characteristics. For one, the movements framework can only work if it presumes...
caste as a self-accepted, demonstrative identity—more accurately, caste as a ‘hard’ identity. Now, while the presumed hardness of caste as an identity is not by itself a problem, it is what follows in the wake of that presumption that freezes the operative dimensions of caste. In other words, it elides the question of identification altogether—as against the insistence of a hard identity—taking both the identities of the self and the other as a priori, in some logical sense fixed and owned unequivocally by the subjects of such identities. It is almost as if the a priori postulation of a caste identity is enough to characterise all the actions and perceptions of its subjects. ‘Caste’ here becomes primarily a mobilisational resource which effectively and successfully gets its subjects into collective and unequivocal action on its behalf.

Also, social movements are definitionally collective in nature, and represent deliberate and deliberated upon spheres of action in terms of clear and (at least in intent) unequivocal means and ends. The framework, consequently, takes on a normative axis of appraisal all too easily. The normative compulsion is built into the very logic of the social movement’s framework (whether articulated in terms of a ‘relative deprivation’ theme or organised around a mobilisational idiom and even rendered as an identity-centered articulation). It is for this reason that, for instance, contesting claims about justice, equality, and, in more recent times, ‘difference’, seem to overpower this axis (see Fraser 1997: esp. Introduction and Ch.1).

The ‘movements’ framework, by exclusively focusing on castes as always-already substantivised entities (or blocs), cannot remain sensitive to the internal dynamics of caste legitimation as indeed contestation. What is more, the ‘movements’ register does not allow castes, either as fluid identities or as normative communities, to exhibit an ambivalence about their ‘casteness’—the givenness of caste-mediated identities being always collectively ordered and definitional to the ‘movements’ framework.

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assertions from below—identities as being decisively a question of empowerment—any reminder of their inherent instability works against the very justification of studying them. Consequently, we need to be drawing on an alternative repertoire of theoretical sources to formulate the question of identity and identification. Of course, subsuming caste to a logic of identity and identification runs the risk of according a reified status to it. But crucially, the implication of stability and relative permanence that caste actors seem to recognise about the identities they express is important in making sense of their meaning-making activities and the action patterns they exhibit.

In many ways, the thesis of substantialisation can be seen to prefigure efforts to understand caste in/and/as identity. It also instructs efforts to map the transformations in caste under the rubric of ethnicity. One can conceive a fit between caste understood as a substantivised independent bloc and the idea of identity conceived as a form of self-identification and belonging. In either case, it is not a logical necessity that such entities/identities are seen to be relative to each other, ordered on a principle that governs all such entities/identities. But this fit also enables a re-theorisation of the changes within the space of identities and substantivised entities, by allowing for

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2 Fuelled by the ‘cultural turn’ of social theory (Alexander and Seidman 1990) and the concomitant demand to focus on the fragment or the periphery, ‘identity’ has come to occupy a central position in social science theorisation. See Hall (1990) and Bendle (2002) for an account. The latter demonstrates the widespread and diverse concern with identity, even as it explores how problematic this concern has become in contemporary sociology. See Brubaker and Cooper (2000) for a forceful argument for jettisoning the very concept of identity since it has assumed such totalising proportions as to remain useful as an analytical tool. For the excesses of identity theorising and its associated politics, see Appiah (1994). As the latter makes clear, much of the preoccupation with identities goes well beyond clearing a space for the same to make strong suggestions about how those identities should be used. In doing so, identity politics and theorisations in terms of identities may execute a displacement of their own, in the process reproducing the essentialisms they condemn.

3 See Barnett (1977) for an early attempt to look at substantialisation of caste through the prism of identity and identity choice.
differentiation within individual groups and individuals within castes. Indeed some castes might become more substantialised than others, even as individuals and families within castes could become uncomfortable with substantialised notions of identity than others within their own caste. Substantialisation, on this register of identity formation, is primarily a process of ‘identity choice’ in which caste is but one of the many such choices available for individuals to choose from and act upon, depending upon the context. Equally, it designates a process by which individual or ethnic-like identities proliferate and compete with each other without any necessary binding logic that relativises them vis-à-vis each other.

The foregoing constitute important reminders for a re-theorisation of caste in/and/as identity. The questions about caste identity nonetheless remain—whether factored into the process and thesis of substantialisation or not. How does caste in/and/as identity unfold itself? Even if caste is privy to ‘substantialisation’, what of caste is getting substantialised—is it the ways in which individuals represent caste or the parameters of caste behaviour and action or is substantialisation obtaining at both these levels? Do the different aspects of casteness, and the members of different castes, undergo substantialisation differentially? Can we speak of caste identity and identification outside the rubric of substantialisation? Does the thesis retain legitimacy outside the parameters of the Dumontian theory of caste? Even more crucially, why is it necessary that caste as a structural principle and caste as substance remain mutually exclusive to one another—that is to say, to foreground a different axis, is substantialisation a process very unique to the modern moment? Have not caste actors made meanings of and worked on their caste identities and identifications in a substantialised sense before this moment? And conversely, is it the case that caste as a structure of relations, interdependently made sense of, is no longer available to the caste actors? Also, at another level, if caste is both continuous and changing, how does one then approach the problematic? Besides, ‘continuous’ and ‘changing’ in relation to what and compared to what? Broadly, these are some of the questions that this study will attempt to tackle. In what follows, I shall set out the concrete ways in which I have gone about operationalising the research focus and problem.
On Identity and Identification and the Question of Othering

It is important to approach any judgement about identity as a judgement about oneself in particular, or about some particular person or group. Thus, the question ‘Who am I?’ points to certain values, allegiances, some community perhaps, outside of which one could not function as a fully human subject. Of course, one might be able to go on living as an organism outside any values, allegiance, or even community. But what is peculiar to a human subject is the ability to ask and answer questions about what really matters, what is of the highest value, what is truly significant, most beautiful and so on. The conception of identity, therefore, is broadly the view that outside the horizon provided from some master value or allegiance or community membership, one would be unable to function as a full human subject and would not be in a position to ask and answer these questions effectively.

Within this idea of identity and identification—the latter being taken to designate a process of having an identity—it is important to note that there is no claim that ‘others’ will be unable to function outside one’s horizon. In fact, such a claim constitutes an inherent limit within extant formulations of identity, the expectation being that the horizon of the self implicates an ‘other’ (or others). Thus, for instance, Richard Jenkins, for whom social identification is ‘knowing who we are and who others are’ (2000: 8). Since identities derive from mutually implicated relations of similarity and difference—“(s)imilarity and difference are implicit in the other; one does not make sense without the other” (ibid.: 7)—they can only be understood with reference to one another and not in isolation. To speak of ‘identifying’ is also to simultaneously speak of othering. It is, as Jenkins avers, the

internal and the external moments of the dialectic of identification: how we identify ourselves, how others identify us, and the ongoing interplay of these in processes of social identification. This is also simultaneously, a matter of how we identify them, how they identify themselves, and so on. (Ibid.: 7, emphasis in original)

But the point that needs to be emphasised—contrary to most expansive theorisations of identity and identification (for the
latter, see also Jenkins 1996)—is that the horizon necessary for oneself is not essential for human beings as such. There are some things that we might judge universally necessary—e.g., a minimal freedom from utter deprivation, or a minimum of caring for children—and one might argue that without these, nobody could become a fully human subject. Consequently, the claim about identity is particularised, and needs to be approached as so. One may come to realise that belonging to a given culture is part of one’s identity, because outside of the reference points of this culture one could not even begin to put together those questions of meaning and significance that are peculiarly in the domain of the human subject (cf. Taylor 1985: Part I). In other words, it is this culture that helps to identify oneself, and in the context of which one gets to know who one is as a human subject.

It is important to recognise that the question about identity and identification is a modern one; as Charles Taylor puts it, it belongs to modern, emancipated subjects (1989: 3–52 passim). According to him, for the medieval man, there could not have been a question about the conditions of human subjecthood for the individual; indeed that one can speak only anachronistically of the identity of medieval man. In a sense, for the medieval self, there were conditions for man as such (especially in the context of a relationship with God) which one could turn their back on with disastrous consequences. The idea that conditions could be different for human subjects, Taylor holds, is inseparable from ‘modern emancipated humanism’ (ibid.: 3–24). Accordingly, being human is not just a matter of occupying the rank assigned to humans in a divinely ordained hierarchy; rather it is that our humanity is something we each discover in ourselves. To be human is not, therefore, to be discovered in the order of things in which people are set, but in the nature that people discover in themselves (Schneewind 1998).

Of course, it needs to be reiterated that emancipated humanism does not by itself lead to the notion of identity (as disclosed above); it is a necessary but not sufficient condition. It is not enough to imagine the human being as an active agent fulfilling his or her purposes in the world. Indeed, for the notion of identity to take shape, there is also the question of a horizon of meaning that will be essential for this or that person’s being human. The need for a horizon of meaning, and therefore of a sense of
individual and national differences, is crucial for the question of identity and identification to take shape.\footnote{For Taylor, the importance of a horizon of meaning and of individual and national differences comes in the Romantic period (late eighteenth to the early and mid-nineteenth centuries), with what he characterises as the question of identity. For each individual to discover in himself or herself what his/her humanity consists in, s/he needs a horizon of meaning, which can only be provided by some allegiance, group membership, cultural tradition (Taylor 1989: 368–90).}

On the terms of this account, then, coherence, vitality, depth, and maturity constitute the four dimensions of a fulfilled identity and/or identification (whether individual or collective). It seems to presuppose a theory of normative validity that is based on the authenticity and primacy of an identity or the process of having one. Not that this presupposition is inherently problematic, but the point is that it does not seem to be capable of accounting for the role of the ‘other’ (or others) in the constitution of identity. It is undeniably the case that a key dimension in the formation of identities is interaction with ‘others’. It is precisely the strength of Jenkins’ account (briefly recounted above) that due recognition is given to this fact, although of course the limitation of his analysis is that he tends to overemphasise the role of the other in the constitution of an identity. Chiefly, his categories of ‘internal identification’ and ‘external categorisation’—as part of what he terms the ‘internal and the external moments of the dialectic of identification’ (Jenkins 2000: 7)—while artful and disingenuous in disclosing the processes of othering in the constitution of an identity and/or identification, do not seem to be sufficiently attentive to the horizon of meaning (in the sense of Taylor recounted above) implicating identity and identification. Even as a sense of self (or identity, on our terms) is founded on a tendency to construct and even demonise ‘others’, these ‘others’ provide critique and destabilisation, rightly focusing on the coercions and contradictions of identity claims. To this should be added, however, the contrary contention that in our reflections about identity and identification, we must assign equal priority to how human agents (as encumbered selves) think about matters, of how they perceive and represent those matters to themselves.
In the most general sense, accordingly, an identity and identification can and ought to possess a degree of self-integrity or self-congruency—enough to allow for its self-realisation or ‘flourishing’. In order to be so, an identity must be autonomous, but this is only one aspect of identity. In fact, for an identity to be autonomous, it must also be constituted intersubjectively in a struggle for recognition. But again, this intersubjective dimension of identity is just one further aspect of identity. Finally, in order to be authentic, an identity must posit itself as a project and articulate that project with its self-understanding. That is, an identity distinguishes itself by the relationship between its sense of purpose (who or what one wants to be) and its current self-evaluation (who or what one currently is). It is this aspect of identity that needs particular emphasis. Autonomy is crucial to pursuing projects of self-realisation, and it is undeniably the case that identities are formed through interaction with others.

It should be clear from this account of identity and identification that the present study combines an empirical/descriptive understanding of identity and identification with a normative/explanatory interest in the same. It is the force of this combined recognition that my comments above on the process of having an identity have sought to record. In what follows, I shall seek to further firm up the coordinates of this study of the Brahmin identity in contemporary Karnataka.

Introducing the Field

To be sure, much of the literature on the question has been concerned to deliver precisely into the framework that we are here seeking to avoid, namely, that of social movements.\(^5\)

Broadly, in keeping with the strictures above, the challenge is not (only) to study the ‘origins’ of an idea or movement—something that the literature just cited does pretty well, in terms of both the conditions which caused them and those which gave them their peculiar shape or means of expression. Rather, the specific imperative is to address (i) how these objective conditions were incorporated into a larger ideological scheme (if any) and why these conditions (and not others) should have assumed a new importance; and (ii) the specific modalities of caste agency and response exhibited by and within this perceptual field. The present study shares much in common with the latter emphasis.

The modern imagination (whether scholarly or official, as indeed of lay actors themselves) accords the Brahmins of Karnataka an always-already corporatised, internally homogeneous ‘castenness’. More generally, the identity or identification is invested with a sacredness or religiosity which, although individual Brahmins might not emblematise, also translates into a normative definition of the community. For the specific and limited tasks that this identification of being ‘Brahmins’—of making up a ‘caste’, even constituting a kind of normative community—is expected to perform, such a postulation of identity seems to be sufficient. For instance, as far as the modern state is concerned, with respect to its policies for the upliftment of the backward classes and Dalit communities, categorising the Brahmin caste as ‘forward’ was (and is, until recently of course) relatively unproblematic.\(^6\) Most of the Backward Classes committees and commissions appointed by the state from 1918 (the year when the first such committee was constituted) have all presumed an internal cohesion as obtaining within the Brahmin fold. As argued in the previous chapter, even scholarly literature on the backward classes and on their movements has largely been content with looking at Brahmins as a homogenised whole, even

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\(^6\) There has recently been a demand, at both the national and state levels, for reservations targeting economically deprived ‘forward’ caste individuals.
when occasionally drawing attention to the internal distinctions, hierarchies and divisions that obtain within the fold.\footnote{Manor, for instance, recognises that ‘the Brahmins of Mysore State were in no sense a monolithic, integrated whole’ (1977a: 33), but does not elaborate.}

It is essential to recognise the validity and necessity—and not merely sufficiency—of such an assumption, given the remarkable similarities that exist in the contemporary trajectories of the different ‘kinds’ of Brahmins, with particular reference to their unprecedented scales of urbanisation and appropriation of modern institutional spaces. The identity of being a Brahmin did and continues to perform certain essential symbolic and material functions in a modern and secularising environment. Quite emphatically, questions of marriage and kinship, even to this day, require a foregrounding of the identity of being Brahmin, even of a specific denomination at that. However, by the beginning of the twentieth century itself, in establishing and sustaining informal networks that enabled Brahmin men to come to the cities to pursue modern education and employment, the significance attached to the internal distinctions had undergone a transformation. As we shall see, the self-identity of being a Brahmin was the only necessary and sufficient condition to acquire an entry into these networks. Not that there was any complete and decisive erasure of the importance of other particularities, but being Brahmin was still sufficient. Thus, the corporatised imagination of the Brahmins has performed and continues to perform crucial functions, and Brahmins themselves participate in recuperating their selves as being so (of course, with significant oscillations and ambivalences).

During the public debates on the government’s decision to implement the recommendations of the First Backward Classes Committee (1918), the Brahmins, in their defense, did invoke the internal differentiations that obtain among the different ‘kinds’ of Brahmins. They had then suggested that the Havyakas and the Sanketis have remained backward as far as their share in modern sources and resources was concerned. Thereafter too, Brahmins have engaged themselves in bitter and acrimonious public and private contestations against each successive backward classes
The following is a cursory description of the internal distinctions that obtain among Brahmins. All Brahmins owe allegiance to one of the three philosophical traditions—Advaita (whose adherents are called the Smartas), Dvaita (the Madhvas) and Vishishtadvaita (the Srivaishnavas). These three traditions owe their significance to the three Brahmin philosophers—Sankaracharya (period not agreed upon and opinions range from

\[\text{For a general and dated but detailed description of some of these internal distinctions, see Thurston and Rangachari (1909: 267–393).}\]
placing him anywhere from 500 BC to AD 800), Madhvacharya (thirteenth century) and Ramanujacharya (eleventh century) respectively (Rao 2002: 5–6). The adherents are distinguished by popularly recognised and understood (particularly male) body insignia that they wear during the performance of elaborately defined daily rituals. The distinctions are also philosophical in nature, bordering on differences in formulating the origins and goals of (the Brahmin) life.

However, these three traditions are further internally differentiated. The distinctions that obtain among the Smartas in particular are great in number—like the Sivalli, Hoysala Karnataka, Badaganadu, Seeranadu, Mulkanadu, Sanketi, Iyer, and so on. Most of these owe allegiance to the Sringeri Smarta matha (Hindu monastery), one of the monastic orders supposedly established by the Sankaracharya himself. The Madhvas too display a range of distinctions, but these are based on the mathas they owe allegiance to. For instance, there are eight Madhva mathas in Udupi, apart from those in other parts of Karnataka, and families are distributed across these mathas. Even the Srivaishnavas are internally differentiated, on the basis of regional and philosophical distinctions.

I shall be confining the term ‘jati’ to refer to such specific entities spread across the Brahmanical tradition. Many Brahmins themselves, for instance, often use the term ‘caste’ to refer to three distinct axes—of being Brahmin, even Smarta (say), while also constituting themselves as Sivalli (say)—although the pressures emanating from the sense of siege that many of them experience forces them increasingly to speak of being one distinct corporate community. This latter modality is the legitimised discourse within the space of larger corporate associations, which consistently urge Brahmins to shed their ‘internal’ identities (they call them ‘sects’ or ‘sub-caste’) in the face of consistent attacks from ‘the others’. This oscillation between particularised identifications and corporatised definitions is neither unmarked nor carelessly tossed about, and therefore needs to be addressed as such.

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9 See Rao (2002) for a description of the philosophical and ritualistic distinctions surrounding the Madhvas, of Udupi in particular. The work even includes a pictorial representation of the body markers worn by the different categories of Madhvas in Udupi (ibid.: 54–55).
In operationalising my intent—of listening to contemporary Brahmins, retrieving their perceptual space, keying into the dynamics and paradoxes of ‘upper caste’ articulation—the methods I pursued as indeed the subjects I sampled chose themselves out. The need to carry out ‘ethnography’—albeit not one delivering from standard anthropological protocols, and even incorporating elements of a survey framework—was clear from the outset. Listening to contemporary Brahmins talk about their selves, castes, community, their lifeworlds, their ‘others’, the larger processes that they believe are shaping their everyday lives, the reflections on their ‘pasts’, and so on, was crucial for my purposes. Likewise, the institutional and the discursive space of the many caste associations, each clamouring for the allegiance of the individual Brahmin, had to be accounted for.

Lest I be misunderstood, it is necessary to reiterate that this ‘ethnography’ departs from the classical modes of the same. Primarily, it does not claim as its object the ‘whole’, nor does it seek to present it in terms of a ‘total narrative’. The intent here is less to provide a ‘complete’ picture of the lives of the contemporary Brahmin community as to animate a problem on hand about the patterns of dynamism that the Brahmin community has exhibited; and, in the process, to move towards interpreting what ‘caste’ means today. Therefore, the depth, as indeed the range of detail, that one has come to expect out of what goes by the name of ethnography might not obtain here. Besides, the fieldwork was carried out using standard survey tools like questionnaires and interview schedules (more the latter), and involved both Brahmin households and caste association activists/office bearers. The fieldwork for this study was conducted during a period of 15 months, between January 2000 and March 2001. Given the theoretical and methodological focus, I had resolved to lay my hands on different kinds of data. The following is a description of how I went about gathering data and of the research materials that I have primarily relied upon in detailing the chapters. It also serves to amplify the research focus of this investigation.

Defined by the substantive focus of this study, I have attempted to get at three types of data: (i) historical records on the late

colonial period; (ii) organisational efforts, over time, to mobilise the Brahmin community within the space of ‘caste’ associations; and (iii) the perceptual space of Brahmin households and of individual Brahmins largely within an urban setting.

In connection with the first of these, I have collated material from the rich tradition of auto/biographies in Kannada. I have also sourced insights and impressions from Kannada literature of the period. A weekly journal named *Mysore Star* published from Mysore from 1881 to 1936 was sourced. This journal, explicitly articulating the non-Brahmin concerns, has been a phenomenal source of information for the non-Brahmin othering of the Brahmin, while also providing clues to Brahmin response to this process of othering. More centrally nevertheless, allusions to the Brahmin response have been also gathered from memoirs and reminiscences penned by Brahmin men of letters as well as from secondary works. The proceedings of the relevant ‘representative’ institutions of the period—the Representative Assembly and the Legislative Council—were sourced along with the reports of the successive Karnataka Backward Classes committees/commissions. Also, extant scholarship has been brought to bear on my recuperation of the Brahmin self and the community of this period.

Attempts to bring Brahmins together—either as individual jatis or as a corporate entity making up ‘the’ Brahmin community—have been witnessed since the beginnings of the twentieth century, and such efforts continue to the present. For data on the many pioneering attempts to form Brahmin associations, I have again gone back to the infrequent reportage in the *Mysore Star* as well as other journals and newspapers of the period, like *Jaya Karnataka*. Contemporary Brahmin associations—some of which have survived from that era—themselves have recounted their pioneering activities in the form of publications and brochures which have also been consulted. State-level federating organisation, the Akhila Karnataka Brahmana Maha Sabha (AKBMS) published a book that mapped the history of Brahmin associations in Karnataka. A couple of descriptive accounts narrating the Akhila Mysooru Brahmana Mahasabha’s (AMBM) activities and its conventions of the 1940s were made available by the general secretary of AKBMS.
As far as the contemporary situation is concerned, the initial effort to collate information through a detailed questionnaire that was sent to 100 Brahmin associations spread across the state of Karnataka—the addresses of which were gathered from a directory maintained by AKBMS—had to be given up owing to a phenomenal rate of non-response. Consequent upon this failure, I visited 50 associations all over the state of Karnataka—specifically Mysore, Kolar, Hospet, Bidar, Shimoga, and Udupi—apart from a more intensive coverage of the city of Bangalore. The federating association, AKBMS, is situated in Bangalore, as are all the head offices of jati associations. Care has been taken to cover the entire spectrum of caste associations.

Between 1999 and 2002, almost every major Brahmin meet, seminar, convention, and felicitation function organised by these associations in Bangalore was attended. Apart from preparing notes of the proceedings, I also interacted with the members and activists in such settings. I have collected, wherever available, the journals brought out by these associations in addition to the souvenir issues published on momentous occasions. Wherever spare copies of back issues were not available, notes were made from the library that many of these associations maintain. The files containing the pamphlets that these associations have brought out from time to time have also been sourced. Further, 35 caste activists were interviewed.

The other central component was embodied through extensive interviews with one or more members of 100 households (in total 135 persons of different generations were interviewed), primarily in and around the city of Bangalore, but also in the cities/towns of Mysore, Hospet, Udupi, Kundapur, Bidar, and Shimoga, and the villages around Bangalore and Udupi. Of the 135 interviewed, 79 were men and 56 were women. The universe was largely ‘purposively’ sampled, in accordance with the presuppositions encoding this investigation, and the numbers gathered together through the device of ‘snowballing’. Many times, contacts established at public gatherings were followed up. Care was taken to make the sample as representative as possible—primarily in terms of the caste composition, class status, education, and occupational profile of the family. The interviews were usually conducted over two or three sittings. These interviews would often turn from being ‘one-on-one’ to involving the rest of the household,
even friends and visiting relatives, in animated conversations. These interjections, however, do not make up my list of the 135 respondents interviewed.

Fortifying these interviews were the questionnaires handed out to the households. The information sought related to details about family members, recent history—migratory, marital and occupational—of the family, their affiliation to mathas, relationship with caste associations, observance of rituals (daily and otherwise), dependence on different networks at hand (kin, friends, neighbours, etc.), and so on. The names of all the respondents cited in the following chapters (chapters 3 to 6) have been changed to maintain anonymity and trust.

Broadly then, I map the contours of the differential investment that the contemporary Brahmin community endows on its casteness. The data sources also translate into three comprehensive registers of enquiry: one having to do with the very persona of the ‘Brahmin’ and embodied in the agency of the individual Brahmin, the other having to do with organised complexes of action such as the caste association or even the public culture of print, and the last taking off from a longer (yet, modern and contemporary) history of non-Brahminical othering. To be sure, all three registers evidently implicate each other; and as the chapters will disclose, I also strive actively to break this homology of data source and register of enquiry. Within the terms of a rather mixed-up mode of mapping, I propose to foreground the dynamics of the contemporary Brahmin identity. Indeed, the reader might just wonder whether, in the specific ways in which the lines of investigation have been positioned, a desire to attend to many themes has overwhelmed—even sacrificed—the need to be intensive. I reiterate that the driving motive of this study is to map out leads, to hint towards a host of conduits of investigation that could help break open the stifling monotony of contemporary caste studies.

The ‘representativeness’ of the sampling technique used is always open to scrutiny. Yet, adequate interpretative protocols have been introduced by way of sifting through diverse sources of data and capturing (indeed validly authenticating) a range of experiences characteristic of Brahmin subjects today. All the same, one needs to be sensitive to questions about the availability of caste-specific data in the contemporary moment. The
decennial census conducted by the Indian government stopped enumerating the population across the caste map since 1941, excepting that which pertains to SC and ST communities. Owing to this, but also owing to the almost negligible effort on the part of social scientists themselves, there is hardly any information about, say, even the share of a particular caste community in the state’s population. In fact, various estimates of the Brahmins’ share in the population of Karnataka remain at best informed projections made by the successive Backward Classes committees/commissions based on the figures available in the 1931 Census. Given that even such basic information is not available, there is absolutely no way of determining other factors like their urban–rural population share, residential spread, patterns concerning demography, migration, etc.

Of course, Brahmin associations have all promised, from time to time, to carry out a ‘caste census’ but not one has been completed so far. All that such associations have is an inventory of their members. Taking that as the sampling frame would have distorted our selection irreparably, since membership of an association is already a statement borne by the individual concerned vis-à-vis the problematic of caste identity and identification choices. To be sure, these are restrictions that confront anybody studying caste today. Again, given such circumstances, snowballing was the only strategy that was open to us, although we were mindful of factoring in various attributes such as jati composition, class status, educational, occupational and migration profiles of the families concerned, membership in caste associations, etc. Supplementing these coordinates, of course, was the recourse taken to other research materials, especially historical and literary sources, and official reports and proceedings.

The following is a primary description of the respondents. The composition of the 135 respondents interviewed is the following. There were 84 Smartas, 40 Madhvas, 10 Srivaishnavas, and one person who would not identify his affiliation. Most important jati distinctions were represented in the sample. One person is an orphan receiving religious/ritual education at the Madhva institution called the Poornaprajna Vidyapeeta, located in Bangalore and has been categorised as a Madhva. The one who did not identify his affiliation is a journalist who said that
he did not know his jati identity. He said that he did not even know that further distinctions existed within the Brahmin fold, but that did not matter to him as long as one can be identified as a Brahmin. Only 32 households had at least one who was a formal member of a Brahmin association. Of the total, 106 respondents were located in Bangalore, 16 were from the cities and towns of Mysore, Shimoga, Udupi, Hospet, and Bidar, and 13 were residents of villages in rural Bangalore, Udupi and Shimoga. In terms of their ages, 37 respondents were below 30 years, 58 were between 31 to 50 years and the remaining were above 50 years. The next chapter, which seeks to present a schematic history of the modern world of Brahmans, encodes data made available through the questionnaire.
The Modern World of Brahmins:  
A Schematic History

As the title discloses, this chapter attempts to profile and forward some considerations on the trajectory of Brahmins in contemporary Karnataka, that is, broadly over the twentieth century. Evidently, such recuperation within the space of a chapter can only remain schematic but it is still a useful and necessary exercise. The regrouping of a history of the contemporary Brahmin is necessary not merely as a gesture of contextualisation, but more importantly in establishing the parameters of action within which the modern Brahmin identity unfolds in contemporary Karnataka. Specific historical developments, as I seek to demonstrate, act together or are a constitutive force in bringing to life the contemporary Brahmin identity. Accordingly, even as this history anchors my analysis of Brahmin identity, I will seek to show the ways in which the making of (and the contestations to) the Brahmin identity constitutively structure (in the sense of both enabling and constraining) the trajectories of being ‘Brahmin’.

As was pointed out in the earlier chapters, the paucity of any appreciable macro-data with reference to caste, particularly since 1941, makes the present task daunting and consequently renders it schematic. I have therefore attempted to innovate. There are different sources of data that I have sought to mine. Anchored firmly within the scholarly literature that has been produced on Karnataka (in particular, on the princely state of Mysore), I have
collated diverse sources. They primarily include journals that were being published in the late colonial period, the proceedings of the legislative houses and the reports and compilations generated by the state, particularly in the form of Backward Classes commission/committee reports, etc. I have also sourced the reflections and introspections of individual Brahmins that are available in the form of auto/biographies in Kannada. Finally, the ‘testimonies’ of the respondents of this study have also been deployed, primarily in terms of a qualitative and consolidated retrieval of family trajectories across the registers of education, occupation, marriage, and migration, over the last three generations.

The disparately encoded sources of data are unevenly situated in responding to the demands that have been placed on them. Even as I seek to (with good reason) speak of the contemporary Brahmin—or even the Brahmin community—I remain sensitive to its internally differentiated profile. Subjective disparateness of the imaginings of the Brahmin identity apart, objectively too there were (and continue to be) many jatis and jati-clusters that obtained within the corporatised Brahmin fold. However, there is almost no data—either macro or specific—for recuperating such specificities of individual Brahmin jati histories. Such an exercise calls for intensive work, focusing exclusively on individual Brahmin jatis. Here, I have been only indicative, even definitively provisional, in my observations on such specific historical trajectories of the individual Brahmin jatis. I will, nonetheless, be in a position to analyse far more confidently the question of specificities, when I take up the problematic of the dynamics of Brahmin identity in the following chapters.

The present chapter is divided into the following sections. The first section will summatively map the predominance of the Brahmin in the emergent spaces of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These spaces of power became available to the ‘native’ population and led to the transformation of Brahmins into a thoroughly urbanised, modern caste economy, enabled in particular by considerable investments in secular, modern education and employment. A comparison with contesting caste and religious communities will bring home the virtual unassailability and dominance of the Brahmin community over modern spaces. In the second section, the consolidation of this
transformation through the deployment of formal and informal networks, using (even recasting) governmental policy and measures, resignifying and reconstituting ‘caste’ rules, norms and practices will be described. The third section profiles the contemporary state of the Brahmins of Karnataka, their overwhelming middle-class status, urbanity, constitutive reliance on the resources made available by the welfare state even in the face of increasing retrenchment from the landscape of electoral politics, the anxieties generated by the reservation policy and so on. The fourth section recreates the processes of individuation but also of corporatisation obtaining within the community through a narration of marital and commensal strategies, efforts to negotiate caste identifications and so on. A final section briefly invokes some peculiarities in the self-identification of being ‘Brahmin’. It seeks to suggest ways in which the unique positioning of Brahmins in the contemporary moment structures the very possibilities of the ‘Brahmin’ identification.

**Occupying the Modern**

Paradoxically enough, the scholarly literature focusing on the various non-Brahmin movements that emerged in different parts of south and west India during the early twentieth century has demonstrated the unmistakable preponderance of the Brahmin community in the newly available spaces of modern institutions. Much of the literature describing the transformative processes that were underway among the Brahmins assume that this was ‘natural’, in the sense that a compulsion to urbanise or take to modern education was an inevitable course of action. While this assumption is rather presumptuous, it cannot be denied that the predominance of Brahmins was most acutely visible in the spaces of modern education and the state bureaucracy (as well as in other modern occupations like journalism and law). These spaces, constitutively vested with power, placed Brahmins in a key position—that of being the sole mediator between state authority and society. Not only did they mediate the negotiations and perceptions of the non-Brahmin population with the state, they were also able to decisively shape the policy of the administration towards its population. This arrogation of the
role of the mediator or of the ‘spokesperson for society’ (Geetha and Rajadurai 1998: xv) is rightly recognised as the fundamental element in rendering the Brahmin uniquely powerful. But it is not often that scholarship has commented upon the transformations this unique trajectory brought about in the Brahmin self, which too was seeking to formulate a legitimate identity for itself in the modern situation.

As in the neighbouring regions, the trajectory of the Brahmin community from the middle decades of the nineteenth century has been remarkably similar in Karnataka.¹ In the Tamil region though, there were some non-Brahmin corporatised castes which emerged as hugely successful mercantile communities during this period.² Their non-existence in Karnataka seems to have only rendered the Brahmin predominance more visible. The shift to being a caste economy (and culture) that was overwhelmingly dependent upon a modern (and significantly urban) service sector has been constitutively transformative of the Brahmin community as well. This is a process that scholars concur began in the middle decades of the nineteenth century. Manor notes the weak position of Brahmins in the rural areas of Mysore State by the 1930s:

As only 3.8% of the population spread rather evenly across the state, Brahmins were numerically very weak in most rural areas. This weakness was compounded by the tendency from the mid-nineteenth century onwards for Brahmins to migrate

¹ See Arnold (1977: Ch.1) for details regarding the Tamil Brahmins migration from rural to urban areas. See Chandrashekhar (1995: 20–68) for a general statement on the Brahmin communities in south India as a whole, but more importantly on their emergence as the predominant part of a powerful educated class that eclipsed the hitherto dominant business communities, particularly in the Tamil region. Note also that when we talk of ‘Karnataka’, evidently, we are not presuming the existence of the present-day state of Karnataka, neither is it an anticipation. It is merely used as a ready-reckoner in order to talk about the geographical region that was to become ‘Karnataka’, which was, prior to the unification of the state in 1956, distributed into many administrative entities.

from the villages to the towns and cities in search of education and employment in the ‘westernized’ idiom. To finance these migrations, Brahmins very often sold rural landholdings and the special tax privileges they had enjoyed in...Mysore’s villages before 1881. This led to a marked decline between 1900 and 1935 in the economic power and numerical strength of Brahmins in rural political arenas [often replaced by that of Vokkaligas and Lingayats who invariably bought land from the Brahmins]. The decline of the Brahmin influence in the rural context was paralleled by remarkable gains in wealth and influence in the towns and cities of Mysore. (1977a: 31)

G. Thimmaiah augments this observation:

Rural Brahmins who owned agricultural land received impressive incomes which enabled them to send their children to urban areas for English education. This helped their absorption in government service. Thus the transition of rural Brahmins was financed by rural surpluses generated from their lands. (1993: 81)

The family histories that most of the respondents recounted during the course of interviews and in the course of filling in the questionnaire suggest that such reallocation of resources continued well into the twentieth century and, in many cases, even to this day. I shall point to many such instances later on in the chapter. In many parts of Karnataka, Brahmin families that owned agricultural property were not directly involved in agricultural operations and lent it out to predominantly non-Brahmin tenants:

The Brahmins held mostly the Inam lands—the lands granted by the erstwhile rulers in appreciation of their services. As both by tradition and also on account of the fact that they had taken up service in government and by reason of which moved out of rural areas into towns and cities, Brahmins were the absentee land-lords. (Thimmaiah and Aziz 1985: 46–47)

The Havyakas (a Brahmin jati predominant in the coastal district of Uttara Kannada and in Shimoga) were perhaps the only...
Being Brahmin, Being Modern

Brahmin landowning and cultivating group. They continue to be involved in great numbers (compared to other Brahmins) in the agricultural economy, particularly in the cultivation of cash crops like areca nut. Further, with regard to the Mysore region, it has often been observed that the distribution of landholdings was not marked by disparities. Comparing Mysore with other states of south India in the nineteenth century, it has been observed that ‘(i)t was only in Mysore that except two—the Sringeri Math and jagir of Yelandur granted to Dewan Poornaiah’s family—there were no big zamindars’ (Chandrashekhar 1995: 11). This pattern continued into the next century too. In fact, Chandrashekhar suggests as much while analysing the data presented in the 1921 Census:

There were no marked disparities in the ownership of land...Mysore had unusually high proportion of owner cultivators and Brahmins rarely held control over land. Though they held some lands they were not the real cultivators and more often their lands were rented out to powerful local magnates who could not be unduly (sic) exploited. (Chandrasekhar 1985: 4)

Thus, the shift from an agriculture-dependent caste economy to what became a predominantly state-enabled service economy does not appear to have been much of a distress-shift. What is more, the shift was neither sudden nor complete. Even as most of the Brahmin families sent out male members to the city to pursue modern careers—cornering a great share of even the lower grades of bureaucratic and other modern jobs—those who failed in getting any such jobs were retained to engage with agriculture, mostly as supervisors. This is a process that is still in currency—varying primarily across regions. For many of the respondent families from the Mysore region, for instance, the urbanity of their family life is so taken for granted that they do not even

3 See Harper (1968) for a picture of the modern history of Havyakas and of their interests in agriculture. Saberwal and Lele (2004) describe the success with which Havyakas, seeking to protect and further their interests in the highly profitable areca nut cultivation, negotiated with the colonial state in a protracted forest settlement lasting from the 1860s to the 1920s. See also Joshi (1997; esp. 138–42).
remember the familial history of migration, if any, from rural areas. However, the trajectory of most of the older male respondents who did migrate from their villages to urban areas is strikingly similar—more often than not, they ventured into the nearby town or city pursuing education or a career all by themselves. They sustained themselves either on the money that was sent from home or, in the case of poorer families, from the institution-like practices of *bhikshanna* and *varanna*. Wherever Brahmins continue to have landed interests and properties, like in the coastal and Malnad regions, the migration into urban areas is an ongoing phenomenon.

It appears that it is only in the post-Independence years, when the state instituted measures like the Inam Abolition Acts (1954–55) and land reforms were initiated (in the early 1960s) that the economic links and networks with the rural areas got severed to a near total degree. This is particularly true of the Brahmin families from the coastal districts of Karnataka where the Brahmins had continued to hold land cultivated by their tenants. The land under tenancy in the two districts of Dakshina Kannada and Uttara Kannada was incomparably higher than other districts. The Land Reforms Act of 1974, it has been noted, had its most profound impact in these two districts (Manor 2002: 278).

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4 These two practices were prevalent in the urban areas of the princely state of Mysore. Their workings and significance are described on pp. 77–81, *infra*.

5 There have been some studies on the impact of land reforms on agrarian relations and economy in Karnataka. See Manor (1980), Thimmaiah and Aziz (1985), Ksheerasagara (1985), Damle (1989), and Aziz and Krishna (1997). However, the impact of such measures on particular communities is not very clear.

6 Again, these districts themselves do not display a homogeneous agrarian system and culture. For instance, while the landowning Havyakas of the plains of Uttara Kannada district had tenants working on their land, those in the hilly regions of the district were more directly involved in agriculture, primarily growing the highly profitable areca nut. See Joshi (1997) and Saberwal and Lele (2004).

7 This was an amendment to the 1961 Act. Yet, as Rajan notes, ‘Although the [1974 Act] was an amendment of the 1961 Act, and continued all the important policies of the latter, the changes embodied in it were so drastic, and the effects caused by them directly or indirectly so
The Brahmin quest for alternative spaces within modern institutions was realised primarily through their preponderance in the cities. Indeed, their share in the urban population was truly astounding. A remarkable 21.7 per cent of the total Brahmin population of Mysore State was by the year 1931 already residing in just the two cities of Bangalore and Mysore. The other towns too are supposed to have had equally significant Brahmin populations, as did the non-Mysore emerging cities of Dharwad and Belgaum, further animating the urban nature of the community. While the Brahmins constituted a mere 3.74 per cent of Mysore State’s (including the British-administered Civil and Military Station located in Bangalore) population, they were the single largest community in both cities, Bangalore and Mysore. In Bangalore, there were 32,182 Brahmins and the next largest community, the Vokkaligas, numbered only 12,994. Brahmins made up 18.68 per cent of the population of the city of Bangalore—that is, almost every fifth person in Bangalore was a Brahmin. Brahmins likewise constituted 19.6 per cent of the Mysore city’s population—again much more than any other community in the city (Government of India [GoI] 1932, Part II–Tables: 230–32). The value of staying in cities, which, as we shall see, were drawing disproportionately the resources of the state, is self-evident.

Over the last century or so, therefore, the community economy of the Brahmins of Karnataka has shifted from one that is largely based and dependent on an agrarian economy to one that drew relentlessly (and even disproportionately) from the establishment of institutions of the modern, welfarist nation-state. Their entry into these spaces has remained largely unabated, though in the last three decades or so dented by the modest successes of the policies of reservation. They have been greatly successful in consolidating their presence in these new spheres through a single-minded investment in modern education in particular. This progression has placed many Brahmins in a position now to increasingly and resolutely look beyond their sustenance and reliance on the nation-state in the current post-liberalisation

important and pervasive, that it would be no exaggeration to say that the 1974 Act constituted a new law’ (cited in Joshi 1997: 160, n. 44).
period. As the structures and institutions of modernity were being established to a rather remarkable degree in Mysore State in particular, it necessitated a quick reallocation of resources by any community that intended to benefit from them. Brahmins began investing economic resources quite decisively into providing their children with a modern, secular education.

The princely state of Mysore in particular had a fairly stabilised idea of being an administrative entity and for long had modern institutions of administration—particularly the bureaucracy—in place. It had therefore taken up the task of building and extending educational institutions rather earnestly and state spending on education had therefore increased rapidly. Modern institutions of judiciary and the press had also emerged as important spaces. Into such spaces the Brahmins entered in a big way as they were apparently equipped with traditions of learning and literacy. This is a phenomenon that got replicated almost all over India but more markedly in south India, and has in fact been a well-documented claim in academic literature.

By the time the British handed Mysore State back to the Wodeyar royal family in 1881, after 50 years of direct rule, modern institutions and spaces had already taken root. The British had opened up bureaucratic positions to ‘natives’ and it was overwhelmingly the Brahmins who had filled such positions. The predominance of the Brahmin in these spaces was such a naturalised ‘fact’ that, beginning from the 1870s to about the latter part of the first decade of the twentieth century, it was the conflict between ‘Madrasi’ Brahmins and the Mysore Brahmins over their share in such spaces that dominated public debates.

It was only from the 1910s that the non-Brahmins began to demand a proportionate share in government services and modern education.

The following account pertains to the context of the princely state of Mysore. However, going by the accounts of the respondents hailing from other parts of Karnataka and select

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8 See Naidu (1996) for details regarding the spread of Western education in Mysore State.
9 For a recent affirmation in the context of Maharashtra, see Naregal (2001).
10 Dimensions of this conflict form a part of the next chapter.
Brahmin autobiographies from the period, broad inferences can be made regarding the non-Mysore regions of Karnataka as well.\footnote{See, for instance, Venkatrao (1974) and Sriranga (1994) for a representation from North Karnataka (most parts of which were part of either the Bombay Presidency or the Hyderabad Nizam State). Also, Karanth (1984) and Adiga (1999) for a representation from the coastal district of South Canara, which was part of the Madras Presidency.} It appears that despite significant differences—in relation to dependence on land in particular—the larger trajectory of the non-Mysore Brahmins concurs with the picture presented here.

By the early decades of the twentieth century, the Brahmin community already had a dominant and entrenched presence in the structures of the state bureaucracy and in the sphere of modern, secular education in princely Mysore. This presence, a concomitant of the fast pace of the processes of urbanisation and modernisation, however, cannot be taken to mean that its accomplishment was at the expense of their hold over villages and the rural economy. An overwhelming number of Sanubhogues (village accountants, a hereditary position that was primarily a Brahmin preserve) as late as in 1924 were still Brahmins. Of the 5,514 Sanubhogues at that time, 5,390 were Brahmins with the rest coming from other communities (Hanumanthappa n.d., Vol. III: 263–64). This office exercised a great deal of power over village affairs and the economy, which greatly enabled the deployment and consolidation of informal networks between the various Brahmins.\footnote{Chandrashekhar (1995: 21–22). This is a claim that is corroborated by many novels, reminiscences from that period. See Bhairappa’s novel \textit{Grihabhanga} (1970) and his autobiography \textit{Bhitthi} (1996).}

Here I will present data regarding two spaces, which were crucial and mutually sustaining, of secular education and the composition of the bureaucracy.

The caste composition of students in the space of higher education was excessively skewed in favour of the Brahmin community. Chitra Sivakumar (1982: 15) presents the ‘social composition’ of the students receiving college education in 1916 (the year Mysore University was established). Brahmins constituted a whopping 78.87 per cent of the college-going population (571 out of 724 students in total). The overwhelming dominance of the community is rendered even starker when we
look at the population share of the Brahmin community as calculated by the previous census (of 1911), which was a mere 3.6 per cent of the total population. The next highest proportion of college-going students was that of Lingayats (whose share in the population was 13.7 per cent), which had 29 college-going students in the community (4.01 per cent). During the year 1924–25, 79.1 per cent of the students taking university examinations in the state were Brahmins, as against 6.8 per cent of Lingayats and 3.6 per cent of Vokkaligas (ibid.: 25).

The situation was not very different in the case of professional courses like engineering and medicine. In 1924, of the 20 applicants selected for the MBBS course in medicine, 12 were Brahmins, and of the 23 selected in the year 1928, 17 were Brahmins (Hanumanthappa n.d., Vol. III: 189). Of the 22 who passed out of the Medical College, 16 were Brahmins as against two Naidus and one Lingayat. During the year 1923–24, of the 113 scholarships that were distributed for male medical students, 63 went to Brahmins (ibid.: 267). During 1926–27, 553 Brahmin students applied for an admission in the Engineering College, of which 216 were selected. The highly skewed nature of this number can be seen when compared to all other caste and religious communities. For instance, only seven Vokkaligas applied, of whom five were selected (ibid.: 270).

The non-Brahmin leaders often referred to the exclusive nature of the space of higher education, and thus to the unjustifiability of spending a large share of the educational budget on it. However, the state continued to fund higher education rather generously. The disproportionate nature of the educational cess collected and educational budget spending patterns was consistently pointed out by non-Brahmin leaders in all available fora, including the Representative Assembly (see ibid.: 176–81 for the debate during 1924–26). In 1924, while Rs 8 lakh were spent on the Mysore University, which had 2,000 students, just Rs 35 lakh were spent on the entire primary education sector which had 56 lakh students. The Mysore government spent, apart from the money allocated to the Mysore University, Rs 50,000 on the Indian Institute of Science located in Bangalore (ibid.).

The skewed distribution of Brahmin students in the university space continued, for in 1945, 60 per cent of the university students were Brahmins (Manor 1977a: 51). Sivakumar (1982: 29) points
out that during 1943–44, 67 per cent of the students enrolled in Mysore University were Brahmins, as against 8.1 per cent and 5.8 per cent of Lingayats and Vokkaligas respectively. The situation was not very different at the middle-school level (see Hanumanthappa n.d., Vol. III: 186). The case of Brahmin women is equally informative. Even as the question of the Brahmin woman becomes a ground for varied contestations and/or collusions—between Brahmins and non-Brahmins, between the ‘orthodox’ and the ‘progressive’ Brahmins, and between the ‘orthodox’ Brahmin men and ‘literate’ Brahmin women—Brahmin women themselves have had a fairly impressive record in matters of education, particularly in comparison with other women. During the years 1911–16, Brahmin women constituted 75.65 per cent of the total number of women students in Mysore State (Sivakumar 1982: 24). Their predominance in professional education too was overwhelming. For instance, of the 13 women scholarships meant for medical students, Brahmin women received eight (Hanumanthappa n.d., Vol. III: 267). Even as the ‘orthodoxy’ among Brahmin men tried to block women’s entry into modern spaces, the women, in collaboration with the ‘progressive’ Brahmin male network, defied the former’s ability to regulate their trajectories.

Such an overwhelming preponderance was not merely reflective of the preoccupations of a few within the Brahmin fold; rather, it represented the larger trends obtaining in the community as a whole, as can be inferred from the figures provided in Table 3.1. The following is a statement on the increasing levels of education/literacy in the community over a span of 40 years,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Brahmins</th>
<th>Lingayats</th>
<th>Vokkaligas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total Literacy</td>
<td>English Literacy</td>
<td>Total Literacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>68.0</td>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>14.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>70.5</td>
<td>15.6</td>
<td>17.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>70.7</td>
<td>24.0</td>
<td>20.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>78.3</td>
<td>33.9</td>
<td>30.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1941</td>
<td>87.1</td>
<td>36.2</td>
<td>32.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

which strikingly demonstrates the gulf that existed between Brahmins and the two other ‘dominant’ caste communities in the princely state of Mysore. Even as the other two communities make a determined bid to improve their literacy levels, the gulf between them and the Brahmins was reproduced consistently.

This predominance was reflected in the government appointments in Mysore, as Table 3.2 illustrates. What is noteworthy here is that Brahmin predominance did not get significantly dented even after decades of formal governmental mechanisms initiated in the form of affirmative action favouring backward classes. This is particularly true of gazetted positions, even as their numbers dwindled more rapidly within the non-gazetted sector. Indeed, the downslide need not necessarily reflect the impact of reservation policies, for, particularly since 1947, the explosion of opportunities in many new realms such as education, banks, public sector industries and other undertakings was singular, more so in the case of Bangalore (see Nair 1998, 2005: 81–89, in particular). The latter were again, at least to begin with, dominated by Brahmin men. This differential trend has continued to the present times, wherein the top echelons of the government bureaucracy are still dominated by Brahmins while the lower levels tend to have a decreasing number of Brahmins.13

Table 3.2: Brahmin representation in the Mysore bureaucracy, 1918–1957

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Government Posts Gazetted (%)</th>
<th>Government Posts Non-Gazetted (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1918</td>
<td>64.86</td>
<td>69.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1936</td>
<td>61.32</td>
<td>49.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1947</td>
<td>46.89</td>
<td>37.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1957</td>
<td>35.72</td>
<td>27.65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Thimmaiah (1993: 75). This source also details the comparative figures concerning the Lingayats and Vokkaligas.

13 Again, no systematic and accurate data is available to validate this assertion. However, see the cover story titled ‘The Resilient Brahmin’ in The Week (10 November 2002) for a broad but indicative inventory of Brahmins occupying top positions in diverse fields.
By 1918 itself (the year the Mysore government constituted the Miller Committee to recommend measures to increase the proportion of non-Brahmins in government employment), the gap between the Brahmins and the rest, as far as government jobs were concerned, was huge (see Table 3.3).

Table 3.3: Representation in the Mysore bureaucracy and population by caste

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community</th>
<th>Subordinate Appointments (%)</th>
<th>Gazetted Appointments (%)</th>
<th>% of Total Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brahmin</td>
<td>69.64</td>
<td>65.0</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lingayat</td>
<td>3.61</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>12.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vokkaliga</td>
<td>2.42</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>20.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vaisya</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kuruba</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adi-Karnataka</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>15.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>7.72</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Between 1921–23, as many as 524 Brahmins were appointed through the Mysore Civil Services, compared to 32 Vokkaligas, 46 Lingayats and 70 Muslims (Hanumanthappa n.d., Vol. III: 263–64). This is during the years immediately after the government’s initiation of a reservation policy following the acceptance of the recommendations of the Miller Committee. Further, in April 1921, of the 78 amildars in existence, 63 were Brahmins as against four Lingayats and Muslims each; and between 1922 and 1925, of the 30 posts filled 20 were given to Brahmin candidates (ibid.: 269). In 1924–25, of the 74 jobs with salaries ranging between Rs 50 and Rs 100, 47 went to Brahmins, five each to Muslims and Lingayats and only one to a Vokkaliga (ibid.). Again, the picture at the top echelons of the bureaucracy was no different. During 1923–33, 36 Brahmins as compared to six Lingayats and eight Muslims were appointed as assistant commissioners. As against one Mudaliar and one Urs, 16 Brahmins were appointed as deputy commissioners. There was some sense of ‘parity’ in the revenue probationers’ appointments—five each were taken from Brahmin and Muslim communities and four each from the Vokkaliga and Lingayat communities (ibid.: 272).

The patterns obtaining in recruitment to some other significant government departments can also be noted. Since the establish-
ment of the Central Recruitment Board (instituted to stem the networks of nepotism) in 1927 to oversee appointments to all the government departments of bureaucracy. 2,679 Brahmins were recruited, as compared to 1,378 Lingayats, 1,015 Muslims, 605 Vokkaligas and 383 individuals from the Depressed Classes. Even in the Police Department, at the level of executive officers, 367 Brahmins were employed in comparison to 40 Lingayats, 55 Vokkaligas and 191 Muslims. In the year 1937, all eight government advocates were Brahmins and out of the 22 public prosecutors, 18 were Brahmins. Sivakumar gives the overall figures pertaining to government appointments during 1921–24, which embodies the general picture of Brahmin preponderance in the government services. Of the total number of appointments offered during this period, Brahmins took 570 jobs (54.2 per cent) as against 42 for Vokkaligas (4 per cent), 63 for Lingayats (6 per cent), 89 for Muslims (8.5 per cent) and 46 for Christians (4.4 per cent) (Sivakumar 1982: 18).

However, the logic of numbers caught up with Brahmins rather early in the space of electoral politics, indeed a striking contrast to their predominance in all the other spaces of modern institutions. By the 1930s, Vokkaligas and Lingayats had already established entrenched positions of dominance in spaces which were determined by the logic of representative democracy, however limited the representativeness of such bodies might have been. This held good both in larger bodies like the Mysore Representative Assembly as indeed the district boards (Manor 1977b: 178–83 passim). But, it was not that in the post-1920s period, the number of Brahmins in the Representative Assembly grew proportional to their share in the population. Brahmins continued to be present in greater numbers than what an allocation based strictly on their share in the population would have allowed for. This was primarily because some of the criteria for becoming members for the Assembly (as indeed for the eligibility to vote) were structured in such a way that only Brahmins could have satisfied them. Thus, most of the members who went on the basis of being graduates were Brahmins. Further, a few Brahmin members of the Assembly were representing ‘Special Interests’ such as those of ‘Depressed Classes’, ‘Women’, ‘Journalists’, etc. Even as they gained their membership on the grounds of representing interests that, by definition at least, had
nothing to do with their being Brahmins, they did put to use their presence in such spaces to speak for their lot. I will later present such an instance of a Brahmin, Gopalaswami Iyer, elected as a representative of the interests of the Depressed Classes. Their numbers in representative bodies began to reflect their share in the population more decidedly only in the local level bodies such as the district boards. Anyway, by the 1920s, it was also more or less clear that these spaces had outlived their usefulness as spaces articulating the democratic aspirations of the populace at large (Manor 1977a: 21–27).

Not surprisingly, Brahmin members of the Representative Assembly did articulate a concern regarding the dwindling number of Brahmins in the Assembly, but they stated it in different ways. They persistently demanded that the property clause be removed as a Representative Assembly membership criterion so that graduates and post-graduates could become members in greater numbers, thereby enhancing the level of erudition of the proceedings (Hanumanthappa n.d., Vol. II: 169–70). The records of the proceedings continue to also note the sustained indifference of the bureaucracy to the members and the ever-present displeasure expressed by the members against such apathy to their opinions on matters of state, economy and society. Given the increasing propensity among the Brahmin families to convert agricultural capital into educational and modern occupational capital, most of the members entering into the Representative Assembly on the criterion of landed property were members of dominant castes like the Vokkaliga and Lingayat. The division and acrimony between members and officials thus also had a caste dimension attached to it.

Nonetheless, the process of circumscribing, if not altogether retrenching the Brahmin from political spaces has been an irreversible process, decidedly at local levels but also increasingly in state- and national-level politics. This has had important consequences for the perceptual space of the modern Brahmin self in Karnataka, in its relation to the modern nation-state, polity and society at large. I take up this theme in the subsequent chapters.

What the foregoing illustrates is the virtually uncontested entry of the Brahmin community into the spaces of secular,
modern education and government services. It is this unique positioning of the Brahmin vis-à-vis the modern public sphere that in very fundamental ways constitutes the Brahmin identity that has taken shape in contemporary times. While the preponderance of Brahmins in such spaces has been a well-documented fact, what is perhaps more significant and yet less commented upon are the initiatives taken by the community to consolidate this predominance. These initiatives too have been crucial in the formation of a corporatised and secularised Brahmin self in the contemporary context, especially since they necessitated that Brahmins look beyond the individual jatis to which they belonged. In the next section, I chart some of the formal and informal networks that Brahmins used in order to consolidate their dominance over the institutions of the modern public sphere.

Networking to Consolidate

The importance of modern formal institutions and the advantage Brahmins held in gaining ready access to such spaces have long been recognised in studies justifying the non-Brahmin movements of the late colonial period. However, it is not as often that the decisive role played by informal practices and networks, primarily based on community identities and locations, has been noted. Here I shall venture to describe the same, stressing the ways in which the very fashioning of the policy of the government was, deliberately or otherwise, facilitative of the Brahmin quest to urbanise and inhabit the newly instituted spaces of modern institutions. The policies of ‘Mysore for Mysoreans’, the eagerness to establish institutions of higher education (the case of the Mysore University being the most stark), often at the expense of primary and secondary education, and other much touted ‘modernisation’ initiatives are the cases taken up here. This section also alludes to some of the more direct and deliberate attempts by Brahmins to deny the non-Brahmins access to such spaces. Besides this, attention is directed to the informal networks of kin/caste/community that bound urban areas of the Mysore State, as indeed the practices of varanna and bhikshanna and the well-established institution of caste hostels. The focus throughout is on the
distinctiveness of the space that the Brahmin has enjoyed, one that enables him/her to make, as his/her own, the positions that are at least on the face of it ‘non-casted’.

The Miller Committee was rather candid when it observed:

[Under the present system of governance, the officers of the government in the higher grades of service have necessarily much influence in shaping the policy of the administration....

The fact cannot be ignored that an officer in the exercise of his duty making appointments and promotions finds it easier to see the virtues of his own community than those of others. (Cited in Thimmaiah 1993: 60)

These statements offer a summary axis to look at the Brahmin community and its workings in the late colonial context, in that they accurately reflect on the trajectories of state policy and its proclivity towards the growth of powerful but informal networks. In fact, there was a legalised practice in the Mysore State that vacancies in the government bureaucracy could legally be filled by ‘nominating’ candidates of ‘good birth’ or hailing from ‘respectable families’. This was an accepted practice till the Central Recruitment Board was established. Indeed, Dewan Seshadri Iyer, as early as 1892, in response to concerns against Brahmin predominance in government services, had suggested the following broad guidelines:

No Brahmin, as a rule, be selected under nominations [for the Civil Services], because already this class is too well represented and competition, for many years to come will, most probably, only add to this number. Moreover the Brahmin is, more or less, a cosmopolitan and must not complain of the selection of non-Brahmin candidates of good birth, family connections, etc. Their educational qualifications may not be as good as those of the Brahmin candidates also belonging to good local families. I do not advocate any hard and fast rule to which there ought to be no exception. All I say is:

1. Let the Brahmin in, if he can, by the competition door;
2. Let the local non-Brahmin come by the nomination door;
3. Let the local Brahmin also come by the nomination door when a sufficiently educated local non-Brahmin is not forthcoming. (Hanumanthappa n.d., Vol. III: 295)
Quite emphatically, these guidelines were not heeded. Even if they had been, the Brahmin was already too entrenched to be ruffled. For, as Iyer himself recognised, the door of competition was already and incontestably the Brahmin’s own. Besides, there were, at that time, very few non-Brahmin families who would have passed the twin criteria that Iyer proposed—of having a ‘good birth’ with ‘family connections’ and being ‘sufficiently educated’. The non-Brahmins had to wait for almost three decades before a more rational and justifiable policy of reservations could be formulated, as it was by the Miller Committee in 1918.

Likewise, the demand that only Mysoreans be considered for government jobs in Mysore (encoded as the slogan ‘Mysore for Mysoreans’) was a long-standing one. The fact that there were, as early as 1881, nearly 70,000 people in government service in Mysore (Naidu 1996: 182) indicates the massive strides that the princely state had made in setting up a modern administrative set-up. As I have sought to indicate in the previous section, government service was virtually a monopoly of Brahmins despite the measures taken to effect positive discrimination towards the local non-Brahmin castes. Interestingly, what was left unmarked in this enunciation of ‘Mysore for Mysoreans’ was the fact that it took shape primarily in the context of an intense struggle for bureaucratic positions between Brahmins who came from the Madras Presidency and those who were residents of Mysore.

Almost two decades of public contestations and machinations later, the Mysore Brahmins prevailed over the ‘Madrasi’ Brahmin lobby—a victory signalled by the appointment of Vishveshvaraiah, a native Brahmin, as Dewan in 1912.14 He, in the very same year, brought in a change in the rules overseeing government recruitments that addressed the demand of ‘Mysore for Mysoreans’. He announced in the Representative Assembly that ‘Only those born in or residing for a sufficiently long period of time in the Mysore state or those who have studied and taken degrees from the Mysore colleges will be eligible to take the Mysore

14 I will detail this contestation in the next chapter while delineating the heterogeneity that marks the category of the Brahmin.
Civil Service Examinations’ (Mysore Star, 4 April 1912). This initiative meant by default that the Mysore Brahmins could now exercise a virtual monopoly over the huge resources of the state bureaucracy, for their main threat (the Madras Brahmins) had been debarred from entering the Mysore government services and they faced no competition whatsoever from any other native community.

However, the non-Brahmin leaders of Mysore, who had by then emerged as a vocal and effective pressure group, were quick in decoding this demand. They were very clear that the apparently progressive stance which favoured the ‘sons of the soil’, in fact, served only the interests of the Brahmins. They argued that the policy shift in the form of ‘Mysore for Mysoreans’ meant that one set of Brahmins had replaced another. Thus, when Vishveshvaraih announced the policy shift, the journal Mysore Star was emphatic:

While the government has rightly become the subject of the indebtedness of the natives of Mysore for narrowing the door to block the entry of outsiders, who can deny that it ought to pay special attention towards uplifting those among its own people who have remained backward for a rather long period of time?... Isn’t it as natural an expectation that the government should have a special interest in the cause of the backward communities, as it has for the natives, even if it were to be seen to be at the expense of the forward communities? (Mysore Star, 4 April 1912)

The non-Brahmin leaders insisted through a memorandum submitted to the Maharajah of Mysore, Krishnaraja Wodeyar IV, in 1918 that if qualified non-Brahmins were not available for the government employment quota from within Mysore, then non-Brahmin candidates from outside be appointed over Brahmin candidates from within (Mysore Star, 30 June 1918; 

\[15\] Mysore Star was a weekly published from Mysore by a Lingayat, Yajaman Veerasangappa. This was one of the very few newspapers which was taking a pro-non-Brahmin position, arguing rather passionately and articulately for the cause of the latter. It was also an important mouthpiece of Lingayat concerns. I make extensive use of this source in the next chapter.
The Maharajah was more than willing to accede to this demand despite the Dewan’s disagreement and went ahead and appointed the Miller Committee.

The establishment of Mysore University in 1916 (and other institutions providing higher education) was another instance which demonstrated the affinity between governmental policy and the concerns and aspirations of the Brahmin community. The establishment of a local university in Mysore State was a long-standing demand of the educated Brahmins of Mysore. Vishveshvaraiah almost single-handedly worked for the realisation of this demand, often incurring the displeasure of the neighbouring Madras University (to which all the higher educational institutions existing in Mysore State were affiliated) and the British administrators of Madras Presidency. Mysore University began functioning in 1916 much to the excitement of the Brahmin community in Mysore State. It increased the chances of the Brahmins coming from even poorer economic and village backgrounds to pursue higher education, which in turn facilitated their entry into the much sought after government services.

Bhagwan (2003: Ch. 3) discusses the context in which Mysore University was instituted, in terms of the complicated relationship that existed between the colonial state and the 'princely states', wherein universities emerged as a significant space for negotiating the nature and extent of colonial authority and the legitimacy of the colonial state in a modern world, etc. Calling attention to this work provides an opportune moment to insert a qualification here. My suggestion that the founding of Mysore University gestures towards the neat correspondence that obtained between the ‘interests’ of Brahmins and state policy must not be taken to imply that caste is the only important prism through which we can make sense of the late colonial situation in Karnataka/princely Mysore. Among the many diverse (and often contradictory) social forces impinging on that context, I am concerned here with trying to trace the trajectory of caste, that too in specific relation to the instance of Brahmins.


See, for a representation, Iyengar (1990) and the autobiographies and reminiscences of the Kannada litterateurs Murthy Rao (1990) and Sitharamaiah (1997), both of whom were students of the first few batches of the university.
The establishment of the university proved to be a drain (and, at least in the initial years, a luxury that the state could ill-afford) on the resources that Mysore was willing to spend on education.\footnote{See Manor (1977a: 50–51) for the skewed budgetary spending on education and spatial distribution of educational institutions in the state.} It clearly affected the advances the state was making in the spheres of primary and secondary education. The non-Brahmin leaders feared, therefore, that the university would demand a large share of the budgetary allocation on education (as it did) while benefiting only a few, most of whom were likely to be Brahmins. They feared also that, consequently, there would be lesser funding for primary and secondary education, a space into which the non-Brahmin communities were by then, even if hesitantly, making an entry.

Furthermore, Mysore State veered towards greatly subsidising higher education. In 1918, Brahmin members of the Mysore University Senate unanimously proposed to abolish fees for all arts education at the university level. The non-Brahmin and Lingayat leader M. Basavaiah (a leading advocate in Bangalore) opposed it on the grounds that almost all the students at the university (most of whom were Brahmins) were already receiving highly subsidised education. He pointed out that during the previous year, 73 students had been awarded degrees from the university. Since budgetary expenditure for that academic year stood at around Rs 7 lakhs, it meant that almost Rs 10,000 was being spent on each student. What is more, this sum did not include their scholarships and fee exemptions (Deveerappa 1985: 50). These claims concur with the picture that has been presented in the first section of this chapter of comparative spending on higher and primary education.

Commenting on the virtual monopoly of Brahmins in higher education, Basavaiah draws attention to the lopsided nature of revenue accretion and budget allocation in a speech before the Legislative Council:

> When the collegiate education shows an extraordinary divergence of developments in the state between different communities inter-se, it regretfully happens that the university which has not any appreciable fund of its own
but which liberally indents upon the revenues of the state, is thereby getting one-sided in indirectly asking those who receive little benefit from the university, to contribute largely to develop the intellectual capacity of those that least contribute to it. (Deveerappa 1985: 95)

Basavaiah’s apprehensions are very clear. While the overwhelmingly urbanised Brahmins contributed a very negligible sum to the state exchequer through taxes, it was the predominantly rural and landed backward communities that largely made up the revenues of the state. Justly, the spending of the government should reflect the taxation patterns. Indeed, for the non-Brahmin leaders, Mysore University was but one instance of the incongruent nature of state policy regarding budgetary spending—of accruing resources from the non-Brahmins in order to spend on the welfare of Brahmins. Thus, Basavaiah rhetoricises:

How have the large hospitals constructed in large cities,… grants for public improvement and other kindred items of expenditure appreciably raised [the agriculturist’s] position in life or his earning capacity?…There is a growing inequality and [the agriculturist] is invariably the butt for tapping revenue, which he certainly cannot afford to pay consistently [without any hopes for his own] progress. (Ibid.: 100)

Similar was the debate on the Bill introduced in 1917 seeking to make primary education compulsory for girls. While Brahmin members were at the forefront in arguing in favour of the Bill, the non-Brahmin members were cautious in their approach. They suggested that the Bill, if promulgated, should cover only the urban areas to begin with, for in the rural areas not even non-Brahmin boys were in any appreciable numbers receiving education. Questions relating to women and that of ‘reform’, which were also veiled ways of negotiating with questions of caste, are taken up for a more detailed discussion in Chapter 6.

Mysore State was often touted as ‘progressive’ and ‘forward-looking’—epithets arising chiefly out of its determined drive towards the modernisation of its administration, measures such as the introduction of railways, electricity and so on. Manor has drawn attention to the gross inadequacy of and misplaced enthusiasm demonstrated in such attempts (1977a: 8–27). But the
massive and unprecedented expansion of the bureaucracy and the undertaking of newer governmental initiatives like electricity generation, irrigation projects, modern industry, mining, railways, etc., were also feeding into the aspirations of the newly-emerging, Brahmin educated classes. Non-Brahmin leaders insistently drew attention to this felicitous convergence of modern state policy with the economy, interests and aspirations of the Brahmin community.  

Non-Brahmin newspapers and activists also consistently pointed out the more direct and deliberate attempts by Brahmins to facilitate the entry of their own caste-men to such spaces and indeed, to regulate the access of people from other castes. The ability of Brahmins to mediate, and if possible block, the entry of non-Brahmins into modern institutions was both strong and ubiquitous. This happened at different levels—by denying or procrastinating admission in schools (leave alone colleges), by shaping administrative policy and most decisively by deciding and defining what constitutes ‘public good and welfare’. Many of the memoirs written by Brahmins of this period offer rich testimonies to the naturalised ways in which their identity as Brahmins was woven seamlessly into their official/professional positions. They also provide candid instances of how bureaucratic positions were filled up, the norms of which tended to ‘naturally’ favour Brahmins. Here I look at the memoirs of a Brahmin official who richly details the period just before non-Brahmin articulations become significant in Mysore State. Navaratna Ramarao recounts

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20 Basavaiah’s speech in the Legislative Council (cited in Deveerappa 1985: 91–101) in response to the budget proposed contains many references to this affinity. It calls attention to the indiscriminate recruitment in the Engineering Department, in particular, which tended to make it ‘top-heavy’ at great cost to the revenue-spending patterns of the government. Such recruitments—across departments—took place despite apprehensions the government entertained in regard to the capability of those recruited. The standard reply to any demand that more non-Brahmins be recruited to higher-level positions was that there were no competent and eligible candidates available. This response is consistently offered on the floor of the Representative Assembly, in particular between the 1920s and the 1940s (for details, see Hanumanthappa n.d., Vol. III).
his experience of working as a Revenue Probationary Officer with the Mysore administration in his memoirs (1990).

Pursuing a law degree in Madras in 1900–01 (there was no law college in Mysore State at the time), and not in a very financially comfortable situation, Ramarao received a telegram from his father asking him to visit Mysore at the earliest, for Dewan Krishnamurthy21 wanted to see him. Ramarao writes:

Then, in the Mysore State, Probationary Assistant Commissioner posts were given to some either on grounds of respect for their family/lineage or on recommendation from some noted person or on communal quota….When a friend had asked me to try for such a position, I had said, 'I have too big a head to slip through such a back door'22…. But now when I received this unexpected telegram, I was a little excited wondering whether I could be in with an offer of an AC post. (Ramarao 1990: 20)

When he went to meet the Dewan, the latter was emphatic:

We [the Royal ‘We’] are close to your father and we are told that you write rather well in English. It has been on our mind for a long time that we should do some favour to your father. We could take you into our office and help you come up in life. (Ibid.: 21)

Since Ramarao thought that it did not quite sound like an AC-ship offer, he took courage to ask the details of what was exactly being offered. The Dewan proclaimed:

We usually start with a Rs. 20/- per month job in the Secretariat for BA graduates. But we cannot give such jobs to all those who come seeking them. Since we know your father well, we thought of taking you to our Home Office on a Rs. 50/- per month scale. (Ibid.: 22)

21 The first Mysorean to become the Dewan, supposedly put in place in order to placate the Mysore Brahmin clique, even when better qualified Madrasi Brahmins were available.

22 Meaning that he was too proud to ask for such favours.
Ramarao refused the offer and went on to complete his law degree to begin a bright career as a revenue probationer. But that is not the material point that is being pursued here. What is striking about the above instance is that even as late as 1900–01, jobs were being distributed on grounds of a respectable family background, recommendations or communal representations. This was much before a backward class/non-Brahmin articulation of communal reservations had made an entry. Notice the Dewan’s ‘compulsion’ to promote Ramarao’s career simply because he wished to do a favour to his father (even as the recipient thinks it is too small a favour). Looking at the auto/biographies from this period, one is struck by the ‘naturalness’ with which such informal networks operated.

The second striking aspect was the Dewan’s unwillingness to offer jobs at the secretariat to those who came looking for them. This demonstrates the willingness, if not eagerness, of the officialdom, which was constitutively Brahmin in its composition, to shut out even such thinly available public spaces to ‘others’. It was not even that such job-seekers at that point of time would have been anybody else but Brahmins themselves. Such instances of informal networks were not isolated; indeed, Ramarao’s memoirs are dotted with endless instances of that order. It was also helped by the fact that there was a huge chasm between the educational levels of the Brahmins and that of the others.

Thus, the Brahmin appropriation of modern spaces was not merely enabled by what is variously described as their ‘traditions of learning’, ‘writing skills’ and so on, but also the above described informal networks and the naturalised tendency of capitalising on the emerging norms of institutionalisation. Ramarao offers us glimpses of the workings of such caste and community networks. Talking about a Madhva amildar, he states:

Sect-patriotism was demonstrated at times. Once a Madhva officer was trying a Madhva sanubhogue in a case of embezzlement. Then the amildar, with tears in his eyes said, ‘This bastard [said endearingly] has committed it, sir. But he has a family to look after. More importantly, one has to respect the angara akshate [body markers of a Madhva male]. If you can agree to let him off after collecting the misappropriated money from him, I will some how try getting it out of him.’
The amildar himself is honest and thus had remained poor. But his devotion for the angara aksbate made him accept not only spending his own money but also allowing a thief go scot-free. This might not be accepted as justice but I cannot say that such compassion and devotion are wrong. (Ibid.: 34–35)

While the invocation of particular jati/sect loyalties is seen in the above illustration, the sense of both being and belonging to the larger category of ‘Brahmin’ is not entirely absent, as many more incidents that Ramarao himself narrates exemplify. Indeed, such a differential recuperation of the Brahmin self continues into the present and is determined largely by its contexts.

Besides, such officials had more condescending ways of negotiating with the larger non-Brahmin populace. Even if one might attribute this to bureaucratic indifference, the non-Brahmin activists preferred to see it as typical instances of subversion resorted to by Brahmins. These instances marked out, to the non-Brahmin articulators at least, the Brahmins’ ability to at once naturalise the powerful spaces of bureaucracy and education as their own, while also complicating the terms of access to these spaces. However, even as such mediations at the level of individuals were significant, there were also some institutionalised yet informal practices that had gained large-scale acceptance within the community, and which were facilitative of the Brahmin quest for modernity. It is to a detailing of the more significant and widespread of such practices that I turn herewith.

What appears to have been constitutive of the ‘right to city’ of many a Brahmin, particularly in Mysore State, are the two practices of varanna and bhikshanna. We know very little of the genealogy of these practices, their provenance, what task they performed in times before, and so on.
significant, were not the only ones in operation in this period. A Brahmin youth studying in a university or a pre-university course could also earn money by tutoring school-going children of Brahmin families or gain ‘freeships’ largely by appealing to the generosity of Brahmin officials in the education department of the college bureaucracy. They could even take up part-time jobs in the bureaucracy. V. Sitaramaiah’s (a prominent Kannada litterateur) reminiscences of his college days describe these arrangements (1997: 14–20), which seem to have been fairly entrenched. Yet, almost every biography or autobiography that one comes across of Brahmins who were receiving education during this period calls attention to either or both of the practices of varanna and bhikshanna.

Varanna, which could be translated as ‘weekly food’, refers to an arrangement among Brahmins residing in cities and towns whereby they feed one or more poor Brahmin boys who have undergone the initiation ceremony, on a particular day of the week, till the completion of their education. Bhikshanna, apparently a more time-honoured practice, translates into ‘food collected through begging’. As the name suggests, students used to go around with a vessel in their hands to local Brahmins’ houses begging for food. However, it is the former which was more in practice than the latter in the early twentieth century. Even as such practices may sound embarrassing (as indeed many of the auto/biographies admit) what is to be noted is the vitality and legitimacy that these practices commanded as well as their practical usefulness. S. L. Bhairappa, an important contemporary Kannada litterateur, recalls how such practices were given legitimacy and dignity. When he,

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26 On the other hand, Bhairappa, a much younger contemporary of Sitaramaiah, had to overcome, during the 1930s and the 1940s, many instances of over-eager non-Brahmin officials seeking to deny him some of these privileges—of freeship, of endowment grants, etc. (Bhairappa 1996).

27 Iyengar (1968, Vol. I: 130–40), narrating his own experiences as a varannada huduga (boy receiving varanna) in Mysore during the 1900s, describes the various linkages that a boy could invoke in seeking Varanna, the cultural legitimacy that such practices enjoyed, the different experiences that he underwent ranging from humiliation to gratitude, and so on.
as a poor student, had to decide on going ahead with seeking bhikshanna, a Brahmin hotel-owner known to him, said:

Anyway, aren’t you born as a Brahmin? Then what is the humiliation in seeking alms? I too have done that. In our region [he is an Udupi Brahmin], they call it Madhukari [collecting the honey]. Like the bee, which goes to scores of different flowers to collect the juice to prepare honey…It is definitely honourable to go to ten unknown Brahmins seeking alms. (Bhairappa 1996: 152)

It is to be noted that the legitimacy of the practice is being premised on the ‘scriptural’ sanction prescribed for a Brahmin male in the brahmacharyasrama (the first life-stage, devoted to learning), for whom begging is perhaps the only justified way of finding food. However, irrespective of such a justification, the seeker himself felt rather humiliated imploring alms (as Bhairappa himself admits). Varanna was definitely more honourable compared to bhikshanna. However, such practices did indeed perform a crucial task for the Brahmin community vis-à-vis the unfolding structures of modern opportunity. While one comes across stray references to the existence of such practices among the Lingayats and the Vokkaligas as well, they were not as widespread in these communities. Also, as we have seen before, neither of these two communities had made substantial inroads into the modern economy for such practices to become necessary.

The entrenched presence of Brahmins in the cities and towns of Karnataka by the early decades of the twentieth century meant that eager Brahmin youths, who came to these modern spaces to further their education and career, could hope to find a stably located relative or caste-fellow willing to provide shelter and support. For instance, the household that V. Sitaramaiah stayed with in Mysore during his graduate and post-graduate education was one where his father had served as a priest. It is on the basis of the ‘respect’ that the head of this household had for his father that Sitaramaiah got to stay with the family. Besides assured

But, as Iyengar (1968, Vol. I: 134–35) indicates, culturally speaking, both these practices seem to have a single source of legitimacy—a brahmachari (male individual in brahmacharyasrama) has to survive on alms.
shelter and food, in themselves crucial comforts, there were other advantages of residing with one's relatives or family friends. The hosts would, more often than not, be an official in the government bureaucracy, or a lawyer, or a lecturer/teacher—each of which were crucial levers of advantage. As almost all the available narratives indicate, this facilitated access to an already entrenched network of social, economic and cultural relations that ensured a comfortable livelihood.29

Therefore, it was usually only when a person failed to find a relative or a family friend that he had to look for alternative arrangements, such as community hostels. These hostels, opened mainly and initially by philanthropist Brahmin officials or lawyers or landlords, were also crucial in furthering the Brahmins' quest for urban space. However, given the sheer number of students seeking opportunities in cities, these hostels could not have catered to all. The urban units of many Brahmin mathas too extended boarding and lodging facilities to students (see, for instance, Iyengar 1968, Vol. I: 133).30 By the early decades of the twentieth century, many Brahmin jatis which had formed associations also established community hostels, which definitionally restricted admission to its own community students and denied the same to other Brahmin students. Such restrictions, in due course, were gradually relaxed. Many available auto/biographies indicate the gradual loosening of restrictions on inter-community dining norms among Brahmins, though not on inter-marriage. In fact, in his autobiography, Bhairappa, even mentions the case of a Congress sympathiser, a landlord in a big village, to whose place even students belonging to the Vokkaliga and Bestha (fishing) castes came for varanna. This alerts us to the many

29 Sitaramaiah's reminiscences of his college days (1997) offer a graphic picture of the 'givenness' of Brahmin networks, which infuse varied forms of cultural and social capital. These helped him obtain a scholarship, access vibrant resources of classical music, 'get to know' important people (all Brahmins) in the bureaucracy, the university, in journalism, and so on.

30 Lingayat mathas established hostels on a much larger and more formal scale all over Karnataka, but this happened much later. This practice was emulated by mathas of other communities as well, particularly of the Vokkaligas.
different strands of influence to which the urbanising community was getting exposed (Bhairappa 1996: 100–01; note, this was in 1947). When Iyengar was a varannada huduga during the 1900s, he visited families belonging to his own community, the Sri-vaishnavas. However, he also says that the need to look beyond never arose. Given the preponderance of Brahmins in the bureaucracy, much of the government’s efforts at establishing government hostels in cities and towns too served the interests of predominantly the Brahmin students. Not surprisingly, this was another bone of contention for the non-Brahmin assertions of the day.

However, the arrangements of varanna and bhikshanna appear to have been more widespread and even more culturally legitimate than hostels. While the accounts available of individual Brahmins who had to resort to such arrangements use the instance of these practices to present a picture of a heroic fight in the face of great adversity and challenge (as indeed they might well have been), the role that these arrangements fulfilled has been critical in enabling the unprecedented urbanisation of the Brahmin community.\(^{31}\)

Such practices seem to have become obsolete by the 1960s, primarily because of the founding of more hostels, both by caste associations and by the state, as also the presence of more extensive kinship networks obtaining in towns and cities. It would be a mistake, however, to underestimate their centrality in forming the sensibilities and subjectivities of a mobile generation. Brahmin youth, often coming from rural, poor and orthodox backgrounds found the ethos of the urban Brahmin households quite different and liberating. These transitions were crucial in preparing the ground for Brahmins to experiment with the ethos and the self of the community, commensurate with the demands of an urban, secularised life.\(^{32}\)

\(^{31}\) In fact, many of the respondents interviewed, that is, those in the age group of 50 years and above, recalled either themselves or somebody in their family being the beneficiaries of such practices.

\(^{32}\) See for a varied experiential spectrum, the autobiographies of Iyengar (1968), Murthy Rao (1990), Bhairappa (1996), and Sitaramaiah (1997). All these individuals went on to wield—both collectively and in their individual capacities—great influence over the social and cultural life of modern Karnataka.
With this broad mapping of the trajectory of Brahmins in the late colonial period, the next section attempts a more contemporary characterisation of the Brahmins in Karnataka.

A Contemporary Profile

Reconstructing a picture of the contemporary state of Brahmins is by no means an easy task. As mentioned at the very outset of this chapter, there exists very little by way of systematic data. Retaining the category of ‘caste’ in the decennial census would have provided us with a macro, if elementary, picture of particular caste communities, which could have acted as a ready-reckoner for any serious attempt to understand contemporary caste profiles. Thus, from very primary data such as the population of a given caste community to more significant information such as its rural–urban distribution, migration and occupational patterns, representation in spaces such as the bureaucracy and judiciary, scholars are forced to work with informed guesses or, more frequently, projections based on the 1931 census figures. On the other hand, strangely enough, there have been almost no attempts by the academic community to gather such macro-data either (see Deshpande 2003: 98–124).

As already disclosed, the most significant efforts at generating a composite picture of the workings of caste have been the data generated by the various Backward Classes committees and commissions. Apart from the Miller Committee that was set up in the 1920, there have been successive committees and commissions instituted in the post-Independence period. Paradoxically, these official reports are the only extensive documents which provide—even if unsystematically, and not often subject to the norms of social science research—some idea of the trajectory of Brahmins in recent years. It is paradoxical because, almost always, beginning from the Miller Committee Report to the present, Brahmins have expressed their displeasure over the various recommendations. The two Brahmin members of the Miller Committee, for instance, attached ‘Notes of Dissent’ to the final report. One of them even refused to sign the final report. Thereafter, however, Brahmins and their associations have either gone to the courts seeking a stay on government orders implementing the commission reports or have gone to the press stating
their ire. It seems inevitable, nevertheless, to turn to these reports to further substantiate our contemporary sense of the Brahmin community. My discussion will also call attention to a few studies of Brahmins in Karnataka. The resulting picture will be further supported by the accounts of the respondents themselves as they speak of the trajectories of their individual families.

Several Backward Classes committees and commissions have estimated the percentage share of each caste group in the state population. These reports peg the Brahmin population in the state at 4.28 per cent in 1961 (the Mysore Backward Classes [Nagana Gowda] Committee Report, 1961); 4.23 per cent in 1972 (the first Backward Classes [Havanur] Commission Report, 1975, Vol. II); 3.81 per cent in 1984 (the second Backward Classes [Venkataswamy] Commission Report, 1986, Vol. I); 3.45 per cent in 1988 (the third Backward Classes [Chinnappa Reddy] Commission Report, 1990, Vol. I). Brahmins are spread all over the state of Karnataka but are a significant population in the districts of Bangalore, Mysore, Shimoga, Dharwad and the coastal districts of South and North Canara.

The picture that these successive post-Independence reports offer is consistent with the larger map of the Brahmin community drawn in the two sections above. The preponderance of Brahmins in almost all modern public contexts continued into the post-Independence period, even as the overwhelming nature of their dominance has come to be increasingly circumscribed.

33 It is to be noted that the data presented by one commission are not comparable to that presented by others. Every commission had to undertake the daunting task of arriving at some sense of a macro picture of the differentially placed caste communities. Each succeeding commission would find that the judiciary had already invalidated the data and the methodology employed by the preceding one. Most of them, depending upon such factors as the time available, the extent of expertise at the disposal of the commission and the cooperation of the bureaucracy, came up with different yardsticks to determine the backwardness or otherwise of a caste community. Thimmaiah (1993) critiques the extremely diverse and at times totally unscientific methods that these reports employed in order to arrive at their conclusions. However, our allusions to the data from these reports vis-à-vis Brahmins are primarily those that had been compiled from official records and were usually uncontested.
at least in some respects and in some spheres. According to the Nagana Gowda Committee, Brahmins made up 4.28 per cent of the total population but constituted 38.8 per cent of the students studying in high schools (cited in Thimmaiah 1993: 85). Further, as on 31 March 1959, 23.93 per cent of the Brahmin population were state government employees, excluding those who were part of the Class IV cadre (ibid.: 88). The Havanur Commission too recorded the disproportionate nature of the Brahmins in different sectors of government services. Brahmins continued to corner a disproportionately large share of these spaces as also of educational opportunities, when compared to their share in the population. Likewise, the Venkataswamy Commission estimated the Brahmins as occupying spaces of modern education and employment to the extent of five to six times higher than what a strict distribution based on their share in the state’s population would have allowed. For instance, during 1984–85, Brahmins occupied 15.86 per cent of the total number of medical college seats and 20.09 per cent of the total number of engineering college seats compared to their estimated population of 3.81 per cent of the state (1986, Vol. I: 167–68).

It is perhaps only in the space of representative politics that there obtained a certain equation between the Brahmin population and their representation in the different elected bodies. In fact, there was more parity as one proceeded towards local levels of representative bodies such as the taluq development boards, town municipal councils, city corporations and so on (see ibid.: 162–66 for the figures). At the level of members of the legislative assembly, legislative council and the national parliament (MLAs, MLCs and MPs respectively) though, 8.17 per cent were Brahmins—more than twice their percentage in the state’s population. In the year 1978, for instance, there were 16 Brahmin MLAs, 10 MLCs and 4 MPs.

We could take a more extensive look at the report submitted by the commission headed by a former Supreme Court judge, Chinnappa Reddy (1990). The predominance of the Brahmins was most acute in the spheres of professional and higher education. Between 1977–78 and 1988–89, 20.58 per cent of the medical seats were occupied by Brahmin students. Lingayats and Vokkaligas, despite having had the benefits of reservations more or less throughout the history of the policy, were still lagging far
behind with 7.63 per cent and 11.56 per cent of the seats respectively. During the academic year 1988–89, Brahmin students occupied 24.37 per cent of the total engineering seats as against 12.06 per cent and 11.07 per cent that the Lingayats and Vokkaligas respectively occupied. As far as admissions to the agricultural university were concerned, there was greater parity—with 16.06 per cent, 16.18 per cent and 15.94 per cent of Brahmins, Lingayats and Vokkaligas respectively. Except for the Lingayats, Vokkaligas and SCs, there was no other community which could even begin to compare with the Brahmin community in these numbers. Considering the Brahmin community was incomparably smaller than any of these communities, its sway assumes greater significance.

Even in the recruitment to government services, the Report adduced that Brahmins had managed to acquire about 14 per cent of the positions as of 1986, and about 12 per cent of the same post-1986. As on 2 November 1988, they held 18.12 per cent of the Group-A posts in government services and 26.24 per cent of all the posts in the Groups A and B in the public sector undertakings. Again, Brahmins, in the political sphere, continued to reproduce the pattern that we have noted. While their numbers in the higher levels of representative bodies such as the parliament, and state assembly continued to be prominent, their numbers at local representative bodies was almost negligible. While there were nine MLAs, seven MLCs and two MPs from the community, there was not a single Brahmin zilla parishad president. Besides, out of the total 863 zilla parishad members, only 27 were Brahmins.

The Report further makes the point that while the preceding two Backward Classes commissions had included a reservation provision for economically backward families (constituting the ‘E Group’) irrespective of their caste background, during the academic year 1988–89, of the total 39 seats in all the professional colleges (medical, engineering and dental) and post-graduate institutions that were given away under this category Brahmin candidates garnered 22 seats (Govt. of Karnataka 1990, Vol. I: 45–169).

In spite of the unevenness and incomparability of the data presented in these reports, a relatively safe and preliminary conclusion that can be drawn from them is that Brahmins continue
to be disproportionately represented in the bureaucracy, spaces of higher education, judiciary, and so on. Their predominance is nowhere near the astounding levels that were witnessed during the early decades of the twentieth century, but as commission after commission have averred:

So far as the Brahmin Community is concerned, there can be no question that they are socially and educationally the most advanced community in the State of Karnataka even if some of them are poor. (Govt. of Karnataka 1990, Vol. I: 50)

This can be corroborated with the aid of some scanty scholarly works that have looked at the question of caste in contemporary social life. For instance, the urban Brahmins of Karnataka seem to have fared exceedingly well. This claim is substantiated in R. Sivaprasad (1987). Sivaprasad works with Bangalore-specific data collected during the years 1973–76 on the population of the city to study social mobility across different communities. He presents data of families not only across caste communities but also across three generations of each family, which gives us a fairly clear picture of the relative positioning of the different communities on a scale of social mobility as well as of the differential ability of the communities to consolidate the mobility achieved. The central conclusion is that social mobility is in concordance with the ritual hierarchy of castes. The congruence is real to such an extent that no caste group has been able to defy its status as determined in the caste hierarchy to either garner dominance or lose its hold over society. Mobility is accordingly largely communitarian, and not individualistic. Thus, Brahmins outscore other communities on almost every count of social mobility. They are even extremely successful in reproducing the mobility chain across generations. In other words, Brahmins have not only been the forerunners in utilising modern educational and occupational spaces, but have also successfully consolidated, over generations, their pre-eminence in these spaces. The gap between them and the other caste communities (including the so-called dominant castes) is at least that of one generation, and that between the Brahmins and the SCs is at least two generations. Brahmin women (in spite of faring badly when compared with their own caste men) have also been important recipients of
modern education. Their pre-eminence in this regard outruns that of women from any other caste. The shift from traditional occupations to modern occupations is apparent in all castes and religious communities, but it is among Brahmins that this shift is most swift and successful. Brahmins, particularly those in the age range of 30 years and below, have begun diversifying into ‘production and service’ occupations (like electrician, mechanics, cooks, etc.) even as their preference for and preponderance in professional and administrative jobs is very clear.

Brahmins likewise are predominantly distributed in the high and high-medium socio-economic status zones,\(^{34}\) where the investments that they have made on property tend to yield high returns. Their average monthly income was next only to the Jain community, which is tiny and primarily engaged in business. A majority of them are distributed within the categories of the high to highest income groups. Further, in the sample there was not a single instance of the head of the household marrying outside the Brahmin fold. Equally significantly, Brahmins exhibited ‘caste affinity’ in selecting friends and interacting with them and their relatives. This tendency is noted for other caste and religious communities too, but the fact of a dominant upper caste community exhibiting a propensity for closed networks of social relations will evidently have different effects than those in the case of subaltern communities like Muslims and Dalits. In sum, the upward mobility made by most of the Brahmin families on each count—of education, occupation, income, and women’s education—is not merely consolidated in the next generation but also successfully stretched further. This general state of wellbeing of Brahmins is not limited to Bangalore, and seems to obtain across the contours of the state (see, for instance, Gist 1954; Madan and Halbar 1972).

The larger transitions underway in the community—of a determined shift from rural to urban areas, becoming invisible (or inconsequential) in the rural areas, the over-reliance on the state for its sustained social mobility, and, increasingly in recent times, the transmutation of the different forms of capital acquired

\(^{34}\) The study divided the city of Bangalore into five such zones based on land value.
under modern conditions into endowments that have prepared them to look beyond official (state-sponsored) institutions—are embodied in the accounts provided by our respondents about their own personal and familial trajectories. For most of the respondents, access to modernity was essentially realised through and was translated into access to the cities. In particular, modern structures of governance (especially the bureaucracy, judiciary and police) and the increasing importance placed on a secular liberal education meant opportunities for shifting the locus of their economic and social power from land and traditional ‘sacred’ education. This seems to have resulted in making the Brahmin largely invisible as an entity in rural Karnataka—both literally and as an image for garnering political and cultural mileage.

Of course, Brahmins continue to reside in significant numbers only in the rural areas of coastal Karnataka and parts of Malnad, where they continue to be direct participants in the agricultural activity. Even with these, it must be noted, resource investment has not been uniformly agriculture based, for they have extensive familial and kinship ties with relatives residing in towns and cities. In fact, the aspirations of the youth among these Brahmins too are to seek secular, higher/technical education so as to be able to lead secure lives in urban settings.

This foregrounds itself in many ways, as in the case of the changing matrimonial preferences of the Havyakas. Prospective Havyaka bridegrooms engaged in agriculture are reportedly finding it increasingly difficult to get brides from the community, for young Havyaka women are inclined towards marrying men settled with a modern job in urban locations. The president of the Sri Akhila Havyaka Maha Sabha was rather proud that their community association was the first among Brahmins to set up a Working Women’s Hostel and that it was getting an overwhelming response from young unmarried women of the community. However, she was also concerned about the trend, as she states:

It is a rather tricky situation that confronts the community. On the one hand, it is definitely heartening to see young women from our community stepping out of the four walls of the house, where their ability and creativity were hitherto contained, to explore independent careers. This has become all the more necessary in the contemporary moment, given that doors are being shut on the Brahmin community from
all sides. It is difficult, on the other hand, when they refuse to go back to villages after marriage. I cannot, for a moment, suggest that they ought to return because their aspirations and talents will never be realised in a village. But, again, it is alarming to see young men involved in agriculture staying single till late in their thirties. There are also reports that such families are willing to seek alliances outside the community, among other Brahmin castes. I would not say that this is reprehensible, but it is definitely unnecessary.\footnote{Interview with Ms Shalmali Venkatesh, President of the Havyaka Maha Sabha, 17 October 2000.}

Many families from such communities that have settled in urban areas have taken the onus of nursing the children of relatives from rural areas who seek to pursue education and employment. As a respondent proudly stated:

> Even though I do not have a family to call my own, many nephews and nieces have stayed here, got educated, employed and have set up their establishments. This gives me immense satisfaction.\footnote{Interview with Ms Durga, 22 October 2000. She is a single, unmarried Madhva woman in her late 50s, who came to Bangalore from a village near Shimoga looking for an independent livelihood nearly 30 years ago. Many other respondents from these parts of Karnataka have similarly helped out their relatives and community members. It has to be noted, however, that Ms Durga is an exception in her generation—having remained single and charting an independent career of her own.}

A long history of urbanisation has also meant that for most of the urban Brahmin respondents there is no ‘native place’ to either visit or even remember. This is more so for the younger generations. The older generations have emotional attachments and memories of their ‘native place’ and the family deities situated there which often provide a compulsive justification to visit the place. The younger generation, however, shows no such bonding, and gradually over two to three generations the family loses intimate, if not complete, contact with that place. It is generally families from the coastal and Malnad regions that have sustained strong networks with their ‘native place’. Many such families
continue to have some direct interest, usually in the form of a joint property (primarily agricultural but also often, an ancestral house) looked after by a male member of the family. The latter would invariably be one who had failed to secure a modern education. Again, if his children got jobs in the city, he too would move out of the village, sooner or later. For Brahmin families of these regions, the temple and the matha (which also serve as the major pilgrimage centres of Karnataka, like Udupi and Sringeri) have provided reasons to maintain contact. However, as new generations take the reins of the family, this contact has become increasingly impersonal as visits no longer double up as occasions to meet family and kin.

As the narratives of our respondents affirm, not all instances of migration have been in pursuit of secular education or jobs in the modern sphere. For most women, till the last generation or so, the primary mode of entry into the city was through marriage. One respondent, a 37-year-old woman graduate and a Smarta, whose father continues to be an agriculturist (albeit primarily as a supervisor) recounted:

I came to Bangalore about fifteen years ago after marriage from a village near Kundapur [Udupi district]. Four of my sisters have since stayed at our place pursuing different things. While one did a course in engineering and another a non-technical course, two others came here after their education looking simultaneously for jobs and marriage proposals. As you know, middle class men prefer working women. The prospects of marriage and of finding better marriage alliances are incomparably greater than what would be out there in the village.37

As we can see, even when families stay back in the village because they have not accessed secular modes of mobility, the reallocation of resources into education and employment has been inexorable, reducing the rural/agriculturist Brahmin to some kind of exotica. This near-complete evacuation of the Brahmin from the rural agrarian economy and sociopolitical life has important implications not only for the community but also

37 Interview with Ms Kala, 7 January 2001.
for the ways in which caste, and the different identities that get recuperated into the space of caste, get articulated and deployed in the agrarian/rural context.

There has also been a significantly different instance of mobility in the recent history of Brahmins: the outflow of the South Canara Brahmins not merely to other parts of Karnataka but also other states and even other countries. These émigrés, semi-literate/illiterate workers in the vegetarian food business, have often been held up as examples of Brahmin grit and ingenuity. The legendary Udupi Brahmin restaurants that have come up all over the country—and now even in the West and the Gulf countries—are the most visible face of this development. There are also others who eke out livelihoods as professional cooks in upper-middle class, urban Brahmin households and as caterers for special occasions like weddings and so on.

For many Brahmin families from the Udupi–Mangalore region, the reminiscence of this respondent (a Smarta), now in his mid-80s, would serve as a ‘community biography’:

I came to Bangalore in 1937 looking for a livelihood. Life was rather difficult in the village (near Udupi). We had very little land, and no assured irrigation. To top it all, we were too many brothers and the ancestral property had been divided many times over. I knew no one in Bangalore but still decided to take a chance. Then the idea of a hotel was still not a very acceptable thing. But I knew that I could work at somebody’s house as a cook and survive. I began working in a former Brahmin Dewan’s house as a help to the main cook. For such jobs, they allowed nobody but Brahmins. I am a Smarta, and the Dewan was a Madhva. It did cause some minor hiccups and I could never have dreamt of becoming the chief cook there, for only a Madhva would have been allowed to take that position. But it gave me a foothold in the city.

I came here alone and for almost twenty years my family was in the village. After many such jobs, I started a canteen of my own and brought my family along. By then, my eldest son had finished B.Com. and had joined the railways, which meant a source of secure income for the family. I shifted my family to Bangalore so that my other children could get better education and my daughter could get married to
somebody who had a government job here in the city. I had my canteen running till all my sons were employed or educated and the daughter got married.\footnote{38} This respondent continued to own some agricultural land in his native village, which was looked after by a tenant but supervised by his brother’s family that had stayed behind. He lost that property, however, due to the implementation of the Land Reforms Act of 1974.

Now, in all such land reform initiatives, there was a gap of at least a couple of years between the proposal of a reform and its implementation. This, many observers have noted, always gave the landowners enough time to circumvent the reform initiatives. Thus, Manor notes that an observed increase in the proportion of owner–cultivators should be attributed to ‘the hasty disposal of inam lands by their owners—often Brahmin absentee landlords—in anticipation of Inam abolition laws. This occurred mainly in old Mysore and Bombay and Hyderabad Karnataka’ (1989: 329–30). Ksheerasagara (1985) even points to the ability of the Brahmin-dominated bureaucracy to impede the effective implementation of the Inam Abolition Acts and the 1974 Land Reforms Act as these were inimical to Brahmin interests. Ksheerasagara further points out that most Brahmins who lost land were those who had migrated to cities for work (see also Nataraj 1980; Nataraj and Nataraj 1982; Gowda 1997).\footnote{39}

\footnote{38} Interview with Mr Venkatesh, 14 April 2000.  
\footnote{39} There were two Inam Abolition Acts that were enacted in the 1950s. While the 1954 Act abolished all personal inams, the one notified the following year abolished those inams that had been granted to religious and charitable institutions. These two forms of inams were largely held by the Brahmins—the former by individual families, and the latter, which were vaster areas of land, by Brahmin mathas and temples. The Inam Commission set up by the British in 1864 had stated that ‘[t]here were 59,492 inams spread over 804,924 acres of agricultural land’ (Thimmaiah 1993: 80), and much of this was at the disposal of the Brahmin community. The families which had preferred not to sell these lands (even while becoming absentee landowners) were to lose them because of the Inam Abolition Acts. But going by the few disparate accounts available, the families that were solely dependent on such lands were few. The land under the administration
These assessments notwithstanding, there is widely felt anger against land reform policies, expressed even now in conversations, caste journals and association meetings. Also, land reform legislations enabled Brahmins to give a communal turn to state policies. A Brahmin resident of a village near Bangalore, who claimed that he had lost ‘hundred and fifty acres of land’, sharply articulates what many respondents voiced:

We tolerated it when the government took away much of our land, even if through dubious means. But taking away lands that were given to temples and mathas—this was a great attack on our religion and culture. This was the direct result of the government, in the name of secularism, targeting the Hindus. Give me one instance when the government enacted any similar law which took away the land or property of the Church or the Wakf Board.

Paradoxically enough, the large-scale migration into urban areas has also meant a sense of disempowerment. As a respondent, who migrated in the late 1940s to pursue education in Bangalore, describes it:

When I was growing up, our village [near Hassan] had nearly 60 Brahmin families—all Iyengars—in the agrahara [village arising out of the royal donation of land to Brahmins]. Almost all of them had lands. Now there is just one Brahmin family remaining there. And the agrahara is completely taken over by the Gowdas [Vokkaligas], as are our lands which they bought. The only remaining Iyengar family runs a rice mill.

of the Brahmin-run temples and mathas was much greater. When the jagirdari status of Sringeri was taken away in 1958, the Sringeri Jagir comprised 47 villages with 47,442 acres, of which 16,636 acres were cultivated (Prasad 2007: 241, n. 65).

Interview with Mr Rama Rao, 15 January 2001. He is a Madhva (55 years), educated only till the seventh standard. While he has been reduced to a lower-middle class status—primarily owing to the land reforms—his parents’ generation had been one of the richest families around. However, what marks his family from the general trajectories of the community is that his children, particularly the sons, have not done well in education. One of his sons owns a petty shop in the village and the other works as an assistant to a priest at the village temple. His daughters are married to government employees (and
The head of that family has completely transformed himself—he speaks the Gowda Kannada, wears those long half-pants, with a towel on his shoulder [standard images of a rural Vokkaliga] in the typical Gowda style. But he has no choice—he cannot remain like an island there, speaking ‘swaccha’ [clean] Kannada like the Brahmans because he will be ridiculed. They often taunt him—Where are the Brahmans now sir! Oh…what darpa, dhimaku [airs and arrogance] they were showing off’ and stuff like that. Now this man knows his place—he knows none of the earlier respect is shown, none can be expected. Earlier the Gowdas used to respectfully call us ‘aya’ or ‘amma’ [‘father’ or ‘mother’]; now they say, ‘Oh…What if they are Brahmans?’ The most power this Brahmin can wield is to ask the Gowda, who brings his paddy to the mill in the morning to be cleaned, to come half an hour later. It is with these useless things he can delude himself that he still has some power.\footnote{Interview with Mr Prakash, 22 July 2000. The respondent, a 62-year-old Srivaishnava, is a retired officer of the state-owned life insurance behemoth, the Life Insurance Corporation (LIC) of India. He is an inactive member of the Hebbar Srivaishnava Sabha. We shall encounter this respondent again in this chapter and in Chapter 6.}

The isolation of the rural Brahmin is also elaborated by a Madhva respondent. His was the solitary Brahmin family in a village near Bangalore, which was dominated by Lingayats in terms of landholdings and Dalits in terms of numerical strength.

When my father was alive, our family was accorded prestige and honour. Everybody in the village took advice from him on matters ranging from land dealings to auspicious days. He was a permanent member of the Veerabhadra Swami Temple Trust in the village. But now none of that obtains. The Lingayats have taken over the management of the temple completely. Even the Holeyas and Madigas [the Dalit castes] dare to stand up to us and enter our house without any hesitation. They now even have an Ambedkar Association in the village. I continue to survive here because I am active in the local Congress party machinery because of my socialist
views. The villagers know that I do not take partial views on contentious matters. That is why they have unanimously voted me for the presidentship of different local boards.\textsuperscript{42}

These paradoxes notwithstanding, the spectacular transition of Brahmins into a modern, state-dependent community is reflected in the educational and occupational profiles of the respondents and their family.

The following is the educational profile of the 100 Brahmin households surveyed. None of the respondents were illiterates. Of the men, 11 had stopped education before graduation; all except two of these were more than 60 years old. Twenty-three of the men had graduate degrees and most of these respondents were in the age group of 40 to 60 years. Nine had post-graduate qualifications and 14 possessed professional degrees. Six of them had pursued religious education and among them all except one had failed very early in their pursuit of secular education. The lone exception was an orphan, who was sheltered by the institution where he was pursuing religious studies. Of the 37 women respondents, five had pre-degree education, 15 had graduate degrees, eight had post-graduate qualifications, and nine had professional degrees. Again, the age profile corresponding with the educational qualifications matched that of the men. Everyone, irrespective of age, spatial location, class status, etc., had received education in highly subsidised government-run or aided educational institutions. This factor is chiefly responsible for the remarkable literacy levels of the respondent families over generations. Interestingly, every household, without exception, has witnessed progressively higher educational levels in each successive generation. While only seven of the respondent families were first-generation literates, 54 of them were second-generation literates and 39 of them were third-generation literates.

The occupational profile of the 135 interviewees is further testimony to their reliance on the modern state. Of the respondents

\textsuperscript{42} Interview with Mr Sripathi, 17 September 2000. The spectrum of experience, perception and evaluation encoded in this testimony is important.
110 were employed (this is apart from 16 ‘housewives’ and nine students mostly staying in caste hostels). Fifty-two of those employed were either retired or currently engaged in government jobs—largely at the middle levels of the bureaucracy. Thirty were self-employed in business and professions and 28 were in the formal sector, as bank and insurance officials, software executives, accountants, etc. Data on the employment of the entire household is also instructive: 34 of the respondents had fathers who were working/had worked in the formal and government sectors, 51 had spouses in such jobs and 72 had siblings similarly employed. As is evident, many households had two or more individuals holding jobs which promised a secure livelihood and this has meant a stable middle-class status over generations.

In more recent times, however, many Brahmin associations, including the federating organisation AKBMS, have been exhorting their youth to look beyond the government. AKBMS has even ventured into cooperative banks, so as to make available credit for starting small business enterprises and has sought the guidance of successful Brahmin industrialists for the purpose. These efforts at mobilising Brahmins towards self-employment and non-governmental jobs have not brought about a perceptible change in the occupational patterns displayed. Most of the middle-aged respondents, who would have begun their careers during the 1970s and 1980s, hold jobs within the governmental machinery. (Though, Sivaprasad [1987] suggests that occupational diversification among the Brahmins had begun by the 1970s itself.) It is perhaps only during the decade of the 1990s that the plea to look beyond the state has been heeded in any significant degree. The shift is obviously neither complete nor unequivocal, nor is it consistent across different occupations and professions. Besides, fewer Brahmins are found today at the lower echelons of the government bureaucracy,—doubtless, an effect of the reservations policy as indeed a consequence of the self-withdrawal of the community from such positions.

These trends notwithstanding, it is necessary to reiterate that Brahmins have been the most extensive recipients of welfarist measures in the post-Independence period—from subsidised education, health, etc., to ‘modern’ jobs. ‘Modern’ employment primarily meant a much coveted job with the government,
including the burgeoning public sector industries and nationalised banks, all of which created unprecedented and secure employment opportunities for the Brahmin youth.\textsuperscript{43} Such an employment meant access to residential sites at subsidised rates, house loans, good schools, hospitals, etc. Most of the Brahmin youth who have found employment in the ‘new market economy’ of the 1990s were all the beneficiaries of the ‘capital’ (social, symbolic and economic) that their parents had accumulated under the ‘mixed economy’ of the Jawaharlal Nehru–Indira Gandhi era. Therefore, there are enough indications that many of them are ready for the next phase of transition—which will see a retrenchment of the welfare state from many fundamental spheres like education, health and employment and a compounding of private initiatives in these spheres. Indeed, they have been significant players in legitimising the neo-liberal discourse in the Indian context.

There are absolutely no statistics available on the numbers of Brahmins in spaces made available by the 1990s policies of liberalisation of the economy and state.\textsuperscript{44} But all the anecdotal evidences point towards the already entrenched presence of

\textsuperscript{43} Many of the successful nationalised banks originating from Karnataka were originally highly localised and sometimes even Brahmin caste banks. They were thus ‘naturally’ predisposed towards recruiting known/caste members. However, even after nationalisation (in the late 1960s) and the introduction of competitive examinations, it was primarily Brahmins who entered these jobs. In fact, in large organisations like the LIC conflicts centred around which Brahmins were taking the lion’s share of the jobs and postings. Thus, till the late 1980s, Kannada Brahmins were acutely dissatisfied that Tamil Brahmins were recruiting only their community members into the organisation (information from a respondent, Mr Prakash, a former employee with the LIC).

\textsuperscript{44} There are some studies on the IT (information technology) industry of Bangalore but caste is yet to enter these discussions as a significant indicator in making sense of its trajectory. See, for instance, Upadhya (2004, 2007); see also Taeube (2004). But newspapers and popular journals have, almost matter-of-factly, referred to the caste locations of the IT bigwigs. Revealing is the following quote from the weekly, \textit{India Today}, cited in (now banned website) www.dalitstan.org: ‘The almost Brahminical quest for respect (no coincidence that five of the six Infosys founder directors are Brahmins) has led it [Infosys] on a quest for adhering to the strictest disclosure norms and globally accepted
Brahmins in such spaces. Brahmins are becoming transnational as never before. For many Brahmin families this has meant a virtual revolution in their financial and social status. In fact, many of the respondents interviewed had a kin or two already riding the wave of the new economy, with a consequent shift in family incomes and lifestyle. Lending voice to such a dramatic transformation of life patterns is the following statement of a retired father:

My son brought home a salary after his first month of work as a software engineer which was at least twice the salary that I received in the final month of my working life. Mind you, I have worked for nearly 30 years for LIC and retired as a middle-level manager. I had to work relentlessly all my life to buy a site (that too at a subsidised rate from the government), and to build this house. But my son went for some project-work from his company to the United States for just three years and came back to buy a site which is worth 55 lakhs in an upper class locality. I bought a car only with his help!

For my generation [now in their late 50s and early 60s] the model of a successful life has been one in which one has built a house in a city, if possible has a car, seen through the education and employment of the sons and marriages of the daughters—this would then be the dream come true. But within the space of say 10 years, things have changed so dramatically that one cannot imagine. Many of my generation, including myself, have gone to the US, and for many of us the US has become a fairly regular place. If anybody had told me, even ten years ago, that all this would happen I would have treated it as a joke!  

accounting practices. It has found respect by practising high corporate values. [Narayana] Murthy [the then chairman of Infosys] is the co-author of the Confederation of Indian Industry’s corporate governance code, and its best face to argue for policy changes to enhance stakeholder value. At Infosys, there is an unwritten rule that nobody will push his son, or a close relative, into a position in the company’ (http://www.dalitstan.org/journal/brahmin/bra001/brah0105.html, accessed 22 April 2004).

Interview with Mr. Prakash, 22 July 2000. Cf. n. 46 infra for personal details about this respondent. The quote that follows in the text is also from the same respondent.
As the above statement demonstrates, the new marker of status for the urban Brahmin family is the ability to realise the ‘great American dream’. There are of course many families which have not been able to realise this dream, and the embarrassment this engenders finds expression all too often in everyday conversations. The new forms of ‘capital’—one’s ability to casually talk about American tourist spots or display the consumption patterns of émigré Brahmins—entail that a hitherto ‘equal’ neighbour, friend or relative is pushed a notch or two down the status hierarchy. These changes even hierarchise individuals within a family:

My two elder sons are employed in the US—one works for Infosys and the other General Electric. But my youngest son is a journalist here in Bangalore. He too has a research degree in sociology. Nonetheless, when I am talking about my family with friends or relatives, they all exclaim—‘what—journalism, is it?’ It is a way of saying, ‘Oh, a calamity has struck!’ I somehow feel the pressure to explain this fact to them.

Clearly, the shifts exacerbate class differentiation among the Brahmins, with some riding the transition while others are left behind with neither the state nor the community to fall back on. While this dimension would require a different axis of appraisal than the one we are instituting here, it seems imperative to take cognizance of the changes. The spatial and cognitive re-drawings of the community and its self have an important bearing on contemporary Brahmin discourse.

Towards Secularising and Individuating Identities

The trajectory that the Brahmins have traversed over the last century has meant important transformations at individual, familial kinship, and caste/community levels. Caste practices regarding commensal relations, marital norms and everyday rituals come to be marked out in distinct ways, even as tendencies towards the individuation and corporatisation of Brahmin identities gather apace. Auto/biographies detailing the life of Brahmins in the initial decades of the twentieth century contain important nuggets about the changing ways of life, the relative decline in the legitimacy and influence of ritual norms and the
acceptance of the changes demanded by the quest to urbanise and modernise. In fact, by the early decades of the twentieth century the restrictions on commensality among the different Brahmin castes seem to have receded in authority. For instance, Sitaramaiah, while recollecting his brief stay in Bombay in 1922, sees the need to mention that he, a Smarta, had to share a room with three Mysore Srivaishnavites:

But I didn’t find any difference. This fact did not present itself as any obstacle or hindrance to me as a human being. The kindness with which they looked after me remains a highly cherished memory. (1997: 3)

His memoir describes how they cooked and ate together, without once mentioning commensal restrictions. Even during his stay in Mysore, pursuing graduate and post-graduate education, he never saw the need to separate himself from members of other Brahmin denominations. Interestingly though, he always marks the latter out in terms of their denomination. The imagination of belonging to a larger category—the Brahmin—seems to already obtain. This has contributed much in facilitating and consolidating the Brahmin’s urban and modern identity.

What is more, commensal restrictions (and the sanctions associated with them) vis-à-vis non-Brahminical castes have also more or less disappeared today—especially in urban areas.46

46 Restrictions concerning commensality and touchability–untouchability do not appear to have been singular across regions, communities or even families. For instance, some of S. L. Bhairappa’s, novels are set in the plains of princely Mysore. Brahmin families of this region are depicted as fairly ‘open’. See, for instance, his novel Grihabhanga (1970). Focusing on the same period but located in the Malnad region, U. R. Ananthamurthy’s novels, for example Samskara (1966), represent Brahmins as observing strict commensal and pollution norms. Even as one is aware of the politics of representation, these enunciations indicate differential investment in these practices across different regions. To this day, commensal restrictions are rather strictly enforced in interactions between agrarian Brahmin and non-Brahmin families in the villages of the coastal districts of Udupi and Mangalore. However, in these locations eating with fellow Brahmins from denominations other than one’s own is a legitimate practice and does not raise eyebrows.
Anybody who believes in such restrictions today will be laughed at for being ‘too narrow-minded’ or ‘communal’. However, many of our respondents admitted that they were uncomfortable eating at gatherings where meat was served. Indeed, 71 of them explicitly stated that they will not eat where meat is served; and only nine households maintained that they had broken vegetarian food habits.

Even the conduct of life cycle events—most importantly, marriages—has undergone a process of secularisation. Marriages are held in kalyanamantapas (wedding halls), which are usually hired for two days. The rituals, which used to last over five days, are now truncated to a matter of a few hours. Food is served in a common hall where invitees, irrespective of their caste, sit together and eat. Some, particularly elders, are still discomfited by the ‘uncultured’ eating habits of non-Brahmin invitees; a few even refuse to eat in marriage halls. A popular way of tiding through such situations is to ensure a rather subtle homogeneity in the invitees called to partake of the wedding lunch, where food is served in the ‘traditional’ manner by Brahmins cooks to guests sitting at tables. A more heterogeneous profile of guests is invited for the evening’s ‘reception’ with food served as a buffet. While caste and kin-people are generally present at both the wedding ceremony/lunch and the evening’s reception, colleagues and friends (whose caste remains unstated but not indeterminable) are invited for the reception. It must be acknowledged, however, that these subtleties are neither strict nor consistent.

When ‘traditional’ distinctions continue to obtain, they tend to be muted and covert. For instance, Mr Venkatesh described how a non-Brahmin would be served at his house:

47 It is ‘traditional’ to the extent that ritualised rules about serving food and proscriptions on certain vegetables and dishes, etc., are adhered to. But, the very practice of serving food on tables requires some drastic restructuring of food consumption practices, something that discomfits many. Practices of food preparation and consumption remain anthropologically less explored. These can lead to many significant issues.

48 It is unclear from where the word ‘reception’ emanates, but it connotes a largely secularised space without the intervention of priests and where the groom often sports ‘Western’ wear.
The guest will be served food along with other family members in the same hall. However, he will not be served on a steel plate, but on a plantain leaf. We don’t make it look as though we are making a difference, for the same food will be served to all. It serves two purposes—one, after food the leaf will be thrown so we don’t have to wash it; two, we always serve food to the guests on plantain leaves, whether he is a Brahmin or otherwise. But things are changing and quickly. Once my grandchildren take over, these ‘distinctions’ wouldn’t exist, not only because they don’t care but also because they don’t know the modalities.

Another respondent, a professional cook, rued that he was being forced to make many ‘adjustments’ because of the peculiar circumstances:

I had to move into this place because the house I was renting in, in the heart of the city, became prohibitively expensive. This is on the outskirts and I have to travel a lot more to reach my clients’ places but that can’t be helped. The owner of the house I am staying in is not a Brahmin. They are nice people but have no regard for purity-pollution. They are very dirty too. They eat non-veg on Sundays and the stench is excruciating. But I am so helpless I cannot do anything.

49 Aravind Malagatti, an important Kannada Dalit writer and intellectual, in his autobiography titled Government Brahmana (1994; now available in an English translation, 2007) narrates the humiliation that he went through when he was served food on a plantain leaf. We will have occasion to refer to the appellation of government brahmana in Chapter Six.

50 Interview with Mr Venkatesh, 14 April 2000.

51 Interview with Mr Bheema Rao, 1 March 2001. Mr Bheema Rao (Madhva, 48 years), with very little resources and education (he has studied till the eighth standard), struggles to make a decent living in Bangalore. He is part of two ‘cook groups’, which are hired by both Brahmins and non-Brahmins for marriages, initiation ceremonies, and also increasingly, for ‘secular’ occasions like birthday parties (often celebrated in a ‘Western’ manner, complete with candles, cake, etc). Given that work opportunities are uncertain and irregular (for instance, marriages are seasonal), many of these groups remain on the brink. Some groups, however, manage to build themselves a
Note that all ‘distinctions’ have not been erased vis-à-vis ‘traditional’ notions of commensality. For instance, a college-going respondent described how her non-Brahmin friends still show a great deal of ‘deference’ and ‘respectful fear’ towards her and her family whenever they visit her:

When I get to meet new people in the college, I never ever ask their castes. Caste never determines my interaction with my friends. But they themselves say, ‘One look at your face, and anyone can know you are a Brahmin’. They also say, ‘We are afraid to come into your house. They have too much of madi (practices of purity/pollution)’. I won’t do it, but my parents follow it as a matter of custom. But customs are the foundation given by the elders and all castes have them.\(^{52}\)

Thus, all statements describing change need to be qualified, not only because particular members within households continue to accord legitimacy to customary practices, but also the household as a whole seems to retain the practices through a rationalisation. These practices are believed to have been ‘functional’ at an earlier time; that they survive even in the present bestows them with a validity of sorts. Moreover, the sacred persona of the Brahmin has today refurbished itself. A crucial aspect of this persona is the rather individuated confidence that it offers a young Brahmin of today. Indeed, as another young woman respondent remarked:

\(^{52}\) Interview with Ms Sarita, 25 January 2000. She (Smarta, 21 years) has just finished her degree in management studies from a college in Bangalore and is keen on pursuing a master’s degree in management. Her father is a senior steno with the government.
I don’t believe in these notions of madi-mailige [pure-polluted; clean-unclean], enjalu-musure [norms regarding what food can be kept with what and what food requires washing hands after touching], etc. They might have been important at one point of time. Now they don’t serve any purpose.

But one thing is clear. Whether I believe in these things or not, whether I follow any ritual or not (in fact, I believe only in meditation rather than in the performance of any of the rituals), I am very certain that I am given the status of being pure. I walk into any non-Brahmin family’s kitchen or even their pooja room, feeling very certain that they would not mind it. But those very friends when they come to my home are very hesitant and defensively enquire whether it is fine for them to come in, to do this or that, etc. Not that I mind it any way.53

Indeed, the ‘sacredness’ that gets discarded by a Brahmin family on grounds of rationality—‘It just does not make sense in the present day’—often comes back on those very terms, albeit shorn of all the ritualism that had marked it earlier. As a young man stated:

I believe in the immense capabilities of sandhyavandane [the daily ritual that is prescribed for a Brahmin male post-initiation ceremony. The significance of the ritual in the recent times has begun in recent times to centralise around a hymn that is uttered while performing the ritual, the Gayatri mantra]. In fact the Gayatri mantra, the cornerstone of our

53 Interview with Ms Pooja, 17 July 2000. She (Smarta, 21 years) is pursuing under-graduate studies in Bangalore. She is a trained classical vocalist and intends to make a career in music. Her family migrated to Bangalore from a village near Shimoga recently. Pursuing a women studies course and keen to articulate those ideas in evaluating her caste self as indeed of being a woman, she was vehement in stating how Brahmin women are more liberated than the other caste women. This, she felt was primarily due to the high educational levels among the Brahmin men and to the samskara (character/conduct) that is ingrained in them from childhood to treat the woman with respect, for she represents the greatest force of shakti, the feminine force of divinity which, according to Brahminical mythology, surpasses the power that the male gods possess.
Brahminness, is the single most powerful mantra in the world. When I was initiated some years ago, I obviously had no idea about the significance of the Gayatri. But the greater tragedy was that none around me (including the priest who conducted the ceremony) had a clue about it. It was done because it had to be done. So for some years, it was just drudgery for me. My mother used to insist that I do it and I used to comply, albeit reluctantly. In fact, my father himself has quit doing sandhyavandane for quite sometime now!

But some three years back, I came across a pamphlet published by, I think, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, which in clear and simple terms told me the significance and powers of the mantra. It is the only mantra that can represent the real pursuit of the Brahmin. Gayatri is not about pleading with God for the worldly riches—it doesn’t beg God for money, power, status or anything like that. It is a plea to the almighty to kindle that ‘dhee sakthi’ [strength of mind and character] that is in everybody, which, once ignited, will take that man unhindered in the path of self-realisation—towards becoming one with the Brahma. Isn’t this the real pursuit of a Brahmin? They have never gone after material needs—though they remained poor, they reaped the riches of indefinitely more basic needs of humanness. Now, anybody, irrespective of caste, class, religion can pursue this—but only Brahmins are inclined towards this because of their samskara.

I don’t need to perform all the other ritualistic acts that go with the recitation of the Gayatri mantra. Indeed I have given up on them for sometime now. I recite the mantra whenever I feel depressed, powerless, challenged, etc., whether I am in my office or on the road or anywhere. It then gives me immense strength.

Now I am in the organising committee of a forum that will popularise the significance of the mantra by conducting a yajna [ritual ceremony] for world peace and harmony.54

As far as matrimonial alliances are concerned, the choice structures were firmly circumscribed within particular Brahmin

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54 Interview with Mr Sandeep, 7 February 2000. He (Smarta, 29 years) is working for a private concern, after his B.Sc. Though he strongly believes that the reservation policy has denied him his rightful opportunities, he is confident that his merit and hard work will bring him a better future.
jatis till as recently as the 1960s and 1970s. One comes across—in the memoirs, biographies, etc.,—absolutely no instances of marriages across jatis/jati clusters. This is corroborated in the respondents’ narratives too. But alliances between and across Brahmin jatis have become increasingly legitimate over the last 30 years or so. Almost all respondents above 60 years have married within their own Brahmin group. However, in the next generation, including their younger brothers and sisters, marriages across not merely jatis within the same traditions (among the different jatis of Smartas, for instance) but between jatis belonging to different traditions (that is, a Madhva marrying a Smarta) have been accepted as legitimate. They are often fixed by the families themselves as ‘arranged marriages’ and seen as being necessary, particularly in getting Brahmins to ‘unite’ and work as a corporate identity.

One needs to be wary, however, about reaching determinate conclusions concerning the irrelevance of particularised Brahmin identity-markers. This is especially so because even to this day when a family begins to look for a marital alliance, the first and unmistakable preference is for partners from within the tradition, and indeed within the particular jati, to which it belongs. A Hoysala Karnataka family will ideally want a match from within the Hoysala Karnataka jati itself. If that search fails, then it will extend to other Smartas; and later to other Brahmin denominations, with the latter too strictly defined. For instance, marriage alliances with Saraswats are a rarity—an avoidance that is mutual. Thus, among the 100 households surveyed, 56 (including one divorcée) have married within ‘traditions’, with most marriages being within the boundaries of particular jatis as well. Twenty households have spouses whose parental family was of a different ‘tradition’. There was just one respondent who had married a non-Hindu—a young journalist (32 years) was married to a Syrian Catholic Christian, the latter had been her classmate during her post-graduation at the Mangalore University.

Data from the questionnaire schedule also reflect a similar trend. Out of the 26 respondents below 30 years of age who filled in the questionnaire, 20 reported marriages across Brahmin jatis and traditions in their own generation (broadly defined as comprising of siblings and cousins). There were only three instances of marriages outside the Brahmin community in this group (all
of which involved a cousin or a once-removed relative rather than a sibling). Of the families of 41 respondents in the age range of 31–50 years, there were 21 instances of marriages (in their own generation) across Brahmin jatis/traditions and just one instance of a marriage outside the Brahmin community. Alternatively, the 33 who were aged above 50 years did not report marriages either across Brahmin jatis or outside the Brahmin community in unions that involved individuals of their own generation.

Marital histories across generations but pertaining to each respondent family too suggest the same trend—of opening out to alliances across Brahmin jatis (even as the first choice continues resiliently to be for alliances from within). Marriages involving non-Brahmin individuals remains proscribed. Strikingly, in the immediate family, there were just three instances of marriage outside the Brahmin fold (two in which the daughter of the household had married a ‘Sudra’ boy, and the other an instance of the son marrying a ‘Sudra’ girl). This is apart from the already cited instance of a respondent herself being married to a Christian.

Marriage outside the Brahmin community is clearly disapproved, and often a source of embarrassment. A rule of ‘community endogamy’ seems to be gathering shape, which receives a secular justification. Thus a respondent opined:

Don’t think that the principle of endogamy derived its legitimacy from any notions of caste purity. Those are later inventions. It was brought into place primarily to ensure that the marital relationship be harmonious. Imagine if a Brahmin girl married a Holeya [a Dalit caste] boy and went to live with his family. Right from eating habits to cleanliness—everything would be so different for her that immediately there would be conflicts. See how many inter-caste marriages have been successful. Most of them end up as failures. Earlier, even marriages across Brahmin communities posed a great deal of problems. But now the Brahmin community is sinking its internal differences. So marriages across Brahmin communities are an accepted practice today and they do not lead to a conflictual environment. So, maybe as

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55 That is involving either themselves or their children or their siblings.
time passes inter-caste marriages could also become acceptable and compatible. But as far as present circumstances are concerned, they are still an impossibility.  

Many respondents, while rationalising intra-community marriages that serve to retain various forms of capital within the community, cite issues of ‘cultural compatibility’. They also display a similar reluctance to foreground issues of intra-denominational superiority, purity, etc., that had legitimacy earlier.

As exceptions to the general rule of ‘arranged marriages’ are isolated instances of ‘love marriages’. Even though these involve greater play of individual choices and preferences, given the ‘caste’ basis of most social interactions, we find that these marriages do not violate the enlarged norms of endogamy either. Thus there are as many as 10 ‘love marriages’ in the respondent population interviewed, but only one of them had married outside the community.  

Thus, greater and more sustained interaction with ‘outsiders’ in public life does not necessarily promote more ‘inter-caste’ marriages.

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56 Interview with Mr Subramanya, 30 January 2000. The respondent is an inactive member of the AKBMS. He came to Bangalore in the early 1970s to further his career in music and has been a Bangalorean ever since. He actively repudiated the significance of caste in his personal life, as indeed in the affairs of the public. However, he was very keen on knowing the researcher’s caste—not only whether he is a Brahmin but also to which jati among Brahmins he belonged. He showed a rather deliberate knowledge of the jatis of the Brahmins he spoke of, and made it a point to mention it each time. He insisted that he gathers such information for curiosity. A Smarta, he was a veritable fund of stories, anecdotes, origin stories, etc., of the different Brahmin denominations. His position on the unsuitability of marital alliance across the Brahmin–non-Brahmin divide notwithstanding, his daughter, a journalist, is married to a non-Brahmin.

57 Interestingly, the respondent who had married a Syrian Catholic made this observation: ‘My mother-in-law always tells me and my parents that Syrian Christians were all Brahmins before they converted to Christianity.’ Interview with Ms Anuradha, 3 August 2000. Anuradha (Namboodiri, 32 years), a journalist working with a newspaper in Bangalore, is a recent migrant to Bangalore; she was earlier a resident of a village near Mangalore.
Within the parameters of ‘community endogamy’ families permit considerable individual independence. Women, especially those with higher education and careers demand husbands who are receptive to their aspirations and who will share household chores. Such expectations are accepted as legitimate, but are often not realised in actual practice. Women continue to be seen as ‘natural’ caregivers. Consequently, many women respondents have had to give up promising careers to look after the family.

Occupations regarded as ‘safe’ and ‘secular’ appear to be overwhelmingly important in match-making. A respondent noted with some amazement:

Things have changed in the last 10–15 years. I will give you two instances. There is a Brahmin family in our neighbourhood. The father is a retired army colonel. The son is a serving major—a good rank, if you do not know. The family has been looking out for a girl for the last five years. They are well-to-do; and the son has a good job by all accounts. But everybody withdraws because he works in the army. In any other community, people would have run after that boy. The other instance is of young men who run hotels. Girls these days are so averse to the idea that a relative of mine is finding it almost impossible to get a match for his son, who runs a hotel which has good business. What’s more, the boy has even a B.Com. degree to boot. Both these cases concern boys. You can no longer take it for granted that boys can be easily married off.\footnote{Interview with Mr Kumaraswamy, a 62-year-old Smarta (14 April 2000). He retired as an accounts officer with a multinational company in Bangalore. He has been an active participant in the activities of the AKBMS, his own jati association and the locality association over the last two decades.}

Caste norms regulating everyday life of Brahmin men had already weakened by the early decades of the twentieth century. The first ‘social’ novel written in Kannada, 

\textit{Indira Bai} (1899) by Gulvadi Venkata Rao, a Saraswat, discusses at length the injunction against Brahmins voyaging across the seas in pursuit of education. However, by the initial decades of the last century it was hardly a contentious matter. Memoirs recounting these times
do not see such journeys as extraordinary. Several writers—Sriranga, a playwright from Dharwad, and T. P. Kailasam, another celebrated playwright from Mysore, for instance—had studied abroad; they had also interacted with others who had made similar sojourns.

Loosening of caste norms is also reflected in the renunciation of ritual practices such as the sandhyavandane, wearing appropriate caste markers, etc. Caste defined norms seem to have largely become by this time a matter of individual preference. Thus, personages like D. V. Gundappa (also known as DVG, an intellectual and litterateur wielding enormous clout in the Mysore State) and V. Sitaramaiah steadfastly performed sandhyavandane whereas others like Sriranga and Kailasam deliberately gave up these practices. Sriranga has remarked on the individuated character of such practices:

I was born in the family of the Adyas [The First Ones]. My tradition-bound Madhva family had received the honorific title of ‘Adya’ from the matha pontiff for its erudition. [But] when I was a small boy, I used to accompany the [non-Brahmin] farmers to the lands. Many times I just stayed behind with them, eating their food. I still remember my grandfather, in a friendly manner, chiding me: ‘You are really a Sudra; you were born in our family by accident’. During my school and college days though, I remained loyal to my brahminical tradition. The photograph on my passport, taken on the occasion of my trip to England, prominently features the akshate [a Madhva marker] that had covered my forehead. Even while playing cricket and tennis I had refused to wear trousers. I reached England—my tuft vanished, I had tea for the first time. Sick of eating cooked rice and potatoes, within two days of reaching England I ate meat; shaved of my moustache and paid money to learn dance; cigarettes and alcohol followed thereafter! Leave that aside—even now I don’t have a tuft or a sacred thread; but I haven’t smelt liquor for the last 25 years! My house has no scent of rituals, etc.,

59 There is very little information available on the everyday life of these communities prior to this period. Consequently, statements about the loosening and weakening of caste norms need not necessarily be read in comparison to a presumed time when caste norms held absolute sway over conduct.
but, the atmosphere is no less pure than of a traditional Madhva household. As my grandfather had said, I am a Sudra in the exterior, but from the inside I am a loyal pure Brahmin! (1994: 5)

Elsewhere he recounts another instance:

Once (around 1944) I had gone visiting Belur and Halebid with two friends. From Belur we had cycled to Halebid. While returning, feeling thirsty and tired we asked for drinking water at a place. They simply stared at us…. Finally one of them said, ‘We are Adi Karnatakas [a Dalit caste], sir’. I immediately said, ‘It is OK then—we are also Adi Dravidas’. Finally we were given buttermilk. (Ibid.: 14)

Of course, one cannot presume that Sriranga represented general trends that obtained among the Brahmins. Even during these decades, Brahmin mathas were holding public debates on different issues of ‘reform’, and there were still powerful currents in favour of the ‘orthodoxy’. Today, when traditional practices are seen to be no longer binding on individuals, a surprisingly significant number—33 of the 79 male respondents (more elders than the youth) interviewed for the study—reported that they observed practices like sandhyavandane, albeit in a truncated form.

We shall take up the contestation between the ‘progressive’ and the ‘orthodox’ Brahmin later (especially in Chapter 6). What is to be noted here is that the processes of individuation and secularisation of the modern Brahmin are enacted on a site juxtaposing the ‘sacred’ against the ‘secular’. The sacredness that is always already attached to the Brahmin persona has thus undergone a transformation. Brahmin men who take to priestly occupations are very few and far between. It is never the primary choice across class positions and spatial locations. Since the early twentieth century, we find that only those considered ‘failures’ becoming priests. None of the memoirs from this period even mentions it as a probable occupational choice existing before kinsmen.

Lifecycle rituals are more generally practiced, even as their schedules have seen great modifications. The initiation ceremony is still performed for Brahmin males, often when they are young.
adults or just before the wedding ceremony (for which it is a prerequisite). As already noted, marriages are performed in a ‘traditional’ but truncated manner, in tune with the demands of urban life. *Sraddha* (death ritual) is performed too, often in temples or mathas. A few have even given up the rituals of such occasions, preferring instead to provide a lunch or dinner in their caste association hostel.

Very few Brahmin men wear caste markers outside their homes, except the sacred thread, which usually gets hidden under the shirt. A few have even discarded their sacred thread, wearing it only on ritual occasions. However, a respondent pointed out other markers of a Brahmin:

> I have *Brahmana kale* written all over my face! [Kale refers to what is seen as represented on the face, and indicates that one can make out a Brahmin without verbal confirmation. It is rather intricately coded, and the one who makes such judgements, often fairly accurately, would find it difficult to explain the components of the kale.] I don’t know what makes people note this. Even I have thought likewise many a time. As soon as I see a face, I feel that person has samskara, has culture and thus he must be a Brahmin.  

Invocations of the self as ‘Brahmin’ and as belonging to a particular denomination go together, and are often determined by the contexts in which the identifications are made. As I shall demonstrate in the next chapter, even after non-Brahmins constituted the image of a corporatised Brahmin, the significance of denominational identities did not disappear. A Smarta respondent, who waxed passionately about the imperative for all the Brahmins to come together to face the hostility against them, observed:

> These Madhvas continue to think hierarchically. While a Brahmin on the street is willing to believe that humanity is one and the hierarchies are to be consigned to the dustbin, Madhvas still stick to their notions of superiority. In fact when a relative [from his own jati] narrated some Madhva friend’s abuse of the Smartas, I told him to go right back and ask that

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60 Interview with Ms Pooja, 17 August 2000.
Madhva as to who his ancestors were. Anybody could tell him that each and every Madhva is a convert from Advaita, unless of course they are the Sudra converts. So any abuse of the Smartas is like abusing his own forefathers!

Their philosophy of proselytisation is common knowledge. It is how they have taken over Udupi which was a Smarta place. The Shiva temples of Udupi precede the establishment of the Madhva Ashta Mathas.

Evidently, negotiating with one’s selfhood as Brahmin is richly variegated and reflects individual experiences and influences. Besides allowing for the emergence of different Brahmin selves, processes of individuation have also differentiated the socio-economic standing of Brahmin families. Class is an important determiner of the modes of interaction among Brahmins. Many poor Brahmin families find it difficult to translate their Brahminness into extant forms of capital. On the other hand, the trope of the ‘poor Brahmin’ is a powerful one; it feeds the self-imagining of Brahmins and their caste associations.

Prefiguring the Brahmin Identity

The question needs to be posed: how does one make sense of all these developments that have been schematically represented in the foregoing sections? Indeed, do these transformations (and the relatively unique position in which they place the Brahmin) prefigure and structure some of the ways in which the Brahmin identity enacts itself out? I shall attempt a brief formulation in the pages that follow.

As indicated in the course of this chapter, the inadequacy of available data on Brahmins—especially that could yield a sharp macro perspective stops us from making any determinate statements on their contemporary situation. Compounding this is the assumption encoded in various reports of the Backward Classes

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61 This (acerbic) qualifier that many Madhvas are converted Sudras refers to the belief that Madhvacharya and many of his successors, in their battle for supremacy against the Advaitins, had resorted to such conversions, particularly in the Udupi region.

62 Interview with Mr Kumaraswamy, 14 February 2000.
committee/commissions. While prefiguring the Brahmin as the ‘Other’, these documents presume an entity that is internally undifferentiated, corporatised and working as a collective interest. While this is necessitated by the demands of politics and administration, it seriously delimits their usefulness for studying the dynamics of caste. Corporatised profiles attached to caste groups and communities are often a concomitant of the processes (internal and external) to which they are subjected. Indeed, the many auto/biographies and the respondents’ narratives are testimony to the contradictory nature of modern caste—one which internally differentiates and individuates its members even as it seeks to consolidate itself into a substantialised entity. This needs to be borne in mind while attempting to capture the modern essence of caste. It needs also to be factored into our macro-picture of caste communities and their associated identities.

For the Brahmins themselves, their early entry into the spaces of the modern was made possible not by their structural location—not by the sheer fact of being (and recognisable as) ‘Brahmin’. Rather, it was because of apparently non-caste factors like their keenness to invest in education, to migrate to cities, to take up modern occupations, and so on. This belief enabled a certain naturalisation of Brahmins in such spaces. Thus, as we saw, by the early decades of the last century self-retrievals that apparently had nothing to do with one’s casteness had begun to dominate the imagination of the Brahmin. This was most articulately expressed by Dewan Vishveshvaraiah who single-mindedly refused to allow networks of nepotism to develop in the bureaucracy. He was also responsible for abolishing caste-specific kitchens and dining halls for members of the Representative Assembly. Vishveshvaraiah was certain that merit alone should determine an individual’s chances, hence his resignation from Dewanship in protest against the Miller Committee. However, it is easy to see that even such a position was basically an argument for and on behalf of the scrupulous Brahmin. It was as though the modern Brahmin self had to take on an impersonal secular garb in order to complete itself.

Thus, in most of these spaces Brahmins were not speaking either as or on behalf of Brahmins. They seem to have taken on secular identities and identifications—of being a graduate, a lawyer, a journalist, a Hindu, a nationalist, a Kannada activist.
The Modern World of Brahmins

The uniqueness of this positioning comes across strikingly in the proceedings of the Mysore Representative Assembly. While definitionally Brahmins became members only by meeting the ‘secular’ criteria of efficiency and performance, other groups had to carry their ‘casteness’ as the primary justification for being represented in the assembly. Further, it was Brahmins who were in a position to fulfil the ‘modern’ demands being placed on the public sphere: Brahmin members were official representatives of ‘Depressed Classes’ (Dalits) in the Assembly; they entered the upper echelons of politics and bureaucracy; and Brahmin women stepped in to fulfil the demand for women playing a larger part in the emerging public sphere.

The instance of Gopalaswami Iyer is instructive in this regard. During the 1920s he represented the ‘Depressed Classes’ (Dalits) of Bangalore in the Representative Assembly. The proceedings of the assembly clearly present him as a vocal member who frequently appealed on behalf of the Depressed Classes—proposing separate residential schools and hostels in different cities, training for women in midwifery (for midwives from other communities refused to attend on them), and that land and building material be provided to them. But interestingly, on various occasions he argued fervently for the Brahmins. He was the spokesperson of Brahmin resentment against ‘communal representation’ in general and particularly in recruitments to the civil services. He wondered whether the government was under the impression that ‘a Hospital Assistant can [carry out a surgical operation] better if he belongs to the backward community, than a Brahmin officer doing the same being an MBBS?’ He added, ‘God will give positions to men, but not brains to all’ (cited in Hanumanthappa Vol. III n.d.: 265). He also opposed the resolution seeking to increase reservation for the Backward Classes stating, ‘It would practically close the doors of education to Brahmins’ (ibid.: 267).

The secularisation of the Brahmin is the structuring grid that animates their contemporary identity. Brahmins who flouted caste prescriptions and proscriptions (of commensality and touchability, for instance), who questioned caste authorities such as the mathas (particularly in matters of ‘social reform’), sincerely believed that their social interactions were situated in a space beyond caste norms and influence. ‘Caste’ was thought to be a concern of the private realm. Not surprisingly therefore, they
responded to their othering by non-Brahmins with incredulity (a theme taken up in some detail in the next chapter). Furthermore, it needs to be noted that the secular Brahmin self dominates other, sometimes contesting, selves—such as that of the ‘orthodox’ Brahmin, the Brahmin located in the monastic order, as well as in caste associations. While I shall elaborate this in the subsequent chapters, it is important to note that negotiations from within and across Brahmin castes have facilitated a modern identity for Brahmins.

It is also important to recognise the structuring of modern public spaces. Brahmins believed that their casteness had very little to do with their inhabiting these spaces. However, given that these spaces (cities, colleges, bureaucracy, law, journalism, or even nationalist/linguistic activism) were dominated by Brahmins in disproportionate numbers, their ‘publicness’ seemed to involve interactions with fellow Brahmins like themselves. This continues to be the case, either as a matter of choice or sheer expectation. Almost all the respondents indicated that their primary groups and units of interaction were the family and the peer group, with the latter (in the neighbourhood or workplace) hardly taking on non-Brahmin others.

Of course, these circumscribed interactions and experiences have been contested from within. Many have negotiated a modern consciousness engendered by liberal education, secular institutions and discourses. Contemporary Brahmin identity is ambivalent about its own Brahminness and this ambivalence seems to configure the contemporary Brahmin identity. It is towards a description of this configuration of identity that the chapters that follow are devoted.
By the beginning of the twentieth century, Brahmins had established an overwhelming dominance on the space of the modern world and its institutions. They attempted to negotiate directly with modernity on their own terms, even as they mediated it to the other castes and communities. However, the larger processes of what I have called the secularising experience proved to be in excess of the Brahmin’s ability to so mediate and contain. Since the experience of secularisation was primarily an experience of modernisation—of becoming modern—it required that those inhabiting the space of the modern become reflexive about themselves, their selfhood and identity. Certainly all caste entities have had to confront similar situations in modernity. The Brahmins, however, have had an additional and very unique demand placed on themselves. The discourse of the ‘modern’ prefigures caste as a system of hierarchy and inequality that is the very antithesis of modern ways of ordering social life. As a constitutive part of this imagery, the Brahmin gets to be not merely the carrier of this unequal system but also its very embodiment.

This rendering of the Brahmin is largely an accomplishment of non-Brahmin articulations (with, of course, the compulsions of everyday politics also undergirding it). Many non-Brahmin communities have rigorously challenged the purported
secularisation of the Brahmin. They have pointed out that secularisation did not diminish the ritual status of the Brahmin—either in generating symbolic-material value or in reconfiguring their dominance in modern, secular spaces. The more secularised among the Brahmins tended to take on this gaze and look at themselves in this ‘othered’ manner. Partly as a response forced by non-Brahmin challenges and partly on their own accord, Brahmins began the process of self-questioning; ‘Brahminness’ was no longer something that could be assumed unproblematically. Besides, as shown in the previous chapter, there were also internal challenges and alternative ways of imagining the self from within. The vexed negotiations of the Brahmin with a self-identity can be represented as a contending dynamic of ‘community’ and ‘association’. The identity of the Brahmin consistently and constitutively oscillates between these two poles of identification. It is towards an understanding of these shifting poles of identification that the present chapter and the subsequent ones are devoted. The modern world of Brahmins is marked by intersecting voices and shifting identifications.

Given the largely descriptive ground that is being traversed, the sequencing of this chapter needs to be borne in mind. The triumphant entry of Brahmins into the modern world, often rendered as a ‘natural’ outcome of events and circumstances, came to be successfully interrogated by the non-Brahmin articulations that gained momentum by the early 1910s. The modern state too, for reasons of legitimacy and expediency, supported non-Brahmin efforts to ‘other’ the Brahmin and brought in many legislations to check the latter’s dominance. In the first section of this chapter, I examine the enduring impact that non-Brahmin othering has had on the constitution of the modern Brahmin identity.

The non-Brahmin challenge brought together many disparate and even mutually contesting caste and religious communities but by no means did it exhaust the nature of contestations over the status of the Brahmin. The Lingayat challenge is a case in point. Lingayats participated actively in secular non-Brahmin articulations, but they also, simultaneously, chose to contest the Brahmin’s ritual supremacy. Their challenge thus inhabited rather contradictory spaces: a secular non-Brahmin space as well as a ritual space where they asserted the right to be ‘Veerasaivas’. The Veerasaiva community had for long served as a critical
counterpoint to Brahmin supremacy in matters of ritual status. Meanwhile, the Brahmin himself was negotiating different meanings for his ritual status in a secularising context. Such instances of ritual reordering and contestations are taken up in the second section. It seeks primarily to demonstrate the complex terrain of mediation that the emerging Brahmin identity has had to contend with.

Equally significant are the processes that were underway within the Brahmin community itself. A secularised and corporatised Brahmin—the Brahmin, in a somewhat retrospective sense—was increasingly coming to demand that the internal distinctions and hierarchies existing among Brahmin jatis be set aside. Interestingly, this demand was being made even as the Brahmin’s own investment in this category of his selfhood was becoming ambiguous. Of course, neither the demand nor the ambiguity led to the decay and death of internal hierarchies and differentiations. The contestation over the relative status of the different Brahmin jatis, the determined bid on the part of some groups to claim Brahminhood, the contests among the Brahmin denominations over share in the modern space—all these form the content of the third section.

**Categorising the Brahmin: The Non-Brahmin Articulation**

In many ways, the non-Brahmin articulations of the early twentieth century emerged as the principal ‘other’ of the modern Brahmin identity. It has also proved to be enduring in so far as the modern Brahmin incorporates many of its elements in constructing his own self. Clearly, the non-Brahmin rendering of the Brahmin owes its articulation to the normative ethos of a modernity built around principles of individuality and emancipation. Given that the Brahmin himself is privy to an inexorable experience of becoming modern, it is easy to see how the latter comes to participate in his own othering.

In this section, I outline the history of non-Brahmin articulation, its constructions of the Brahmin and the modern state’s participation in these exercises. I primarily use the journal *Mysore Star* to reconstruct the non-Brahmin discourse. This journal provided non-Brahmin leaders and intellectuals a space not only to draw the State’s attention to the need for ameliorative measures
for non-Brahmin communities, but also to conjure into existence a 'Brahmin' with whom a polemical and oppositional engagement could be forged. *Mysore Star* was owned by a Lingayat leader, and accordingly served also to articulate the concerns of this caste order. The journal thus adequately represents the mutual—and often contending—self-identifications that go with the fact of being non-Brahmin and Lingayat. In doing so, it also reflects on the very limits of the non-Brahmin self, as indeed on the latter's recuperation of the Brahmin self. The Brahmin’s response to such a categorisation is complex.

Note that the word ‘response’ is used here advisedly. The ‘challenge’ and the ‘response’ are not available in a mechanistic sense to either the Brahmin self or the non-Brahmin other. One needs to guard against imposing a notion of instrumentality or deliberateness on either of them. The non-Brahmin recuperation of the Brahmin, to be sure, does not exhaust the Brahmin’s own sense of what it is to be a Brahmin. Consequently, the Brahmin’s ‘response’ is necessarily in excess of the non-Brahmin’s retrieval of the Brahmin self, both in its formulation and in its effects. This reminder is necessary as it lends a dynamism to the perceptual field we are going to encounter. Even as the Brahmin self subjects itself to many of the definitions that the non-Brahmin imposes, it also contests aspects of this othering. But both in ‘subjecting’ its self to the other’s categorisation as well as in resisting it, there is always an ‘excess’ in the Brahmin response that needs to be accounted for—primarily, in this instance, the Brahmin’s very own processes of secularisation and modernisation.

Lingayats, Vokkaligas and Muslims were the main participants in the non-Brahmin alliance that was formed in Karnataka. Lingayats and Vokkaligas were landed communities and were numerically dominant. But, as we saw in the previous chapter, they had abysmal literacy rates and an appallingly low representation in the modern bureaucracy, education and judiciary.  

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1 Manor (1977b) delineates the problems in assuming that the Vokkaligas and Lingayats are internally homogenised castes/communities (also see Boratti 2004 for a detailed engagement with the Lingayats); but for our specific purposes here we will not work with these complications. Our object remains the specific contours of the Brahmin response to its othering.
Muslims were no different. It is primarily this shared experience of being under-represented in modern spaces that informed such an alliance. Thimmaiah (1993) has noted that even the Kannada-speaking regions of Bombay Presidency witnessed the emergence of the non-Brahmin cause (see also Omvedt 1994; Gore 1989). In these areas, the Lingayats were numerically and economically (both in terms of landholding and trade) the dominant community and were the leading articulators of the non-Brahmin cause. As early as 1883, the Dharwad Lingayat Education Development Fund was instituted and many Lingayat hostels had begun functioning in the region (Javali 1999: 31). While data regarding the Hyderabad Karnataka region is hard to come by, Lingayats from Bellary (Madras Presidency) seem to have been active in the mobilisations of their counterparts in Bombay Presidency. However, since Mysore took to modernising governance on a large scale, there was a huge expansion of its administrative machinery. This offered unprecedented opportunities to castes and communities for upward mobility. Consequently, it is here that the non-Brahmin cause finds determinate voice and leadership.

The contours of a non-Brahmin opposition to Brahmin dominance in government services and educational institutions assumed shape in the closing decades of the nineteenth century. They nevertheless remained disparate and sporadic. In 1874, the Mysore government, then under the administration of the British, had passed an order reserving eight out of every ten positions in the Police Department to non-Brahmins, including non-Hindus. However the order, despite being reissued in 1895, was hardly complied with and finds specific mention in the observations of the Miller Committee (1918). Tamboochetty, a non-Brahmin who was the Dewan for a brief while, had as early as 1895 sounded a

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2 The Committee noted: ‘In spite of this long standing order...we find in the Police Department that in 1918, out of 361 officers, 191 were Brahmins’ (cited in Thimmaiah 1993: 73). The instance of the Police Department is an interesting one. Occupations like this and those of the Sanitation Department and the armed forces required a great deal of transgression of caste rules concerning purity. Secularisation of these ‘functions’ in the modern situation thus allowed the Brahmin to encroach upon such spaces too, without of course seriously compromising his Brahminness.
note of concern regarding the overwhelming dominance of Brahmins in the Mysore bureaucracy. The Maharani of Mysore too had expressed her resentment against Brahmins, especially Madras Brahmins, being too strong in the public services (Chandrashekhar 1985). In 1896, the Lingayat members of the Representative Assembly submitted a memorandum to the Maharajah seeking ‘by the grant of scholarships and in other ways, to encourage the spread of education in our [Lingayat] community’ (Hanumanthappa Vol. III n.d.: 278–79).

The Representative Assembly appears to have played a crucial role in enabling articulations of the non-Brahmin cause. The Assembly as noted in the previous chapter, was elitist by virtue of allowing only the propertied and the university-educated to become members and voters. It was only at a later point that it recognised caste associations as legitimate entities, which could send members to the Assembly. Thus, Vokkaligas, Lingayats as well as Muslims and other minority castes could make an institutionally recognised entry into the space of modern governance. That these communities used the space in earnest to further their community interests can be seen even through a cursory reading of the Assembly’s proceedings.

By 1908 the Mysore Representative Assembly was rather sharply polarised between Brahmins and non-Brahmins. This is evidenced by the fact that in that year the Newspaper Regulation Bill was passed because the non-Brahmins voted for it while most of the Brahmin members opposed it. The latter’s opposition was on the grounds of protecting the liberty of the press. Non-Brahmin members, on the other hand, took what at first glance was a regressive position.\(^3\) Mysore had by then a vibrant print media which was largely free from interventions of the state. Ramakrishnan notes, ‘(d)uring [1874–1908] not only as many as fifty papers started from Mysore, what is more important, these

\(^3\) Joseph (1981: 21) has noted that ‘most of the members from rural Mysore, representing the rural gentry, vehemently supported the Bill’, and that it was primarily due to their ‘myopic view’ in not grasping the ‘liberal ideas of the century’ that the Bill was passed. This, he suggests, was in contrast to the opposition of the ‘members from the urban centres of Bangalore, Mysore and Shimoga, chiefly of the legal profession [who] pointed out the inherent dangers involved’ (ibid.).
papers led and participated in several social and political movements’ (1985: 108). But as far as non-Brahmins were concerned, this was a Brahmin-dominated press, one that actively and publicly took sides on behalf of the Brahmins in the ‘Brahmin versus non-Brahmin’ confrontation. Except for the Mysore Star and the Vokkaligara Patrike (the Vokkaliga’s Journal), almost every other newspaper published from Mysore and outside took active positions against non-Brahmin demands. For instance, DVG considered the doyen of Kannada journalism, explicitly expresses his displeasure on the formation of the Praja Mitra Mandali and the appointment of the first significant non-Brahmin Dewan, Kantharaj Urs. In 1921, shutting down the publication of his bi-weekly English journal Karnataka, he states:

> Only efficient and able officials/authorities have the ability to take criticism that is both unforgiving and acidic. Journalism becomes dreary and un-enjoyable when the inefficient and the narrow-minded take over offices. Once the Party called the Mysore Praja Paksha was founded in Mysore state, it appeared to me that Karnataka ought to be stopped. (Cited in Venkataramanan 1988: 56)

The Dewan invites DVG’s criticism of narrow-mindedness because he had made his sympathies for the non-Brahmin cause explicit. In his memoirs, DVG writes:

> Vishveshvariah [who preceded Urs] was an exceedingly able administrator. He had nurtured radically novel ideas. It is only possible for such able persons to take unforgiving criticism on the new ideas. When ordinary folk take over the administration, such criticism, even if logical, will only lead to bitterness. Therefore, from here on, our criticism has to be tempered. (1997: 151)

Evidently, the overwhelmingly Brahmin press of Mysore was using modern arguments about the ‘freedom of press’ and the ‘creation of an unbiased public space’ (DVG, cited in Venkataramanan 1988: 48) to create public consensus against a dispensation which explicitly supported non-Brahmin demands.
The decade of the 1900s proved to be momentous in the history of non-Brahmin articulation in Mysore. The founding of the Akhila Bharatha Veerashaiva Mahasabha in 1904 in Dharwad, the Vokkaligara Sangha in 1906, the Mysore Lingayat Education Fund in 1907 and the Central Mohammedan Association in 1909 (all in Bangalore) signalled the readiness of at least a visible elite in these communities to contest for modern resources. The founding statements of all these initiatives underlined the importance of educating their communities and finding adequate representation in government services. This was equally true of other communities such as the Jains and the Urs that joined the non-Brahmin articulation (Naidu 1996: 102–05).

The joint memorandum submitted to the Maharajah in 1912, through the Representative Assembly, is apparently the first clear articulation of a willingness of these communities to come together on the platform of ‘non-Brahminness’. The Central Mohammedan Association, the Lingayat Education Fund, and the associations of Aryavaisyas (a trading community), Devangas (weavers) and Jains were the signatories. It had three demands: one, that more government jobs should be given to them; two, their community members should be accorded places in representative bodies such as the municipality and the Representative Assembly; and, three, scholarships should be given to the students of these communities to pursue studies both in the state and abroad (Mysore Star, 16 December 1912). While the response of the monarchy to these demands was overwhelmingly positive, the aggregate figures of non-Brahmins in government employment and enrollment in educational institutions (particularly higher education) do not reveal an encouraging increase. This articulation nevertheless is important. A common focus—resentment against the perceived dominance of Brahmins in modern spaces—drew them together into an alliance, voicing a language of non-Brahminness that by the 1910s–1920s had been popularised by the Justice Party of Madras. The articulation took precipitate form with the founding of the Praja Mitra Mandali in 1917.

Scholars who have worked on the non-Brahmin movement in Karnataka have concluded unanimously that it was elitist, urban and myopic. It never spread beyond Bangalore, Mysore and Kolar. It did not attempt to fashion a mass base for itself and though it spoke apparently on behalf of the entire non-Brahmin population,
in fact, it served the needs of the elite of these communities. Besides, it was excessively focused on garnering a share in the government services (Chandrashekhar 1985: 82–83; Manor 1977a: 33; Naidu 1996: 197–98; Thimmaiah 1993: 51–52). Now, it is true that representation in the state bureaucracy was a very important concern for these communities, simply for the reason that it was a space that they could ignore only at great cost to their overall development. As we saw in the previous chapter and will further testify in this one, the preponderance of Brahmins in the administration had almost debilitating consequences for the development of these communities.

Non-Brahmin leaders were keenly aware of the crucial role a presence in the government services played. C. R. Reddy, a visionary and chief ideologue of the Mysore non-Brahmins, was very clear that ‘(p)ublic life in India at the present means a scramble for places and offices’. Accordingly, for him, it was necessary that these are distributed fairly as between different classes. Place means not only power to oneself, but opportunity to educate and find places for one’s children, relations and people. Office is a clear lever of the highest importance and as such we must see that we get our share. (Cited in Chandrashekhar 1985: 50)

Evidently, there is a clear vision of what these spaces mean in the emerging social order and the implications of any community’s monopolisation of these spaces. Thus provisions for a secular and modern education, representation in the government bureaucracy and judiciary, and accessibility to governmental fora such as municipal corporations, the Representative Assembly and the Legislative Council become central demands of the non-Brahmin leaders. It was these three issues that were foregrounded in the first memorandum the Praja Mitra Mandali submitted to the Maharajah in June 1918 (Mysore Star, 30 June, 7 July and 14 July 1918).

Concerning access to modern education, the memorandum clearly identifies the vicious circle that was in operation. It identifies the mismatch between the source of tax generation and the recipients of government spending, emphasising thereby that while much of the revenue spent on education was collected...
from rural areas, very little was spent on establishing educational and allied institutions (like hostels) there. Since most of the rural schools teach in the vernacular medium, it often stifled the progress of non-Brahmin students to the sphere of higher education, forcing them to occupy the lowest levels of government services. Even this possibility was small and most students went back to ‘traditional’ occupations like agriculture and the allied services. Even if some did come to the cities seeking higher education, many would drop out since there were very few community or government hostels.

The memorandum hints at the Brahmins’ reinvention of their ‘traditional’ dominance. It also suggests the ways in which that dominance gets consolidated in the modern situation:

Even as the age-old tradition and practices were furthering the hierarchical emotions affecting the growth of different communities...[t]he modern educational practice and the unequal representation given to different communities in modern bureaucracy have equally adversely affected the welfare of the backward communities....

We would like to point out the shortcomings in our present educational system that have actively contributed to the paradox of the inverse relationship that exists between the amount of tax paid and the educational facilities given access to:

1) Students who pass the Lower Secondary examination in Kannada or Hindusthani medium in rural schools do not have the qualification to join High Schools to further their education, to gain which they are forced to study just the English language for two or more years. To do this, they have to come to a city or a town wherein, invariably, either due to casteism or for some such social reason, they can never arrange for food and shelter for themselves.

2) There is no uniformity in syllabi nor are the educational facilities available equal. Not all the towns have hostels belonging to all the castes.

3) Even though the primary education has been made free, it is actually the rural people who are paying for much of the expenses incurred on higher education to which either their children do not have access to or they have been rendered incapable of pursuing it. (*Mysore Star*, 30 June 1918)
Linking up issues of education and employment, the memorandum states:

It is neither new nor novel that everybody seeks to get education primarily to get a placement in the government bureaucracy. Therefore it is only natural that all communities ought to get adequate representation in the government services that match their share in the population. This will ensure that all the communities in the state will possess adequate motivation to get educated. In order to ensure such representation, the government should appoint, though temporarily, non-Brahmin candidates from outside Mysore till such time when education has been made available to all castes and adequate number of non-Brahmins attain qualifications to compete for government jobs available. (Ibid.)

Concerning the third demand, the memorandum beseeched:

All autonomous bodies, including the Legislative Council, have to be re-formed to ensure representation to all communities according to the share in the population. (Ibid.)

The royal authority was quick to respond to these claims. Within two months (in August 1918), a committee headed by Chief Justice Leslie Miller, was appointed to look into the unequal representation of communities in both education and government employment. The terms of reference were explicit:

1. Changes needed, if any, in the existing rules of recruitment in the public service;
2. Special facilities to encourage higher and professional education among members of the backward communities; and
3. Any other special measures which may be taken to increase the representation of the backward communities in public services, without materially affecting efficiency; due regard being paid also to general accruing to the state by a wider diffusion of education and feeling of increased status which, it is expected, will thereby be produced in the backward communities. (Cited in Thimmaiah 1993: 58)
The clause about ‘efficiency’ in the above mandate was in response to widespread antipathy expressed by Brahmins. They opposed the appointment of the Committee on the ground that ‘reservation’ would adversely affect the efficiency of the government machinery. On its part, the Committee tended to pose the issue of efficiency differently:

Efficiency, however, is not to be measured solely or even mainly by academic qualifications and it will not be denied that there are many important branches of administration in which other qualities, such as sympathy, honesty of purpose, energy and common sense go as far to make an efficient officer. (Ibid.: 59–60)

While recommending the categorisation of most communities, save Brahmins, as ‘backward’, it maintained:

Within a period of not more than seven years, not less than one-half of the higher and two-thirds of the lower appointments in each grade of the service and so far as possible in each office are to be filled by members of communities other than the Brahmin community, preference being given to duly qualified candidates of the depressed classes [the Untouchables] when such are available. (Ibid.: 64)

It further recommended the abolition of competitive examinations for recruitment to government jobs and the relaxation of requisite educational qualifications for different services. The Committee stressed the need for spreading primary and secondary education, opening more English schools, opening schools for the Panchamas (the Untouchables), starting community hostels in towns and cities, and increasing scholarships, particularly for higher education.

More directly, the non-Brahmin construction of the Brahmin (as indeed of the caste question) can be gleaned from the following editorial of the Mysore Star. Commenting on the response of

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4 The Committee worked with two criteria to determine the backwardness of a community: (i) any community with less than 5 per cent of English literacy rate; and (ii) any community which had inadequate representation in middle and higher rungs of the government services.
Brahmins to the non-Brahmin movement in neighbouring Madras Presidency, it notes:

It surprises us that barely a whimper is made by the non-Brahmins [against the Brahmin appropriation of modern spaces] and the Brahmins and their newspapers have begun crying hoarse and alleging that *brahmadvesha* [Brahmin hatred] has become too strong. There is no country in the entire world wherein there exist people who do not have some form of internal systems of distinction. States of distinction are natural.... It is a law of nature that there exist so many religions, varnas, jatis, kulas (lineages), and languages.... However these distinctions have the destiny of unity, which is what is the goal of great philosophers. Till that state of unity is reached, each and every distinction needs to work for its own betterment. Many distinctions, of religion, jati and kula, have existed from time immemorial in our country.... These are based on legitimate foundation and have a great deal of thinking and good will behind them. Therefore they cannot be rooted out by anybody. However, since people of recent times have made changes in the Great Reason that lay behind such systems at their moment of origin, some have begun to think that such principles of distinction themselves are the reason for all the problems. Religion, caste, kula distinctions should not die. They will not, in fact. What should meet its end is the practice of unequal hierarchy that many indulge in, claiming basis in the natural principles of distinction.... When Brahmins, all so educated, are rushing after government jobs as though they are the heaven on this world, it is only natural that others follow the leader.... Some argue that if there are caste-based restrictions regulating dining habits and matrimonial networks, let there be, but they should not regulate national activities. To this, we too agree. (*Mysore Star*, 14 January 1917)

This statement bears testimony to a curious and even contradictory space, one that invalidates the hierarchical principle of the caste order even while celebrating the distinctions (*bhinna*) that obtain among caste entities. Caste as constituting the differential essence of its members, and therefore, the larger purity–pollution principle regulating inter-caste relations, are all seen to possess an inexorable legitimacy. Certain practices,
However, get defined as outside the normative purview of the caste order—the practice of inequality based on one’s caste identity, occupational choices (particularly government jobs), and the space of nationalism.

The dissatisfaction of Brahmins is evidenced in the Notes of Dissent attached by the two Brahmin members to the Miller Report, as well as in the presentations made to the Representative Assembly. Significantly, Brahmin opposition to the proposed measures of protective discrimination is not articulated in ritual–hierarchical terms. They seem to concede the demand of Sudras and Panchamas for education and high-ranking jobs. In fact, the two Brahmin members of the Committee preface their dissent by affirming the need for uplifting the backward classes. Their opposition is configured mainly through the register of ‘merit’. Thus, K. T. Seshaiya, a Brahmin member of the Assembly, argued:

> Whether a candidate for office is a Jew, Christian, Protestant or Jacobite, his qualifications alone count. In no country and at no time in the annals of the world, was government service held to be representative institution to be recruited on a communal basis. (Cited in Naidu 1996: 205, n. 59)

However, such statements also tended to camouflage sentiments reflective of caste norms linking occupation and ritual status. *Sampadabhuyadya* (a daily, which according to *Mysore Star*, represented the interests of secular Brahmins) states:

> The arrangement of appointing representatives on communal basis is not beneficial. And this arrangement is...in no country practiced. He, who has the merit... alone has to be appointed to do the job. Will the job be performed to the satisfaction of all if an able *Agasa* [Washerman; the reference here, in fact, is to a ‘lower’ caste and not merely to the ‘function’ of washing clothes] is appointed as a minister? Or even, if a top ranking officer is appointed as a scavenger [again referring to a Dalit caste and not merely to the ‘function’ of scavenging]? (Cited in *Mysore Star*, 11 November 1917)

This position ties together, at once, the modern discursive register of ‘merit’ and the norms of the caste system that seek to regulate occupational entry. Such a fusion of distinctive codes, it
needs to be reiterated, was not an isolated instance. *Mysore Star*, commenting on the position endorsed by Sampadabhyaudyaya, frequently observes that Brahmins were the first to relinquish ‘caste occupations’, and if they wished others to go back to their traditional occupations, Brahmins should lead by example.

Brahmins also pointed out that they had not resorted to illegal or unjustifiable means to occupy modern spaces and that it was unfair to punish them for their merit. Further, they focussed attention on the differences that obtained within the category ‘Brahmin’, referring particularly to the Havyaka and Sanketi Brahmins who had remained largely agriculture-dependent jatis. As a Brahmin Representative Assembly member, S. R. Balakrishna Rao, deliberated:

> [T]he principle on which groups of people were classified as backward is wrong. The Brahmin community is made up of a number of subjects and is not a homogeneous body. There were subjects among them who were really backward in education and were also poor. Should not such people be helped? (Hanumanthappa n.d., Vol. II: 377–78)

Notwithstanding this public dissent, the non-Brahmin articulation was exceedingly successful in ‘othering’ the Brahmin. As an invocation, the ‘Brahmin’ came to represent everything that was abhorrent to a modern mind. Meanwhile—and by no means independent of this non-Brahmin construction—the Brahmin himself was undergoing a secularising experience primarily owing to urbanisation, liberal education and modern occupations. He was growing circumspect and reflexive about his self as ‘Brahmin’, an identification that was now invested with all that was antithetical to the modern ethos. Brahminness, therefore, had to be reconfigured and reinscribed. In what follows, we present two locutions of the Brahmin self. Paradoxically, these are drawn from the pages of the *Mysore Star* and illustrate the possibilities following the non-Brahmin articulation and the ongoing secularisation of the Brahmin self. While the first of the two locutions was becoming increasingly difficult to defend, the second came to dominate the retrievals of the Brahmin self. The non-Brahmin articulation too denounced the first of these locutions, which it found unacceptable. It, however, seemed content with the latter retrieval.
A letter, titled ‘Working of the Reforms: The Brahmins’ Lot’, was written by a ‘South Indian Brahmin official’ in the Manchester Guardian and republished in the Mysore Star (20 February 1920).

An excerpt:

My poor sons are able to get on smoothly through grace in the midst of non-Brahmin administration. The British Government was encouraging Brahmins in the last century in consideration of their intelligence and education and their loyalty. They [the Brahmins] are now in a depressed condition...as in their thirst for British education and encouragement they have lost all their properties and deserted their homes. Non-Brahmins with below average education are now encouraged and the Brahmin minority is put down in all ways, socially and officially. The Brahmin villages abound in passed candidates who do not know what to do. I assure you that, excepting a few Brahmins here and there who have lost their senses, the majority are always loyal to the British Government, and appreciate the benefit of its administration. If you are pleased to pursue the 11th Skandam of the Sri Bhagavatham you will observe that the Government will pass into the hands of Sudras towards the end of Kaliyuga. The lowest castes are now forcibly and even against their will allowed to go through Brahmin quarters and to join all social functions. I beg to add and venture to assert that in a few years hence the word ‘Brahmin’ will have to be expunged from the Census Report.

Compare this to another letter titled ‘Nija Brahmananaaru? Avana Dharmavenu?’ (Who is the Real Brahmin? What is his Dharma?), written by a Brahmin Head Master T. Nanjundaiah, which appeared in the Mysore Star on 9 November 1929:

The word vedamurthy denotes the actualisation of the vedas in a man. I, the unscholarly Head Master of the Hireguntanooru Boys High School, T. Nanjundaiah, who, even if one takes a thorough search from head to bottom, has not a trace of such Brahmathva, bow before you. What is Brahmana? What are the Brahmana karmas [Brahmins’ ascribed work]? How will the Brahma Tejas [Brahmin splendour] be? How does one recognise a Brahmin who possesses that Tejas?—I know not. But when I asked a Mahatma, he said that one who has control over his senses, external and internal, who meditates, is clean, patient,
contented, has \textit{Brahma jnana} [absolute knowledge], is invested with the qualities of scientific temper, devotion, theism, egalitarianism because of his ability to practice the teachings of his Guru is called the Brahmin. He even provided the necessary evidence from the sastras....

Neither do I have those qualities nor have I seen anybody endowed with them...since I, myself, don't have brahminness, how will I have the capacity to recognise a true Brahmin? My conscience does not allow me to act like a Brahmin, as if in a drama, when I am not following the Brahma karma and cannot even imagine of matching up to the greatness of the brahminhood. I have no symptoms of brahminness. I am performing 'This Worldly' activities, I am interested in 'This Worldly' things and, to top it all, I eke out a living through offering services. That I offer services for returns in itself points to my Sudraness, since it represents \textit{tamoguna} [character of ignorance]. Brahmins, for whom \textit{satvaguna} [character of wisdom and purity] is the dominant quality, will know my jati [of being a Sudra], just by the fact that I offer services. I am a straight man who says what he does and does what he says. I eat and drink where I feel like....Given that I don't even know myself, how will I know Brahma jnana or brahminness? I do not like getting called Brahmin by un-true conduct....

Taking all this into consideration, the great Brahmins should find answers to the following questions—Who is a Brahmin? What is his \textit{dharma} [duty]? Does everybody follow this dharma? Do they believe that, at least, they themselves follow this dharma? After finding answers to the above, if they find that they all follow brahminness and that it is only myself who does not, then they should, I request, dismiss me from the 'Brahmin' list itself.

Significantly, both these writers occupy modern spaces—one as a bureaucrat and the other as a school teacher. Their divergent recuperations of 'Brahminness' is testimony that secularisation and non-Brahmin challenges did not necessarily homogenise the Brahmin’s understanding of his self. Individual trajectories and contexts were also significant in formulating the response of an individual.

The first writer unhesitatingly owns up and speaks on behalf of his Brahmin identity. For him, traditional authority and the normative ground of caste are the basis on which social life ought to be organised: Sudras cannot enter Brahmin colonies, nor take
up occupations that are not prescribed for them. Changes in society place his sense of self-identity under siege. But given that scriptural authority ordains his Brahminness, it lies beyond his volition. Nanjundaiah, though, can take a step outside his Brahmin self and evaluate it. He employs three prototypical images—the ‘ideal Brahmin’, the ‘contemporary/degraded Brahmin’, and his own Brahmin self (one that is at a remove from the former two images).

Interestingly, these prototypes endure to this day. For Nanjundaiah, his ascribed identity as a Brahmin has no significance. It is there merely because he is born in a Brahmin family. Thus being ‘Brahmin’, for him, is no more than constituting part of a ‘list’. He invests no significance to it unlike other Brahmins around him. However, it is not that the category of Brahmin has no meaning for him. He re-inscribes it with a different code. A Brahmin to him is one who could be born of any caste or community but who has acquired an identifiable inventory of attributes. The attributes are interesting; it ranges from egalitarianism and scientific temper (decidedly modern values) to devotion to the Guru, purity and so on. This strategy of universalising the category of Brahmin is an enduring frame by which the secularising Brahmin begins to negotiate with his caste self.

Both locutions seek authentication in scriptural authority, even as they put it to divergent uses. Thus, Nanjundaiah lampoons contemporary Brahmins not because of modern notions of equality, rather, because they do not live up to the scriptural imagination. Such articulations do not demand a radical break with the past that it constructs for itself. Instead, it asks that Brahmins live up to an inherited image.

As noted above, the non-Brahmin articulation seems to have been content with this language of caste and does not appear to have a stated position against the ‘caste system’ as such. For instance, in 1915, when state government schools were thrown open to the Panchamas, ‘not only Brahmin parents but even non-Brahmin parents (including Muslim parents) withdrew their children from such schools’ (Thimmaiah 1993: 51). This is further evidenced in the Mysore Star, which notes the heartburn among Lingayats that students from their community were denied a ‘separate bathroom’ in the hostel attached to the Maharajah’s College, Mysore, while Brahmin students were provided this facility.
Intersecting Voices, Shifting Identifications

(Mysore Star, 6 and 27 May 1923 and 3 June 1923). Importantly, the grouse was not that the Brahmins were following a ‘caste rule’ in a secular space, but that Lingayats were not being extended the same facility. As Lingayats constituted the most important constituency of the non-Brahmin alliance, the contention that the non-Brahmin discourse hardly questioned caste as a system gets further strengthened.

One could of course view such moves as instances of ‘sanskritisation’ in the idiom of M. N. Srinivas, but it could be profitable as well to approach it as ‘modernisation’, or, more accurately, as a contestation over modernity itself. As we shall see, in the case of Lingayats, disputations over being categorised as ‘Sudra’ was more than merely a question of their place in the varna order; it permeated their struggles over the meaning of being a modern caste community. The resolution of this question was essential for certain subaltern jatis among Lingayats who were engaged in an acrimonious battle with the elite jatis within this fold over legitimate ways of constituting the Lingayat community and the norms that ought to govern this constitution. Whether the Lingayat community was to be divided as Brahmana Veerasaiva, Kshatriya Veerasaiva, etc., or whether it should be seen as a composite, non-hierarchised community was a debate that raged for decades in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (see Boratti 2003). Secular Brahmins like the Census Superintendent of 1931, Masti Venkatesha Iyengar (whom we encountered in the previous chapter in the discussion on varanna), were prone to dismiss anxieties on the part of such communities over their ritual status as being of little significance, whereas for the communities themselves, these were legitimate questions about ways of imagining and re-imagining their place in the emerging scheme of things.

The non-Brahmin discourse often constructs an ‘ideal Brahmin’ or a ‘Brahmin-in-essence’ and ventures a positive evaluation of this figure. Such an essentialisation is encountered very frequently in Mysore Star, ironically the converse of the strategies of othering germane to the non-Brahmin articulation. This Brahmin is not only tolerated; he is, in fact, celebrated. A write-up titled Brahmadveshigalaru? (Who are the Haters of Brahma/Brahmins?) argues:
Q: What is the loss in believing that birth determines one’s varna?
A: That is plainly unfair. Then, even if a Brahmin turns corrupt/unclean and joins Islam or Christianity, he will still be called a Brahmin...The sastras have defined distinct characters for different varnas. But now, since they have the arrogance to think that they have become Brahmins by birth itself, all the goodness inherent in the Brahmin character has been rooted out. Can there be a greater loss? Isn’t the one who is destroying such a great Brahmin character the brahmadveshi?...Instead of realising that they themselves have turned the primary threat to brahminness, they have begun calling others brahmadveshis.

Q: But in today’s world, who cares for the quality/character? Isn’t it merely the ‘practice’ that everybody observes? Doesn’t the government too take into consideration merely the birth as the marker of one’s brahminness?
A: The nitty-gritty of such questions does not entangle the government. They merely follow the practice accepted by the outside world. Moreover, in religious matters, the decision of the king cannot be taken as final.

... Q: Then, who are the brahmadveshis?
A: Those who are destroying the Brahmin character and arguing that the varna comes with birth and that the character is not important for determining one’s varna—they are the real brahmadveshis and varnadveshis. (Mysore Star, 17 February 1918)

Likewise, an editorial in Mysore Star on 27 May 1917 rather appreciatively refers to a speech made by a Brahmin, which argued:

According to the vedas, the Brahmin and other such varnas were born to facilitate the human quest for the development of spiritual thinking. These varnas, as time progressed, turned into the present occupation-based varnas. The varna divisions were, in fact, facilitating caste unity and had no principle of hierarchy. The varna contamination began happening when such Adhyathma [knowledge of the absolute being] oriented schema began to be used for determining ‘This Worldly’ occupations. Therefore, we ought to grasp the essence of the vedas and seek to uplift, and not oppress, women and the backwards.
Thus the Mysore Star consistently makes a distinction between, what it calls, the *jatibrahmana* (Brahmin through birth) and the *karmabrahmana* (Brahmin through action, for whom the ‘ultimate goal of life is to think for the good of the world’) and fervidly argues for the latter. For instance, the editorial dated 19 November 1916 is a lament about the absence of the karmabrahmanas, since most of those who are Brahmins by birth have taken to Khatriya, Vaisya and Sudra occupations. This editorial even goes on to celebrate the activities of the Aanandavana Vaidika Samskruta Paatashaale, an institution located in Bombay Karnataka and run by a Brahmin, which sought to inculcate Brahminical values.

Such lamentations about the ‘demise’ of the ‘Brahmin-in-essence’ were widespread. A letter written by a Vaisyakulaa-bhimaani (fan/supporter of Vaisya community), challenges Thyamagondlu vaidika (knowledgeable of the vedas) Brahmins to answer a few questions:

I hear that the local vaidika Brahmins are conducting meetings regarding their brahminness. Let them answer the following questions that are based on their present status. These questions are based on proof...Can one be called a Brahmin even after he has committed one of the *panchanahapataka* (five great sins) like drinking? Can a Brahmin, who has committed ‘lesser sins’ like *britakadhyapana* (receiving remuneration in order to teach) be still called a Brahmin? Can a Brahmin who has not engaged himself in learning be still called a Brahmin? Can a Brahmin, who being a hotel owner cleans the *enjalu* [the leftovers, seen as polluted] of all, irrespective of their caste, be still called a Brahmin? Can a Brahmin, who is employed in Medical Department or the Excise Department, be still called a Brahmin? (Mysore Star, 28 August 1926)

Many of the above queries implicate the secularising Brahmin. In 1919, Mysore Star reproduced the letter written by the head of Kolhapur Sankaracharya Peeta to the Baroda king, also the president of the Bombay Depressed Classes Conference:

I cannot overstate the regard I have for your efforts. But I also warn you that we can neither ignore nor misread our sastras. Regarding these aspects, our sastras have necessary and great spiritual norms. But it is also true that over time many meaningless and harsh practices have also crept into
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our unions. The former are non-negotiable. The loyal, who are seeking after the realisation of *atma*, have to necessarily follow the proscriptions imposed. They ought not to eat those things that are proscribed to a real vaidika and cannot mix with those who are prohibited....This is necessary not merely for their individual quest of realisation but also for the greater common good....Till he reaches the stage of greatness endowed with powers of purifying anybody who comes near, he should follow all the proscriptions to stay pure. All the norms regulating pollution and untouchability have this very philosophy as their basis....

But, of course, it is indeed hard to come by the real vaidikas....The practices and discourses do change according to the demands of the present....I strongly believe that a Hindu *loukika* [one pursuing a non-sacred or secular calling] who is not following the path of self-realisation, treats the converted Muslims and Christians fairly but ill-treats the Panchamas who are very much Hindus, is committing a phenomenal sin....However I have a sermon for the Panchamas too....All the Panchamas, in the past, and a majority even now were/are slaves to the most polluting acts....We all know how, from their own communities, many a yogi and bhakta emerged to earn our respect....I am a pontiff and I strongly state that the primary aspects regarding our practices and dharma ought not to be changed. But it is inevitable that many things change according to the changes in country....Firstly, since many from the formerly untouchable castes are taking to the good ways but, more importantly, also since many from good castes are finding it difficult to ignore ‘this world’ like their vaidika predecessors did, such formerly untouchable people have to be treated with respect....[However] if the demand for change in practice becomes more widespread, I assure you that I am willing to sit with other pontiffs to prepare a charter of the changes to be brought about. (*Mysore Star*, 30 March 1919)

Apart from re-imagining the contents of being a vaidika, what is significant here is the category of the ‘Hindu’ (with all castes, from the untouchables to the Brahmins, constituting the Hindu community) that the pontiff foregrounds. However, re-inscribing these populations into a single category—‘Hindu’—does not obliterate caste distinctions and specificities. Nevertheless, such enunciations by Brahmins were enthusiastically received by the *Mysore Star*. It perhaps provided a common ground on which the
contesting imaginations of the Brahmin and the non-Brahmin could meet. The reconfigured Brahmin self, one that denied to its own ascribed status a moral and normative grounding but which nonetheless positively evaluated the ideal Brahmin self, seemed successful in convincing its Other—the non-Brahmin—of its legitimacy. The Brahmin was perhaps most disconcerted by the modern state’s responsiveness to the non-Brahmin demand for representation. The resignation of Vishveshvaraiah dramatised this in important ways. The king, who held Vishveshvaraiah in great esteem for his efforts to modernise the state and its economy (Naidu 1996: 187), was nevertheless willing to let him resign on the issue of the Miller Committee. This ready compliance of the state despite spirited opposition from a highly respected Dewan, many members of the Representative Assembly, the Brahmin-dominated press and the bureaucracy in general, was disconcerting to the Brahmins. Many factors—such as the policy of placating local landed interests (Manor 1977a), palace intrigue and politicking (Chandrashekhar 1985), and the sheer need to manage a population increasingly dependent on governmental attention—could have contributed to the state’s readiness to heed the non-Brahmin demand. For the Brahmins, though, it was the first clear signal that despite their preponderance in the executive and civil social institutions (like the press), they could not completely determine the trajectory of the state. Once heeded to, this meant that the modern state begins to get articulated (both by caste associations and by individuals) as one of the significant ‘others’ of the Brahmins in the modern condition. The increasing volatility of electoral politics at all levels, the willingness of the state to appoint successive Backward Classes commissions and to take measures like land reforms, have only served to affirm a certain narrative of the state for successive generations of Brahmins.

But these do not exhaust the external categorisation and othering that the Brahmin has had to confront. The case of the Lingayats maps some of the other concerns that trouble the Brahmin. As we have noted, Lingayats, unlike other non-Brahmin communities, contest not only the secular space occupied by the Brahmin but also the (secularising) Brahmin’s continued control over the space of the ‘sacred’. The next section
Being Brahmin, Being Modern presents further instances of such contestation so as to highlight the complexities involved in making the Brahmin identity. It also allows us to speculate on the internal coherence of the Brahmin, which the non-Brahmin often presumed. This in turn leads to the final section where I discuss the internal contestations that Brahmin self-identification entail.

Contesting the ‘Sacred’ Brahmin: The Lingayat Instance

The cases represented here primarily concern Lingayat interests in equaling, if not supplanting, Brahmins in the caste ritual hierarchy. Not surprisingly, the discussion will uncover the eclectic power of the secularising Brahmin who mediates even those affairs that he had ostensibly withdrawn from the contest over ritual status.

One could begin with the struggle over the two Government Sanskrit Colleges of Mysore State. This points not only towards the interpenetration of non-Brahmin identification with Lingayat identity but also towards the consequences of these intersections. The entry of non-Brahmins into the Government Sanskrit Colleges of Bangalore and Mysore was debated during the 1910s and 1920s. But non-Brahmins had to wait till Independence to get effective entry into these colleges. The Maharajah’s Sanskrit College in Mysore was older, more prestigious and ‘sacred’ than the Chamarajendra Sanskrit College in Bangalore. Both these colleges received patronage from the Sringeri matha (a Smarta institution) and the Parakala matha (a Srivaishnavite institution, the official Gurupetea [seat of the teacher] of the Mysore king). Nevertheless, they were primarily funded and managed by the government. These colleges were to train Brahmin male students in the vedas, scriptures and in the performance of rituals.

It must be remembered that by the early twentieth century (if ever) the priority before Brahmin youth was not Sanskrit education or religious training. None of the auto/biographies available from this period even mention such a choice as a distinct possibility. In fact, by then (as it continues to be, almost like a rule without exception), ‘sacred’ education had already become the least attractive option for Brahmin young men. Most of the Brahmin boys who found themselves in such institutions of learning (as is
the case today) were failures in pursuing secular education, except of course for those few students who could not afford a secular education. But even in institutions of traditional learning, there was an acute need to enable students to work within secularising Brahmin spaces. Thus C. Subba Rao, retired Deputy Commissioner, made an endowment of Rs 10,000 (a large sum then) with the Maharajah’s Sanskrit College, Mysore as early as in 1894–95 with the expressed intent of

inducing Sanskrit scholars [all of whom were Brahmins] to receive a high English education so that the narrowing influence of their purely Sanskrit education might, to a certain extent, be remedied and they might receive the benefit of liberal education without which the stores of traditional learning were not likely to be productive of useful results. (Cited in Naidu 1996: 73)

Despite the depleting priority of Sanskrit among Brahmins, they held monopoly over it. The only people who appeared to complicate this scenario were the Jangamas (the priestly group in the Lingayat fold), who apparently had traditional access to Sanskrit education and had authored many Sanskrit texts of ritual and philosophy. Consequently, it is certain that the demand to democratise Sanskrit/religous education made by the Praja Mitra Mandal, purportedly on behalf of all non-Brahmins, was in fact an issue solely of the Lingayats.

In 1920 the government appointed a committee to examine this non-Brahmin demand. The members of the committee were officers in relevant government positions. Incidentally, as it were, they were all Brahmins. The committee recommended that only the Bangalore College be rendered accessible, that too for non-Brahmins of a ‘high or good caste’. However, such students would be taught only Sanskrit literature and not the vedas. The committee held that the Mysore College must remain restricted to Brahmins. It also suggested that teachers in the Bangalore College should be allowed to take transfer if they felt uncomfortable teaching non-Brahmin students. The Mysore Star responded with a scathing editorial (18 June 1922) targeting the recommendations

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5 See Murthy (2000: 206–07) for a list of such texts.
for being undemocratic and unjust, and pointed out that the institutions in question were government colleges meant to cater to one and all. Nonetheless, a government order dated 10 June 1924 brought into effect the recommendations of the committee.

In the year 1925, another committee was constituted to look into the question of the continuance of teaching veda and prayoga (the practical aspects, relating primarily to the performance of rituals) in the Bangalore Sanskrit College. This question came up because the teachers in the college (all of whom were Brahmins) felt uncomfortable teaching non-Brahmin students. This committee had four Brahmins, a Jain and a Lingayat as members. The four Brahmin members were for abolishing the teaching of veda and prayoga in these two colleges, on the ground that none of the teachers in the college was willing to teach these subjects to those other than Brahmins. The Lingayat member argued that since the vedaghosha (chanting of the vedas) is quintessential for the Lingayats, the teaching of the vedas ought to continue. He further opined that even though the study of Sanskrit literature is thrown open to non-Brahmins, without access to learning of the vedas, it was like a body without life. But his proposal lost out for want of majority. (Murthy 2000: 213)

The Lingayat challenge was primarily articulated in terms of a spirited claim to Brahminhood, one resting on the authority of the vedas and other sacred Sanskrit texts. Such contests between the Brahmins and the Lingayats were frequent and bitter. Indeed, the Lingayat challenges to the supremacy of the Brahmin and the accompanying claims to Brahminhood never cease. Even when subsumed under the non-Brahmin critique of the Brahmin, they are not rendered ideologically problematic or unsustainable. They co-exist, even if uncomfortably, with each other. These contradictory impulses appear to have directed the trajectory of the non-Brahmin articulation in the Mysore State, given that Lingayats were the chief sustaining force behind it.

In what follows, we shall narrate four instances that indicate the range of concerns that animated the Brahmin–Lingayat field, each instance testifying the Brahmins’ willingness to deploy and consolidate their versions of reality.
i. Census Contestations

The Lingayats were enumerated as Sudras in the 1871 Census. Not only was this categorisation continued in the next census (of 1881) despite the widely articulated displeasure of Lingayat leaders, but also they were placed below some of the ‘untouchable’ communities in the varna hierarchy. This led to a great deal of dissent—tracts were written, books were published and community newspapers such as the Mysore Star were copiously distributed to assuage feelings of disbelief and hurt. The Mysore Star served as a context for Ranganna, a (Madhva?) Brahmin working for the Railway Department, to engage in an extended argument over Lingayat claims to higher caste status. Ranganna, in his letter, pointed to the eclectic composition of the Lingayat community, which included castes ranging from washermen, barbers, oil pressers, trading and agricultural castes, to Satanis (who work as low level assistants in temples). According to him, these people merely by wearing the Lingayat markers could not claim the exalted position of having become Saiva Brahmins or Veerasaiva Brahmins; such status was accorded only to Brahmins and not to ‘pretenders’ (Veerasangappa 1882: 20–22). His derision goes further:

Veerasaivas call themselves Brahmins now. Many Veerasaiva women who are staying in the palace of the Mysore king as his concubines have begotten children in such relationships. Then we could even call them Kshatriyas! Isn’t it? (Cited in Murthy 2000: 201)

The Mysore Star editor launched a caustic debate with Ranganna and other Brahmins who joined in. The editor’s own defense was based on a plethora of Sanskrit texts, all of which were copiously cited in order to confer the status of Brahmins to Lingayats (Veerasangappa 1882: 24–42). This public debate went on for decades and in different fora. In 1884, some Brahmins of Mysore put up a public notice:

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6 The editor of the journal later published the debates that took place as a tract titled Mysore Star Correspondence (Veerasangappa 1882). The details stated here are from this volume.
There is no sacred thread on the body of the Banajigas [a trading group among the Lingayats] and they do not have the initiation ritual. Their women, when they have their periods, do not seclude themselves but merely take bath and attend to the kitchen. When this is the case how will the Veerasaivas become Saiva Brahmins? In places around Bellary and Hubli they have tied the Linga [the bodily worn sign of Siva signifying a Lingayat] to Vokkaligas, Barbers [Sudra communities] and even to Harijans—how can they be called Brahmins? All of them are Sudras and that's the truth.... If bronze can be made into gold then even you can get brahminhood. (Cited in Murthy 2000: 202)

Of course, there were other communities that also claimed Brahmin status—the Viswakarmas (goldsmiths), barbers and so on. Indeed the Viswakarma demand appears to have enjoyed wide currency even if with little cultural legitimacy. Bhairappa, in his autobiography, narrates the story recounted by a Viswakarma widow in his village.

When Sankaracharya was in Sringeri, he had Viswakarma as well as Brahmin disciples. Shankaracharya belonged to the Viswakarma jati; that is why he is called Acharya [goldsmiths have Achari, a derivative of the Sanksrit word Acharya, as their surname]. Once he wanted to test his students. He left his footwear at the riverbed and came back to the Matha. He told his Viswakarma students to fetch it. Each of those boys wore the slippers for some distance each and brought them back. The next day he asked the Brahmin students to fetch them from the riverbed. They reverentially placed the slippers on their head and brought them back. Then the Acharya shouted at the Viswakarma students: ‘You have all become very arrogant. You don’t have the reverence that the Brahmin students have. I will give them the matha and go away.’ Then the Viswakarma students fell at his feet and begged forgiveness and asked that the matha be given back to them at least at a later date because they belong to his jati. The Acharya said, ‘After a thousand years, the matha will be yours. Let them have it till then.’ Now that period is over. But the Brahmins are refusing to give it back to them. Our people will not keep quiet; one day all of them will go together and take control. (Bhairappa 1996: 23–24)
However, these claims do not seem to have ruffled the Brahmins as that of the Lingayats did. This could have been due to the sustained nature of the claim, as well as due to their growing clout in the administration, increasing rates of literacy and presence in crucial spaces such as the press and the judiciary. As we shall see, the controversies were frequent and passionate and played themselves out in all available spaces.

ii. The ‘Sarana’ controversy

Subhodaya was a weekly from Dharwad, edited and published by a Brahmin. It carried an article titled ‘Allama, Basavana Vrittaantavenu?’ (What is the Chronicle of Allama and Basava?) in its issue dated 18 April 1919, which was penned by Srinivasa-charya, a (Madhva?) Brahmin. Basava and Allama are the two figures who came to be constructed as the founding pillars of the twelfth-century ‘sarana’ (personal identification of the Lingayats, denoting the one who has sought refuge in god) movement’. The first half of the twentieth century saw a determined effort by sections of Lingayats to reconstruct this ‘movement’ as the grid around which a corporate Lingayat community could be imagined. The piece by Srinivasacharya attempted to subvert this imagination by calling into question the caste status of Allama and the motive of Basava. Lingayat sections that were keen on ‘resurrecting’ these figures, expectedly, took great offence. This controversy, which came to be known as the Subhodaya Prakarana (the Subhodaya incident), generated a lot of community interest and efforts. Meetings were organised in different parts of the Kannada-speaking regions; matha heads were sought out for monetary and moral assistance; and the respective community newspapers actively took part in articulating their positions.

For instance, in a case debating the ritual status of Lingayats, the Bombay High Court in 1926 ruled that ‘the Veerasaivas are not Sudras; they are Lingi Brahmins [Brahmins who wear the Linga] of the highest order’ (Nanjundaradhya 1969: 75). Even the enumerators of the 1931 Census were instructed to list them as Lingi Brahmins, but reportedly not one of the Lingayats took on that appellation. By then, apparently, the need to acquire state recognition for ritual contestations had outlasted its value.

It is problematic to speak of the Lingayat community, at least with reference to this issue. The Panchacharya (the five originary teachers) tradition, the mathas which belonged to it and the (upper) castes
Some excerpts of the contentious article by Srinivasacharya were reproduced in the *Mysore Star* (14 September 1919):

Allama, according to the available historical records, was a Sudra. The name ‘Allama’ is symbolic of the Muslim god. Chitradurga’s Murugha Matha collects donations from the Muslims because Allama was a Muslim. Allama went to Kalyana to assist Basava, a minister under Bijjala, who was involved in a mission of conversions. Allama entered Basava’s house, where the food was being served to the followers of the faith, with a liquor pot on his back, true to his previous caste. We can confidently say that Basava spoilt the sacred Virasaiva faith and did not further it. With the desire to become the king, he harboured *Minda-Punda jangamas* [paramour-trouble maker wandering mendicants] and built an army. He fed one lakh and ninety thousand Jangamas not out of \textit{bhakti} but out of this desire. He had a keen sense of conspiracy, and not of true devotion. Moreover he was a meat-eater too.

A Lingayat leader went to the district court in Dharwad seeking an injunction against the article. It is not certain how the court went about ascertaining the validity or otherwise of the claims made before it. However, the *Mysore Star* (ibid.) claimed that the court found the petition of the Lingayats valid and held that the article had indeed hurt the sensibilities of the Lingayats. The court censured the editor and the writer; the matter rested with the editor apologising for publishing the said article. The Lingayats though were not satisfied. The court had suggested that the Bombay government could, if deemed necessary, proceed against the defendants. Many Lingayats attempted to convince the government about pursuing that option, but it was never exercised.

which owed their allegiance to them were accused by those espousing the *Virakta* tradition of actively collaborating with the Brahmins in order to defame the ‘progressive’ twelfth-century movement, which apparently spoke against caste distinctions and often incurred the displeasure of the upper castes within the Lingayat fold. Some aspects of this internal contestation and turmoil—that witnessed remarkable upheavals in the late colonial period—can be found in Murthy (2000) and Boratti (2004).
It is significant to note that Srinivasacharya, in the course of the essay, claims to write a history. The Lingayats, however, see this as yet another attempt by Brahmans to subvert their history and memory. By this period, the contestations between Brahmans and Lingayats had become routinised. What was more difficult to contend, as far as the Lingayats were concerned, was the role played by Alur Venkatrao, a Madhva Brahmin who spearheaded the Karnataka Unification Movement in the Bombay Presidency Kannada-speaking areas and is today known as a pioneer Kannada activist. An extremely versatile person, Venkatrao was then the president of the Karnataka History Congress. It was in that capacity that he was asked to depose in the Subhodaya case and offer a perspective on the varnasrama (governed by the hierarchy of four colours/group and four stages of twice-born life) system. He says that his deposition had gone against the contention of the Lingayat side, on the basis of which the court decided the case against them. This version, of course, contradicts the Mysore Star’s contention that they won a censure and an apology. We have no way of checking the veracity of these claims. But Venkatrao’s status as the president of the History Congress is accepted not only by the court but also by the Lingayats. He does not describe what his arguments were but his position on the question can be gleaned from other instances that he describes.

He mentions that many Lingayats objected to him mentioning Basava as the founder of Veerasaivism in his writings. Puzzled, he asks a Lingayat friend about the reasons for this. The friend tells him that that very question—whether Basava is the founder of Veerasaivism or just a reformer—was a major bone of contention between two sections of Lingayats. Accepting Basava as founder would date Veerasaivism as a recent (twelfth century) pheno-

9 For an analysis of his disparate concerns, see Raghavendra Rao (2000). This work also details the preoccupations of DVG. See also Venkatrao’s autobiography (1974). We will encounter him in the next chapter too.

10 This information is from Venkatrao’s brief essay (1989) on his good friend, Hardekar Manjappa, a Lingayat leader and one of the very few Lingayats who had defied the general non-Brahmin (unwritten) diktat of not joining the Indian nationalist movement as it was perceived to be dominated by and furthering the interests of the Brahmans.
menon. It would also subvert the Panchacharya tradition which claimed a more antiquarian past. A resolution of the question was thus foundational for the nature of the corporatisation of the Lingayat community. It is rather strange that Venkatrao, a public activist, newspaper editor and president of the History Congress, should feign ignorance of the significance of this widely debated question. Further, he narrates the discussion that he had with Manjappa on the twelfth-century ‘movement’. For the non-Panchacharya sections among the Lingayats, the founding importance of the movement rested on what was seen to be its rejection of the varnasrama dharma and accordingly in its openness to recruit anybody irrespective of caste into its fold. Indeed, for these sections (which were also the ‘lower castes’ among Lingayats), the success of this assertion would allow them to stake an equal status within a corporatised Lingayat community. Venkatrao is unconvinced, even as the explanations he offers are not very clear:

I told Manjappa that my views on the Veerasaiva Dharma are very different from the common perception. I agree neither with the perception that Basaveswara was against the Brahmana dharma nor that he destroyed the varnasrama system. (Venkatrao 1989: 139)

Thus, Brahmins such as Venkatrao and Srinivasacharya, who occupied spaces that were ostensibly outside caste, deliberately or otherwise mediated in the formative processes of other caste communities. While these communities recognised this mediatory role, they found it difficult to contain the effects of the secularisation of the caste self. What was even more difficult to contain was an alternative imagination that many Brahmin public figures worked with—of ‘Brahmin’ or ‘Sudra’—as achievable qualities rather than as purely ascriptive statuses. The following instance from DVG’s memoirs illustrates this.

DVG is here narrating a vaidika Brahmin’s ‘political thinking/philosophy’. On the way to a temple, the young DVG, in a mood to exhibit his recent readings on political philosophy before a vaidika Brahmin (who is not English educated and therefore alien to western political philosophy), explicates the ideas of democracy, socialism and so on. After listening to him in rapt attention, the vaidika responds:
So, it means, from now on everything is going to be *sudra prabhutva* [the rule of the Sudras]. Isn’t it? (DVG 1997: 271)

A little perplexed by such a crisp response, DVG plods him on. The Brahmin’s response is summarised by DVG:

Sudra means a person who is narrow-minded; and not one among the four varnas. Let the jati be anything; what is crucial is to have broadmindedness. Look at, for instance, our own village. Who does not respect the words of...Muniyappa,...Maarashetti,...Sonnegowda or even those of Hyder Saheb, Haji Madar Saheb, Syed Pasha Mia [all from non-Brahmin/Sudra communities, including Muslims]? Doesn’t everybody honour them? Who will and can say ‘no’ if respectable people and intelligent people rule the state? But what you are explaining to me doesn’t sound like that. You talk of ‘majority’; you even talk of ‘larger numbers’. Is it the case in any country in this world that a majority is intelligent and justice-bound? If the majority is indeed like that then why do we need the state? It seems in *krta yuga*, it was like that....So, are you by any chance saying that *krta yuga* is back upon us?! The meaning of ‘Sudra’ is somebody who is always in distress—I don’t have this, I don’t have that; this good happened to him but why didn’t it happen to me and so on. Thus Sudra is one who heightens his desires and consequently his jealousy....Therefore, if such people take over the responsibility of looking after the state, they might just care for themselves and their own needs. Will they take care of the state? It could only result in riots and anomie and never in a state that cares for justice. All that we need is justness, isn’t it? (*Ibid.*: 271–72)

Without analysing this remarkable passage, we merely gesture to the different ways in which the term ‘Sudra’ is being used in the two instances—that is, in the Subhodaya article and in the vaidika Brahmin’s take on contemporary democracy. While the former calls attention to an empirically identifiable group of people, the latter invokes it as a value, a disposition of mind. Indeed, the simultaneous availability of these two senses of ‘Sudra’ made for crucially shifting identifications, even as a certain will to mediate and overpower ought also to be recognised.
iii. The Parali case

The case of Parali is a more straightforward instance of the Brahmin will to mediate and dominate the affairs of other communities, at least as far as the Mysore Star was concerned. It again offers an instance of the above-mentioned oscillation between the two invocations of the term ‘Sudra’. Parali, a famous Saiva pilgrimage centre located in Warangal was part of the Nizam-administered Hyderabad State. In 1924, local Brahmins filed a petition with the Nizam seeking to disallow Lingayats from officiating the offering of abhisheka (ritual bathing) to the sacred Linga of the temple. Their claim was that the Veerasaivas, being Sudras, do not possess the authority to learn the vedas; and that, consequently, any recognition of the right to offer vedokta rudrabhisheka [a ritual that involves bathing the deity with ghee, milk etc., the performance of which is authenticated by the chanting of vedic hymns] would be against dharma. The claim was accepted by local government authorities, who ordered that Lingayats should not perform the ritual. Vexed by what was termed as ‘gross violation of tradition-honoured rights’, Veerasaivas approached higher authorities seeking intervention.11

The government decided on a sastrartha to settle the issue, wherein experts and scholars from both the sides would argue their respective cases on the basis of the sastras. Even prior to this mode of resolution, a three-member commission appointed to look into the matter had upheld the Lingayat right to offer abhisheka. It ruled:

Veerasaivas are Lingi Brahmins [meaning that they are Brahmins who wear a Linga on their person, referring to the practice of the Veerasaivas of wearing a Linga on their person], and thus have a right to learn vedas. They are

11 In fact, the Mysore Star gave vent to the incredulity felt by Veerasaivas. A letter titled ‘Brahmanara Vichaara Vaichithryavu’ (Bewildering thinking of the Brahmins) asked: ‘Leave alone the question of untouchables for a moment. If Veerasaivas—who are the followers of the Vaidic path, who are above the Saivas, are the practitioners of Saktha Visishtadvaita, have borne the Sivalinga that they hold equal to their life—enter the temples of our Karnataka Brahmins, it appears that their God gets defiled!’ (Mysore Star, 7 February 1925).
eligible to perform the abhisheka. (*Mysore Star*, 20 June 1925)

But the Brahmin contention was that while it is true that Veerasaivas do have a tradition of performing abhisheka, they do not use the vedic hymns during the performance; and that therefore they automatically become unsuitable to perform the abhisheka (*ibid.*). Since it became evident that such claims and counter-claims were irresolvable through the pronouncements of modern mechanisms like commissions, it was decided that a sastrartha be held to decide on the issue.

While the Veerasaivas had a ready scholar in Swamy Viroopaksha Pandita, a Jangama who was the Vedabhashya Professor in Indore Province’s Sanskrit College, to lead its case, the Brahmins apparently found it difficult to find a scholar to champion their cause. Finally, after much deliberation, a lawyer from Pune, Vishnutheertha Bapat, was hired to argue the Brahmin contention. Both parties began a major campaign soliciting help. The *Mysore Star* even alleged that two Brahmins from Parali went to Indore and told the Brahmin officials of the Education Department that it was their moral duty to stop Viroopaksha Pandita from taking part in the debate; otherwise they would be indirectly contributing to an activity that would belittle the Brahminness of the Brahmin community (*Mysore Star*, 8 August 1925). But Viroopaksha Pandita had decided to come even if it were to be at the cost of his job. The government also suggested three names, including those of Mahatma Gandhi and Sarojini Naidu, to act as arbitrator. But apparently the Brahmins did not approve of any of the names (*Mysore Star*, 8 August 1925), forcing the Nizam to appoint a former chief justice of the Hyderabad High Court as the chief arbitrator.

The central issue here was one of proving (or disproving) the rights of the Lingayats over the vedas and consequently their claims over Brahminhood. For about six days the Veerasaiva scholars presented their case. On the seventh day, when the gathering was in place for the counter-argument, it was found that the chief pleader of the Brahmin side had left for Pune leaving a note behind stating his inability to argue the case (or so claimed the *Mysore Star*). The Brahmins tried hard to get a pandita (scholar) to plead their cause but in vain. The *Mysore Star* (8 August 1925)
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alleges that this inability in finding a Brahmin vedic scholar surprised the Government Commissioner.\textsuperscript{12} The \textit{Mysore Star} (\textit{ibid.}) even claims that the Brahmins finally employed an Aradhya (a high-caste Lingayat) to argue their case. Clearly, the Veerasaivas were keen on establishing that they had competent vedic scholars and were the rightful claimants of rudrabhisheka.

The Brahmins then furnished evidence for 15 days, but finally these were found wanting (\textit{ibid.}). The Nizam’s government, in July 1929, dismissed the case and restored to the Veerasaivas the right to perform abhisheka. The ‘Brahmin’ that the Veerasaivas constructed in the course of their defence can be found in the following summary of Viroopaksha Pandita’s statements during the sastrartha:

\begin{quote}
It was proved with enough evidence from the sastras that Veerasaivas, who are the Lingibrahmanas, are Devabrahmanas and thus it is they who have a greater right to perform the abhisheka and not the ordinary Brahmins who are alingi [without the Linga]. Moreover, such ordinary Brahmins, for they are the products of sankara [illegitimate inter-caste unions], can never attain suddha [pure] brahminhood.

That they are not pure Brahmins is borne out not only by many an authority, but also from their ritual practices, the evidence regarding the origin of their founder Gurus and by the fact that their women are, even to this day, prohibited from worshipping the god, reciting the vedas, and receiving initiation. Most of the Brahmin jatis like the Chitpavana, Karhade,…Shenave, Konkani [all referring to the Saraswat Brahmins], Ramanuja [Srivaishnavas], Madhyandina, Madhya, Saraswat, etc., were, not many years ago, part of Sudra communities such as Vyadha, Billa, Beda, etc., and only recently been elevated to brahminness, and this, their own scriptures point to. Most of these groups, even now, eat meat and consume liquor and do not have vedokta [veda ordained] samskara. Even their own sacred books admit that their founders, like Madhvacharya, were born out of wedlock, to a widow. All these make it clear that they are not pure Brahmins.\textldots\textsuperscript{(Cited in Nanjundaradhya 1969: 32–41)}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{12} References to this debate and controversy are found in many journals of this period. See, for instance, \textit{Svadharma} (quoted in \textit{Mysore Star}, 12 December 1925) and \textit{Jaya Karnataka} (8 February 1925).
Further on, it is stated:

Thus, they have as their Gurus who, in turn, had lower caste people as Gurus.....Even now they do not eat together and fight incessantly amongst themselves over each other's position in the internal hierarchy. Therefore such Alingi Brahmins who are corrupted by the mixing of many a low jati can only be given the status of adulterated brahminhood and definitely not that of pure Brahmins like the Lingi Brahmins/Veerasaivas. (Ibid.)

Viroopaksha Pandita draws constant attention to what he sees as the illegitimacy and fluidity of the contemporary composition of the Brahmin category. Constant redrawing of boundaries has made available alternative (or counter) claims to Brahminhood. Saraswats and Halekarnatakas were two of the communities that were engaged in bitter disputes with ‘better legitimised’ Brahmins like, for instance, the Hoysala Karnatakas over their Brahminhood. There were many feuds even among the more ‘legitimised’ Brahmins (for instance, between Smartas and Madhvas) over internal ranking and hierarchy.

However, these contesting Brahmin communities promptly closed ranks when an ‘illegitimate’ community claimed Brahminness. A controversy enveloped around the entry of a Veerasaiva deputy commissioner into the sanctum sanctorum of the famous Madhukesvara temple; Brahmins maintained that only dashavidha (ten types) of Brahmins were allowed into this space. The Veerasaivas, in turn, raised uncomfortable questions about the composition of the dasavidha. This question was especially crucial in Karwar, because Saraswats and Gowd Saraswats were present in great numbers in this district. They were engaged in an attrition of their own with the other ‘more legitimised’ Brahmin communities over their Brahminness (Conlon 1977). The Saraswats’ fish-eating habits invited (and continues to invite) contempt from other Brahmin communities. However, they could not be summarily ignored because they had become economically powerful and, perhaps even more crucially, had entered the legal profession in large numbers. Appropriation and recognition of those communities was therefore crucial for the Brahmin fold as a whole. When finally the case went up to the Bombay High Court, it was a Saraswat lawyer who argued (but lost) the Brahmin case.
But such appropriation did not ensure equal status with other Brahmin communities. To this day, Saraswats are not accepted in marriage by other Brahmins, as the ‘memories’ of their ‘entry’ into the Brahmin fold are still fresh.

As for the contests between the Brahmins and Lingayats, they were strikingly frequent and centred mostly on the Lingayats’ claim to the vedas. The *Mysore Star* is literally inundated with challenges and contestations on this issue, such as the one made by a letter on 27 March 1926, which called the Brahmins for a debate before the Mysore Maharajah. But by the 1930s, these demands for Brahminhood as far as Lingayats were concerned seem to have lost attraction. The reasons could be debated. Arguably, the increasing willingness of the state to accord legitimacy to ‘backwardness’—rather than or even at the cost of claims to Brahminness—was perhaps one contributory reason. Another was the moral and material ascendancy of those Lingayat sections that sought to establish the twelfth century as the primary source of imagining the Lingayat community.

**iv. The ‘Vyasana tolu’ controversy**

The controversy over *vyasana tolu* (sage Vyasa’s shoulder) also tells something about the rivalry between Brahmins and Lingayats, but more importantly it raises questions on the efficacy of the corporateness of Brahmin identity. The story behind vyasana tolu is briefly this:

After writing the *Mahabharata*, Vyasa went around the world propagating the supremacy of Vishnu over every other god [viz., the principle of ‘Vishnu Sarvottama’]. In Naimisharanya, the Siva devotees challenge him to propagate the same in Kashi. Taking the challenge, Vyasa comes to Kashi and with his shoulders held high declares the supremacy of Vishnu. Nandeesvara [the principal follower of Siva] gets angry and paralyses his arms held high. When Vishnu himself chides Vyasa for his incorrectness, Vyasa praises Siva, accepts his supremacy and gets back his arms. (Murthy 2000: 220)

Besides, it needs to be noted:

This symbol, which publicly proclaimed the supremacy of Siva over Vishnu [and thereby of (Veera)saiva over Brahmin],
was conspicuously tied to [a flagpost during] processions of deities and pontiffs... By about 1900, vyasana tolu had turned itself into a symbol shaming Brahmins... Apart from the picture of Basava, a picture titled ‘Sri Vishnu sudarsana labha’ had also become immensely popular [among Lingayats in north Karnataka]. The latter depicted the story of Vishnu worshipping Siva and giving away his eyes to Siva as a mark of his devotion. (Ibid.: 220–21)

A vyasana tolu procession was organised by the Lingayats of Bagalkot (Bombay Presidency) on 11 September 1911, occasioning a spirited protest from local Brahmins. The police refused permission to the Lingayats, but the district collector gave the go-ahead. Brahmins approached the court and got an injunction against the procession; but by then, the procession had already begun. When the Brahmins went up to the head of the procession to announce the court verdict, they were beaten up. According to the Dharwad-based newspaper Karnataka Vrittapatrike, ‘the processionists went to the Brahmin agrahara and plundered the Vitoba Temple and threw away the statue of Hanumanta’ (cited in Mysore Star, 30 October 1911).

The incident was a rather contentious one, and it is difficult to ascertain what ‘really’ took place. The Mysore Star claimed that given the ‘pronounced ability of the Brahmin’s pen’ everything was indeed exaggerated, while the Karnataka Vrittapatrike accused the Lingayats of ‘pretending as though nothing has happened’ (Mysore Star, 30 November 1911). Such street-fights appear to have been rather common particularly in the northern parts of Karnataka. Apart from the fact of actual physical confrontations, what is of interest is the alleged targets of the Veerasaiva processionists. Both Vitoba and Hanumanta are

13 The issue of the legitimacy and propriety of Lingayat matha heads carrying themselves in a palanquin was also bitterly contested, with Brahmin pontiffs taking recourse to judicial action in order to get injunctions against Lingayats holding palanquin processions. The Sringeri Smarta head had unsuccessfully approached the court (during 1833–43) to disallow Lingayat pontiffs from holding such ceremonies (Murthy 2000: 219). We are not sure about the details of this case, nor of the nature of its deliberations. In the immediate context of the vyasana tolu controversy, however, this was also an issue in question.
principally the gods of Madhva Brahmins. Moreover, Madhvas have had an acknowledged pre-occupation in establishing the principle of ‘Hari/Vishnu Sarvottama’, with the Smarta Brahmins being their principal ‘other’ in such contentions. This calls into question the corporate identity of the Brahmin community.

Interestingly, in the specific context of the vyasana tolu controversy, all the symbols invoked, ostensibly to provoke and insult the Brahmin community, are in fact those that would hurt the sensibilities of Madhvas rather than that of an undifferentiated ‘Brahmin community’. In fact, one may even presume that Smartas would not have experienced any heartburn on such degradation of essentially Madhva symbols. In the Mysore Star correspondence cited earlier, all Brahmin participants appear to belong to the Madhva Brahmin community, if their names are any indication.

What’s more, both Ranganna and Bhujangacharya (the two Brahmin participants in the debate) denigrate Siva in order to praise Vishnu [Veerasangappa 1882: 21 (Ranganna’s statement) and 166 (Bhujangacharya’s statement)]. They even unambiguously state that Brahminhood is only for the Vishnubhaktas, and the Rudra/Sivabhaktas are not eligible for it. Similarly, there have been instances of the Sringeri pontiff, the supreme guru of Smartas, being invited to mediate quarrels and contentions between Jangama mathas. There are also references to accepted practices of inter-marriages among the Smartas and the Aradhya Lingayats (see Shastri 1963).

Thus, even as the vyasana tolu incident showcases a controversy between the Madhvas and the Lingayats in particular, it bears testimony to the lingering tensions within the Brahmin fold as well. This leads us to our third section, one designed to probe further the complications that obtained within the ‘object’ of the

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14 Names till very recent times offered fairly accurate indications of the Brahmin caste to which a person belonged. Apart from the surnames, which are a giveaway, even the first names usually remained distinct. This has changed quite drastically today. Not all families keep surnames as part of the official names of their children. Obviously, this makes it difficult to guess the particular affiliation of a Brahmin.

15 Smartas are not Saivas in the sense that they are not marked by an exclusive devotion to Siva. They worship five deities, and thus are distinct from the Saivas.
non-Brahmin articulation, namely, the Brahmin community as a corporatised entity. While extant modes of internal demarcations and contests within the Brahmin fold are rendered unviable by the non-Brahmin challenge, these continue to obtain and represent a sort of mediating device, structuring aspects of the Brahmin identity.

**Some Tensions Within**

As we have seen, Brahmins have laid claim to a naturalised monopoly over modern institutions; and it needed a concerted policy on the part of the state to contain this monopoly. State efforts, especially aimed at ‘other backward castes’, have yielded mixed results (see Galanter 1984) with the integuments of a broad Brahmin hold over jobs and education remaining in place. The situation entails new questions, about the internal ‘resilience’ or hegemony of the Brahmins and about equal opportunities within the Brahmin fold. These would lend sharper sociological determinacy to the data about modern institutions—the agency which undergirds them, the rules and resources which constitute them—and to the formation of the modern Brahmin self.

As stated in the previous chapter, it was non-Brahmin demands that sensitised the state to collect data on the ‘caste’ composition of government services, institutions of education and so on. However, the non-Brahmin articulation did not find it logically nor politically necessary to differentiate among the Brahmins. In this circumstance, the state too did not feel compelled to ask whether all Brahmins came to appropriate new spaces of power or whether only certain jatis and denominations had managed to do so.

In what follows, I allude to three specific ‘identifications’ (which also constitute axes of differentiation) that have complicated the grounds of identity available for Brahmins in the wake of the non-Brahmin articulation.

The first relates to the contestation between the ‘Mysoreans’ and the ‘Madrasis’, which dominated public debates for about two decades in Mysore State, immediately prior to the non-Brahmin articulation. This contestation shows that internal divisions were not only restricted to the space of the ritual, as is
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generally conceived, but also involved the spaces of the secular.
I have already discussed (in the previous chapter) this
acrimonious debate, articulated in terms of ‘the natives’ versus
‘the foreigners’. Dewan Vishveshvaraiya’s policy of ‘Mysore for
Mysoreans’ marked the culmination of this contestation.

Crucially, this contest began with the expansion of the modern
bureaucracy and other institutions of governance at the time when
Mysore State was under the direct control of the British authorities
(1831–81). Thus in 1881, there were nearly 70,000 government
jobs (Naidu 1996: 182) and Brahmin men—particularly those from
the Madras Presidency—had cornered most of them. There were
many reasons for this. Madras Presidency in general, and the city
of Madras in particular, was far ahead in the spread of modern
secular education compared to Mysore. Consequently, larger
number of Madras Brahmins were educated and had better
qualifications. Particularly from 1891, when Dewan Seshadri Iyer
introduced the Mysore Civil Service Examinations, the better-
equipped Madrasi Brahmins virtually inundated the top echelons
of the Mysore bureaucracy. In turn, they brought in many of their
own clan to work at the lower levels. As the Miller Committee
later remarked, ‘[A]n officer in the exercise of his duty making
appointments and promotions finds it easier to see the virtues of
his own community than those of others’ (cited in Thimmaiah
1993: 60). Though the Committee was making this observation
with regard to the Brahmin community as a whole, one can draw
parallels with the Madras Brahmins too. Also contributing to their
dominance of the Mysore administration was the British mistrust
of ‘native’ Mysore Brahmins. Naidu (1996:183) cites a letter of
the then British Chief Commissioner of Mysore and Coorg in which
the Hebbar Iyengars (who represented the cause of the Mysore
Brahmins in this struggle) are called ‘unscrupulous’ men.
Reportedly, British officials widely perceived local Brahmins to
also be inefficient and intellectually poor.16

Mysore Brahmins, self-styled as ‘natives’, were predominantly
Srivaishnava Hebbar Iyengars whose language at home was Tamil.
They were primarily descendants of those Iyengar families which

16 The details can be had in Naidu (1996: 183–85) and Thimmaiah (1993:
40–43).
had either come to Mysore region along with their founding guru Ramanujacharya in the eleventh century (fearing persecution from the Chola Saiva king) or had been converted into Srivaishnavism thereafter. Hebbar Iyengars had grown close to the Mysore king, who was even persuaded to accept Srivaishnavism and accord the status of Rajapeeta (the status of the ‘official’ guru) to the Srivaishnava institution, the Parakala matha. Thus the Hebbar Iyengars had become rather powerful in the palace lobby. But given British preferences and changed administrative structures, we find a significant influx of the Madras Brahmins into the Mysore bureaucracy from the 1870s.

Hebbar Iyengars perceived a real threat to their life opportunities. But they could not have used the language of ritual hierarchy in legitimising their claims. For instance, they could not have said ‘we are the purer Brahmins; so we should be given all the jobs’. They had to invent a modern, secular language to argue their case. They accordingly brought forth the ‘sons of the soil’ argument, encoded as ‘Mysore for Mysoreans’. They maintained that the first preference in government recruitments should be given to Mysoreans. Not only did this argument underplay caste—the ‘Mysorean’ was used as a trope for the Mysore Brahmin—but it also used a modern register of justification. Interestingly, the plea ‘Mysore for Mysoreans’, which asked for some form of protective discrimination, the abolition of public examinations, etc., shared remarkable similarities with what was to later become the non-Brahmin argument. Indeed, as a corporatised Brahmin category responding to non-Brahmins immediately thereafter, they refused legitimacy to these same arguments. Throughout the dewanship of Seshadri Iyer, the Mysore Brahmins argued for restricting the Mysore Civil Services to Mysoreans. They demanded that jobs be automatically given to ‘first class graduates and post-graduates from Mysore’ on such grounds as language familiarity and the purported discrimination of Mysore candidates by the bureaucracies of the Madras and Bombay Presidencies as well as by the Indian Civil Service (Hanumanthappa n.d., Vol. I: 250–65).

The emerging public—particularly as represented by the newspapers—was divided along similar lines. The Bangalore Spectator took the side of the Madras Brahmins, while the Karnataka Prakasika argued the case of the Mysore Brahmins.
This bitter public debate went on till 1912, when the appointment of the Mysorean Vishveshvaraiah as Dewan signalled the Mysore Brahmins’ triumph. What is particularly interesting about the contours of this contestation and its ‘resolution’ is the naturalisation of the secular–modern as being Brahmin. Prior to the emergence of the non-Brahmin, emergent spaces of the secular–modern were often tacitly recognised as legitimately made up of Brahmins. The press, the State (both colonial and princely) and the bureaucracy were all partisan entities, taking sides on behalf of one Brahmin group or the other. The naturalisation of the secular sphere as a Brahmin preserve was so complete that it perplexed the latter no end that the non-Brahmins could even ask for a share in resources and opportunities.

The contestation among Brahmins also reveals the nature of their secularising experience; it shows that the trajectory of a caste’s secularisation need not inevitably imply the corporatisation of caste identity. Thus, the Brahmins increasingly sought to keep their casteness under erasure, while foregrounding the secular identities that they inhabited (such as being Mysoreans, or even manning the apparatus of governance). Indeed, in the absence of an ‘external’ other, this strategy could be deployed to confound the identity of being Brahmin itself. But such a field of internal hierarchisation is suspended once the non-Brahmin articulation takes shape, with the othering instituted by the latter necessitating a response on the part of Brahmins as a corporatised whole.

Brahmins continued to recruit caste distinctions as resources to negotiate secular issues. However, these never retained their legitimacy as publicly defendable actions. The dominance of the ‘Madras’ Brahmins, and, more importantly, the animosity between them and the ‘Mysore’ Brahmins, therefore, continued to be played out on the sidelines in a circumstance that was increasingly being overwhelmed by the Brahmin–non-Brahmin confrontation. Some of the memoirs recollecting the contours of the period vouch for this. A. N. Murthy Rao, a celebrated Kannada writer, recounts an instance in his autobiography (1990) which demonstrates that the non-Brahmin challenge did not necessarily put an end to the largely secular confrontations within the Brahmin fold. Noting the undercurrent of internal animosity, Rao narrates an altercation between Mysore and Madras Brahmin teachers in a school where he taught for a brief
The immediate occasion for the flare-up was the introduction of a ‘higher grade’, which benefitted about 30–40 high school teachers. Of these, it was alleged that all except three were Iyers, leading all the ‘Kannadigas’ to call it the ‘Iyer Grade’. He recalls:

One day in the Common Room [where all the teachers sat] a Kannadiga teacher said something to the effect ‘These people come from outside [they survive on our generosity], but boss over us’….The response from the Tamil group was swift. ‘Mysoreans lack brains. Therefore you had to import from Madras. We might be surviving owing to your graciousness but remember that you are surviving because of our brains’. (Murthy Rao 1990: 228)

Rao recuperates this animosity solely in terms of ‘Kannadiga versus Tamilian’—or even ‘Mysorean versus Madrasi’—thereby erasing the casteness of the event. But, from the names that he mentions it is apparent that it was primarily an exchange between the Mysore Brahmins and the Madras Brahmins. Thus, even as secularising Brahmins unitedly contested the non-Brahmin assertion, in contexts such as the above, which were bereft of the non-Brahmin presence, they were willing to foreground their other identities.

Non-Brahmins frequently alleged that Brahmins worked as networks of nepotism, recruiting and promoting caste and kinsmen into the bureaucracy. However, such networks were evidently inflected further in terms of the ‘kind’ of Brahmin one was, where one came from and so on. From the days of Dewan Poornaiah (particularly since the fall of Tipu Sultan in 1799) there have been complaints of nepotism. Allegations that undue favours (particularly regarding recruitment into government service) were levelled against those who belonged to the same denomination as that of the ruling powers. Poornaiah was supposed to have appointed many Madhva Brahmins into the bureaucracy (Chandrashekhar 1985: 17). With the exception of Rangacharlu

\[17\] This incident takes place during 1925–26, that is long after not only the public row over the Madras Brahmin domination had died down but also fairly long after the non-Brahmin articulation had legitimised its attack on the Brahmin.
and M. Vishveshvariah, all the Brahmin Dewans have had to face charges of favouring Brahmins of their own jati/sect.

The second instance examines the disagreements amongst Brahmins over their relative ritual status. These too precede (but also co-exist with) the non-Brahmin imagination of the Brahmin. While different Brahmin jatis within a single philosophical tradition (like the Smartas) entertained notions of hierarchy among themselves, what appears to mark the religious history of Karnataka is the mutual animosity between the Smartas and the Madhvas. A longer religious history of the ‘Karnataka’ region might yield a firmer perspective on this, but we shall confine ourselves here to its contemporary manifestations.

In this instance, unlike that of say the Saraswats, the ‘Brahmin-ness’ of the contending groups is not the central issue. We rarely find Smartas saying that Madhvas are not Brahmins. Rather, what is at stake is their relative ‘purity’ and relational position in the ritual hierarchy. Smartas, therefore, relentlessly remind the Madhvas that their tradition was founded after the Smartas’, that most Madhvas are converts to this denomination and that the support of local chieftains was often enlisted to physically take over Smarta places of worship, mathas and landed property.

The records available at the Sringeri Smarta matha are replete with instances such as the following. The matter relates to an attempt by a Madhva matha in Udupi to take over the matha of a relatively small Smarta Brahmin jati called the Haigas (the Havyakas of today). The Haigas were affiliated to the Sringeri matha but had their own matha in Teerthahalli, Shimoga district. Following a complaint, the then Mysore Dewan, Poornaiah, in a letter dated 27 July 1810, directed local official Shankariah to initiate appropriate action:

In the Haiga matha of Teerthahalli, ever since the death of the elder pontiff, the minor pontiff is in charge. Some locals reportedly went to the Puthige matha [one of the eight Madhva mathas of Udupi] and slandered against the sanubhogue of the Haiga matha. Based on this, the Puthige pontiff allegedly called the Haiga pontiff and the shanubhogue to his presence, along with the account records. The Puthige pontiff not only has taken possession of the said records but also has got the shanubhogue murdered. We have
received a complaint to that effect based on the one registered
with the Sringeri pontiff by the wife and children of the
shanubhogue….If you find the allegation to be true, this is
what you are supposed to bring to the notice of the Puthige
pontiff. That the Theerthahalli Haiga matha belongs to the
Smartas and, consequently, comes under the jurisdiction of
the Sringeri matha which alone is responsible and has the
right to regulate its affairs. Lumpens will always be there
complaining with you against the matha. But it is not your
job to regulate the functioning of that matha, isn’t it?
Therefore, you are hereby directed to give back all the records
pertaining to the Haiga matha to the concerned and, hereafter,
not to get into the affairs of the Haiga matha. (Cited in Sharma
1969: 53–54)

Achyutha Sharma’s *Sri Udupi Kshethrada Naija Chitra matthu
Chaarithrika Hinnele* (the authentic picture of the Udupi pilgrim
centre and its historical background, 1969) provides a decidedly
Smarta version of the allegedly forceful acquisition of Udupi from
Sthaniya Brahmins (a Smarta jati).18 Reportedly, in the fifteenth
century, the Madhvas enlisted the help of local Bunt and Jain
chieftains and landlords to violently wrest the prosperous temples
of Udupi and the vast areas of agricultural land these temples
possessed from the Smartas. The book details how Vadiraja
Swamy, a proactive Madhva pontiff, took the lead in this effort,
even displaying a willingness to convert Bunt and Jain powers-
that-be into the Madhva fold. It further cites a series of colonial
civil and criminal court proceedings that involved the two sides.

18 We have not been able to check the veracity of either the claims made
or the details presented in this fascinating book. Given that it cites
many court records verbatim, complete with citations, and presents
documents from the Sringeri matha, one could grant it a primary
validity. What is more, many of the respondents interviewed did
recount the bitter animosity that prevailed between the Smartas and
the Madhvas. One of them even referred to the alleged invasion of
Udupi, supposedly then a Smarta stronghold, by the Madhvas, a story
that Sharma narrates with great passion. Even if one decides not to
stand by the contents and claims of Sharma’s book, we could take its
publication as testifying to the internal contestations that mark the
Brahmin fold.
In more recent times, the contestation appears to have been much more muted and privatised, even though the animosity remains. DVG notes the Smarta–Madhva divide in his pen portrait of the Madhva Dewan, P. N. Krishnamurthy:

Many did say that during Krishnamurthy’s dewanship, Madhvas became rather powerful…. [If] one were to take a look at the coterie around him, one could legitimately entertain a doubt. In the eastern side [of the Dewan’s bungalow], there was a small temple of the Pramadevaru [a deity exclusively of the Madhvas]…. Every evening, mangalarati [waving an oil lamp/camphor flame before the deity] and bhajans [devotional songs] used to signal the culmination of the puja [worship] held in the temple. Krishnamurthy, along with his family, would be present then. After the Mangalarati, devotional songs used to be sung. One that some of the overly devoted would sing on that occasion was:

How he kicks their butt, our Madhwaraya [Madhva-charya],
Our Madhwaraya, our Madhwaraya.
He kicks the shameless Advaitis,
The sons of bitches/widow-marrying Smartas,
How he kicks their butt, our Madhwaraya,
Our Madhwaraya, our Madhwaraya...

And it went on like this. (DVG 1997: 51)

The expletives in the song are virtually untranslatable.\footnote{Translation is by Ms Bageshree S., a journalist friend from Bangalore.} Indeed, one of the Madhva respondents recalled that this song was sung just before food was served in the Madhva matha of Teerthahalli. His memories date back to the early years of the 1960s, during his frequent childhood visits to the matha.\footnote{Interview with Dr Ananth, 13 August 2000. A Madhva, aged 48 years, Dr Ananth is a medical practitioner in the city of Shimoga. He is an inactive and disinclined member of the Shimoga Jilla Brahmana Sabha (the Shimoga district representative of the AKBMS) and of a recently floated local association—the Vipra Trust, which is actively pursuing the formation of Brahmin residential colonies in the outskirts of Shimoga, plots that are to be sold at subsidised rates to Brahmins, irrespective of the particular jatis to which they belong.}
Another important Brahmin sect, the Srivaishnavas, was also ranged against the Smartas. A Smarta respondent recalled a popular saying that is fairly widespread among the Iyengar Brahmins, which depicted their scorn for Siva. It was said that a true and spirited Iyengar will never enter a Siva temple, even if it is dilapidated and unused; not even when a rampaging elephant relentlessly pursues him on a violently stormy night.  

We shall now turn to another axis of contestation. The Hale Karnatakas (a Smarta jati) were placed under boycott by the Sringeri matha. In the early decades of the twentieth century, they vigorously attempted to get back the status of Brahminhood. The following letter titled 'Brahmana bandhugalalli vijnyaapane' (A request to the Brahmin brethren) appeared in the 27 July 1927 issue of the Mysore Star. The writer V. Ranganna (who, it can be deduced from the tenor of the letter, could have been a Hale Karnataka himself) calls himself ‘An obedient servant of Sankaracharya’. The letter, evidently brimming with sarcasm, seeks to challenge the Brahmins.

The Halenaadu Karnatakas had requested the Sringeri head that the disgrace and infamy that is heaped on them be removed and that they be allowed to regain rights of commensality and other such rights vis-à-vis other Brahmins. The Sringeri Swamy had rejected this request on 10-01-1867...[However] on 15-12-1923 the Swamy himself went to their houses and gave his blessings [a symbol of acceptance into the fold].

Soon after this, the Brahmins of Nanjanagoodu [a pilgrimage centre near Mysore] got together in a meeting and decided that the Hale Karnatakas are not Brahmins. Consequent to the decision, they have got appropriate praayaschitta [expiation] done on those Brahmins who, consequent to the Swamy’s gesture of acceptance, had mistakenly eaten with the Hale Karnatakas.

If these Brahmins truly believe that because of this ‘act of atrocity’ committed by the matha [of accepting the Hale Karnatakas into the Brahmin fold], the Brahmana dharma and the Swamy’s pride and aura have been affected adversely, they could decide to boycott the Sringeri matha.

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21 Interview with Mr Subramanya, 30 January 2000. Refer to Chapter 3, n. 56 for details.
itself and become autonomous so that they can save the Brahmana dharma.

In 1929, a full six years after the Sringeri Swamy’s gesture of reconciliation to the Hale Karnatakas, the Mysore Star reported the continuing disdain they faced. The Srikanteshvara Temple of Nanjanagoodu contains a space called *sukhavasini* into which only Brahmins were allowed. The report says that the Hale Karnatakas, in spite of getting permission from both Sringeri Swamy and the Mysore Maharajah, were still not allowed access to that space in the temple. Further, the report alleges, the Brahmins were putting pressure on the Swamy and the Maharajah to take back the permission.

I have not been able to follow the events thereafter, and Ranganna’s letter itself did not attract any responses—from Hale Karnataka Brahmins, other Brahmins or from the matha. There is, however, a mention of the Hale Karnatakas in the 1931 Census Report of Mysore. The Superintendent of Census Operations, Mysore State, Masti Venkatesa Iyengar, notes:

> The community known as Halekarnataka claims to be a Brahmin community and is refused that status by the three main groups [the Smartas, the Madhvas and the Srivaishnavas]; but it is treated as Brahmin for Census purposes as the people return themselves as Brahmins and cannot be said to belong to any other group. (GoI 1932, Part I–Report: 318)

It is not possible to conclusively determine whether state recognition in the form of census enumeration impacted the social acceptability of the Hale Karnatakas within the Brahmin fold. There appears to be no caste association of the Hale Karnatakas

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22 It is significant that the journal *Mysore Star* (a decidedly anti- and non-Brahmin space) should make its space available for the Hale Karnatakas time and again. What is more, the Hale Karnatakas are not the only ‘Brahmin’ jati receiving such sympathetic treatment at the hands of the journal; even the Gowd Saraswats, another caste bidding to be recognised as Brahmins, received similar kindnesses of positive reporting.
today, unlike almost all the Smarta jatis which continue to have associations.

The aforementioned Census Report details many other castes that were staking a claim to be enumerated as Brahmins. The Report is also a good study of the grounds of justification—many evidently perfunctory—that the census officers adopted in evaluating such claims. Here are some claims to Brahminhood and the manner in which they were addressed:

Some persons of a community calling themselves Venkatapur Brahmins and ordinarily included in the Satani community desired to be enumerated separately.

....
The Shattada Sri Vaishnava Samaja of Kunigal requested that the people hitherto known as Satani should be shown under the name ‘Shattada Sri Vaishnavas’.

....
A representative of the Brahmin community dwelling in or around Devarayasamudra desired that his community should be described as Vadama Dravida.

....
The Aradhya Brahmanas of the Akhila Bharatha Aradhya Brahmana Maha Sabha requested that the Lingayat community should be re-classified under castes as shown in a statement. [The statement is not reproduced in the Report.]

[Ibid.: 316–17]

The following observations, made in a section rather characteristically titled ‘Their [the claims’] Disposal’, offers a window into the seamless ways in which the officials’ secular position and their casteness intertwined. The section begins with these remarks:

Requests of this kind come up at the time of each Census. It does not seem to be realised by the persons who make such requests that the Census is a record of existing conditions and that it makes no attempt to grade people by their class. For the purpose of a Census no caste is either higher or lower than another. The difficulty in accepting a new name for the Census Tables arise from the fact that too many and too frequent changes from Census to Census would make the statistics collected of no use. Also when a community not generally considered a Brahmin or Kshatriya community,
Being Brahmin, Being Modern

wants to adopt a name that makes it appear as a sub-caste among Brahmins or Kshatriyas the proposal is rejected. ([Ibid.]: 317, emphasis added)

The Census then takes up each claim, and either accepts or rejects the same on the basis of the guidelines it set for itself as mentioned above.

The people of the Viswakarma community have long desired to be shown ‘Viswakarma Brahmins’. For reasons already stated [that the three main ‘sections’ of Brahmins do not accept their claim] the proposal could not be accepted.

The request that the name ‘Satani’ may be changed to Sattada Sri Vaishnava could not be accepted because Sri Vaishnava is the distinctive name of one group of Brahmins and the Satani community is not generally treated as a Brahmin community. The adoption of the new name would have been misleading....The Aradhyas act in the Veerasaiva community desired to be treated as a Brahmin community. The three main groups forming the Brahmin community in the general Hindu fold do not accept the claim of the Aradhya to brahminhood; but this by itself, would not be a reason for rejecting the claim....The special reason applying to the case of the Aradhya is somewhat different. They are Veerasaivas though they be Veerasaiva Brahmins and to class them separately would be to begin a classification of the Veerasaiva community into castes. This is not necessary from the Census point of view and it is also not certain that public opinion in the Veerasaiva community would approve of the division of the community into many castes in the Census Tables. ([Ibid.]: 317–18)

Such interventions on the part of the modern ‘enumerating’ state—arbitrary as they evidently are and mediated by those who occupy the position of the enumerator—do not seem to have had any foundational impact on the ways in which the Brahmin community (or any such community) maintained its own boundaries; at least not immediately. Nevertheless, the ubiquitous presence of the Brahmins in such secular spaces does seem to have enabled them to ‘contain’ the claims to Brahmin status even at the official level.
In the course of this chapter, I have tried to map the contours of the emerging Brahmin category particularly in the wake of the non-Brahmin categorisation. In the sixth chapter, the axes of these self-definitions and contestations are complicated while seeking to indicate the play of identities and identifications in the contemporary Brahmin self. But before moving on to those concerns, the next chapter delineates another important space of Brahmin identity and identification. This space too unfolds in the modern moment and is again definitionally cast by the non-Brahmin imagination of the Brahmin category—the space of caste associations.
This chapter profiles and describes Brahmin ‘caste’ associations, from the pioneering efforts marking the beginnings of the last century to the contemporary moment. I suggest that the ‘association’ presents the modern Brahmin identity with a crucial problem for negotiation. The caste association is conceptually an enunciatory space; and brings into sharp focus the equivocation that the Brahmin self exhibits under the conditions of the modern non-Brahminical othering. The first two sections of this chapter profile and examine the different kinds of Brahmin associations that exist in Karnataka. The different types of Brahmin associations that emerged, their socio-geographical spread, their spheres of influence, and their ways of recuperating the Brahmin identity and community are described here. The

1 The associations’ members themselves—including office bearers—exhibit little knowledge of the history of the associations or about the compulsions that oversaw the establishment of their organisations. Consequently, while I have detailed information on some associations, in many other cases it is very scanty or even non-existent. Even in the case of the recently established associations, the activists display very little knowledge about such matters. The geographical spread, differentiated ways of working of these associations and so on have also restricted my ability to be more exhaustive.
third section concerns the unique contours of the enunciatory space represented by Brahmin associations. The final section is an attempt to delineate in broad strokes the tenuous relationship obtaining between the Brahmin community and the demands of the caste association. While both ‘community’ and ‘association’ entail logics germane to the modern condition, they work with differing and often mutually contesting compulsions and demands, bringing about varying effects within the Brahmin fold.

Profiling Brahmin Associations

There exist two distinct kinds of Brahmin associations: those that claim a constituency over all Brahmins irrespective of the internal differentiations and hierarchies (what we term corporate associations), and, alternatively, associations that are exclusive to single Brahmin jatis (namely, jati associations).²

Corporate associations believe in and espouse the position that any foregrounding of the ‘internal’ differences and distinctions can only be at the cost of the unity of the Brahmin community. ‘Brahmin unity’, these associations aver, has become essential today in order to fight against those seeking to marginalise the Brahmin community and place it under a state of siege. It is argued that continued preoccupation with internal philosophical and ritualistic differences will only weaken the community further. These associations suggest that internal differentiations retain meaning only within the confines of the household—for instance, in the ways of performing marriage or the annual death rites; but in the public world, where the Brahmin community is under siege,

² There are also, if negligible in number compared to the other two types, associations at the level of jati clusters—e.g., the Madhva Yuvaka Sangha that seeks to bring together distinct endogamous Madhva jatis under its banner. See Conlon (1974) for discussion of a similar instance obtaining among the Saraswats in the early twentieth century. These are distinct from the two types mentioned in the main text. It is interesting to reflect on the specific conditions that enable such clustering but in the discussion that follows, the focus will be primarily on corporate and the jati associations.
foregrounding such distinctions will only debilitate the community further. There are many such associations in Karnataka.

The federating unit, the Akhila Karnataka Brahmana Maha Sabha (AKBMS), which seeks to represent all existing Brahmin associations and the larger community, is the most insistent proponent of such a viewpoint. It was established in 1972 and is located in Bangalore. It views all Brahmin associations of Karnataka as its affiliates and most units accept such a status. According to AKBMS, there are more than 400 Brahmin associations in Karnataka, of which 323 are affiliated to it (Vipra Nudi, January–February 2002). ³ Many of these associations participate in the conventions that AKBMS conducts, while proclaiming their affiliated status on their letterheads and in official communications. AKBMS, apart from affiliating the already existing associations, has sought to establish district and taluq level units of its own, and these now exist in almost every district of the state (although its penetration into further levels has not always been uniform). Not all these district and taluq Brahmin associations (the Jilla/Taluq Brahmana Sabhas) were the result of the initiative of the AKBMS though; many of them predate AKBMS but have now become its affiliates. What’s more, many such associations continue to get founded purely with local initiatives even to this day, and only as an afterthought or after persuasion by the AKBMS do they seek its affiliation.

The AKBMS had merely 13,651 members (13,473 life members and 178 patron members) on its rolls as on 20 January 2002 (ibid.). Almost in every meeting, every pamphlet and every issue of the journal, the incumbent president never fails to mention this ‘miserable state of affairs’, particularly when (as is alleged) one considers that the Brahmin community of Karnataka contains

³ Vipra Nudi is a monthly journal brought out by the AKBMS from 1980. It was called Vipra Vani till 1986 when it was renamed as Vipra Nudi. It is meant to ‘document the contemporary happenings in the Brahmin community’, while also publishing articles that ‘seek to inculcate community-consciousness, boldness, self-reliance and progressiveness in the community’ (Vipra Nudi, August–November, 1996). The frequency of the journal depends on the financial health of the AKBMS.
‘lakhs of people’.\(^4\) Over six years, that is, between 1996 and 2002, almost 5,500 members were inducted, registering almost a 70 per cent jump in numbers. Such cycles of activity and inactivity mark the history of the association, largely reflecting the enthusiasm and personal initiative of the office bearers. Initially the AKBMS was conceived as an affiliating federal body without members of its own, but later it too began enrolling individuals as members.

Another form of corporate associations are the locality-based ones that can be found in large numbers in Bangalore. These associations—such as the BTM Layout Brahmana Sabha or the Jayanagara Brahmana Sabha—have as their constituency the Brahmin population residing in that specific locality/neighbourhood, again irrespective of the jati distinctions. Most of these came up after the founding of the AKBMS, particularly in the late 1980s and early 1990s. But again, not all these were founded at the initiative of the AKBMS.

There are also Brahmin associations established within large public and private sector industries and organisations intended as ‘employee welfare associations’, like the Hindustan Machine Tools Brahmin Association, Indian Telephone Industries Brahmin’s Welfare Association and the Karnataka State Government Employees Brahmin Welfare Association (KSGEBWA). These too decline to recognise the distinctions obtaining from within. It is noteworthy that such associations are generally not found to exist in the ‘new economy’ enterprises such as information technology organisations and call centres.

Finally, there are issue-focused corporate associations. They function exclusively as matrimonial bureaus and financial institutions, helping the unemployed Brahmin youth to set up small-scale or cottage industries, extending educational services, etc.

\(^4\) ‘Adhyakshara Nudi’ (Words of the President) in Vipra Nudi, July–September 2002. The AKBMS office-bearers make rather inflated estimates of the share of Brahmins in the state’s population. For instance, a previous president, while elaborating on the vision that he nurtured for the community and AKBMS, claimed: ‘There are about 40 lakh Brahmins in the state of Karnataka but the membership strength of the AKBMS is still about 8,000’ (Vipra Nudi, November 1996). Forty lakh translates itself into nearly 9 per cent of the state’s population.
In contrast to these corporate associations are the many jati associations that seek to represent particular Brahmin jatis. Thus we have associations such as the Mulkanadu Mahasabha, the Sri Akhila Havyaka Mahasabha, the Hebbar Srivaishnava Sabha and so on. Almost all these associations, except the Mulkanadu Mahasabha (formed in 1991), were established in the first half of the twentieth century, most of them in the 1940s. Membership to these associations is restricted to jati members. Most of these are affiliated to AKBMS as well, indicating thereby, at least as a public statement, an agreement on the latter’s principle of Brahmin unity. Further, in order to legitimate their existence and relevance, none of these associations argue that internal philosophical and ritualistic distinctions are still relevant or that such distinctions require continuous public reiteration. However, many of their activities, particularly that of the matrimonial bureaus, reaffirm such distinctions. Almost all these associations have their head offices in Bangalore. Indeed, while public proclamations of the jati associations seek to underplay the significance of doctrinal distinctions and hierarchies, suggesting that these are merely a question of difference and therefore of a mere ‘secular’ identity, what happens inside jati associations remains open to diverse influences, and thereby, at times, to the affirmation and insistence of such distinctions and hierarchies.

In spite of these differentiations, the agenda before these associations—apart from those that focus on a single issue—is largely similar. A typical active Brahmin association conducts a range of activities during a year. The scale on which these activities are conducted is reflective of the association’s financial capability, the response from its constituency (members as well as non-members) and the enthusiasm of its activists. Among the so-called ‘religious’ activities—this categorisation is one that the various associations and the activists themselves invoke—the guiding thread is the perceived need to create spaces for imparting the Brahmin samskara and the related anxiety that the Brahmin youth in particular is losing out on its heritage of *brahmanya* (Brahminness). This, it is suggested, is either on account of indifference on the part of Brahmmins themselves or due to the non-availability of such spaces, particularly in urban areas.
The associations conduct a range of activities under this category. Many of them conduct the saamoohika upanayana, a mass initiation ceremony for Brahmin boys and young men. Initially, it was exclusively meant for poor Brahmin families. However, increasingly, activists felt that a number of Brahmin families postpone conducting the initiation ceremony till the occasion of the marriage, a practice that is perceived as being un-Brahminical. This is held to be further fuelling the already weakening interest in Brahminical rituals. Consequently, the associations no longer care about the financial status of the applicants; they are happy as long as families show interest in the ritual. This change of position has not apparently changed the profile of the Brahmin families that opt for this arrangement nor has it increased the number of Brahmin boys who go through the ritual. The associations hire part of a temple premises (usually offered freely) to conduct the event.

The associations also conduct religious discourses on various scriptures by well-known scholars. They hold Vishnu/Lalita Sahasranama Paaraayanas (chanting the thousand names of Vishnu or Lalita, over and again, which is considered to be auspicious, ‘healthy’ and ‘calming’) and conduct different Brahmin festivals and birth anniversaries of the Brahmin founding philosophers. All these activities take place in the local temple premises or at some member’s residence.

Under ‘socio-economic’ activities, annual scholarships to needy students are given after soliciting applications through the local press. Often these scholarships do not amount to much, and are intended only as a statement of encouragement. So are the felicitation functions that are held annually to honour rank holders in SSLC (Secondary School Leaving Certificate), pre-university and university examinations. Annual financial assistance is given by larger associations to the old, destitute women and priests, which are again fairly paltry sums. For instance, AKBMS disbursed a

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5 Indeed, the ‘appropriate’ time for a Brahmin boy to get initiated is at the age of eight years. A notice put up at the Poornaprajna Vidyapeeta, Bangalore (a Madhva religious educational institution) by the Madhva Swayamsevaka Sangha soliciting applications for the saamoohika upanayana that it was planning to conduct clearly stated that the initiates should be between eight to ten years.
mere Rs 1,33,559 to 171 individuals (students, poor women, disabled individuals and priests) during the financial year of 2001 (Vipra Nudi, January–February 2002).

AKBMS started a Brahmin Employment Bureau in 1990 and its office gets daily enquiries regarding job availability (Vipra Nudi, January 1993). Vipra Nudi has a separate column providing space for the prospective job seekers and job-providers. Many large jati associations too run employment information centres. This initiative is largely targeted at the lower end of the skill market. Most of the jobs that are on offer are for stenographers, accountants, fitters, plumbers, electricians, receptionists, cooks, drivers, etc., which, in turn, corresponds to the proficiency levels of those who turn to these columns hunting for a job. Even those who have obtained jobs through such initiatives or those who have been rendered financial assistance through the different financial institutions that AKBMS has floated do not definitionally become active members of the association.⁶

Many associations, particularly the jati ones, have for a very long period of time concentrated on the single-point agenda of enabling young men from the community to get educated. Many jati associations run hostels in Bangalore, Mysore and Shimoga that cater primarily to students coming from their own community. In recent decades, after sustained persuasion from the corporate association leaders, many of the hostels have been thrown open to Brahmin students from outside their jati.⁷ Most generous donations made to these associations are for such educational endeavours. The associations manage to get endowment grants from members (and non-members) to sponsor a day’s food expenses in the memory of a family member. The Brahmana Vidyarthi Sahaya Sangha of Bangalore, Anathalaya of Mysore and the Shimoga District

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⁶ A long-standing and probably the most dedicated activist of the AKBMS claimed, during the office-bearers convention (13–14 October 2001), that they have provided livelihood to over 400 individuals. Of them, he was sad to state that not even 10 were present during the convention.

⁷ It must nonetheless be pointed out that these hostels never became the primary providers of access to the city and modern education. By this time, the already entrenched urban Brahmin households were performing that role. Accordingly, these hostels remained small-scale ventures that came into picture only when other—more extensive and intimate—networks were either unavailable or unfavourable.
Brahmins Association are the corporate associations that presently run hostels for Brahmins of all jatis. One of the jati associations, the Sri Akhila Havyaka Mahasabha, has recently started a working women’s hostel and another (the Hoysala Karnataka Sangha) has recently begun a post-graduate hostel and both are located in Bangalore. The Kowshika Sankethi Sangha runs a girls’ hostel in Mysore apart from two others in Mysore, three in Hassan and two in Shimoga. Apart from these, almost all the hostels that have existed from before are meant for men. The Kowshika Sankethi Sangha runs an Old Age Home in Bangalore.

Sympathisers and active members of AKBMS have launched three co-operative banks, primarily to add teeth to the association’s endeavour to make the community self-reliant. While these banks work as autonomous institutions subject to governmental regulations like any other co-operative bank, being peopled by Brahmin sympathisers, they are generous in facilitating Brahmin ventures in the project of ‘self-reliance’. AKBMS also runs a Brahmin chit fund group along with a financial welfare association. Many Brahmin young men have been given loans to start small business ventures of their own. Every application for a loan from a Brahmin will have to be accompanied by an application for a membership of the AKBMS. Even as this measure has helped to swell membership numbers, activists themselves admit that it has not ensured their participation.

The AKBMS also conducts state-level conventions of Brahmins, which are marked out as significant events in its history and a great deal of enthusiasm, work, fanfare, and money goes into the making of such conventions. Resolutions are passed at the end of each convention and, sometimes, are followed up with the state and other authorities. Even as such conventions help individuals forge a sense of community and unity, much of the enthusiasm does not carry long after such conventions are over. The jati associations too conduct such mass-scale conventions, though much more infrequently than AKBMS, the locations of which are not necessarily the major cities. Some even conduct world conventions, some of which take place in Western countries.8

8 For instance, the ‘Havyaka Awakening—World Conference’ was conducted in Gokarna, a religious centre in Karnataka, in April 2002. The ‘Millennium Konkani Sammelan’ was held in Chicago in July 2000.
Enthusiastic associations also periodically conduct free medical camps, blood donation camps, sports days, cultural events, etc. Many large Brahmin associations have a matrimonial wing keeping records of prospective alliances. The office-bearers claim that this activity receives greater response than the others. The one run by AKBMS has regular visitors numbering about 20 a day on an average. It restricts itself to providing contact addresses and suggests that the families carry out negotiations on their own. The association insists that if any marriage does take place, the concerned families must inform the association about it. However, the activists claim, they do not get to know about most of the marriages, and, if at all they do, it would usually be when another applicant calls on such families soliciting a matrimonial alliance.

But, approaching a caste association to look for a matrimonial alliance is a deferred option as interviews with our respondent families disclosed. Even active members keep the association option to the last while looking for alliances.

The MGSK Vadhu-Varanweshana Kendra, Bangalore is a Brahmin association that works exclusively as a matrimonial bureau. It is of recent origin (1998), but in the first four years since its inception it regularly conducted monthly marriage conventions under the auspices of various Brahmin associations—primarily in Bangalore. The conventions take place on a Sunday, usually in the premises of a temple. In the three such conventions that I attended, about 50 to 75 families were in attendance in each. The association restricts the afternoon session exclusively for widow/ers and the physically challenged.

Only AKBMS conducts events that are called political. These are not many; neither are they sustained and regular. For instance,
before parliamentary and assembly elections, AKBMS convenes a public meeting to which representatives of the political parties are called, demanding that more Brahmins be selected as election candidates. Resolutions are also passed urging the state to give more Brahmins chairmanships to the different state-run boards and corporations. More privately though, most activists support and even canvass for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the right-wing Hindu nationalist party. This is not an official position, but there appears to be a great deal of cross-participation of individuals in Brahmin associations as well as the BJP affiliates. Even the affinities shared by the spectrum of articles published in Vipra Nudi with the ideological predilections of the BJP leave no one in doubt about the relationship.

Associations that work for the welfare of the Brahmin employees of the organisation concerned too have a similar agenda before them. They too conduct mass initiation ceremonies, offer scholarships, etc. But their ability to take up cases of employee grievance at the workplace is extremely circumscribed. They cannot work from the premises of the organisations since they are ‘caste-based’ associations. The offices will usually be situated in the residences of the office-bearers. They cannot officially represent grievances to the authorities on behalf of an employee. They express annoyance with the fact that SC/ST employees are allowed to form associations formally even when they are caste-based, and that the same is denied for them (Brahmins). But most of them work through informal networks, tapping caste networks that cut across bureaucratic hierarchies. This is the range of activities that a Brahmin association undertakes.

The endeavour to organise Brahmins within caste associations is almost a century old. By the 1910s, many initiatives to form associations were already in place. While the Hoysala Karnataka Sangha was founded as early as 1908, many corporate and jati associations emerged during the 1920s. The Hebbar Sri Vaishnava Sabha was established in 1918. Jaya Karnataka (10 March 1925), a weekly, mentions an attempt to organise the Brahmins of

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11 Interviews with the president and general secretary of the KSGEBWA; and also with a member of the Hindustan Aeronautics Limited Brahmin Employees’ Welfare Association.
Dharwad in 1925. Mysore Star, during the 1910s, periodically reports the founding of many associations. However, most such efforts appear to have been local, and were unable to spread out or even sustain themselves. Many, like the Hoysala Karnataka Sangha, became inactive after the initial enthusiasm (Venkatasubbaiah 1995: 9–11) or died a quiet death.

It was in the 1940s that a revival of sorts was recorded, for reasons difficult to determine. In 1940, Dharwad witnessed a Brahmin convention called the Akhila Karnataka Brahmana Sammelana (Murthy 2000: 250–51). The Akhila Mysooru Brahmana Mahasabha (AMBM) held two conventions—in Tumkur (1944) and in Hassan (1949) (Venkatanarayana 1988). The decade also saw the emergence of many jati associations—Sri Akhila Havyaka Mahasabha in 1942, Badaganadu Sangha in 1943 (Hoysala Karnataka Sangha too was revived in 1943), Kowshika Sankethi Sangha in 1944, Madhva Yuvaka Sangha, Uluchukamme Brahmana Mahasabha and Bettadapura Sankethi Sangha in 1945. Such abundance was matched only in the 1980s and the 1990s, when most of the locality-based, organisation/institution-specific associations emerged, along with the many district and taluq associations that AKBMS forged. Each of the jati associations that were founded in the 1940s survives to this day.

Looking at the history of these efforts to organise Brahmins, it is evident that jati associations have demonstrated a proclivity to sustain themselves over fairly long periods of time. This continuous existence is of course marred by periods of inactivity and internal dissent, but these associations have all survived. On the other hand, corporate associations have been unstable and prone to extinction. The 1925 Dharwad endeavour, the AMBM of the 1940s and the 1940 Dharwad convention, all seem to have died soon after. Further, the Mysore initiatives of the 1940s show no awareness of the Dharwad convention of 1940 which in fact talked in terms of the entire Brahmin fold of Karnataka. Between the 1940s and 1970s there appears to have been no major initiatives in mobilising the Brahmins at the state level. The first such association to have had a fairly long existence is the AKBMS. Registered in 1974, it continues to survive till date, though with

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12 A Madhva Sangha was established in 1932 in Bangalore.
visible marks of fatigue, often threatening to get consumed by frequent lay-offs from activity.

**Shifting Articulations: Corporate and Jati Associations**

This section details the varied logics of corporate and jati associations. I begin with the pioneering efforts of the 1940s and devolve upon the contexts in which AKBMS emerged. The axis of this re-examination is then counterposed to the trajectory and concerns of jati associations.

The registers of identity animating the corporate associational activities of the 1940s point to the deeply contested space that an association wishing to speak for the Brahmins was seeking to inhabit. For the Brahmin, this space comes overdetermined in its meanings, possibilities and legitimacies, and is largely inimical at that. It is a field that the ‘non-Brahmin’ had made his own, acquiring legitimacy by defining himself in opposition to the figure and persona of the Brahmin, and deploying the associational space as a crucial medium to enunciate this subjectivity. The modern state (and in some senses, the growing dominance of the ethos and ethics of modernity itself) readily agreed to play by those very terms. What is more, an increasing number of Brahmins began to interrogate the state of being Brahmin and, thereby, came to form a complex relationship with the efforts being made to bring Brahmins together under the umbrella of associations. Primarily, the Brahmin persona that was resurrected by the associations in the wake of these complexities had to be vested with greater moral force, energy and legitimation. In doing so, this self-imagining had to evade an exclusive focus on the ‘materiality’ of the community (in terms of its demands for resources) and instead foreground a normatively appealing Brahmin. However, this elision works to subvert the very imperative of caste associations—of seeking to work towards improving the material conditions of the community. In an attempt to strike a balance between these two incompatible pulls, the non-Brahmin attack is itself made to work towards justifying the emergence of Brahmin associations. As we will see below, hostility to state intervention for social justice—e.g., through reservations—also provided a ground for articulating the need to come together.
Accordingly, the first resolution passed at the Dharwad Convention of 1940 was that the ‘Brahmin class has a special responsibility to protect the _sanatana samskriti_ [eternal culture]’. The President of the convention had this to say:

The ultimate goal of the Brahmin class is to work to realise the dictum, _sarvejanaha sukhinobhavanthu_ [welfare of all]. His contribution to this task is through gaining the riches of meditation. But, for that to come true, there ought to be a conducive environment in the country which sadly does not exist today. We have always held steadfast the belief that the varnashrama dharma is the most protective of the stability of our society. Just because the varnashrama system builds the society on the basis of birth, it does not mean that it belittles qualities/character. A Brahmin without character is inappropriate. Let us not give unnecessary prominence to the accident of birth; but neither shall we accord it an unnecessarily lowly status. Our ultimate aim is to fulfil the brahminness that is there available to us at birth, through our character. (Cited in Murthy 2000: 250–01)

This statement is a good demonstration of the tensions animating the Brahmin association. In order to even begin talking about the perceived lacks in the material life of the community, one needs to undermine its very centrality for the everyday life of the Brahmin. It is also an invention of a language code that seeks to speak of caste status, if not hierarchy, in non-caste ways. It at once invokes a scriptural imagination of the Brahmin, while also making a case for the non-availability of an environment that would allow the latter to pursue his ordained task. Unlike associations of other caste communities, Brahmin associations have had to enact an extra exercise of legitimisation. Any straightforward and assertive statement of intent that argues for the need of associations to work for the upliftment of the community remains unavailable to Brahmin associations. Consequently, they are forced to invest the space of the association with a wider moral force. The directive thus is to help the ones born into Brahmin families to ‘achieve’ Brahminness, with the latter posited as a quality aimed at the welfare of all. Even as it concedes legitimacy to the modern interrogation of the logic of caste that equates the fact of birth and the ‘quality’ of the individual, it is forced to set limits to this interrogation.
To state the point differently, the association cannot repudiate and thus normatively stand outside the ‘degenerated’ contemporary Brahmin. More importantly, it cannot justify any equivocation with respect to the identity of being Brahmin. By definition, the association has to own up the community and speak on its behalf; and in doing so the category of the ‘Brahmin’—as it exists and not merely as it ought to exist—will have to be foregrounded and defended. Thus, the space of the association makes it inevitable that it confront the challenge posed by non-Brahmin othering in the most direct manner possible. The founding statement of AMBM, therefore, is more definitive:

The conditions in the country are changing resulting in lessening of opportunities of livelihood for the Brahmins. This is obstructing the service that the Brahmins render to the world. To think of ways to overcome this difficult phase, to protect the well-being of the entire Brahmin population of Mysore state, to alleviate their economic status, to improve education, dharma and good conduct among Brahmins so that their rightful service to the human world is ensured, a permanent organisation called the Akhila Mysooru Brahmana Mahasabha, inclusive of the religions of Smarta, Srivaishnava and Vaishnava [Madhva] as well as their branches has been formed during the all-Mysore Convention held in Tumkur on 8-4-1944. (Cited in Venkatanarayana 1988: 3)

It is pretty obvious that the imagination of a self outside caste, available to particular Brahmins, could not contain the bewilderment and deep sense of siege that the non-Brahmin challenge had authored. The overdetermining role of the non-Brahmin articulation is evident in the resolutions that were passed at the end of the first convention of 1944. For instance, the fourth resolution passed at the 1944 convention states:

For it is his ultimate duty to depend upon the harmony of the world, the Brahmin can never think of any community as not his own; and can never steer away from the national unity. Thus, the Brahmin community seeks the empathy and trust of all the communities of the nation, and this Convention proclaims that that the Brahmins can never disrupt the life of the society. (AMBM n.d.: x)
Even before the need for a Brahmin association can be articulated, suspicions about (what is after all) a dominant identity and community mobilising and organising itself must be quelled. Moving on to more specific issues, the two resolutions that followed implored the king not to discriminate against the Brahmin community, even if they are not given any preferential treatment (*ibid.*: x–xi). The president of the second convention (1949), charting a similar trajectory, foregrounded many issues:

1. The need to impart those tenets of Brahminism that are common to all the three philosophies and ensure that one is not pitted against the other.
2. While nobody objects to the government according special privileges for persons from backward communities, it is unfair to ask a forward community to stymie its development in order that others become equal to them.
3. Our rituals etc., which mark us as Brahmins, are only applicable and important within the four walls of the house. Since they have no role in shaping or guiding our lives outside the household, it is unfair to identify us as Brahmins and deny us our rightful share.
4. It is not useful, as is the practice today, to pledge all the resources available in the family to educate children. Only intelligent children should be sent for university education. Others should be given job-oriented training. (Culled from the president’s speech, *ibid.*: 18–33)

Unpacking the plank of Brahmin unity—an aspiration that has persisted all through the history of corporate associations—is important, for it tells us something significant about the limits facing corporate associations. As pointed out in previous chapters, already by the beginning of the twentieth century (that is, decades before any sustained associational venture to achieve Brahmin unity came up), processes of urbanisation had already set in motion a remarkable degree of corporatisation of Brahminical interests. Even as commensal restrictions were fading away, the new social networks getting established in cities had recognised the sufficiency of the identity of Brahmin in recruiting new members, irrespective of which specific Brahmin jati one belonged to. Indeed, even endogamous boundaries were being enlarged to include all ‘legitimate’ Brahmin jatis into its fold.
Yet, for corporate associations, Brahmin unity has been and continues to remain an enduring obsession. Such associations, in explanation, often point to the continued existence of jati associations, the sporadic assertions of supremacy by the matha heads over the other contending Brahminical orders, and to the visible disinterest shown by members of the community towards associational activities. All these are valid, but only to a limited extent. For, jati associations do not necessarily take positions against the idea and need for Brahmin unity. Mathas too participate in the activities of corporate associations, even if their very existence is derived from sectarian distinctions and they continue to be largely patronised by specific jatis/sects. And finally, even though the majority of the Brahmins do not participate in caste associational activities, most concur with the necessity of Brahmin unity. We argue that at stake here is the very ground of the association and its specific configuration as it obtains in the Brahmin instance. It is the demand to foreground and act through the identity of the Brahmin that complicates the space of the Brahmin association. A delineation will have to wait till the next section.

However, what is it to be Brahmin anyway? As the president’s speech states, whatever ‘the tenets of Brahminism’ that he refers to are, it is a private affair and has little to do with Brahmin individuals when they are outside, in public—as students, jobseekers, promotion seekers, as lawyers, journalists, teachers, and as nationalists, Kannada activists, etc. In the spaces of the public, they are un-casted and the fact that they are Brahmins makes no difference to their public interactions as individuals. Marking them as Brahmins in public spaces then becomes a burden imposed by other caste communities and, more importantly, by the authority of the state. This imposition, in most such articulations, is unfair also because of a more important reason. Most Brahmins, these enunciations suggest, are Brahmins merely by the fact of birth; however by their actions—their calling, their everyday conduct and actions—they are not. The refusal to heed this distinction, these testimonies argue, enables the state and other communities to target the Brahmin community. This insistence that the identity of a Brahmin is a burden imposed from the outside is a lasting element in the vocabulary of Brahmin associations and individuals.
This could lead us to conclude that for these corporate associations the question of what it is to be Brahmin is irrelevant. That, however, is not the case and it continues to be a passionately contested issue. Indeed, AKBMS is constantly innovating on projecting symbols that would appeal to all the Brahmans and mathas. In recent decades, goddess Gayatri and the Gayatri mantra are being projected as the unifying symbols. Another such symbol, but one that deftly visualises sectarian differences even as it contains allusions to hierarchy, is the usage of the figures of the trimatāchāryas—viz., Sankara, Madhva and Ramanuja—represented as the trinity, equalised and sanitised of hierarchy. Willing to take a further step towards accepting differences, it grants affiliation to jati associations. Even as such positionings draw AKBMS into a virtual whirlpool of difference and distinction, such gestures have also enabled it to contaminate the difference-affirming mathas and jati associations with the discourse of unity.

The trajectory of AKBMS highlights the remarkable continuities in the articulations of Brahmin associations over the decades. The context in which the AKBMS came into existence marks watershed in Karnataka politics and caste equations providing the setting for the contemporary phase of Brahmin mobilisation, beginning from the 1970s, across the state. It was a context in which the trope of a ‘community under siege’ could find near universal acceptance within the community. In a manner of speaking, the ‘Mandalisation of the polity’ had become an actuality and a potent force by the decade of 1970s in Karnataka, almost two decades prior to its birth at the national level. The elevation of Devaraj Urs (who belonged to a tiny OBC caste) as the first non-Vokkaliga, non-Lingayat Chief Minister of Karnataka had confounded political equations.13 His sociopolitical vision had serious implications for the Brahmin community. For the latter, the question was not so much of an anxiety about losing their political foothold; for, by then, it was amply clear that visions of political prominence on their part were merely hallucinations of grandeur. However, a

13 See Manor (1980 and 1989), Nataraj (1980) and Nataraj and Nataraj (1982) for contending perceptions on the importance of this period and, in particular, of Urs himself.
fairly successful land reforms measure and the famous Backward Class Commission Report prepared by L. G. Havanur (1975) lent a great deal of credence to the long sustained visions of victimhood that the Brahmin community entertained about itself. The modern state as the ‘other’ was finally given concrete shape during these years. These measures were perceived as a wilful attack on the community to the extent that even to this day many Brahmin families invoke Indira Gandhi (who was the prime minister during this period and lent support to Urs’ measures) and Devaraj Urs as the two most anti-Brahmin politicians.

The appointment of the Havanur Commission to recommend guidelines for the welfare of the backward caste communities is seen, in particular, as the defining moment of the state’s anti-Brahminness. Even though Karnataka had by then seen two Backward Classes Committees’ (the Miller Committee and the Nagana Gowda Committee), the Havanur Commission was the first to enjoy quasi-judicial powers of summoning witnesses and collecting evidence. This, many commentators have held, was an important move on the part of the government, one that sought to ensure that the Brahmin-dominated bureaucracy was forced to assist the Commission in laying its hands on important data. The bureaucracy was alleged to have dragged its feet in such matters previously (see Shetty 2000: 96–97); many suggest that it continues to be the case even now (Ravi Varma Kumar, chairman of the Fourth Backward Classes Commission, in an interview with the author).

In 1971, a small group of enthusiasts founded the Brahmana Yuvaka Sangha in Bangalore, which decided to hold a day-long state convention in 1972 in Bangalore. The perceptions of siege, the illegitimacy of the Brahmin association, and the compulsion therefore to invent newer justifications of legitimacy had to be confronted on the day of the convention itself. When the then education minister A. R. Badarinarayan (a Brahmin) came to address the convention, he had to face a black flag demonstration by Dalit organisations, forcing him to quickly assuage apprehensions regarding the motives behind the convention:

Brahmins coming together is not against anybody. It is indeed a matter of regret that the community, which served and made sacrifices for the welfare of the nation, is forced now to serve
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itself. Why hostility against this community that has not harmed anybody and is merely attempting to improve its conditions by organising itself? (Cited in Venkatanarayana 1988: 2)

The opposition was primarily against a representative of the state participating in a Brahmins’ convention. This opposition has been consistent in forcing politicians to be wary of attending such gatherings. For instance, in the fourth convention of AKBMS, held in 1983, the then Chief Minister Ramakrishna Hegde (a Brahmin) in his inaugural speech reflected on the issue of owning up his community identity and of his inhabiting the space of the Brahmin association. He stated:

There were many obstacles, even threats, which I had to face while coming to this convention. But I still decided to come as the Chief Minister of Karnataka. We need to change our ways of thinking. Who after all is a Brahmin? Anybody who has good conduct will be called a Brahmin. It is not an identity acquired by birth. Isn’t Dr. Ambedkar a true Brahmin in this sense? We need to develop a broader outlook. We should never obstruct the development of the Dalits and the OBCs. We should all work for their upliftment. (Venkatanarayana 1988: 36)

Some of the activists interviewed expressed impatience with the position taken by Hegde. An activist of the J. P. Nagar Brahmana Sabha, a retired employee of the public sector industry, Indian Telephone Industries (ITI), who was also active in the ITI Brahmins’ Welfare Association, was unreserved in his disdain:

This is all nonsense. Nobody will come and ask whether you have qualified yourself to become a Brahmin. For all purposes, the state calls us Brahmins and discriminates.

14 There is a possibility that some of this reticence could already be thinning out, and the increasing base of the Bharatiya Janata Party in Karnataka may have much to do with this. The blurring of the distinction between the so-called ‘Brahmin culture’ and ‘Hindu/Indian culture’ has been rapid in recent decades. Yet, how far this will go is difficult to predict because caste-based articulations and politics continue to be potent mobilisational resources.
against us. The state has neither the inclination nor time to engage itself with questions of quality, character etc. So whether we want it or not, whether we wish to hide it or not, our identity of being Brahmins is given.\textsuperscript{15}

Likewise, a former president of the Mulkanadu Mahasabha stated:

We can’t go on conducting interviews to recruit the so-called ‘real Brahmins’. Of course, the values that this persona represents are essential in our lives and everyone needs to strive to achieve such qualities. But imagine going to individual Brahmins and asking them to take a test. Particularly in the present context when people are unwilling to even attend our meetings, how ridiculous it will be to arrogate ourselves the role of testing Brahminness? Associations will accept anybody who is a Brahmin by birth—that is the first and last criterion. Of course, the fact of birth in a Brahmin family will itself have given them a samskara that makes them Brahmins.\textsuperscript{16}

The convention of 1972 resolved to establish AKBMS, whose founding principles were decreed to be ‘samskara’, ‘sanghatane’ and ‘svavalambane’. AKBMS now exhorts that these ought to be the guiding threads for all Brahmin associations:

\textit{Samskara} [Codes of conduct]: Even as one is born a Brahmin, the real brahminness is acquired only through good conduct and qualities, learning the vedas, the strict following of the everyday rituals.

\textit{Sanghatane} [Organisation]: Even as we preserve our brahminness, organising the community is crucial so that we protect ourselves and our rights-duties.

\textit{Svavalambane} [Self-reliance]: In today’s context, it has become inevitable that we do not wait for the mercy of the government and look for individual initiatives so that we become self-reliant.

\textsuperscript{15} Interview with Mr Venkataramana, 12 May 2000. He is a 60-year-old Smarta Brahmin.

\textsuperscript{16} Interview with Mr Narasimha Shastri, 15 July 2000. He, a Smarta Brahmin, retired as a top-level manager with a leading brewery in Bangalore.
Thus, religious activities for gaining ‘culture’, conventions, meetings and mobilisation for purposes of ‘organisation’, and economic activities such as establishing financial institutions, educational institutions and student hostels for ‘self-reliance’ must be carried out. (AKBMS 1989)

The terrain charted by these guiding principles indicates the structuring agenda that is in many senses given for the corporate association. The imperative to address the status of being an ‘other’ is reflected in each of the three statements of intent. The very first principle is an acknowledgement of the contested status of the Brahmin being. Even as the emergence of the association presumes a naturally given community with distinct and recognisable boundaries, the contexts in which it finds itself forces it to reframe this very basic question. One could have taken birth in a Brahmin family, but the Brahminness has to be earned through the enactment of the prescribed code of conduct. Consequently, at best, the fact of birth is just a facilitator.

But this positioning immediately emerges as an oxymoronic problem, and indicates towards the schizophrenic status for these associations. Any unwillingness to recognise and work off an already constituted community, formed as such by the fact of birth, will render the agenda of a caste association deeply contradictory and unviable. This status is reflected in the incompatible but simultaneous existence that the next two principles are forced to lead. The latter are already working within uncomplicated and naturally given boundaries of the Brahmin community; and yet, even these are being formulated in a dialogue with the othered status of the Brahmin self.

The first major issue that AKBMS took up was the fight against the Havanur Commission. Memoranda were submitted to the state government and to the President of India, and a case was filed against the order implementing the Commission’s recommendations. AKBMS started functioning from the premises of the Badaganadu Sangha, a jati association that was already three decades old, possessed its own building in an expensive locality of Bangalore city and financially in a sound position. A former Indian Civil Service officer, P. H. Krishna Rao, took over the mantle of the association by becoming its president and providing AKBMS with the required intellectual flagship and dynamism. He wrote
and published booklets on the status of the community, prepared arguments against the Havanur Commission and the subsequent government orders. Krishna Rao was also the president of the Madhva Yuvaka Sangha.

It may now be useful to throw a cursory glance at the relationship that obtains between AKBMS and its affiliates. The AKBMS implores repeatedly through its journal that the associations which have not become its affiliates should do so in order that the Brahmin community could present a united front to the outsiders. Addressing its affiliate associations, it repeatedly requests them to participate more actively in the deliberations of AKBMS. It is also quick in assuring that affiliation does not take away the autonomy of the individual associations. The president of the AKBMS17 (in 2002) said:

I am not happy with the work that has been accomplished during my presidency. While I am devoting all my resources towards discharging my responsibility as the President, the inability to carry the community with the association has remained a limitation. It does not look like the existing associations—both old and new (including the sect-specific ones)—have fully accepted AKBMS. Each such association is doing good work and many are also financially strong. But to the activities of the AKBMS, their co-operation is not to the desirable level. Many leaders of these associations have been accommodated in the Central Committee of the AKBMS, but not many attend the meetings. When this is the case, how is state-level mobilisation ever possible? (Vipra Nudi, July–September 2002)

In spite of being a federating organisation, clearly AKBMS has had very little regulatory power in the affairs of its affiliates, even in regulating its own relationship with these associations. In comparative terms, jati associations are far more stable and

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17 A long-time activist of the Brahmin mobilisational efforts, Mr Srikantan is an industrialist. He gave away a fairly large piece of land that he owned in a middle-class locality in Bangalore to the Bettadapura Sankethi Sangha, the jati association to which he belongs. This gesture is interesting in the sense that the AKBMS at that time did not have an office space of its own.
economically sound than the AKBMS. Most of these associations own large pieces of land right in the middle of Bangalore, with expansive buildings in place. Most have commercial complexes, which generate a significant monthly income through rents. Many also have ‘community halls’ which are rented out to families belonging to the jati (not exclusively though; for most give it out to all Brahmans, and some even to the non-Brahmins) to conduct events such as weddings at far cheaper rates than commercial establishments. This indeed is a great attraction for the Brahmin families, for in Bangalore, community halls are not only prohibitively expensive for even middle-class families but also usually unavailable when required. It is indeed factors like this, and the matrimonial bureaus that these associations run, that bring many a family into the associational networks, even if fleetingly.

AKBMS has always found it difficult to match up to the stability of the jati associations—not just financially, but also in terms of finding and sustaining a band of active and enthusiastic members. Throughout its initial years, AKBMS was forced to feed off these associations. It has never failed to surprise AKBMS office-bearers that its recently completed project of building a multi-purpose complex in Bangalore should debilitate the association so comprehensively as it has. Besides, it is finding it difficult even to get along with its usual and relatively inexpensive routines like publishing the monthly journal, distributing scholarships to needy students, and assistance to the poor Brahmin women, priests, etc. The building project had even led to a square division among the ranks of the AKBMS activists resulting in a bitter and animated fight. The president, who initiated the project, was accused of impropriety and illegality in taking loans by pledging endowments, which supposedly led to the possibility of the association becoming pauperised.

Its sustained inability to become financially stable provoked the general secretary of AKBMS to come up with an interesting metaphor during the State Level Brahmin Association Office-bearers’ Convention organised by AKBMS (13–14 October 2001). Comparing the financial status of AKBMS with that of many of its affiliates, he said: ‘It is rather like the situation found in many a Brahmin household. The salary of the “software son” is incomparable to the pension that his father draws’. He went on to plead, ‘Please do not send parents to old-age homes’.
Nonetheless, AKBMS has been a prime mover in floating the All-India Brahmin Federation (AIBF) which aspires to coordinate the work of all Brahmin associations across the country. The AIBF was inaugurated during the fourth convention of the AKBMS held at Bangalore in 1983, with the reported participation of over 200 representatives from all over the country (Venkatanarayana 1988: 37–38). AIBF continues to exist—its executive committee meetings are reported in *Vipra Nudi* from time to time—but with very few activities conducted under its banner.

What further complicate the agenda of the corporate association are the internal differentiations among Brahmins. The Saraswat instance is interesting. Saraswat claim to Brahminhood is still strongly under dispute, particularly in the coastal districts of Karnataka. The number of Saraswat members in Brahmin associations across the state is miniscule, including in that of AKBMS, even as they are accepted as partners in building and sustaining a corporate Brahmin identity. The wariness is mutual, and has a complex profile. AKBMS, in the recent past, had a Saraswat Brahmin, a rich industrialist, as its treasurer, who enjoyed a high profile and spent quite a bit of his own money on the association’s initiatives. However, an activist of the Udupi taluq Brahmana Sabha, an affiliate and local representative of AKBMS, was rather categorical in stating, ‘Saraswats are not Brahmins. That is the reason why they are not part of our association [the Udupi taluq Brahmana Sabha]. They have their own organisation’. When it was pointed out to him that the AKBMS accepts them as members, and in fact does not think that it is an issue to be debated, he drew an allegory to state his case, ‘AKBMS is like the sea. It takes all into it. But we are a river. We cannot take all and sundry into our fold. And AKBMS cannot issue directives in such matters’. AKBMS nevertheless does not accept Viswakarmas as Brahmins, even though the Viswakarmas have staked claims to Brahminhood for almost a century. To be sure, AKBMS or any such association

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18 Interview with the General Secretary of the Udupi Taluq Brahmana Sabha, 25 February 2001. The Udupi taluq, which was part of the erstwhile Dakshina Kannada district, has now been made into a district. However, at the time of interview, the Udupi taluq Brahmana Sabha had not changed its name.
is in no way the deciding agency that exercises any terminal and successful moral authority over the Brahmins.

There is thus many an element at work here. At the level of the community as a whole, Brahmins might not be incensed by the Saraswat claim to Brahminhood. But a non-Saraswat Brahmin family will not be very keen on proposing marriage with a Saraswat family. Within the association, the latter are accepted; whereas in Dakshina Kannada, they are officially not part of the Brahmin associations. Such complexities could be multiplied. For instance, the AKBMS is largely perceived as a Smarta-dominated space, and most of its office-bearers are Smartas. No corporate association at any given point of time can escape the hold of such perceptions.

The act of tying together disparate and largely autonomous units into a corporate cluster is not a problem unique to Brahmins. Even Vokkaligas and Lingayats have very complex internal differentiations and hierarchies. Like the Brahmin instance, in these communities too the internal, hierarchised entities have formed caste associations, some of which survive to this day. Yet, such associations are very local and have remained in obscurity compared to the stature and dominance of the corporate associations such as the Vokkaligara Sangha and the Akhila Bharata Veerashaiva Maha Sabha. How does then one understand the continued sustenance of the jati associations? Also, are corporate associations the same as jati associations?

While the corporate associations have had to work with an already delegitimised category of the Brahmin, no such animosity from the others—nor even embarrassment about an identity—appears to obtain in the jati association. This is true even of jati-cluster associations such as the Madhva Yuvaka Sangha. Even as most of these associations came up in the 1940s, they were neither expected to carry the burden of the Brahmin category nor did they articulate the need to foreground their Brahminness or Brahmin unity. What helped such initiatives to keep their Brahminness invisible was the relative anonymity that these identities carried outside the Brahmin fold. None of these associations pronounced their Brahmin identity in their names or their emblematic statements, or even in their constitutions. While it is not clear whether this was a deliberate move, the point is that, being relieved of the burden of representing and articulating the concerns of the Brahmin community, these associations do not feel the need to speak on behalf of a besieged identity.
Accordingly, the most important distinction to be made between the jati associations and their corporate counterparts is the differential investments that they devote on the category of the Brahmin. This appears to define their trajectory over time and their very ability to lay claim to the space of caste associations. The differential demands placed by the two types of Brahmin associations become apparent when one juxtaposes the ‘statements of intent’ governing either. Thus, for instance, not even once in the souvenir of the Hoysala Karnataka Sangha, published on the occasion of its completion of 50 years, is the register of ‘siege’ invoked, which is very much unlike the calls to unity and adversity that underlie the more corporate forms of Brahmin agency. Significantly, such a switching of codes also obtains within the articulation of a single caste activist. While conducting the affairs of jati associations they do not feel compelled to speak either of or as Brahmins, but switch, at the first instance, to an invocation of the siege register when inhabiting the space of the corporate association.

Notwithstanding the centrality of this distinction, there are two qualifications to be made. One, it should not lead anyone to believe that the Brahmin identity is not of significance to these jati associations and their constituents and activists. It is, in very many ways. Many of these associations do participate in corporate associational activities. Their members and activists are in no distinct ways different in their narrations of being Brahmins in these ‘adverse’ times. They are proud to be the recipients and bearers of the Brahminical tradition, and so on. The point here then is merely one of positioning the enunciation of self in distinct ways as far as the associational space is concerned.

Second, also in perspective is the very structure of caste and its economy. The many Brahmin jatis continue to be entities of significance. This has remained the case despite the existence of the category and the idea of Brahmin, which members of these diverse Brahmin jatis have deployed in making sense of themselves, in accessing different resources. Jati, as a large kin

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19 The golden jubilee celebrations took place in 1995. As noted before, the association itself was established in 1908 but was dormant till 1943. The latter year is taken by the association as the year of its founding (Venkatasubbaiah 1995: 9–13).
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group, is still where the most intimate interactions take place and are circumscribed. As previously noted, marriages within the jati fold continue to be the norm. There continue to be articulations of pride in one’s jati-specific culture, cuisine, intellect, and history, for all of which the reference for comparison is not some non-Brahmin caste, but other Brahmin jatis. It is not that this field of emotion, capital and resource can automatically be translated into the space of a caste association, for the latter makes very different demands on its participants. Yet, jati works itself out differently when compared to the identity of the Brahmin, particularly since while the latter comes already suffused with specific valence, the former are empty pots as far as the protocols of modern association-making are concerned.

They function almost as large kin networks, revelling in celebrating festivals, matha-related events, and in seeking further access to different kinds of capitals. They have had precious little to do with the ‘outside’—the state and its institutions and imperatives of governmentality, and other caste communities—a feature that marks them apart from both corporate Brahmin associations and other ‘lower’ caste associations. This characterisation is particularly true of smaller associations, such as the Shivalli Smartha Brahmana Maha Parishat and those that exist in ‘diasporic’ locations, both within India (e.g., the Havyaka Welfare Trust of Mumbai) and outside (e.g., the North American Sankethi Association, NASA), which works with a focussed and bounded group. Perusing the literature and documents published by these associations leaves one wondering whether they inhabit the same discursive world as the corporate Brahmin associations.

Maithri Samooha of Bangalore illustrates an instance where the ties of jati and origin work exceedingly well. Maithri Samooha seeks to bring together the Madhva Brahmin families that hail from the Koteshvara region of the coastal Udupi district. The level of participation and the enthusiasm of the members and their families witnessed in some of its meetings was impressive. What makes this possible is not merely the fact that these families belong to a fixed but large kin network, which brings its thick affective and material ties—such as knowledge of each other, marital relationships, attachment to their ‘native place’ and to the temple there, etc.—into the association. It is also not just due to the dedicated team of activists that it commands. Largely, these
families migrating to the towns and cities, particularly Bangalore (for at least three to four generations now), have entered the restaurant/catering business. But in the last two decades, they have begun to network and circulate finances, and have successfully ventured into newer areas, such as the bakery industry. Maithri Samooha has emerged as a key space in which both affective and material ties are reiterated and renewed. It not only publishes directories of householders, runs a matrimonial bureau, felicitates community elders and achievers, but is also involved in helping young men set up bakeries and hotels by giving them interest-free loans and technical know-how. These young entrepreneurs are also allowed to deploy the networks and contacts that the veterans have at their disposal—with politicians (ranging from state cabinet ministers to the municipal corporators), the police, licensing authorities, etc. While such levels of enthusiasm and efficiency are hard to come by even in other jati associations, jati ties are clearly seen to provide more such possibilities than corporate associations do.

Even as we note all this, the question that comes up is: if the realm of the jati is more amenable to mobilisation as association, why then is this phenomenon restricted to Brahmins? If the explanation was to be largely found in the very structure of caste—that is, jati exercising a greater affective and material control than an amorphous varna/jati-cluster category—then one might expect a similar trajectory to obtain in other communities too, which is not the case. The peculiarity of the Brahmin instance has to do with the illegitimation of associational efforts that choose to speak as, and on behalf of, Brahmin identity. This task of enunciating is the focus of the next section.

**The Enunciatory Space of the Brahmin Association**

Caste associations are essentially a modern space. Steven Barnett (1977) argues that historical changes wrought by, what can be

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20 We need to note that for most of these individuals, much like the general trend that obtains among Brahmins, career options such as hotels/bakery, etc., are low down in the pecking order, resorted to only when the more sought after salaried/professional careers such as engineering or medicine are unavailable.
summatively referred to as, the modern ethos have increasingly driven a wedge between caste code (patterns and rules of behaviour) and substance whereby birth (substance) alone comes to define who a person is. It is this separation that really opens up the space of caste association. But, clearly, for the Brahmin this space, as indeed that of caste itself, is far more complicated. Moreover, what exactly is getting substantialised is also open to interrogation, for Brahmin as a caste identity (even a varna category) is being harnessed for purposes of self-making even as specific jati identities and sectarian distinctions continue to provide persons with resources of identification and identity.

Paradoxically, while Brahmins were the first to inhabit almost all modern spaces, insofar as the space of the caste association is concerned, the trend is inverted: Brahmins follow most non-Brahmin communities into inhabiting this space. Vokkaligas, Lingayats, and the many other partners in the non-Brahmin alliance had established their community associations by the 1900s. Many of them have had an uninterrupted existence since then, with the Vokkaliga and Lingayat associations, largely in tandem with their community mathas, emerging as important players in state polity during the post-Independence period. Alternatively, the first determined effort by the Brahmins to form corporate associations came only in the 1940s. Besides, the other distinct feature that characterises the trajectory of the Brahmin associations is the visibility enjoyed by their jati associations.

This certainly seems an anomalous state of affairs, recording at once the bounds of agency as well as the simultaneous institution of an identity and its displacement. The question is what sense can we make of this process. Caste associations are an assertion in modern civil society demanding that the state recognise their legitimacy and in the process respond to their needs of material and even symbolic resources. The dominant discourses in the late colonial period (most importantly, the nationalist discourse) sought to delegitimise caste as a legitimate resource for identity-making and as a rallying ground for interest-articulation. The modern Indian state (going by its aspirations as articulated in the Indian Constitution, but prefigured earlier in the colonial government) stood firm against such demands and recognised caste as a measure of in/equality among communities. This recognition that the state accorded to caste is what has enabled
the lower castes to articulate a demand for, and to some extent even ‘experience’, equality, through re-invention, mobilisation and corporatisation as part of their quest for mobility and identity. Caste associations have been an important medium of this quest. This process of governmentalisation of caste categories configures the field of caste in ways that allows the recuperation of the Brahmin as an always-already available icon, which can be pressed into service to bring about a predictable economy of sentiment and mobilisation, irrespective of the protestations of the Brahmins themselves.

The demand for an equitable and representative distribution of modern resources has been the most constitutive reason for the emergence of caste associations. Interestingly though, many caste communities ventured to form associations in the late colonial period also as part of a strategy geared towards ritual status upgradation in the local and regional caste hierarchies. The census classification of castes into specific slots in local ritual hierarchies based on the varna order was often a highly contested site. Many caste associations would emerge during every census making a case for a higher slot for themselves in the caste hierarchy. These acts of material and symbolic upgradation were often bound up in inextricable ways. For instance, the founding of the Akhila Bharata Veerashaiva Mahasabha by the Lingayat elites in 1904 actively foregrounded these concerns to justify its formation. The literature focusing on caste associations suggests that these trajectories obtained in many parts of the country. However, where Brahmin associations are concerned, the ground seems to shift, partly as a consequence of the fact that the space and the language of caste associations is marked by the non-Brahmin contestation of the ‘Brahmin’.

Where caste associations emerge primarily to contest the caste-regulated unequal distribution of resources and to invoke the state to their cause, the very idea of a ‘Brahmin caste association’ is bound to strike one as an anomaly (even as being morally

21 Carroll (1975, 1978) critically summarises the extant literature. Some of the works dealing with specific caste associations (in different parts of the country) are Basu (2003); Kothari and Maru (1970); Michelutti (2004); Shah (1975); Templeman (1996). Khare’s (1970) is among the very few attempts to look at the Brahmin case; see also Mitra (1994).
untenable and unjustifiable). And in fact, it did seem to appear so not only to the other communities but also to many Brahmins themselves. Both the founding grounds of justification that were available before any community seeking to mobilise itself in the associational space were (and are in many ways) inherently unavailable for the Brahmins. The question of upgradation of ritual status was obviously not an issue for the Brahmins; on the contrary, it was becoming increasingly apparent to the community that their unquestionable supremacy in the jati order and varna scheme could precisely be the problem in the years to come. Besides, since the very bedrock on which other communities stood was marked by resentment against Brahmin domination of the modern resources, even the other ground was unavailable.

Moreover, the illegitimacy and impropriety that seemed to structure the idea of the Brahmin association was not ephemeral; that is to say, it did not end by the late 1920s along with the subsiding of the non-Brahmin challenge. While the initiatives of the 1940s explicitly referred to the hostility they perceive from the ‘public’ (e.g., the press) and the state (Venkatanaryana 1988), the 1972 conference had to bear the brunt of a black flag demonstration. Even the fifth state convention of the AKBMS, held in Hubli in April 1984, invited such public protests.

Since associational enterprise seeks a foregrounding of an assertive and legitimisable caste identity, any effort to forge a Brahmin association is caught in a paradox. A Brahmin association is a belligerent posture. It seeks to take an unequivocal and unquestionable pride in being ‘Brahmins’, and that too as a publicly enunciated and proclaimed stance and statement. Both these points are crucial—that the pride be unhesitating, and be publicly articulated. However, such posturing also has to act out in a social field that is, in many senses, already given. Most crucially, it is a field that is already saturated with notions and positions vis-à-vis Brahmins, Brahminism, etc., and largely negative ones at that. Thus, even belligerent postures would have to contend with such already formulated and powered discourses.

22 Interview with Mr Venkataram, 12 January 2000. He is one of the senior-most activists of the contemporary phase of Brahmin mobilisation and has been one of the moving forces behind the establishment and sustenance of the AKBMS. He was also, at the time of the interview, the General Secretary of the AKBMS, a post he has held before.
Brahmin caste associations, therefore, have had to painstakingly build a case for their existence. While internal class hierarchies—the register of the ‘poor Brahmins’—do emerge as an important ground of justification for these associations as part of their everyday functioning, they have all through their history failed to convince their ‘others’ (the state and non-Brahmin communities) of the legitimacy of this register. Of course, internal economic disparities exist and grow by the generation, and there is a significant number of Brahmin families today that have failed to acquire the different forms of capital that matter. For such families, Brahmin associations could as well be the only source of hope and fortitude, particularly since the state remains largely unresponsive. Yet, the very structuring of the association makes it difficult to legitimate internal distinctions and hierarchies. That is to say, in this discourse, all Brahmins are rich and powerful; all non-Brahmins/Backward Classes/Dalits are poor and powerless. Accordingly, it is not surprising that the sense of siege—of the Brahmin under duress—has emerged as the single-most defining ground of justification for the Brahmin associations.

It is such aspects of the structuring of caste associations that has received little attention in the extant scholarship. Scholars have looked at caste associations almost exclusively as a mere medium in the hands of caste communities for claiming secular and symbolic gains. In doing so, the focus has firmly been on the organisational structure—rules and regulations, their voluntarism, in contrast to the involuntary nature of jati membership, their amenability to secular politics, etc. While most early studies took these communities as pre-given entities (for example, Rao 1987; Rudolph and Rudolph 1967), studies that followed recognise that these communities were themselves being forged, in the process of which the associational enterprise was crucial (for example, Arnold et al. 1976; Carroll 1978, 1979). Following Bernard Cohn (1968, 1987; cf. Srinivas 1962), many have foregrounded the centrality of the colonial configuration of caste categories (of caste itself) in making sense of the trajectory of the caste question, including that of associations (see, for example, Dirks 2002).

Of course, it is important to recognise that caste associations exist within the contact zone wherein ways and means of being caste begin to negotiate with modern ethos and institutions.
Accordingly, the caste association is an ‘experiment’ (Conlon 1974: 352) with the idea, identity and practice of caste. Yet, in making sense of the modernity of these associations, the scholarship has paid little attention to questions such as how is this space configured, what are the other forces in the social field that these associations work with, the dynamic possibilities as well as limits this social field places on the associational enterprise, how different this field is from the other modern spaces that caste finds itself in, etc.

I suggest that the definitional task of a caste association consists of speaking as and on behalf of a subject-position, and therefore it should be seen primarily as an enunciatory space. Accordingly, the interesting questions to ask about it will be: how is this enunciation structured? Who is enunciating? Who are the addressees? Does it change across the caste spectrum and over time? And so on.

Associations are not, despite their own insistence, prime agents in transforming the socio-economic status of the community. When they emerged, many non-Brahmin associations did attempt to take on this role, but few succeeded. Such agents of transformation and mobility were and still are the individuals, but more importantly the familial and kin networks, which have remained by and large obdurately resistant to expanding their boundaries. Accordingly, evaluating associations vis-à-vis their own claims of being agents of upliftment can only see them as irredeemably failed enterprises. The test of their efficacy lies neither in their success in bringing together and homogenising disparately encoded entities, nor in ensuring more favourable resource allocation.

It would be worthwhile to see them as enunciators of the communities that they seek to bring to life, and on whose behalf they speak to the outside. They strive to represent a carefully constructed self to the outside—to other caste communities, the public sphere and the state. This outside is in important ways already predetermined, and thereby forces the enunciator to speak in certain comprehensible and acceptable ways. Since the task before the associations is to present an acceptable face to the outside, what happens ‘within’ could remain very different from, and even contradictory to, the narratives of self that these
associations produce. These testimonies are a matter of public positioning—drawing upon selective elements from history and the present, deploying them strategically, creating an identity and its others in order to present what it wants the self and the world to imagine it(self) to be.

This is not a task that is unmediated, both by the larger context and the predicaments and predilections of the self; however, the task of the association is in speaking/uttering it. This positioning is not to be discounted as opportunism or as representing a state of false consciousness. The community both participates in and reconstructs such imaginations of the self and community, undergoing in the process shifts in its own modes of identity and identification. The enunciating subject here is not only the caste activist but also ‘members’ of the community, including those who do not physically participate in the associational proceedings.

As we saw in the Brahmin instance and further attest to below, the associations are representative in the sense that they provide the community with a language in which to articulate a self-image that is primarily other-directed but which also configures perceptions of self. Indeed, non-Brahmin associations emerged in the colonial period as the primary articulator of the idea and the institution of caste, and set the protocols of negotiation with the modern ethos and institutions. In those cases, the associational space emerged as the foremost vehicle in articulating the legitimacy of furthering both communitarian aspirations and interests as well as the individual projects of the elite.

Accordingly, it is the emerging urban middle class and the modern educated elite that take the lead in the formation of corporat associations in the case of the non-Brahmin communities. It has often been pointed out in scholarly works on caste associations that caste activists/leaders channelise personal ambitions and designs through caste associations. For many such figures, caste associations were a legitimate route to further their political ambitions and aspirations—individual as well as communitarian. A random perusal of public documents of the late colonial period

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will bear testimony to this. In the case of these communities, the space of the association emerges as the most central and pioneering register of articulation in all their attempts to lay claim to the new resources—of power, economy, status and, in some sense, even being modern. Thus, though these endeavours have been called elitist for feeding into the personal agendas of a few individuals (which indeed they did), it is important to recognise that they did function as an effective critique of the overwhelming Brahmin dominance and helped to articulate the demand for a more egalitarian resource allocation as well as social order (see Arnold et al. 1976). That is to say, both caste activists and the associations were foundational to these subaltern assertions.

The Brahmin instance differs sharply. Here, access to the newly emerging cultural economy was a reality not due to the deliberate efforts of the state or of caste elites but because of the fact that the community—primarily through familial, kin and acquaintance/friend networks—was already privy to this economy. And, unlike the non-Brahmin instance, the elite (or, perhaps more accurately, individual men who were playing or aspiring to play public secular roles) were clearly reticent about inhabiting the caste associations. Accordingly, the Brahmin ‘caste activist’ is fairly distinct, even if within the range of positionalities that we have been encountering across the prism of the secularising Brahmin. While publicly spirited individuals stated their sympathies for the Brahmin cause in unambiguous terms, they cannot be identified as caste association leaders; indeed, they never became the office-bearers of any of these associations.

The instance of Tataiah is particularly illustrative in making this point. M. Venkatakrishnaiah—better known as Tataiah—was a versatile public figure. He was a pioneering journalist (having founded many newspapers and magazines, but all of which were identified as the ‘advocates of the Brahmin cause’ by the Mysore Star [11 November 1917] repeatedly), a member of the Mysore Representative Assembly, a founder of many public/Brahmin institutions, a pioneering activist of the Mysore Congress, a recognised reformist within Brahmin circles, and so on. His extraordinary career spans almost two generations of the Brahmin community (1890s to the 1930s), during which it witnessed tumultuous happenings. Throughout his public involvement he
remained a chief exponent of the Brahmin cause, in the face of a spirited non-Brahmin challenge. For the greater part of its existence, the non-Brahmin assertion in Mysore projected Tataiah as the most identifiable representative of the Brahmin cause. What is more, unlike many of his contemporaries, Tataiah himself was not hesitant to inhabit that subject position. However, what is equally striking is that he did not seek to establish caste associations for Brahmins. Neither have there been instances of his taking official positions in any such existing association. While Tataiah’s instance is the most illustrative, it is true of many others too. Moreover, as we have seen, even for individuals who worked as activists, the association was an ambivalent space.

The foundational ground of justification that the Brahmin community associations work off is the very state of being othered. The self-description of being ‘a community under siege’ not only provides a context for these associations to spring up and justify their emergence, it also lends the necessary symbolic and material resources of motivation. This justificatory ground, it must be reiterated, is not one that is defined by a summary rejection of the non-Brahmin construction of the Brahmin. It is a spirited negotiation with that construction—taking some of its elements as its own, rejecting others, and reformulating the terms all along.

Complicating the Brahmin association’s response too is its perception of the modern state itself. The nation-state, invariably, is the principal agency on which caste associations make demands. Their negotiation is with the state, and not with other caste communities and their associations, making it responsible to their demands of upliftment and welfare. However, Brahmin associations look upon the state as its principal ‘other’. They have, over the years, imagined the state as an institution that is deliberately working against the interests of the community and accordingly have moved towards articulating a community position in which self-reliance is held to be the only way out. This articulation has sustained its hold on the imagination of the community for long, but seems to have become acute during the decades of the 1970s and the 1980s, as reflected by the spurt in corporate associations across the state.

An acute sense of the siege that many Brahmins have felt in recent times can be had from the poem reproduced below. Yet,
interestingly, it makes for a more assertive and confident posturing of the self.24

Beware! We are Brahmins
O Brahmin-haters, are you now feeling satisfied keeping us under siege? Why do you look at us with so much of hatred?
... Can’t you tolerate if we come up in life?
...
Aren’t we the Gurus who taught you? Aren’t we the ones who blessed you, and kept the God pleasant? We longed for the good and peace of the world.
... Dumped us in a corner, under the garb of reservations In the name of jati, you devoured everything, in stealth. True, those who are oppressed ought to be lifted up But tell me, is it fair to stamp out those who are already sitting upright?
You pull at our topknot; tear up our sacred thread Spew venom at us, just because we are Brahmins.
...
Even with merit, we have no status or position. How much do we tolerate this dishonour?
We burn from inside, cry in silence
...
We have merit—why then do we need anybody’s pity? Should men with moustache25 need the pity called reservations? Do not bother—We need neither your prestations nor alms We have the strength of the intellect—that is our greatest protection! You say, ‘We won’t let you live’ And we will live a life of greatness.
...

24 The poem is reproduced in Jagriti, a souvenir brought out by the AKBMS in 1994 during the seventh state Brahmin convention held in Bangalore.
25 Translation of a colloquial expression, wherein the moustache symbolises masculine virility and strength. Thus, all the reservation-beneficiaries are equalised to women, a ‘potent’ abuse in itself.
Clearly then, and uniquely so, the space of the association comes to the Brahmin as a contested zone. Yet, as can be seen, demands of enunciation play out differently in corporate as against jati associations because of the context in which the latter operate. Here the modern reconfiguration of caste and its framing by the imperatives of the modern state are not the theatres of action. Even as jati associations take a great deal from the idioms of modern organisation (for example, voluntarism, liberty of entry and exit, deliberative and democratic decision-making), their mobilisational energies owe more to ‘traditional’ idioms than to governmental imperatives. Also, unlike corporate (Brahmin and non-Brahmin) associations, they are not other-directed. Or, perhaps more accurately, their ‘others’ do not come with any pre-given meanings and burdens as far as the field of governmentalised caste is concerned. Accordingly, these associations do not display the urge to speak as, and on behalf of, a Brahmin identity that is in many ways always-already under siege. Although these associations are no less enthusiastic about being Brahmans, and even as that identity generates affective and material resources for their constituents, it is not the same as the identity that has been pre-constituted as the figure that represents everything that is non-modern and regressive.

Clearly, the suggestion to approach caste associations in this manner allows us to not only ask different questions about this space, but also discriminate between different sets of associations encountered across the caste spectrum. Thus, it is the corporate Brahmin associations, much like the Vokkaligara Sangha and the Akhila Bharata Veerashaiva Maha Sabha, that the extant literature has dealt with, in the sense that it is these that owe their emergence and existence to the very modern configuration of the Brahmin question in the south Indian context, bringing to life a wholly new Brahmin identity in the process. It is these associations that then take on the role of spokespersons of that newly-configured Brahmin identity, in the ways alluded to above. Jati associations, on the other hand, are more self-bound and self-serving than other-directed. This is not to suggest that they are non-modern, primordial, and not subject to the vicissitudes of time, but only that the constituency they seek to organise and represent are jatis that, in the process of articulating in the idiom of association, press into service the ways of being that are ‘given’ to a jati order—
that of being an extended kin group with its attendant affective and material economies.

The section that follows complicates the relationship that the Brahmin community at large comes to share with its associational effort, which also firms up this idea of enunciation further.

**Between Association and Community**

In 1925, Alur Venkatrao wrote:

To improve the material conditions of Brahmins, an association has been founded in Dharwad. The association is planning to immediately call a Brahmin convention to discuss this issue.

Now, Brahmins are rendered havenless. They are unwanted by the people and have become the recipients of the government’s ire. To themselves they have become unfit for care. They are neither welcomed in the Congress nor are they respected by the law. While it is true that, to some extent, the times are to be blamed for this state, to a great extent, their loosing of brahminness is the main cause. Thus, regaining it ought to remain the principal duty of Brahmins. The superiority of Brahmins will neither be based on worldly authority nor on material affluence but on their dharma of service to the world. The individual who has gained this dharma—irrespective of his religion and caste—can capture the world.

But, how does today’s Brahmin class, which is spiralling downwards for the last 5000 years, acquire the ability for undertaking such a momentous task? The country is pitted against it, as are the times; and there is a failing in the self. Thus, with these three doshas (fault-lines) acting in tandem, it is clear that the Brahmin class is only reaching its nadir. Greater the heights reached, deeper the fall. Brahmins’ vrtti (divinely-ordained task) is of service to the world; Sudras’ vrtti is that of service to the self. With such a similarity between the two, it was but natural that once the Brahmin fell, he took up the Sudra vrtti. Now that this calling is obstructed, God has given the Brahmin an opportunity to uplift himself. The whole world is keenly observing how the Brahmin will use this opportunity. Earlier many, beginning with Buddha, used their brains to obliterate the Brahmin class. Later the Muslims attempted the same with arms. But
the Brahmin class has retained its identity despite these physical and psychological attacks. Compared to these challenges, the present challenge is nothing great. However, given that poverty has increased greatly, the class cannot even combat the smallest of crises. In earlier times of crisis, the material condition of the Brahmins was not in such a dismal state. Poverty kills the greatest of the virtues. Isn’t it obvious that dharma becomes relevant only after one’s life is ensured? Therefore, the fundamental question the Brahmins have to think about is that of making an honourable livelihood. This has resulted in the question of economics becoming primary in all places. It is not that even in our times of such precariousness, there aren’t Brahmins who have not protected their *brahmanya* [Brahminness]. Such are to be respected by all. But they are negligible and we need to think about the larger populace. In summary, the question that the association has taken up is of paramount importance. Nonetheless, we warn the leaders that while tackling this issue, they ought not to forget the primary mission of the community. Otherwise, they will have to bear the sin of destroying the society by luring it with the desires of this worldly pleasure. *(Jaya Karnataka, 10 March 1925)*

This statement represents the ground from which the secularising Brahmin related to the enterprise of the Brahmin association. The nature of relationship sought is also at once an agenda that is being set before the space of the association. Venkatrao here is unhesitatingly sympathetic to the project of the Brahmin association. And yet, he did not become an active constituent of the Brahmin association. He was already standing outside it and was seeking to make an ‘objective’ assessment of the possibilities of the Brahmin association.\(^{26}\) Moreover, he could

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\(^{26}\) It needs reiteration that Alur was no unequivocal secular self. This was so not only because he displays sympathies for the Brahmin project. A perusal of his life and works tell us that he was an irrepressible Madhva enthusiast too. He wrote ceaselessly about Madhva philosophy, the sect and its prominent figures. This was no mere scholarly engagement; he remained a devout Madhva all through. Nationalism, the Kannada movement and an enthusiasm for history but also being a Brahmin and a Madhva were all significant sources of self for Alur. None more superior, legitimate and public than the others.
only offer a non-material framework and agenda for such associations to adopt and work with. He begins with a conception of the Brahmin persona that has nothing to do with the fact of birth. But he is also quick to contain the ramifications of such a definition even at the cost of sounding almost contradictory. The fact that the state and the others ‘obstructed’ the pursuance of callings that ‘serve the self’—evidently, by containing the Brahmin predominance in the government services and other such spaces—was, for him, an ‘opportunity’ that the Brahmin ought to use to regain his brahmanya. Thus, even as Venkatrao recognised the need for alleviating the ‘material condition of the Brahmins’, he was quick to remind the leaders of the ‘primary mission of the community’: the ‘dharma of providing service to the world’ without seeking returns. Material upliftment is indeed relevant and is of high priority but only because of the context in which we live; otherwise it is corrupting the goal of Brahmin life.

There are, to be sure, many pragmatic statements that one comes across in the pages of Vipra Nudi, which cogently argue for an agenda of the possible. Charting out such an agenda, an article entitled ‘What Should the Brahmin Association do?’ states:

There is a consensus that, apart from activities like conducting Sanskrit classes, mass upanayana ceremonies, and religious lectures, the AKBMS should help in greater matters such as education, economic upliftment, and social development, which it is not doing. But those who give suggestions do not contribute to our efforts saying they are not casteists! The only possible activity is the help that we can give to the poor and the middle class—helping students, widows, vaidika Brahmins and arranging loans for association members. For this we should undertake a finance mobilisation project. We should use religious functions to mobilise Brahmins for social causes, which is not happening. It is fashionable to suggest that we should start engineering and medical colleges but it is highly impractical. (Vipra Nudi, May 1987)

In spite of such clear statements of intent, most of the association spokespersons feel the need to keep referring to the ideal

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27 The demand that Brahmin associations open engineering and medical colleges is at least 50 years old.
imaginations of the Brahmin persona. But the constituency it seeks to stand up for and help out will have no use for such pontification. This mismatch could be the most direct expression of a failure of the project of the Brahmin association. A former activist of the Jayanagara Brahmana Sabha (JBS) expressed his unhappiness thus:

> When do you think an individual approaches an association? It is at a point of desperation. Caste associations are the last resort of an individual—whether to get his daughter married or to get the little monetary help that we give for the children’s education. When such is your clientele, if you lecture them on the glories of brahmanya, they have little use of it. Of course those are important. But one should have a filled stomach to attend to these philosophical concerns. When I was active in JBS, I would insist on focusing on such things.  

Another highly respected AKBMS activist delved into a related point:

> One of our major problems is getting the youth to take interest in their caste welfare and culture. Everybody recognises this but do not realise the cause. If you go on conducting only Vishnu sahasranamas or arrange religious discourses on Upanishads, how do you expect the youth to take interest in the association or the community? They have very specific problems. They are ambitious, meritorious but, given the larger context of denial, have no idea about realising their dreams. Daily students, young men come to me for advice. I offer them advice, particularly about going abroad—either to pursue education or careers. If our associations do not think along these lines, they will continue to get only retired people. I am not decrying the conduct of religious ceremonies but we have to think of expanding our horizons. I have been, along with some others, trying to emphasise this orientation for so many years now, but have not been very successful.  

> Interview with Mr Srirangan, 16 April 2000. This respondent, a Srivaishnava Brahmin, works as a tax consultant and an insurance agent. He was an active founder member of JBS. One of his sons married a non-Brahmin 10 years ago, and Srirangan still feels embittered about it. His other two sons are married within the fold.

> Interview with Mr Sadashivaiah, 1 March 2000. He (Smartha, 60 years) is a successful industrialist and has been an important adviser to AKBMS
However, significantly, most families interviewed shy away from participating in associational activities. Indeed, even those with membership of some association did not deliberately decide to become a member and therefore set out to look out for an appropriate association. Mostly the decision to join was incidental, often at the instance of a friend or relative; and being so, the commitment seems ephemeral. In fact, most respondents—except the activists or those with close kin who take a proactive interest in such matters—have never attended a convention or a meeting. Nonetheless, there is a widespread feeling of dissatisfaction about the ways of working of the associations. The latter are accused of focusing on ‘unnecessary’ issues like conducting religious functions. Most respondents agreed on the need for Brahmin associations, but were insistent that the agenda of these associations should be one of the ‘development’ of the community.

We don’t need associations to instill Brahminical values. Families themselves will inculcate the Brahmin samskara. Every family teaches the young to respect elders, perform rituals, and adheres to the conduct of [life-cycle events]. Besides, for such things we have mathas and temples. The association agenda is clear—to help out poor Brahmans in some useful way. Today, when youth are not getting government jobs, the associations should focus on helping them to become self-employed. They should give poor merited students scholarships to secure their future. Open medical and engineering colleges and other higher educational institutions so that no merited student should remain deprived of education. I would say education should be the sole focus of these associations. Brahmin and scholarship are synonyms; if that is compromised then there is no pride in calling ourselves Brahmans.30

30 in the recent years particularly on matters of preparing the young men to become self-reliant and shed their dependence on government jobs. He was the chief motivator of the grand show intended to kickstart such an agenda—the Vipra-97—that AKBMS organised in 1997.

30 Interview with Ms Priyamvada, 26 October 2000. She, a 53-year-old Madhva, is a Kannada professor in a Bangalore degree college. She came to Bangalore from a village near Udupi soon after her marriage to a hotelier. She had passed out of her pre-university just then. She is passionate about classical music and has practiced it for most of her
Most associations have failed to become ‘mass’ organisations. Perhaps a crucial point that is often not recognised is the centrality of individuals in the life and even the longevity of caste associations. Many of these associations are a testimony to the self-generated inspiration and commitment of such individuals, for there exists little incentive otherwise. They are motivated primarily by a shared sense of frustration and moral anger against the outside world for unjustifiably treating the community, which, in their eyes, has done great service to the society and the nation. But as soon as that individual or group of individuals become inactive, the association falls into a kind of stupor and many a time meets its end.

Individuals who found themselves occupying spaces that were seen as untainted by their caste-ness (officers of the state, the judiciary, the modern professionals, and so on) appear to have largely declined to take the lead in forming, or working as office-bearers in corporate Brahmin associations. This seems to have

life. It was this passion that resulted in a divorce, by which time she had three children. Her husband and his family firmly believed that music is not for Brahmin women and constantly abused her for her interest. When abandoned by her parents after divorce, she decided to make a life all by herself. She courageously pursued her studies and completed her master’s degree in Kannada and became a lecturer in a college. Now both the sons (one is in a Western country) and the daughter are employed and married. This respondent, even as she is remarkably vocal about her contempt for and anger against ‘Brahminical conservatism’ (her words) which refused to accommodate her passion for music, remains positive about her Brahminness. For instance, while talking about her teaching, she said: ‘When a new batch comes in, I can recognise, instantaneously, who among them are Brahmins. You can see keenness and commitment among the Brahmins and, because of their samskara, they have great respect for the Guru. Others are just the opposite. And in a class of 110–120 students, you can attend to only a few. So naturally the Brahmins benefit. This happens across the disciplines and with all the teachers irrespective of their caste background. In fact many lecturers who are not Brahmins rue this fact and say how the others just don’t show interest. Now they are realising that it should come from within and no amount of external push by the government, etc., will help. This explains why it is always the Brahmin students who get ranks.’
resulted from both the individually held conviction that such spaces are (or at least must remain) ‘secular’, and the need to ward off non-Brahmin criticisms accusing them of Brahminising these spaces. Most Brahmin caste activists happen to be individual male entrepreneurs—businessmen, hoteliers, industrialists, etc. Interestingly, till the 1940s, most pioneering activists of Brahmin associations were advocates. Thereafter, however, the activists are predominantly self-employed, in sectors that are largely non-institutional. While the fact that government and quasi-government employees have avoided involvement with Brahmin associations is often resented, the leaders forward their own success in non-state spheres as testimonies to the fact that Brahmins can and will survive despite neglect from the state.

The other significant catchment area is that of the retired state and state-run institutional officials. For many among the latter, a primary motivation was frustration about their inability to help ‘deserving Brahmins’ while being part of the state machinery, even as their non-Brahmin colleagues extended favours to their caste men/women with impunity. Many of these associations testify to the self-generated inspiration and commitment of such individuals, for there is little incentive otherwise.

The following testimony of a former activist indicates towards the crucial roles that individuals play in the logistics of an association:

A group of five or six of us [all men from different Brahmin jatis and above 50 years] came together in 1987 to bring together Brahmins residing in the neighbouring localities [all of which have separate associations now] and established a Brahmana Sabha, affiliated to the AKBMS. Within a span of five years we were known as one of the few well-run and successful Brahmin association in the state. We were conducting a range of activities catering to the different sections in the community. Apart from the highly successful annual samohika upanayana, we organised many religious activities like pilgrimages, publishing booklets on the significance of rituals, etc. But what brought us recognition and popularity were the publishing of calendars, which almost acted like a mini-almanac and conducting coaching classes for the SSLC students, irrespective of their caste. We were running our own library catering to poor students of engineering and other technical courses along with providing
scholarships, honouring the meritorious students, etc. We had even managed to get a plot of land. However, we were grounded in no time. Ego clashes, entry of people who had neither a vision nor a commitment to serve the community, all forced us, literally, out of the association. As soon as that happened, the association fell into dormant days. GBMs [general body meetings] have not been held for years now, elections have not taken place and accounts are not being kept. Even the whereabouts of the office and thus of the association itself are not known.31

While he still attends AKBMS meetings, GBMs, conventions, etc., this former activist has become far more wary of jumping into the projects of Brahmin associations unhesitatingly. However, he has taken up the initiative of forming an association of the tiny Brahmin community that he belongs to, hailing from Udupi. He feels more comfortable in an intimate setting such as this, where to a great extent he interacts with his own kin networks and within which he has an unquestionable reputation for integrity and commitment. Another of his castaway colleagues too has ‘returned’ to the more comforting environs of the jati association to which he belongs. But the others who got frustrated with internal bickering never came back to any association.

There is a huge difference between the number of members that an association has on its rolls and the numbers who actually participate in its meetings and conventions or write for its journal. There is also a great deal of cross-membership at the level of office-bearers of both corporate and jati associations. Most active members are old (at least in their 50s and above). In any meeting, function or even convention and conference one will invariably witness this composition. Almost all major associations have youth committees, which again are peopled by individuals in their late 30s or early 40s.

Most participants are men, with a sprinkling of women. Again, most associations have women’s committees, but in effect they are an afterthought and clearly demarcated in their agenda—running the matrimonial bureau, holding cooking classes, etc. By

31 Interview with Mr Kumaraswamy, a 62-year-old Smarta Brahmin (14 April 2000). His profile is already disclosed in Ch. 3, n. 58.
the late 1980s, some of the associations had brought in modifications in their constitutions so as to accommodate two women members in the executive committees. Generally, however, these positions fail to attract aspirants and the committee nominates and coerces two active women members to the fray.

AKBMS has one vice president’s post reserved for women. It also has an affiliate trust, the Tejasvini Brahmana Mahila Seva Sangha, which is managed by and works exclusively for Brahmin women. In 2000 AKBMS organised a Vipra Mahila Sammelana (Brahmin Women’s Conference) in Bangalore which, interestingly, witnessed many heated discussions by women participants asking for ‘equal rights’ in the performance of rituals, apart from deliberations on providing self-employment avenues for women, changing familial spaces and relationships, and so on. The Hoysala Karnataka Sangha and the Akhila Havyaka Mahasabha have had women presidents. Notwithstanding all this, women’s participation in these associations continues to be very low compared to the men. The caste association is a markedly male space. While a typical active member at any association meeting will be a man, aged between 50–70 years, and usually leading a post-retirement life, most of the active women will be family members of the active males of the association. There are a few women who have taken up ‘community work’ on their own, and have gained respect for their work, articulation and ability to lead. They have pursued successful careers of their own, in politics, industry, NGOs, and so on, and are sought after by the associations to preside over their functions, meetings and conventions.

The selective and sustained refusal of the majority of the community to inhabit the associational space is attributed by almost all to one predominant reason. In the words of a formerly active member of AKBMS:

The reason for the failure of Brahmin associations in mobilising and uniting Brahmins lies in the very persona of the Brahmin. Brahmins are an intellectual class. Every one of them is educated, has a thinking and questioning mind. Everybody is a leader. It is difficult to herd them together like sheep. If a Vokkaliga leader commands, all his caste-men will abide by it. Here, among Brahmins, each will ask—why should we, what is the desired impact, etc. So it is a challenge to organise them.
This quality is both positive and negative. On the positive side, you are assured that Brahmins will never become communal minded and act as fundamentalists. They will never hate anybody just because a leader tells them to. That is the primary reason why you have not seen Brahmins retaliate to non-Brahmin abuse and ridicule. They easily could have because they occupied all top positions and in many cases continue to. But the dignified way in which they have sought to negotiate with the other communities is truly outstanding. For a contrast, look at the Muslims. You tell them, ‘You have destroyed a temple in Ayodhya. So allow us to construct a temple there’, and they respond by giving a call for Jihad! Brahmins have not been like that. On the negative side though, you will see them fight amongst themselves incessantly on petty issues. There in fact is a saying in Sanskrit to the effect that Brahmins can never unite.

Clearly, caste associations are neither born with a moral authority nor do they receive the allegiance of the community by default, unlike the mathas. Among the Brahmins, the mathas appear to have played a crucial role in organising and regulating the affairs of the communities that owe loyalty to them. They act as non-voluntary frames of divinely ordained authority and continue to enjoy a great deal of goodwill. The matha heads are still presumed to possess great abilities. This goodwill is enough to ensure a state of material affluence.

Accordingly, even to begin with, the domains of functioning of the mathas and the caste associations had to be sorted out. In the second convention of the AMBM (held in 1949), the Sosale Vyasaraja matha head, in the course of his inaugural address, refers to some objections regarding the need for caste associations when there are mathas.

Isn’t it clear from the fact that a pontiff is asked to inaugurate the convention that the aim here is to seek their blessings and guidance in this attempt to undertake social reforms in

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32 Interview (12 March 2000) with Mr Vamanamurthy, a 62-year-old Smarta Brahmin who was previously active in JBS (along with Mr Kumaraswamy) and in AKBMS.
Notwithstanding such clearly stated lines of division, the relationship between mathas and corporate associations continues to be one of unease. Every major Brahmin convention, meeting or function begins in the presence of some important matha functionary; almost always, efforts are made to get heads representing all the three traditions. The ritual conduct specified when a loukika is in the presence of a sanyasi (renouncer) is followed with rigour and their sacred authority is never breached. The unease, however, crops up when the matha heads are made to respond to questions of the ‘everyday’, so to say. The corporate associational intent to equalise internal differences apparently puts many a matha head into a zone of discomfort. Even as recently as 1990, a Udupi matha head called for a debate on the issue of dvaita superiority over the advaita philosophy, drawing sharp reactions from the office bearers of the AKBMS. The then president of the AKBMS noted that in a context wherein efforts to organise the community are proving to be extremely difficult, such statements will have adverse effects. According to him, ‘the challenge by the pontiff for a public debate on dvaita–advaita superiority will prove to be an axe aimed at our efforts to unite the community’ (Vipra Nudi, February 1990). Likewise, in a book consisting of short introductory essays on the different Brahmin mathas of Karnataka, edited by an AKBMS activist (Prakasha Rao 1981), the matha heads who differed with the association’s insistence on Brahmin unity were squarely criticised. In fact, the AKBMS at its fourth convention held in Bangalore in May 1983 (when pontiffs representing all the three traditions were present) suggested in a memorandum addressed to the mathas:

It is a matter of increasing concern that, leaving behind the real intention that lay behind the triple-philosophy, the tendency to create wedges in the community is growing. You ought to, in no ambiguous terms, order that all the Brahmins

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33 Published during its third convention held in Bangalore.
be united and impress upon your followers that they are all one and the same. (Venkatanarayana 1988: 16)

Of the 35 activists interviewed during the study, only three thought that Brahmin pontiffs are indeed interested in obliterating differences. A few others maintained that since the mathas were founded on exclusivising philosophies, it would be difficult and even unfair to expect them to work like caste associations. All the others were unequivocal in criticising the ‘divisive’ nature of the mathas.

In a sentiment that is often expressed, mathas are accused of being too rigid, unresponsive and self-absorbed. It is pointed out that the Lingayat and the Vokkaliga mathas have made stupendous progress in terms of responding to the varied needs of their communities, most importantly in starting impressive institutions of higher learning, particularly of professional education like engineering and medical colleges. It is held that they have successfully emerged as key actors in the political arena, attracting a great deal of patronage and goodwill from the political leadership and successive state governments. Thus, it is their success in being secular power centres that is the object of envious narration by the Brahmin activists.

Brahmin mathas, it is maintained, have remained immersed in their ritual jamboree and internal squabbles. Indeed, the above mentioned memorandum devotes most of its attention towards impressing upon the mathas to remake themselves on the lines of Lingayat and Vokkaliga mathas:

In times such as ours, when the atheists have grown stronger, our beliefs and customs are ridiculed under the garb of rationality, it is secure to see you very much like the elephants which make their own way in the forest, taking up sanyasa with loyalty towards our great heritage. However we wish that you should keep in mind the material interests as much as that of the needs of the soul, so that you could guide us in the urgent task of rescuing the Brahmin community from the great difficulties. Many of our mathas are unable to perform such a task, primarily due to the current adversities. It is nonetheless heartening that at least some of them continue to be in a good financial position owing to the continued patronage extended by their followers….It is the most immediate need of our times to cater to the needs of the
90 per cent of Brahmins who are below the poverty line, and therefore we bring the following to your attention. (Ibid.)

Four of the six points raised in the charter pertain to the ‘everyday’ needs of the community, such as the opening of educational institutions, forming a common endowment fund with contributions from all the mathas to help the community, establishment of financial institutions, and working towards Brahmin unity. Notwithstanding this insistence, apart from a few mostly religious and primary educational institutions established by some of the mathas, the response has been one of stoic silence.

The point, note, is not that the mathas, caste associations and their constituents lead mutually exclusive and autonomous lives. There is a great deal of fluidity and hybridising in the conceptions of identity articulated—be it in terms of self-understandings about one’s own condition, programmatic ideas about ‘what is to be done’, conceptualisations of the ‘other’ and so on. For instance, the following describes the way in which AKBMS has sought to respond to the policy of reservation and thereby offered the community an articulate position on the issue.

The response of the Brahmin community and associations to the issue of reservations is not one of an unequivocal rejection. From the days of the Miller Committee to the contemporary period (a context in which reservation policy is quickly losing its very effectiveness owing to economic liberalisation), the Brahmin community has come a long way in negotiating with reservations.

To recall, when reservations were first mooted the Brahmin community reacted to the idea with a sense of disbelief. The position that the Brahmin spokesmen took was one of bitter opposition. However, the belligerent mood of rejection had to be soon retracted. By the first convention of the AMBM in 1944, the community had come far from the initial position of stubborn resistance. The convention, for sure, pleaded with the Maharajah to reconsider the existing reservation policy so that only ‘merit’ could be made the criterion in education and employment. But much of the deliberations at the convention focussed on the need for the Brahmin families to shed their exclusive reliance on government jobs. It called upon the community to take up independent vocations, and to begin looking beyond the government for its survival.
Indeed, in much of the literature these associations have produced on reservations and in the various memoranda submitted to the state and judiciary, nowhere is the position simply one of negation. It was made clear that the opposition was not one of principle but concerns the implementation. It is suggested that the community understands the need to provide special opportunities to the disadvantaged sections; nor is the demand made that Brahmins be provided with some share within the reservation quota. The points of objection, rather, are to the ‘indiscriminate’ increase in the reservation quota resorted to by the state governments; the ‘arbitrary’ implementation of reservations in promotions; the refusal on the part of the government and various backward classes commissions to take the economic status as the sole criterion for extending reservations to OBC communities; and the larger ill-effects of morale and efficiency that the policy can have on the well being of the nation.

Clearly, the objections are free from any trace of self-interest and are often couched in universal terms. The community is apparently concerned to highlight the implications of such reports and government orders extending reservations on ‘the well being and development of the nation’. The AKBMS memorandum presented to the central and state governments in February 1978 on the ‘injustice done to Brahmin Community’ by the government orders implementing the Havanur Report states:

The Brahmin caste is socially and educationally advanced but economically very backward. It desires that it should not be discriminated against. The Brahmin should not be treated as a Second Class Citizen. The caste does not want special treatments or privileges or concessions or advantages. But it should be treated as economically weaker section and should be given protection under Article 46 of the Constitution…

It is against national interest and the interest of the people as a whole to harass, penalise or victimise a gifted caste which by its own hard work and enterprise has come to occupy an important position in society. All that the Brahmins claim is justice and fair play. (Venkatanarayana 1988: 27)

34 In more recent times however, at the all-India level, there has been a demand made for reservations among economically dispossessed upper castes, including Brahmins. In the specific case of Karnataka, the demand is yet to gain ground.
Even as the memorandum appeals that the government order be revoked and the practice of caste enumeration be revived in census operations, it suggests that the government appoints a fresh commission that is ‘more representative’ and competent.

By 1986, however, in response to the Second Karnataka Backward Classes Commission Report, AKBMS had taken on a more pragmatic overtone. While recognising that reservations have to be accorded to SC, ST and other backward communities, and reiterating that reservations ought to have economic criteria as their basis, the AKBMS in a pamphlet notes:

> We have never asked for the tag of ‘backwardness’ and there is no point in asking for it too. In all our demands, the emphasis is merely that in the best interests of the nation merit should be welcomed irrespective of caste. Thus, isn’t our demand that 50 per cent should be reserved for merit and the remaining for reservation legal, logical, and rational? We have not asked anything for ourselves. (Venkatanarayana 1988: 4)

Two courses of action are charted before the community, one ‘temporary/immediate’ and the other ‘permanent’. While the former are concerned with steps like approaching the court against specific government orders, it is the latter charter of permanent measures that represents a complex positioning of the community vis-à-vis the state. This is a charter that aims to completely delink the community from the state, even if only as a matter of posturing and positioning:

1. In the next three years, schools, colleges, and technical educational institutions that are our own should be established.
2. It is clearly seen in the attitude of the government that, in the years to come, our community will be given less and less opportunities. Even in the merit pool our students are not dominating, calling bluff of the commonsense that Brahmins are ahead in merit. In talking about opportunities being denied to our students, we have to realise that there are limits to our fight against the government. Therefore, along with our fight, we have to … begin to think beyond government jobs into agriculture, industry, trade et al., particularly since only 2% of the
entire state’s population is employed in government services.

3. In starting such institutions, mathas, industrialists, the well-off have to lend a helping hand.

4. Along with educational institutions, there is a dire need for financial help. Since it is desirable that we have one such institution across the state, the recently established Akhila Karnataka Kshemabhyudaya Sangha will have to assume a leading role. (Ibid.: 7–8)

The position articulated herein reflects the growing belief that the state has actively connived in denying opportunities to the community. Clearly the initial steps towards the formulation of a discourse of self-reliance are being taken. That the situation on the ground did not really reflect such an independence from the apparatuses and institutions of the state is not seen to be problematic. The grouse and frustration against reservations is such a constitutive element in the contemporary Brahmin discourse that the community indulges in a plethora of stories about some relative or friend losing out in the race for a technical education owing to reservation quotas. The experiment of Vipra-97, a three-day convention organised especially for the Brahmin youth by the AKBMS in 1997, was in some ways a culmination of the rhetoric of self-reliance. It was an ambitious project of the AKBMS, the central idea being the ‘need to provide the youth with a new vision’ (from the souvenir brought out by the AKBMS during Vipra-97). The language delivering that vision is equally informative:

> It is the first such attempt to stamp out the general belief that Brahmins can only be priests or become top officials, and that neither industry nor trade is their cup of tea, and to show to the world that if a Brahmin makes up his mind he can and

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35 Which can be summarily referred to as the ‘35% marks story’—for, the typical story began with some Brahmin (only very few times such stories cast one’s own self) being denied a medical or engineering seat despite scoring 90 per cent or more marks in the preceding examination only because some ‘SC’ (stated with a derisive tone) with just 35 per cent (just passing marks) had to be accommodated. The circulation of this story was widespread.
...will succeed in any field... It is the driving mantra of the
convention that, hereafter, it is only self-reliance that exists
before Brahmin youth.

...The present context of reservation, which harms the
interests of the Brahmin youth the most, necessitates Vipra-
97. In reality Brahmins are never opposed to reservations.
Indeed they agree that the communities, which for historical
reasons were left behind, need to increase their
representation. But they cannot sit idly in the face of a
government policy of social justice that seeks to compromise
the very survival of the future generations of Brahmins. Even
as it is important that we fight against unfair and unjustifiable
policies of the government, it is equally important to realise
and adjust our strategies in the changing social and economic
contexts.36

Many activists view the convention as a historic moment in
the history of Brahmin mobilisation. Structured in the model of
an exhibition fair, it contained stalls acquainting Brahmin youth
with the diverse opportunities for self-employment along with
offers of financial assistance.

By the 1990s, a new avenue had made its entry. The following
is an article published in *Vipra Nudi* (September 2000). Audac-
iously titled ‘Wake Up, Brahmin! You are Unconquerable!! The
Field of the Meritorious, the Computer Software Industry—
Untainted by the Hangman’s Noose, the Government Reservation’,
the article speaks of a new confidence marking the self-description
and evaluation of the community:

The computer field, which recognises only merit and is rid
of caste, community etc., today is overflowing with brilliance.
It is indeed the greatest achievement of the 21st century that
the Brahmin community, which was being stamped out in
the name of reservations, is occupying 60 per cent of this
field...

Even before the angry eyes of the government and the
politicians fall on it, it is generating billions worth foreign

36 Vipra-97: *Yuvakarige Hosa Gari Thorisva Daarideepa* (Vipra-97: The
path-light that shows a new aim to the youth), *Vipra Nudi*, January
1997.
exchange and according an important place for the country in the eyes of the world. Since even students who have finished their PUC but are proficient in computers are extended invitations to work abroad, it is clear that the foreigners have noticed the sorry state of government degrees. It is now commonsense that more than 60 per cent of ranks at the SSLC and PUC levels are taken by Brahmins. Brahmins, recognised as the most superior in the varna hierarchy, are evading all obstacles and are monopolising the computer field.

It is indeed the defeat of the ‘reservation politicians’ that in foreign countries only merit is being recognised and not reservations.

...The Brahmin families, which were economically backward, can sport a smile of contentment. However, the young men will have to inculcate the tradition-honoured Brahmin culture and conduct. They will have to understand that it is precisely these that are keeping their brilliance alive and helping them in times of crisis like the present. They ought not to become casual about it, which will lead them to lose the blessings of Gayatri, the mother of all that is meritorious and brilliant.

(Vipra Nudi, September 2000, emphasis in the original has been removed)

Indeed many such articles have appeared in Vipra Nudi recently, giving testimony to the growing confidence of the Brahmins in the liberalisation policies and the new economy. The perception is not restricted to the participants of the association; even those unconnected with association affairs lend voice to such perceptions as we will see in the next chapter. Primarily based on the interviews conducted with individual Brahmins families, an effort will be made to highlight some dimensions of the formation of the contemporary Brahmin identity by juxtaposing the respondents’ narratives with the descriptions foregrounded in this and the previous chapters.
The introductory chapters presented caste and its ‘substantialisation’ as an overarching framework for theoretical and empirical elucidations. This focus has translated into a concern with ‘caste’ as an axis of identity and identification; and it is this focus that the present chapter hopes to consolidate. The chapter seeks to describe the focus more fully from the standpoint of the Brahmin person—situated within individuated worlds of kin, family and friendship networks.

I begin with the varied contestations that were staged between the ‘pro-reform’ Brahmins and the ‘orthodox’ Brahmins. The field of this contestation allows us an entry point into understanding the ways in which contemporary Brahmin selfhood manages to resolve itself into a secularised imagination. Indeed, when we speak to the Brahmins of today, the contest over who is suitable to represent the Brahmin self from among the different contending imaginations is resolved in favour of the secularising Brahmin persona. However, this resolution does not mean that the Brahmin has been able to coherently address his/her caste self, or, more pointedly, about the Brahmin-ness of his/her self. This equivocation will be focussed upon in this chapter as it pursues the question: what does it mean to be a ‘Brahmin’ today? Our narrative, hopefully by now, has set up a whole new context for negotiating the bases of caste action, as indeed of caste as an axis of identity and identification.
Of ‘Progressive’ and ‘Orthodox’ Brahmins

By the early decades of the last century, the question of ‘community reform’ emerged as an important issue before the Brahmins. Brahmin men (and a few women) who were educated and occupied secular positions of power were at the forefront, demanding that the community shed many of its practices which were seen as being regressive. The opponents—represented by both Brahmin individuals and institutions like the Brahmin mathas—were dubbed as the orthodoxy. This confrontation, and the specific ways in which it was staged, proved crucial in providing an idiom for restructuring the possibilities of the modern Brahmin identity. The confrontation plots itself as an encounter between the ‘orthodox Brahmin’ and the ‘progressive Brahmin’; it culminated in the successful validation of the latter, often at the cost of the former. The justification for reform was often rooted within the ground of tradition. The point of divergence was on the ground of ‘correct’ interpretation and the ‘original meaning’ of the sastras. The ‘place’ of women was often the site of this contestation, especially since the issues concerning Brahmin women and reform—whether of age at marriage or of equal rights—provided non-Brahmin leaders an opportunity to decry the ‘double standards’ of progressive Brahmins when it came to the development of non-Brahmins.

During the late 1910s and early 1920s, there was an ongoing debate on allowing women to become members of the Mysore Representative Assembly. There were many members, including Brahmins, who were opposed to this idea. However, as the reports on the proceedings of the Assembly illustrate, the ‘progressive’ Brahmin was increasingly gaining legitimacy against the ‘orthodoxy’, and it was only a matter of time before his demand that women be allowed to contest for membership was accepted (as it was in 1927). The non-Brahmins, however, saw it as a conspiracy to increase the number of Brahmin members in the Assembly (Hanumanthappa n.d., Vol. II: 175–86). In a 1921 session, D. S. Mallappa, a Vokkaliga leader, was ‘surprised’ to see his Brahmin friends pleading earnestly on behalf of women on the ground that they were backward and that facilities should be provided to make them forward. He then wondered why they should not have extended the same support when the question of
advancing the interests of backward communities came up for discussion in the Assembly (ibid.: 181). Paralleling this are the debates about the age at marriage, which gets articulated at different fora—from the Assembly to the many sastrartha held before the different matha heads, as indeed ‘progressive’ Brahmin individuals confronting the institution of the matha and so on. What the issue primarily animates is the clear decline in the authority of the institution of the Brahmin mathas and of the ‘orthodoxy’. However, as we shall see, the erosion of their authority does not simultaneously announce the weakening of the hold (or, at least, the invocation) of the sastras over the definitions of appropriate (and inappropriate) conduct. The terms of conduct are re-framed but do not become obsolete in their ability to provide meanings and structures of legitimacy.

Besides, it is also important to note that the reformatory zeal exhibited by many of the ‘progressive’ Brahmin individuals did not necessarily entail the latter championing the cause of non-Brahmins. This is of course no smug statement of a re-invention of the Brahmin will to successfully define and legitimate itself in the changed circumstances. In fact, as the respondents’ self-descriptions will exhibit, the challenge to the identity of being Brahmin was rather foundational, one that was endured in a markedly ambivalent state even as the quest for self-seeking continued to be essayed. These ambivalences are important, since they obtain as integuments of the process by which the modern Brahmin self gets to be constructed.

The particular issue of reform, namely, the age at marriage, was primarily a concern of the Brahmin community. It was chiefly among Brahmins that the age at marriage was relatively very less, which had such consequences as the predominance of young widows, significant rates of child mortality, and so on. The 1893 memorandum presented before the Assembly on the proposed Infant Marriages Act aimed at raising the age at marriage of both men and women. It had 81 Brahmins arraigning against it and 33 in favour of it. The major participants in this debate were Brahmin members of the Assembly, with the proponents deliberating primarily on the high rates of Brahmin widows and their pitiable conditions (ibid.: 155–63). There were public meetings discussing the issue in which the sastras were the sole legitimating authority.
What is significant here is that the ‘orthodoxy’ consistently opposed both community reform and the non-Brahmin demand, while the ‘progressive’ group opposed the latter and passionately supported the former. Indeed, it was often the leaders of the ‘progressive’ group that remained the primary opposition for non-Brahmin articulations. For instance, Tataiah, in a prolific public life spanning close to half a century, was at the forefront of all such reform measures—widow remarriage, raising the age at marriage, extending the clause of compulsory education to girls. But he is also the most representative symbol of the Brahmin will to deny the non-Brahmins their equitable share in modern resources.

He was most active in the debate on the age at marriage too. In its issue of 30 May 1915, by way of a report titled ‘Vivahacharche’ (Debate on Marriage), the Mysore Star relates the discussion that took place in the presence of a pontiff of the (Madhva) Uttaradi matha at an advocate’s residence. In that meeting Brahmins of all denominations had gathered in great numbers. Heading the pro-reform side, Tataiah argued how the sastras are there for the community and not the other way; that the sastras have always advocated modifications according to the changing times, and that the tide of the times was for raising the age at marriage. He cited many sastra-validated sutras (aphoristic rules) in making his case. While he failed to convince those present, the moral authority that he had at his disposal was unmistakable.

The deference accorded to the authority of the matha was certainly becoming circumscribed and even circumspect. This

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1 Hosting and felicitating the head of the matha to which a family owes its allegiance has been an important practice, and continues to this day. While the reaffirmation of one’s allegiance to the matha is the obvious intent behind such felicitations, it is also an occasion to assert one’s own standing in the community and, obliquely, an attempt to tap the highly connected networks of the mathas for one’s benefits. During the late colonial period, such occasions were also employed to discuss critical issues concerning the Brahmin jatis to which families belonged. Significant among them were matters concerning the propriety of samudrayaana (crossing the seas) at marriage and female education. Such debates used to go on for weeks together.

2 Conlon (1977) narrates, in greater detail, the conflict between the Saraswats and their matha again on the issue of reform.
coincides with the coming to be a secularising Brahmin self, one who acknowledges the authority of both the institution of the matha and of its head but whose space of negotiation is by no means unequivocal. The erosion of the authority of the Brahmin mathas was a sub-text that ran through the story of the Hale Karnatakas that we discussed previously. The fact that the matha in question there was the Sringeri matha makes the point even more pertinent, for the latter is the defining institution for Smartas and their identity. Its authority was not merely spiritual and symbolic; it both represented and is vested with a great deal of temporal power (see Gnanambal 1972; Shastri 1997). It ranged from the confiscation of property of the heir-less to buying destitute women and ostracising families that had violated ‘caste’ prescriptions and proscriptions.

The following narrative from DVG (1997: 479–82) makes the point effectively. DVG is narrating an incident wherein a highly influential official in the British bureaucracy, Right Honourable V. S. Srinivasa Shastri, a Privy Council Member (a Smarta), is debating with the Sringeri pontiff the issue of the imperially constituted Sarda Bill (1929) which proposed to raise the legal age at marriage. Even DVG, a resolute votary of the vaidika Brahmins (who, for him, represented the true essence of Brahminhood), was clearly seeking a position that in many ways was at odds with the ‘orthodoxy’. DVG had accompanied Shastri on that trip to Sringeri.

In the course of an audience, the matha head expresses his anguish:

It is good that you came here at this point....It appears that there is a legislation being debated in the Imperial Council in Delhi, called the ‘Sarada Bill’. What has become of our times? Why name a legislation, which is totally disagreeable to Mother Sarada [the presiding deity at Sringeri], after her? This anomaly has to be put a stop to. You are the one to do it, for you are a Privy Council Member and have access to the Viceroy in person.

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3 The reference is to the Child Marriage Restraint Act 1929, popularly known as the Sarda Act named after its chief architect Harbilas Sarda.

4 See his Vaidikadharma Sampradaayastharu (The Followers of the Vaidikadharma, 1997).
Shastri suggests that since it is puja time, they could discuss the matter the next day. The pontiff gives him a hymn to chant daily. Shastri accepts it but tells the former that although he would not chant it, he will definitely keep it as a mark of respect. DVG is intrigued, and later enquires as to what he meant. Shastri clarifies:

I do not even do the sandhyavandane every day....Then how can I assure that I will chant this hymn everyday? Moreover, the hymn itself is nothing great. Don’t we have hundreds of hymns like this one? What is so special about it? But the Gurupeeta [the authority vested in the seat of the Guru] has given it to me with some abhimana [patronising love] and it is our duty to respect it.

The following day they discuss the Bill. Shastri gives a long response to the guru, and quoting the full conversation might be necessary here:

**Shastri:** You are referring to the Bill that seeks to increase the age-at-marriage for girls. I too agree with the Bill. A few years ago, when I was a member of the Madras Legislative Council, I thought such a change is necessary and had prepared a Draft Bill. However...my proposal did not make it. My opinion though has remained the same. Now when someone else proposes it, how can I oppose? Not only that, in many of the marriages performed in my own family, the bride had crossed the age that is now considered to be appropriate. Thus, it is not merely my thinking but also my action that is pro-modification....

The naming of the Bill as ‘Sarda Bill’ is not to name it after the Goddess Sarada. It is merely named after the proposer, Harbilas Sarda. He is himself is greatly devoted to the Hindu religion....He has authored a book...titled ‘Hindu Superiority’, wherein he has presented a collage of the opinions of European scholars praising Hindu religion. Thus he is a man who takes pride in his religion....

I believe that the sastras prescribe the marriage of only those who have reached puberty. I have studied this prescription as found in the sastras...they do not show any basis for the present practice of marriage before puberty, between the age of eight and ten. We can only guess that this has come into practice due to some unknown historical pressure and thus is not ancient. Please see the hymns that are chanted...
during the ritual of marriage. [He reproduces the hymns]. Their meaning is clear. It is not something that is appropriate to be told to a girl of eight to ten years…. One should also analyse the ritual of marriage. It says the couple should spend three nights together. [Quoting a sutra, he says] it means that the bride is ready to undergo this ritual at the time of marriage. This is what the grhya [household or domestic] sutras say too.

**The Guru:** We have not seen the grhya sutras.

**Shastri:** That is because the grhya sutras are irrelevant to the life of a renouncer like you. But the present contention belongs to the sphere of householder’s Dharma, and therefore I think grhya sutras ought to guide us in the matter.

**The Guru:** That appears to be an important point. We will get back once we read the grhya sutras. (DVG 1997: 479–82)

There are several crucial elements that mark the secular Brahmin self in the above narration. First, the different position that Shastri is articulating vis-à-vis the guru. He is not an obedient subject that unquestioningly bows before the authority of the guru. But it is also a subjectivity of silent and yet firm deference vis-à-vis the guru that Shastri keeps intact, honouring the authority, if not the particular figure, occupying that position. He even thinks of ingenious ways to prevent the guru from coming across as incompetent—as the suggestion that the guru, being the renouncer, is perhaps not aware of the issue that concerns the householder. Second, he is somebody who can question the guru and still hold ground. Note also that Shastri is arguing his case precisely on the grounds of a ‘correct’ and thus more ‘authentic’ reading of the sastras, and not on the ground of individual choice.

It is one of the clearest expositions of the emerging Brahmin self, particularly because it is transposed against the terms of a ‘traditional’ characterisation. Indeed, many individuals such as Shastri are much more ‘informed’ about their Brahminness than those inhabiting the authority structures of the matha or priesthood, even as they remain unsure about owning up that identity. They make articulate defences of the entity and identity of the Brahmin, and many even do so with generous citations from the scriptural texts. Their newer contexts allow and even spur many of them to be reflexive about their identities. There is a keener, more critical and argumentative self-perception of their Brahmin selfhood, which, as we shall see, also comes across in
the perceptions of the families and individuals interviewed. It is not merely an identity that is taken on, but one that is variously and critically received; refashioned as a response to the larger processes of secularisation, non-Brahmin othering and the variegated demands that other contending self-perceptions seem to be making on them. A. N. Murthy Rao (encountered in Chapter 4) expresses a similar incredulity in his autobiography (1990) while making a stronger point about the institutions of mathas and orthodoxy. He observes:

> It is the pontiffs and religious leaders who can objectively analyse tradition to guide the community in its perception and negotiation with it. Moreover, their word carried greater weight then [he is referring to the early decades of the last century]. But even in them a social consciousness had not developed. They thought that ‘tradition’ is itself ‘religion’ and were anxious to protect it. They, often, did not even bother to find whether the scriptures authorised the tradition and the prevailing customs....I would expect our religious gurus to be well versed in all the scriptures. Or at least that they defer taking positions until after they have had a close look at the scriptures. It even surprised me that the pontiff had not even known about Harbilas Sarda for his name was routinely mentioned in the newspapers then. It appeared to me that those who have taken sanyasa [renunciation], even if it be the pontiffs, should not lose interest in the outside world so completely. (Murthy Rao 1990: 52–54)

Similarly, the ‘progressive’ Brahmin persona shared an increasingly ambiguous relationship with the ‘sacred’ Brahmin—particularly that construction of the Brahmin self that was seen to embody the oppressive regimes of caste as a social system. The ambiguity was itself radically textured and encompassed a range. While, for instance, T. P. Kailasam (1884–1946), known as the father of modern Kannada theatre, was contemptuous of what he described as the ‘priest-craft’, DVG is more sympathetic albeit setting an agenda before whom he characterises as vaidika (referring primarily to the priestly) Brahmins.

An England-educated geologist, Kailasam was reportedly a maverick, and that too for a Brahmin of his generation. Coming
from an influential Iyer family of Mysore, Kailasam gave up a bright career with the government to lead an aimless life writing plays in Kannada and English. Kailasam was clearly not drawn into the politics of his day (even while being greatly impressed by Gandhi). He can, if anything, be put under the category of a ‘reformist’.

While all his Kannada plays were contextualised to the middle-class Brahmin families of his times and therefore can be seen to be reflections on the contemporary state of the community, the one titled ‘Nam Brahmanke’ [Our Brahminness], encountering the space of conduct of the annual death rites (the sraddha) of the wife of a Brahmin High Court judge, is the most pugnacious. Its subtitle (which is in English) is ‘A Satirical Farce to titilate and ventilate Today[’s] Orthodoxy’. The ‘place, language and situation’ of the play is, as it affirms, ‘modern’. The famous proclamation from the Bhagavadgeeta, as told by Lord Krishna, namely,

\[
\text{Chaathurvarnyam mayaa srishtam} \\
\text{Guna karma vibhaagashaha} \\
\text{[I created the four-fold varna division} \\
\text{Based on quality/character and the deeds]}
\]

is prominently positioned along with the list of the characters, and frames the intent behind the play. The following are two short poems in English in free verse, written by Kailasam himself, that are positioned as framing devices.

When Greed, the demon, djinn or elf, 
Obsesses Brahmin’s Soul, 
‘Its lust of flesh or pow’r or pelf 
Distorts his God-bound soul! 
Poor fool! Confusing sense of Self, 
He plays dread Satan’s role!!

…

Gang North, gang South, gang West, gang East, 
The foulest foe of man indeed, 
This pest!!…inhuman beast…this priest!

\[\text{All the citations that follow in the text are from the collection Kailasam Kritigalu (Kailasam 1987: 475–505).}\]
The quote from the *Bhagavadgeeta* and the two verses set the stage for a thoroughly vituperative indictment of the Brahmin priests of his day. The story builds on the resourcefulness of the Brahmin family-priest in chopping the rituals to suit the requirements of the busy judge and his college-going, cricket-enthusiastic son. Incidentally, the priest himself is a failure in his pursuit of modern education, having been a classmate of the judge during early schooling. Of course, he deploys all his resourcefulness for money, without an iota of regard for the image of the ‘ideal Brahmin’. At one level, it is the ‘downfall’ of the idealised Brahmin (in particular, the vaidika Brahmin) that this play bemoans; lamenting the degradation of a ‘creed’ into ‘greed’, of ‘priesthood’ into ‘priestcraft’. But at another level, this priestly degradation is counterposed against a secularising Brahmin self that is represented in the figures of the judge and his son and daughter. The latter are on a mission to reconfigure their Brahmin self. This entails ambiguities in their identification of being Brahmin but it is in no sense a dismissal of such identification. The judge and his children all seem to reconfigure the terms of identity from their own locations, even as they share a similar ground of the need to be reflexive about the process while the priest himself is not allowed this exercise of reflexivity.

All this can be legitimately seen as Kailasam setting an agenda for the Brahmin community of his times—an agenda that is as much framed by the non-Brahmin critique as it is by the larger trajectories of secularisation and individuation, wherein the need to become ‘modern’ is feverishly emphasised even as that

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6 To be sure, Kailasam’s plays nowhere foreground the non-Brahmin othering self-consciously; nor does such a frame present itself distinctly by means of a reading of the plays in themselves. For instance, in the play under consideration, some of the integuments for a mapping of the Brahmin self are provided by a Christian friend and the Muslim servant rather than by any non-Brahmin ‘Hindu’ characters. Nevertheless, some of Kailasam’s other incidental remarks—a witticism that has acquired a near-folkloric status in the Kannada cultural firmament—point to a sensibility that is very alive to this larger thematic of non-Brahmin othering within which ‘caste’ seems to be operating in the Karnataka (and south Indian) context. These remarks have been variously collated in reminiscences and collections.
'modernness' is itself deeply implicated in and made responsible for one’s Brahminness. The judge’s son is indignant of the purity–pollution principles undergirding caste. He wonders, while getting a shave done from the family barber, whether at least after death and in heaven his grandfather would be allowed to shake hands with the barber’s grandfather.

He has to play a cricket match in an hour’s time when the Brahmin cook comes to remind him that it is the sraddha day of his dead mother and that he needs to take a purificatory bath. The son replies:

Bath?! Yes of course! Mother’s Shraddha…Say A! Constant! …father’s Court say C! more constant!! But my Cricket match say B!…most constant! I should be ready by eleven! But all three becoming Constant is absurd! Therefore one of the three must become variable! High Court cannot be moved; Cricket field fixture; so also the match! It is impossible to put off the mother’s sraddha; so, all the three have to be constant! Therefore…fourth factor taking bath…must be variable! Just get me the moguta [a piece of cloth made of silk, which at all times remains pure]. I will just wear it and be ready…for the Ceremony!!

Notice not just the deployment of a mathematical logic in perceiving a ‘sacred’ phenomenon, but also the priorities that he assigns to each of the factors by dividing them into constants and variables. The everyday practices governed by a principle of purity–pollution are treated with disdain, even as the very coherence of the need to perform the sraddha is recognised and recouped. The son then wheedles the family priest into manufacturing a ritual, firmed up by a Sanskrit sloka (chant), for lighting a cigarette (of course by means of an offer of a rupee as the bait). He also cajoles the priest to finish off the ritual within half an hour so that he can make it to the match in time.

The middle-class Brahmin characters in all of Kailasam’s Kannada plays generously use English words and sentences in their Kannada. The English words are made to work as Kannada words, by adding ‘u’ or ‘oo’ at the end. Such usages have been ‘sanitised’ here while quoting Kailasam. In the quotation, the English words and sentences in the original are italicised.
The widowed daughter of the judge, pursuing postgraduate studies, undertakes another disavowal of the ‘orthodoxy’ of the Brahmins. She takes her Christian friend home in order to prove that Brahminism, as it is practised, has become slave to the principle of ‘Greed! Thy name is ‘Orthodoxy’. However, when confronted by the view of her Christian friend that ‘Hinduism’ has degraded itself by creating the caste system, she embarks on the most unambiguous recovering of the question of caste. The daughter clarifies that caste was not meant to be a system, but a ‘divinely deliberated organization’ conceived for the ‘well-being of the society’ by Lord Krishna. Elucidating the point, she states:

CASTE ORGANIZATION...ACCORDING TO THE Bhagavadgeeta OBTAINS TO-DAY...IN EVERY PART OF THE WORLD, EXCEPT IN INDIA! I shall explain it to you. The Benthamite cry of ‘the greatest good of the greatest number’ is of a very recent origin. This is but a feeble echo of the ‘sarvejanaaha sukhinobhavantu’...The Vedic dictum that reverberated from one end to the other of this earth! The basis of the relation of the individual entity...to the communal entirety...is to so use the talents that God has given him for ITS good, in requital of his receiving the benefits from the community as an approved unit thereof!! Thus, if you have nothing but brains, becoming a Brahmin...if you have more muscles than brains, becoming a Kshatriya...even if you don’t have either...as Milton said ‘They also serve who stand and wait’...if you till the land, becoming a sudra...serving the talents that God has endowed to the society is the only human’s duty!! THUS NO PARTICULAR CASTE IS SUPERIOR TO ANY OTHER CASTE. See, now with war raging [the reference is here to the Second World War], every man who fights...is a ‘Kshatriya’ irrespective of his birth; every priest who prays that ‘Well befall the right’ and cheers the fighter is a Brahmin. Every tiller...sower... reaper...cook...merchant...that provides the ‘sinews of war’ is a Vaishya or a Sudra!!...Now to the caste system that is peculiar to our India...[II] is the subtlety of priest-hood, which, turning into priest-craft, has dominated the ninety two percent of illiterate Indians to the extent of giving lie to Lord Krishna’s organization by making the small detail of Location of Birth in society

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8 Which is a statement against the Brahmin orthodoxy of his times, for the widowed daughter is sent for higher studies.
Thus the caste system is held to be an aberration, while caste as organisation is a principle that marks all societies. Lord Krishna—a non-Brahmin by birth, as pointedly noted⁹—made the caste identity of an individual determined by his vocation, while ‘priestcraft’—authored by those who claimed Brahminhood by birth—has worked to make the accident of birth the determinant of one’s identity. As we shall see later, this frame informs the self-recuperation of Brahmin selfhood for most of our respondents. Kailasam does not make his characters pursue the question of the ‘accident of birth’: what does it mean to be ‘accidentally’ born into a Brahmin family and not, say, a Sudra family? Our respondents, however, work through this puzzle by foregrounding a notion of samskara—that is, a culture of upbringing as indeed of a genetic make-up that is seen to be unique to Brahmins. I shall take up the terms of this delineation later on in the chapter.

Meanwhile, Kailasam returns to another ground for a refashioning of the Brahmin identity. Having noted the explanation, the Christian friend is even more confounded as to why the family continues to observe events like the sraddha, and in the process ‘foster hollow orthodoxy...despite [its] contempt for the jargon of mantrams and tantrams of...the priest-craft’. The judge then offers to answer her, both ‘by proxy’ as well as directly. By way of the former, he asks the old Muslim servant why he did not go home after his night duty at the judge’s place. The old servant, evidently overcome by grief, says with a quavering voice:

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⁹ Framing him as a ‘non-Brahmin’ as against the other probable modes of recupering his identity—of being a Yadava or a Kshatriya, for instance—brings into perspective the over-determining impact the non-Brahmin articulation exercised on the register of caste of those times.
Though my feet were dragging me homewards in the morning, my mind was unwilling, sir. The cook reminded me that today is madam's sraddha. I have been brought up by the grandmother, the elder madam and the younger madam [judge’s grandmother, mother and wife respectively]. I just can’t forget that sir. Therefore, I couldn’t get myself to go away.

The judge then turns to the Christian friend and clarifies:

…do not forget, he believes in his MOHAMED...just as religiously as you do in your CHRIST...and we do in our KRISHNA....It is not the ceremonies that pulled this old man...to aver that while his feet mechanically dragged him homeward, it was his heart that reminded him of the sunshine and the sweet love that these three women have been spreading all over us....So, the religious part of these ceremonies commemorating the departing of our dearly beloved forebears...is not so much in the ritual as in the spiritual; begot of love of present-past-and future being...a love ruled not by brain or reason but by the beat of the heart, which binds a Mussalman—a Christian—or a Hindu!... When human hearts beat in tune, the differences of colour, caste, heredity of the flesh-built bodies...are transcended and such hearts defy such differences!

Apart from the marginalisation of the act of ritual by foregrounding the trope of the ‘spiritual’, what is also significant here is the elision of the question of caste in order to inhabit the more secularised and broad-based space of being Hindu, of even being merely human. This transference is one of the strategies which the contemporary Brahmin consistently engages while negotiating his/her caste self. Thus, moving on to what he terms a more ‘direct handling’ of the Christian friend’s question, the judge explicitly foregrounds an imaging of the self as Hindu:

These ceremonies in general and the annual ceremonies to commemorate the memory of our dear departed relatives in particular [are all] not entirely a matter of abstract discussion and cool reasoning....The religion of the Hindus is so universally applicable in respect of the fact that it not only points out that while Science is but Relative Truth, Religion
is absolute truth for all time; but it emphasises, nay, reinforces
the tenets of all other creeds and religions which have faith
and belief in all our ONE-MAKER!!! Science, by its own
history, is truth, but relative to the limitations of resources
and accoutrements in point of instruments and implements
accessible to man for each phase of man’s history!—But
Religion is absolute truth for all times! Look here! (pointing
to Radhakrishnan's portrait hanging…)—a Hindu engaged
by Britain of all countries, to teach all Oxford in the subject
of Comparative Study of Religions! (Pointing to … portrait of
Gandhi) the mute suffering humanity all over this war-ridden
earth looking up to another great Hindu to usher in an era of
peace and plenty, governed by AHIMSA and TRUTH!—
should convince you…that ‘When the Heart reigns rampant,
Reason grovels Couchant!’ (capitalisation in the original)

Now, if Kailasam was willing to dismiss and disown the
contemporary ‘degenerate’ state of the Brahmin ‘priestcraft’, DVG
is more sympathetic and willing to accommodate priests in the
imagination of the community. Indeed, it appears that the latter
was in some sense responding to Kailasam himself, for he employs
the term ‘priestcraft’ which is Kailasam’s very own.

DVG proposes an eight-point charter (ibid.: 370–01) in order
that the Brahmin priests could improve their ‘pathetic economic
status’ and also, more importantly, remove the contempt of being
called the practitioners of ‘priest-craft’. The charter, broadly,
emphasises the need to reconcile the two Brahmin personas, with
the priests being advised to determinedly stick to their calling
without seeking returns even in times of duress such as the
contemporary times while the secular Brahmin is implored to
preserve the value of the way of life of the vaidika Brahmin by
according the latter an exalted status. DVG even seeks to deploy
the imagination of being Hindu in arguing for the importance of
such Brahmins:

[Moreover] nobody should feel that the tradition of the vedas
and sastras concerned only the Brahmins. Their protection
is the duty of the entire Hindu creed, for it is a property that
belongs equally to all the Hindu varnas. Why just the Hindu
society, they are a great treasure to the entire world. The
vaidika Brahmin, if anything, functions only as a trustee in this matter. He is somebody who protects his traditions of knowledge and customs for the well-being of the entire people. *Brahmanasaṃdikshane* [protecting both the Brahmin person and the Brahmin persona] is essential, thus, for the benefit of the Hindu society in its entirety, and for the well-being of the entire world. (*Ibid.*: 374)

The negotiated being and becoming of Brahmin selves were thus multiple and varied. There are some reminders with regard to this play of identities impinging on the personhood of the contemporary Brahmin that need mentioning, before we proceed to an analysis of the self-descriptions of the respondents themselves.

First, it appears that speaking on behalf of the modern Brahmin self need not translate itself into or become equivalent to speaking as (leave alone speaking for) the Brahmin. This is linked up with an associated point, namely, that even as the secularised Brahmin self is consciously seeking distance from given, pejorative imaginations, the selfhood that gets postulated is not thereby an alienated subjectivity. It is not a simple rejection of the Brahmin identity *tout court*, or even a refusal to inhabit that space. The reworking of the self-perception of being Brahmin is a legitimised enterprise—in that the refusal to follow everyday caste rules or question the traditional structures of authority is all undertaken within the limits of tolerance. What is not permissible, however, is the breaking of endogamy, an act that continues to be the clearest statement of dissent, indifference even.

Second, it is clear that the emergent Brahmin self is not a monolithic and coherent entity that encompasses all Brahmin individuals who are secularised and individuated. There is a textured and differentiated spectrum. The heterogeneity that marks this emergent self can be seen as a testimony to the deep impact that the demands of being modern have had on the Brahmins. Nonetheless, one can identify the larger matrix which unifies and renders this self a sociologically identifiable entity. It is in the direction of such an identification that we shall move in the sections that follow.
Regrouping the Strategies of Brahmin Selfhood

From the discussion thus far, it can be gathered that the following are the primary strategies of the Brahmin self. First, the Brahmin begins to articulate her/himself in the modern condition as being a ‘self under siege’ and sees no hope for its future. Even as the secularising Brahmin would like to be seen as operating in spaces that are beyond the pale of caste signification, the vehemence of the non-Brahmin articulation and the support the latter receives from the modern state forces him/her to confront his/her Brahminness as the prime marker of self-identification. More acutely, the associational endeavours foreground and feed off such imaginations.

Second, the Brahmin self largely accepts and even actively participates in the image of the ‘oppressor’ that the non-Brahmin articulation builds for it. Accordingly, the construction of a ‘past’ that was abominable because it was seen to have been organised around the ‘caste system’ is shared by both; and, both see the ‘oppressor Brahmin’ as a ‘degenerate Brahmin’, even if the contemporary Brahmin denies this ‘oppressor’ status a coevalness in time with him/herself. The Brahmin’s own life situation of secularisation and individuation suggests to her/him the impossibility and the undesirability of successfully enforcing caste norms upon oneself and on others.

Third, the Brahmin, both as an individual self and at the level of the association, sets up a distinction between the ‘ideal’ Brahmin (the idea of being Brahmin) and the ‘real’ (the empirically available Brahmins, with all the frailties and corruptions of being human) and argues for the former space of conduct and identification. Here the Brahmin is turned into a value (or valuation) that is detached from the fact of birth. The Brahmin identity is thus universalised detaching it from its several or particularising specificities.

Fourth, the emergent Brahmin self seeks to keep its caste identity under constant erasure or at least seeks to displace and marginalise it in its modes of self-retrieval and self-perception. Thus, as the Headmaster Nanjundaiah (cited in Chapter 4)

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Note this section compresses much that is derived from the previous chapters and the present one.
Identities and Displacements

states, its descriptive value is nothing more than being a ‘list’ of people—a mere ‘association’ rather than being a ‘community’. What then is made to take centrestage in the Brahmin self-imagination is its secularising function—of being Indian, Kannadiga or even Hindu at one level and of being a bureaucrat, lawyer or teacher at another. This, in many ways, also enables a recuperation of the Brahmin self as a mere associational affinity even as one can and ought to ideally aspire to Brahminness in its ideal sense. The ambit of this articulation resolves many of the tensions that the Brahmin persona is forced to address in the contemporary context, even as it restructures the modern Brahmin identity in important ways—making possible certain enunciations and forbidding others, even rendering some more legitimate than others.

One can, for sure, profitably make sense of the emerging contours of this identity and identification as constituting a will-to-legitimacy, especially in the face of contestation. For, as we have demonstrated, the secularising attributes of the Brahmin situation did act as a highly utilitarian cultural resource that was put to use in the emerging public sphere of print and officialdom. The attempt to speak from a position that is, as it were, ‘de-casted’ almost always gave it the power of an universal self-definition, often forcing the non-Brahmin articulation to defend (what from the Brahmin viewpoint seemed to be) its sectarian agendas.

Nonetheless, it is greatly important to recognise that these processes impinging on caste action were beyond the ability of even the Brahmin to mediate and contain and it is this inability that explains the deeply ambivalent relationship that the Brahmin entertains vis-à-vis one’s own casteness—with the identification of being Brahmin. Thus, even as one seeks to mediate the realities of the others, one’s own sense of being gets mediated and transformed. Broadly, it would be within this architectonics that one should receive the narrations and self-descriptions of modern contemporary Brahmins, the more precise contours of which I shall present in the sections that follow.

Subjected to such processes, most Brahmins strive to avoid speaking as a caste subject. Their caste identification is circumscribed to the ‘private’ realm. This is starker when we witness the near erasure by Brahmin intellectuals and public personae of the challenge mounted by the non-Brahmin movement. Even at the height of this challenge their writings and
articulations maintained a studied silence, save for a few like Tataiah. However, all these personages were seeking a space that they thought would be beyond the influences and imperatives of caste. But the very fact that most such secular spaces were peopled almost exclusively by Brahmins renders the secular self that emerges as one that is deeply Brahminised; and it is this kind of a naturalisation of secular spaces as one’s own that also works to erase the casteness of such spheres. Still, the very logic of these secular spaces begins to bear on the casteness of the person occupying and speaking from these positions. Even as the secular selfhood gets to be marked by its Brahminisation, the Brahmin selfhood too gets to be secularised. Accordingly, for the modern Brahmin any suggestion that s/he is still acting as a Brahmin—as a caste self—comes as a surprise, an accusation.

Irrespective of such strategies to marginalise the caste self, there are other compulsions that oblige the Brahmin to come to terms with a Brahminness translated as a sense of being a community—that is, as a moral collective that constitutes one’s primary reservoir for meaning making and also obtains as the chief provider of material resources. On the one hand, these compulsions are concretised by the imperatives of non-Brahmin othering, since for the latter the Brahmin represents a focal point of both moral collective and associational hegemony. On the other hand, the Brahmin’s own life trajectories emblematise aspects of existence which, more often than not, entail spaces marked out as distinctively or exclusively Brahmin. These manifold demands on the Brahmin self lead the modern Brahmin to remain definitionally equivocal vis-à-vis his/her Brahminness. Interestingly therefore, the Brahmin self inhabits a contradictory and ambivalent space, drawing upon a spectrum that implicates both sense of community and sense of association. Note the point is not that each Brahmin individual can be plotted somewhere along this spectrum; not even that each such individual deliberates, according to the demands of the context, to inhabit one sense rather than the other. The ambivalence is more fundamental than that. One comes across rather blatant instances of the will to hegemonise, but equally frequently there are instances wherein the Brahmin remains truly unsure as to what to do about a Brahminness that the modern normative order despises so completely.
It is this embedded equivocation, an oscillating sense of self, which we witness in the narrations and self-descriptions of our respondents. The rest of the chapter brings to head the dynamics of identity represented in the foregoing pages and chapters. More frontally, I engage the question of what it is to be a Brahmin today—a question informed by the contexts we have recapitulated. It also testifies to secular processes of transition and self-identification within the community. The focus will be on the differential investments that they make on the category and identity of being Brahmin, as well as on the varied reasoning that is offered by way of negotiating between the self and its others. The delineation is divided into shorter sections, each informing and interjecting the others.

**On Being and Becoming Brahmin: The Oscillations**

The perception of a self under siege comes fairly automatically for the respondents. It was largely while responding to the question ‘How would you characterise the Brahmin community of today?’ that this perception is foregrounded. However, this evaluation of the state of self and community is circumscribed to the contemporary moment, even to certain states within the contemporary moment. There is evidently a prior and a ‘post’ phase to this moment of siege. I shall venture to describe these constructions herein.

A 62-year-old respondent, a practicing advocate and well-known singer, stated:

‘Blame it on Brahmin’ is the catch-all mantra in the country today. The atmosphere is so vitiated that for anything and everything that is affecting the society, Brahmin-bashing is taken to be an adequate explanation. We have a proverb in Kannada that reflects this state very well—*anishtakkella saneesvarane karana* [For all ills, Sani (a god, but one with an innate propensity for harm) is responsible]. Brahmins are reduced to the state of being the *sani* of this society.\(^{11}\)

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\(^{11}\) Interview with Mr Subramanya, 30 January 2000. Some details about him are already disclosed in Chapter 3, n. 56.
The sense of being a scapegoat contains many facets and is often articulated as being total and incessant. A respondent described in detail the various ways in which Brahmins are being attacked:

The attack comes from various directions. We are a community that is excessively dependent on education and that is why we are predominantly middle class. But because of the reservation policy, Brahmin students, even if they score 90 per cent, fail to get into professional courses, which render their future very bleak. Brahmin students are even systematically discriminated against—they are given fewer marks so that they can never make it to the top ranks. I see it happening in my own college and also when I go for annual evaluation to the university. There is a collective conspiracy all around to exclude Brahmins from the mainstream. The idea is simple—deny education to Brahmins, and you have strangulated the community. We neither have money nor the acumen to do anything else. We cannot become rowdies or racketeers because our upbringing doesn’t allow that. Where does one go?

Politically we are decimated. Being a mere 3–4 per cent of the population, we can never hope to have any say in democracy. Because democracy is basically oppression of the minorities. And we are so conscientious about the country that we are very bothered about population explosion—family planning is a major success in our community making us a fast dwindling entity. In two centuries or so, there will be no Brahmins left in this country. Muslims can go on producing children and make our Hindu country Islamic, but Brahmins who are the protectors and perpetuators of the great sanatana dharma [the eternal religion—primarily referring to Brahmin-centric Hinduism] are getting decimated. The so-called Dalits and non-Brahmins, instigated by unscrupulous politicians, are targeting us for anything and everything. They think that we have oppressed them for the last 2000 years and that it is payback time. There is only venom against us in society.\(^{12}\)

\(^{12}\) Interview with Mr Padmanabha, 24 March 2000. Forty-eight-year-old, Mr Padmanabha is a Madhva, and teaches biology in a Lingayat-owned undergraduate college in Bangalore.
Many respondents in the course of conversations pointed to the ‘demeaning’ representation of the figure of the Brahmin in popular cultural constructions. This is an issue that the AKBMS has also fought against intermittently. What hurts them the most, a respondent pointed out, is the fact that many a time it is Brahmins themselves who participate in such constructions:

You simply open your mouth and you are ridiculed for being Brahmins. In cinema, it is only the Brahmins who are pointed finger at. There were many movies that were banned because they made fun of other people. But you have a series of Kannada films like Samskara and Phaniyamma targeting the Brahmins but they won awards—all in the name of being intellectual or art movies. The irony of it was that all such films were made by Brahmins and Brahmins themselves saw the film three or four times. They all thought they were making a statement—they wanted to tell the world that they are no longer Brahmins. That irritates me to no end. But for those who care, survival itself has been rendered so difficult that there is no time to react in any organised manner. Neither do we have numbers nor money. So Brahmin-bashing is a fashionable political gimmick and they are also sure that they won’t be resisted….If you look at the history of Brahmin-blaming, the front-runners will all be Brahmins themselves turning upside down to convince the so-called oppressed about their de-Brahminised credentials….It is a criminal offence to abuse a Holeya [an untouchable community] by calling him a ‘Holeya’, but if you abuse a Brahmin by calling him a Brahmin one is called a reformer!13

The foregoing is only a glimpse of the more intensely articulated reflections of the experience of siege. What further deepens this mentality, as the above cited respondent points out, is the inclination on the part of many Brahmins themselves to participate in othering the Brahmin self and refuse to own up their Brahmin

13 Interview with Ms Spandana, 15 August 2000. Spandana, a 38-year-old Madhva (married to a Smarta) is a housewife. Her husband is self-employed with uncertain income levels. She is a graduate and previously worked in a secondary school.
identity. But as will become apparent, this refusal to own up the self and identity of being Brahmin is inherent to the contemporary Brahmin self—even to those who articulate deeply felt perceptions of siege. The difference could only be a matter of level or range. A 70-year-old respondent marks out the ‘beginnings’ of this moment of siege:

It is when the ‘economic’ took over that the crisis for the Brahmin community began. We were always only bothered about the pursuit of knowledge and the society recognised it by giving us the rajasraya [shelter of the kings] through brahmadeyas [gifts of land] and other such gifts. And obviously we were never expected to look after the lands, or engage in any manual labour directly. There was a group of people who were asked by the society to do that. Everything was thought of in terms of the whole. The tiller thought, ‘He doesn’t till; it is I who should till the land’. Nobody questioned the basis of chaturvarna [the four varnas] because it was the most natural thing to do. Neither did the Brahmin feel superior because he was a scholar, nor did the Sudra think that he was lowly because he was tilling the land.

But then the partitional thinking crept in, and the ‘everybody is equal’ logic came about. So the others began to think, ‘If he doesn’t till the land and I do, why should he be the land-owner and not me?’ This logic spread to other spheres of life, aided by the British’s policy of divide and rule and later by our very own politicians who saw an easy scapegoat in Brahmins to further their careers.14

The egalitarian moment confounded the Brahmin community, assert our respondents. One began his testimony rather eloquently:

Brahmins are at the crossroads today. They are not sure which path to take. Indeed they are not even certain that there are such choices available. They could be mirages that don’t in fact exist.15

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14 Interview with Mr Srirangan, 16 April 2000. Fn. 28 of the previous chapter contains information about him.
15 Interview with Mr Prakash, 22 July 2000. We have already encountered this respondent in Chapter 3, n. 41.
This respondent is a retired officer of the state-owned insurance company, LIC. The translation of the capital resources available at the disposal of his family too has been remarkably typical of the larger trajectory of the community itself. While the respondent’s parents were agriculture dependent (nonetheless as non-direct participants), he translated those resources into education and ‘government’ employment for himself. He owns a house in a middle-class locality in Bangalore. Being a beneficiary of the welfare state’s governance agenda, the next generation in his family has successfully benefitted from subsidised education and has now transcended its dependence on the state. Two of his sons are based in the US, while the third works as a journalist with a national daily in Bangalore. Now retired, the respondent regularly visits his sons abroad. Though his eloquent delineation of the contemporary moment of ‘crisis’ of the Brahmin community that we cite below apparently has very little to do with his own life situation, he evidently shares the space of perception of a siege along with his fellow-Brahmins.

What is more, for him, the ‘crisis’ or ‘disarray’ (turn of phrases that he himself identifies) characterising the community has to do with something definitionally intrinsic and inherent to the Brahmin persona:

We are all prisoners of our values, values that are ingrained in us by the upbringing that our families and our community provide us with. We should behave appropriately, we should be pure, we should not speak harsh and inappropriate, vulgar things, we should not adopt devious means to achieve anything, our intellect is our only instrument for doing well in life, we belong to a community that has given the others values of life and indeed has lived a life according to those values. In short, we have been given a samskara which hangs heavy over our heads. I am carrying all that baggage and strive to give it to my sons.

I consciously used the word ‘prisoners’, for the values work in today’s life more as restrictions than as facilitators. When I see other communities, like the Vokkaligas or the Lingayats, the characteristic feature of their community is to be a go-getter. And in the present context, I feel, they are able to get on much better than us because of this feature.

Education has remained, from times immemorial, the only pursuit for the Brahmins—the one and only thing that they
have pursued with passion... It used to work just fine earlier. Population was less and so was competition. They used to work hard, be intellectually unmatched and set very high standards for themselves and the society. But that doesn’t work in all ages. The demand of the times is one of flexibility. Brilliance and education have not remained the exclusive property of our community. There are brilliant people among Vokkaligas. And they have something else too. If you get the first rank in the CET [the Common Entrance Test that the Karnataka Government holds for entry into professional (engineering and medicine) colleges], then fine. If not, give Rs 50,000/- as donation, and join. We have no such capacity. If you cannot get the first rank, then you are dead and I have seen absolute duds among Brahmins.

While a Vokkaliga would say, ‘OK, if you can’t get a rank, then open a provision stores!’ the Brahmin will tell his son, ‘It is your karma that you couldn’t get a rank. You will have to repay that!’ That will be the end of his life. He will begin to blame himself for being born a Brahmin, and his family will start feeling guilty. We have become like that pandita of *Panchatantra*.  

Earlier, there was a belief that if you give a Brahmin a job he will do it honestly and sincerely. And the Brahmins reciprocated such trust. Now all that is gone. Look at the Bangalore City Corporation, where you find less and less Brahmin officers....If you become an engineer, you can keep digging like a bandicoot. Now no morals exist there. I am not saying those who are there are bad, but they are not brought up with those values. A Brahmin engineer cannot become corrupt to such an extent. Even if he does, his values start eating him up with guilt unlike others who think that there is a lot of public money and they must get their share of the booty. It is a kind of torture for us—that way of life is not right but this way of life cannot happen. We still think, we are Brahmins and so things must be delivered to us. But that era is over.

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16 The reference is to the parable in the *Panchatantra* in which a scholar boasts to the boatman about his multifaceted scholarship. Midway through the stream the boat begins to sink; and when the boatman enquires whether he knows how to swim, the scholar replies in the negative. The boatman, pitying the uselessness of all the erudition that the scholar has gained, swims to safety.
We have become like the proverbial horse wearing a bind. The bind allows the horse to see only one path, the one that is straight ahead—both metaphorically and literally. When that path either comes to an end or is strewn with too many hindrances, the horse, because of the bind, can neither physically see that there are other paths; nor, even if it does, is very comfortable pursuing them.

Another respondent, a proprietor of a small-scale industry, also echoes this conflict between the ethics of the times and that of the Brahmin selfhood:

The dharma of this era is economic. Today finance speaks from the position of authority, but the Brahmin's position of authority came only from religion. This is a period of transition during which the vyaktidharma [dharma of the person] of the Brahmin is clashing with the lokadharma [dharma of the times or era]. We are like the Brahmin who sports cropped hair but there will be a tuft hidden inside that.  

What gets instituted here is a very strong notion of self as community—the self-identity of being Brahmin is accorded an inalienable sense of a moral collective, a social morality that is the basis of self-description and meaning-making in life. This notion of the self is so foundational and rooted that the Brahmin persona fails to comprehensively modify and change according to the changing rules of the external world. The resultant sense of siege can also be characterised, therefore, as springing from an inability of the Brahmin persona to meet the new demands. There is something intrinsic, even if the object of conscious socialisation, that bears on the circumstance of being Brahmin—namely, the transmission of (and into) a samskara. But this process now finds itself difficult to navigate through the external world, which has

17 Interview with Mr Diwakar, 10 April 2000. Diwakar, 60 years, owns a small-scale industry in Bangalore. He has been the President of the confederation of small-scale industries of Karnataka. He is active in the effort to publish and popularise the vedas in Kannada and Karnataka; and has also been an active participant in various classical music fora in the city.
begun to play itself out by new rules. This ‘new’ normative world, supposedly, has come into existence without any agential intervention on the part of the Brahmin self. The Brahmin persona and its normative framework, whose value and status had been accepted by the society at large, are no longer either legitimate or being legitimated by the present.

It is primarily this ‘crisis of legitimacy’ of the self as Brahmin that confronts the respondents. In fact, the narrative of a painful and sudden break, as it were, from an age when caste operated as a non-hierarchical arrangement (or rather as an archimedean instrumentality, uninformed by notions of either equality or inequality) to an age when the ‘talk of equality’ pervades caste is almost evenly spread across the respondents. The narrative, of course, is often variously inflected or foregrounded through such ideas as ‘social reform’, ‘equality’, ‘precedence of the economic’, ‘predominance of equality over contentment’ and so on. A respondent, one who is a well-known Kannada writer and aged about 84 years, put it thus:

Brahmins were made to feel anxious right from the moment the British came to India. They brought with them the idea that caste is divisive and Brahmins are exploiting the others etc. Don’t take me wrong here. I am not saying that what they said was wrong and caste system should have continued. All I am pointing to is that there was no notion of high and low before that. The Brahmin did what he was supposed to do as did the Sudra. And nobody thought one was above the other. Brahmin had accepted caste but others did too. Others did not feel targeted by Brahmins; they didn’t see it as oppression but as natural. When all this talk about equality came in, both the upper and lower castes were equally confounded. Suddenly the Brahmin community was made to feel that they were doing something horrible and were a blot on the country etc. Simultaneously, the Sudras began to feel that they were being exploited, oppressed and suppressed by the Brahmins. But if you read history, it tells you that despite such allegations, it was the Brahmins who were at the forefront of eradicating untouchability, opening schools for Harijans, etc. They were the first to understand the idea of equality and tried to reform themselves. But the notion of Brahmin oppression has stuck from then on and the governments and politicians have made ample use of this
canard and have driven the community to desperation, forcing them to leave the country in great numbers.\textsuperscript{18}

The sense of siege is then primarily about the idea and identity of Brahminhood, about bearing or carrying the weight of that identification itself. Of course, when it gets actualised into personal contexts, it is also circumscribed into specific individuals occupying recognisable contexts. Thus, for instance, the articulation:

\begin{quote}
The crisis is primarily because Brahmins are not getting government jobs. Education is now available to all and there is competition. By giving reservations according to caste and not looking at economic background, Brahmins further lose out. So those Brahmins who couldn’t compete with others and create opportunities for themselves feel a sense of crisis. I have seen it in my legal profession. Recently there were recruitments held for vacancies in the lower level judiciary, and many of the Brahmin candidates did not qualify. Of course, many other non-Brahmin candidates who fared much worse than these people got through because of
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{18} Interview with Ms Savitri, 30 June 2000. As already mentioned, she is a well-known Kannada writer; and has had an urban existence all through her life, her father having been a government official in Mysore. She has been an active participant in different civic associations from very early on in her life. This engagement though excludes the space of caste associations. Being a conscious decision—‘I did not want to have anything to do with caste’, she emphatically declared in the course of the interview—it made her refuse even an invitation to be the chairperson of the Karnataka Brahmin Women’s Convention that the AKBMS organised in the year 2000. These choices—of association and dissociation—indicate the boundaries that the secularising Brahmin self drew, and still draws in defining the question of what it is to be a caste self. Clearly, it is not that she is participating in any unequivocal rejection of her Brahminness, of being a Brahmin self. Indeed many of the traditional significations marking the Brahmin persona—legitimated by notions of purity—were invoked in her narrative. In fact, in the course of the interview, she uttered many times over ‘I am proud to be a Brahmin. The word “Brahmin” brings to my mind images of purity’, and the marks of this self-identification also obtain in the statement quoted in the main text.
reservations. Those who did not get the job said, ‘Oh, we are Brahmins and that is why we were denied’. The crisis is for individuals like them who are average performers but cannot make a decent living because of policies like reservations.\textsuperscript{19}

But the moment of the present is yet constructed as being fundamentally opposed to the very idea of the Brahmin. Not surprisingly, this moment is also cast as being overdetermined by its casteness, and obtains as an important reminder of the resilience of caste in public life. The contemporary moment, it is repeatedly pointed out, does not allow them to obliterate the significance of caste, even as the latter is asserted as a goal towards which they (our respondents chiefly) strive hard and in a genuine spirit. More accurately, it does not allow them to treat their ‘Brahminness’ as a diminished emotive and meaning-generating identity—to render, as it were, their Brahmin identity as a mere ‘list’ to which they belong, an \textit{associational} attribute they happen to have. As our respondents see it, the identity of being Brahmin that they carry is the primary tool of recognition as far as the outside world is concerned. Thus:

See...I am reminded of my caste when I have to fill up an application form, any form that is related with the government that is. You apply for a government job, school or college admission, loan from a bank, apply for a promotion—see it is only these places which ask for one’s caste, reminding me that I am a Brahmin. Otherwise, nobody asks me what my caste is or I don’t ask people their caste before I sit next to them.\textsuperscript{20}

\textsuperscript{19} Interview with Mr Shivaram, 12 April 2000. This respondent is a retired civil court judge and a practicing advocate. Though a member of the Mulkanadu Maha Sabha, he prefers to be active in the activities of the Ramakrishna Mission since it does not ‘make much of one’s caste’ but ‘seeks to inculcate true Brahminical values in all irrespective of their caste’.

\textsuperscript{20} Interview with Mr Ravi, 20 April 2000. He is a Madhva aged about 50 years. He is a clerk with a nationalised bank. He is an active founder member of a locality-based Brahmin association in Bangalore.
And again, in this instance a Smarta housewife, that:

It is the government that gives birth to caste and keeps it alive. The government encourages caste. They make tall claims that ours is a secular nation but continuously talk of Brahmins, Harijans, Gowdas, etc. Why is that? If the politicians stop talking about caste and stop using it for their petty election purposes, then caste will vanish in ten years. See in our house, we have never followed any caste. We treat everybody the same way. In fact my own daughter married a non-Brahmin and once we knew that the boy is cultured, educated and comes from a good family we had no problems.\textsuperscript{21}

On a more generalised axis, however, it is asserted that not only has the identity of caste changed in the contemporary situation, but also that the play of caste identities (although ever present) has lost its meaning and significance:

It is only to justify the votebank politics and reservations that caste is made out to be oppressive and all that. Otherwise what is caste? It is just a group. To talk about caste in this age is blasphemy. It is long dead and gone. Caste is now like being journalists, engineers, etc. If people permit, even an IAS officer’s son will automatically become an IAS officer, like the Brahmin’s son becoming a Brahmin. I don’t do rituals, I am not a teacher. Thus I do not have the merit to be called a Brahmin. It just comes along shedding all its original values. But I still get called Brahmin only to deny my legitimate share.\textsuperscript{22}

Thus the respondents seek to project the ‘external’ world around them as one which expects them to make requiring that they make sense of their lives and lifeworlds primarily and exclusively as

\textsuperscript{21} Interview with Ms Seeta, 30 January 2000. She is 58 years old and came to Bangalore along with her husband who was seeking to improve his career prospects. She is not a member of any caste association.

\textsuperscript{22} Interview with Mr Nagesh, 19 October 2000. Mr Nagesh is a Smarta, aged 59 years. He retired as a senior clerk in LIC.
being Brahmins—from the standpoint of being fully embodied as caste selves. And yet, this demand is being received as inimical to a sense of self that the Brahmins—our respondents primarily—seem to (already) possess or at least voice, one that oscillates between a conception of identity approached as a communitarian attribute and as an associational identification. On the one hand, it is antithetical to that sense of self which seeks to derive a moral universe from a putatively ascribed Brahminness—self as community—and which, in a transformed idiom, now constructs (or accepts) the Brahmin as an oppressor, a usurper of life-opportunities. On the other hand, it stands in sharp contrast to an inclination to render the idea of caste as a mere associational sense of belonging which is taken on (like being a journalist or engineer) without any moral or normative hold over that self-identification.

The Brahminness that they see themselves as vested with is at once peripheral and central to their selfhood. In the next section I will amplify the terms of this equivocation. I will chart the space of denial by which they avoid inhabiting the identity of Brahmin in an unambiguous manner.

'We are “Branded Brahmins”/We are Branded as “Brahmins”'

The relationship that modern-day Brahmins (and not just, one would think, our respondents; the latter seem to offer particular maps of a more generalised subjectivity) have with their identity is marked by an unwillingness to take on the subject position that the status of being a Brahmin accords them. By arguing for a certain dynamic and mobile conception of the caste system in some pre-era, when Brahminhood could be conferred if and only when certain characteristics came to mark the person in question, they seek to distance themselves (both spatially and morally) from the memory, history and location of the Brahmin subject-position. Thus, it is only after any such era (which translates into the contemporary moment, the existential and lived moment) that the status and identity of being ‘Brahmin’ is seen to be tacked on to the question of birth (or descent). Most of these subjects, significantly, go on to deny for themselves the Brahmin identity that is ‘thrust’ upon them. In fact, a significant number of our respondents termed this latter process as
‘labelling’ (‘They labelled us as Brahmins’\textsuperscript{23}) or ‘branding’ (‘We are branded Brahmins’\textsuperscript{24}).

Almost constitutively, every person who was approached began by suggesting that the researcher should not have come to him/her since s/he is not an ‘appropriate’ or ‘representative’ or ‘adequate’ Brahmin. Everybody accordingly ventured a list of names of those whom they thought were more completely Brahmin. Most ‘appropriate’ Brahmins, it turned out, were men who had a self-generated interest in the sastras. They were known within their circle as those who could authoritatively speak for real Brahmins, as ones who were authenticated by the classical texts. Significantly, however, this referential behaviour excluded both caste association activists and those who might be seen to be following everyday notions of purity–pollution as indeed commensal and marital restrictions (and whom one might characterise as ‘orthodox’ Brahmins). It also excluded the individuals working as priests. Such a reordering of the parameters of appropriate conduct (as indeed of adequacy of self-identification) is indicative of notions of community and identity that contemporary Brahmins seek to imagine.

One respondent suggested that a petition should be filed in the Supreme Court on the official identification of the community:

My own observation of the present-day Brahmins tells me that they cannot be called Brahmins by any stretch of imagination. And I am pretty certain that your study will also reach the same conclusion. Then, once you complete your thesis, you must approach the Supreme Court with a Public Interest Litigation.

You go to the court and tell them that since most of the Brahmins do not perform sandhyavandane three times a day like the Muslims offer their prayer, do not wear the sacred thread, do drink alcohol and eat meat, sit with the untouchables without caring for the norms of purity–pollution, do not pursue knowledge for its own sake any longer but contrarily pursue education to get a job, use

\textsuperscript{23} Interview with Mr Santhosh, 12 February 2000. He is a Madhva, aged 45 years, and works as an accounts officer with a garment export company.

\textsuperscript{24} Interview with Mr Kumaraswamy, 14 April 2000.
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abusive language like others, take up all kinds of proscribed occupations like working in shoe companies, their women wear jeans and work as models or even film stars, instead of lighting the lamp as our tradition ordains, blow out candles while celebrating their birthdays, so on and so forth, this community should not be labelled as Brahmins. Merely because they are born in Brahmin families they do not become Brahmins. You can consult any sastra on this. Since they cannot be called as Brahmins, their rights should not be snatched away from them in the name of their caste.25

Echoing a similar sentiment was another respondent, a journalist:

I don’t perform sandhyavandane everyday, leave alone my children or grand children. And that is the basic minimum one should do to be identified as a Brahmin. My grandchildren don’t even know the caste the others say they belong to! If you talk about their sects, their mathas, etc., they would be completely blanked out. Then what is the point in keeping this label on our head, which only works to our disadvantage?26

In the wake of this, since they themselves are insufficiently Brahmin, our respondents assert that the label of ‘Brahmin’ imposed is aimed primarily at debilitating them. Such an othering, they complain, continues to be attempted even after the Brahmins themselves have come a long way from the stereotypes that shore up the labelling. Even further, it is asserted that these negative representations are deployed in specific contexts and spaces in order that they serve the goal of defining Brahmins exclusively through their caste identity. For instance:

I first realised that I am a Brahmin and belong to a community that is discriminated against when I was denied a B.Com. seat in spite of having all the necessary qualifications. A

25 Interview with Mr Kumaraswamy, 14 April 2000.
26 Interview with Mr Vishnumurthy, 26 October 2000. Fifty-one-year-old Mr Vishnumurthy is the editor of a local daily in Mysore. He is an active member of the Mysore Jilla Brahmana Sabha and the Mulkanadu Maha Sabha.
fellow with 45 per cent got in ahead of me. It was then I was made aware of my caste.27

Likewise, here is a doctor comparing her work environment with that of her husband while reflecting on her status of being a Brahmin:

I work in a government hospital. The sense of being targeted is acute. I was denied a promotion because an SC got it. I didn’t feel strongly about it but wherever reservation is an issue, there it hits you. Government is so pro-them that you tend to feel threatened. Of course, beyond my own personal feelings, I think reservation is unfair to society at large because merit is not given its due. It is driving Brahmins away from government institutions. They are now thinking of going to places where merit matters. Our own institution is witnessing that—Brahmins are leaving one by one. The institution has suffered; there is lack of excellence. One doesn’t want to stretch oneself and improve because the positions are guaranteed, promotions are time-bound. They should also be worthy of their positions. Even in terms of the work environment, my SC colleagues are not friendly, are not open and transparent; in fact, it is far easier to communicate with a Brahmin colleague. Ethically too they are not up to the mark which may be because of their upbringing unlike Brahmins.

But my husband works for a multinational company. For him, his caste doesn’t matter. Nobody asked him for his caste while applying or in his entire working life. It just doesn’t enter his mind at all.28

**Circumscribing Caste: Privatising and Erasing**

Accordingly, most of the respondents suggest that outside of these spheres, caste—both as a principle of recognition and as a structure

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27 Interview with Mr Srinivasan, 25 October 2000. A 33-year-old Srivaishnava, he works as a human resources executive with a multinational company in Bangalore. A recent migrant to the city (one-and-a-half-years ago), all his education has been in Chennai.

28 Interview with Dr Rathna, 8 August 2000. She, a Smarta, works for a specialised medical institution in Bangalore.
of legitimation—does not exist or should not matter. In fact, such a suggestion takes one or both of the following forms: that caste remains significant only within the privatised zones of family and matrimony, and/or that outside the sphere of government, caste is rendered insignificant and irrelevant and that it is the state which for its own reasons of expediency has kept caste alive. As one respondent, a senior journalist with an English newspaper, argued:

I come across people who are very critical of our practices like wearing the sacred thread or performing sandhyavandane etc. I myself have left all that for quite sometime now. But these religious practices are private and no one should get disturbed by it. Every caste has its own set of practices and nobody seems to get hassled by others continuing to practice them. Moreover, community practices and ways of living are guaranteed by the Constitution.29

Another even delinked the issue of caste from those practices that are invariably seen as emanating from one’s caste location:

My everyday beliefs, practices are personal and have got nothing to do with jati. And if you take a closer look, there is no uniformity among Brahmins too. Cleanliness, rituals, food habits are all personal and have no caste monopolies.30

What seems to be propelling such assertions is also the larger context of an increasing legitimacy being attached to the discourse of Hindutva but I shall turn to this theme later. More pointedly, however, the strides—perceived to be remarkable—registered by the community in the new professional spaces opened up by a liberalising economy unfettered by government and the constraints

29 Interview with Mr Balan, 17 July 2000. Mr Balan is an Iyer Brahmin, who has lived a large chunk of his professional life in Bangalore. Being a political and investigative journalist, he displayed a keen sense of awareness of the contemporary state of the Brahmin community in relation to the other caste communities and its relationship with the state. Accordingly, even as he is not a member of any caste association, he believes in the need for their existence—if only as a ‘scarecrow’.

30 Interview with Mr Nagesh, 19 October 2000.
of reservation have convinced the respondents that such spaces are unimpeded by the logic of caste. They seem to believe that this new economy will play a leading role in restoring their rightful place in society. The trend towards transnationalisation in the community, alluded to in the third chapter—"Nobody asks your caste when you are applying for a visa. And once you leave India, you will forget your jati"—has also fuelled a sort of righteous indignation at the state of affairs and a renewed sense of assertion.

Let the Sudra shakti celebrate and rejoice its ascendance in the government, in government offices, in politics. It has not missed anybody that these are precisely the things that are beginning to rot. Let them pay the price for ejecting the Brahmin unfairly. They want democracy—so let the 96 per cent decide for themselves and forget about the remaining four percent. Let them rejoice becoming 'Government Brahmins'.

The phrase 'Government Brahmins', incidentally, is a coinage used by many of the respondents. It is used to refer to the Dalits and other backward castes that have entered educational institutions and jobs in government services through reservation quotas. For the respondents, they are the 'Brahmins' within the space of the government, receiving patronage of the administration on the ground of inheriting a certain caste identity (like the Brahmins themselves who were patronised by kings earlier). The phrase packs a lot of derision and usually invites disdainful laughter in a Brahmin conversation. This renewed sense of assertion and confidence is made possible by an ability to articulate a position beyond the nation-state, as a means of consolidating its social, symbolic and economic capital:

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31 Interview with Ms Savitri, 30 June 2000.
32 Interview with Mr Ravi, 20 April 2000. Also, compare his statement with DVG's narration of a vaidika's response when told of the democratic order (Chapter 3).
33 A Dalit Kannada writer used this phrase—Government Brahmana—as the title of his autobiography, primarily as an act of assertion and challenge against the derision. See Malagatti (1994); see also Siddalingaiah (1996). An English translation of Malagatti's narrative is now available (2007).
In the Silicon Valley there is no reservation. If you have merit, you will survive; otherwise you won’t... Here you might de-recognise us on the basis of our caste, but we will always remain indispensable because of our brains. Why is Narayanamurthy drafted in the Bangalore Agenda Task Force [an ambitious project to develop Bangalore on the lines of Singapore], why is his opinion sought after for every policy initiative? When we were begging, everybody was anti-us; but now it is reversed. You cannot forever rule the society with a crown, but it is possible with knowledge. And who else but the Brahmin is the knowledge centre? Who else but Brahmins have pursued knowledge for its own sake? The new economy they say is a knowledge economy. Advocating the power of knowledge, the new economy is again coming back to seek out the Brahmins.34

Nevertheless, it is also the presence of a history of othering and its continuing significations that they have to contend with. A large number of the respondents themselves perceive the community in ways that are similar to the non-Brahmin articulation. But they produce significant spins on this representation, in particular, by instituting a series of displacements (‘not me, not here, not now’, etc.).

Internalising or Resisting the External Categorisation?

Most of the respondents take the imagery of Brahmin oppression as an irrefutable fact of history, but actively seek to distance their own location from this figure. Even the act of retrieval of this ‘oppressive Brahmin’ is not uniform. Some retrieved this fact of caste discrimination as natural and inevitable in the times they occurred:

34 Interview with Mr Sadashivaiah, 1 March 2000. A personal profile is already disclosed in Chapter 5, n. 29. The reference to Narayanamurthy in the voice just cited is to the chief mentor and brain behind Infosys, the Indian software company that has registered a great deal of success (as well as generating mythologies about itself). The company, as indeed Narayanamurthy, is perhaps the contemporary icon of the community. The number of respondents and caste journals that invoked his and his company’s name has been significant.
It is definitely possible that the Brahmins have oppressed. It is a human instinct that anybody with power tries to oppress those without and the others do not resist. It might have happened long ago. I have not seen it, I have not done it; neither have my father or grandfather. But why accuse only Brahmins for caste exploitation? Every caste would have exploited every other caste below itself. But now those things are no longer there, and are impossible in cities. I go and eat at many of their places because they are not like the Holeyas and Madigas [untouchable castes basically] of earlier times. They are clean and even call our priests and cooks on occasions to conduct rituals.35

For most others though, the exploitation was illegitimate and unacceptable, at least by today’s standards:

I have seen my mother-in-law rinse the vessels washed by the maidservant. That was unnecessary. Earlier it seems they even had rules about the distance to be maintained between the low castes and the Brahmins. That was unfair.36

However, a number of caveats follow. It is claimed that in the present, ‘caste’ as a social principle structuring reality has lost its relevance and legitimacy; and that if it continues, as a respondent

35 Interview with Ms Spandana, 15 August 2000.
36 Interview with Dr Apoorva, 14 August 2000. The 35-year-old respondent is a Smarta working in a government-owned specialised hospital in Bangalore. She is not a member of any caste association but the local Brahmin association did approach her family for membership. She and her husband have not become members because they ‘don’t find time to participate’. But she knows the Brahmin families around well enough because she calls them for arisina-kunkuma [a widely prevalent practice among Brahmins wherein the Brahmin married and still-to-be-married women/girls of the neighbourhood are called on auspicious days to partake the appropriate symbols of the married/virgin status—arisina-kumkuma [turmeric and vermillion]. In fact, it is these routinised ritualistic affairs that are still widely practiced which generate and preserve neighbourhood caste networks. These informal networks work more reliably than formal associational or institutional networks such as caste associations and mathas.
put it, to ‘rear its ugly head’, then it is solely due to votebank politics. All such constructions and caveats play an important role in formulating a picture of the ‘past’, one relating to the community, for the respondents.

It all dates back to 2000 years ago when lots of interpolations happened. The vested interests within the Brahmin community like the self-styled scholars and gurus, twisted the original essence of Hindu dharma. To further their own interests, they misinterpreted the varnasrama dharma into a system that accords primacy to the accident of birth. Lots of superstitious rituals were invented that did not have any sanctity in the vedas, only to exploit the non-Brahmins who were not only ignorant but also innocent. That is when the others began to talk about Brahmins being cunning, selfish, conservative people. But these were actually pseudo-Brahmins masquerading as Brahmins.

A former activist of the AKBMS proposes a more subtle distinction that would be required if one has to grasp the past of the Brahmin:

While trying to understand the Brahmins and their history, we have to make a distinction between what I call an ‘influence over’ and ‘domination’. While the Brahmin’s role was understood as the former all along and was accepted as such by everyone including the non-Brahmin, the latter understanding is only recent. Brahmins exercising ‘influence over’ the society was only natural if you take into consideration the preoccupations of the community. They were the only learned class, who were devoted to the acquisition of knowledge. Look at their occupations—they were village teachers, priests, astrologers, etc. So what else would one expect but an influence over other castes? It is only in the fit of things that the Brahmins exercised a great deal of control. Obviously, there would have been black sheep among them who would have used this...

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37 Interview with Ms Swapna, 10 August 2000. She, a Madhva aged 22 years, is a resident of a village near Shimoga. She is pursuing a post-graduate degree in Mangalore.

38 Interview with Mr Nagesh, 19 October 2000.
trust and confidence for selfish means, but why blame an entire community for that? Understanding the legitimate influence that the community exercised over the rest as a practice of ‘domination’ is recent, and is put to only political use. The fact that even those who abuse us on political platforms, the politicians, come to us for advice and counselling demonstrates that. Take any political leader worth his name; his personal assistants will invariably be Brahmins.

Thus the benign and legitimate influence the Brahmins exerted over the rest of the society, one that was duly accepted by the others, is transformed into a fact of domination and exploitation merely by a change in perception. Even more pointedly, a respondent asked:

But what is wrong in Brahmins dominating? They have not made any mass executions like Hitler did. They have not grabbed land. Brahmins from the beginning were selfish about only one thing—their quest for knowledge, moksha [personal salvation]. It is precisely this awareness that knowledge is power that brought them respect. They have never been rulers in the entire history of India. And no miniscule community, which makes up a mere 4 per cent of the population, can command the remaining 96 per cent to give it respect. If the others respected the Brahmins, if the British took them in all high positions, then the others have to explain why they did it, not the Brahmins. You cannot blame the Brahmins that they occupied all the positions.

Further, in what is perhaps a constitutive manoeuvre, a distinction is posited between a religious, priestly space of ‘denial’ and a secular space of accommodation:

In so far as religion is concerned, we have been exclusivist and controlled everybody powerfully and been manipulative.

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39 Interview with Mr Muralidhar, 20 March 2000. He is a 42-year-old Smarta, working as an office manager in an academic institution in Bangalore. He took active part in the activities of the AKBMS in the early 1980s, particularly in mobilising Brahmins from across the state.

40 Interview with Mr Ravi, 20 April 2000.
The priestly class has been largely responsible for this. For instance, an astrologer would scare an illiterate non-Brahmin out of his wits. But I wouldn’t agree that the non-Brahmins have been denied in other spaces like education. In fact, we have been extremely helpful in paying their fees and with practices like varanna.\footnote{Interview with Mr Nagesh, 19 October 2000.}

The respondents, accordingly, are quick to point towards their own individual pasts in documenting how denial was exclusively in the realm of the sacred and not in other realms. It is also insisted that even the former priestly form of restriction is steadily loosening out:

My father [a teacher in a village school near Mangalore] was a liberal. He used to take non-vegetarian food. He never followed rituals. He was known more as a teacher than as a Brahmin. He was never bothered about caste and he never attended Brahmin congregations. He was active in the local bhajana mandali [a bhakti-oriented association rather than caste-based prayer congregation in which devotional songs are sung by those assembled] instead.

He had no restrictions on his students coming home and all caste students would come in. It was his mother who would ask those kids their caste; and my mother’s mother [whenever she came visiting] would purify the place once they left. But as far as other things are concerned, my father really went out of his way to help all his students. In fact even the two old conservative women sometimes used to feed the poor students in the afternoons. I think Brahmin dominance in education and bureaucracy can only be explained as a natural and ingrained urge to seek education among them and its absence among others.\footnote{Interview with Ms Anuradha, 3 August 2000. Her profile is in Chapter 3, n. 57.}

Another respondent too qualified the figure of the ‘oppressive Brahmin’ with the following:

I think, to some extent, it is true that the Brahmin community has been exploitative. They went too far on purity–pollution,
for instance, in temples. Everybody would come to temples and the Brahmins discriminated against them. We see it in films, isn’t it? The others would feel bad. They tolerated to the extent they could. But when they became a group they revolted. But when they become a group they revolt. Rituals and notions of cleanliness should of course be there, but shouldn’t be taken too far. But the Brahmins did not deny the others access to education or anything like that.43

The above riders are very crucial for the identity that the Brahmins construct for themselves and for the others today. The willingness to recognise caste as a set of ritualised practices, distinct and separate from its secular and material content, to even ‘take responsibility for’ (and ‘atone’) the discrimination against the non-Brahmins while positing the same as in the past and largely absent in the present—all these represent a framework of negotiation in which a series of displacements are effected upon the space of self.

Caste, understood exclusively in terms of ritual practices and hierarchy, is located outside themselves and even outside the community. As a respondent asserted:

If a Brahmin is expected to live today like a Brahmin ought to, he cannot survive. Ninety five per cent of today’s Brahmins are not Brahmins; likewise the Vokkaligas. We have lost all qualities to be Brahmins. Caste is now no more than an identity or a designation, merely giving one a sense of community. I did not take it, I can’t give it up. It is with me, even if I don’t want and deserve that label.44

It is significant that the respondents understand by the term caste a ‘system’ that draws its sustenance and legitimacy from a complex of relationships between primordially-defined entities based on the principle of purity and pollution. They fix caste as a system to a particular period in history—indeed, as an aberration—that neither exists prior to this period nor post- this period, that is, in the present. Thus, caste as a systemic relationship between

43 Interview with Ms Pooja, 17 July 2000. A profile is in Chapter 3, n. 53.
44 Interview with Mr Nagesh, 19 October 2000.
Being Brahmin, Being Modern

primordial entities is characterised as neither sanctified by the heritage nor useful and legitimate for the present. Not even the various Brahmin associations, which are ideally the most direct embodiments of a sense of community that one can get within the Brahmin discourse, seem to contradict this picture. There are of course self-representations that complicate the space of this characterisation, as in the following set of claims:

Our sastras prescribe that we should, to the maximum extent possible, have relations and interactions with only those who belong to our own varna—that is, people who possess our level of purity—or with those who are of a higher order. The texts clearly warn us that it is harmful to interact with the lower orders. But some among us don’t like the practices of the Brahmin community; they are not willing to follow them. They are against sandhyavandane, the sacred thread, sraddha, samskara…. They do not follow practices of purity–pollution. They mix Brahmins with Sudras and Muslims even during religious occasions like marriage and upanayana. If the community goes along the dictates of such people, then our brahminness will be destroyed in 20–30 years, as it happened among the Saraswats...

But still they want the use of our temples when they need it; the priest should come running when and if they call him. They are keen that their Brahmin identity is guarded—I am Brahmin, my children are Brahmins, I want kin relations only with Brahmin clans, etc. They will never give up the uses of the Brahmin institution.

The above are statements from K. V. Karanth’s booklet Devasthanagala Sadupayoga [The Proper Use of Temples], part of a series of tracts that he wrote during the 1980s and published himself. All his works enunciate and accept the legitimacy and relevance of caste as a system based on the principle of a hierarchised complex of purity–pollution. As can be deduced from

45 This claim made vis-à-vis the Saraswats is interesting but we have no leads to pursue it any further.
46 The edition of the book that we have had access to and from which we have just cited (pp. 27 and 98–99), is dated 1993, but this work and his other publications were published before this date. None of these new editions carry the original date of publication.
the remarks cited, he takes a sharp position against the processes of secularisation that are underway. Consequently, it was surprising that many of our respondents referred approvingly to his works during the interviews, even as they affirmed that they had themselves come a long way from those prescriptions. The point really is that caste practices will not be legitimised as appropriate in an unqualified manner, and not definitely as a public enunciation. Such equivocations as those that tack caste to some place (or some era) are inevitable:

I am from coastal Karnataka. We have relatives there and we also go to the pilgrimage centres there. Even to this day, Brahmns there don’t let other caste people into their houses. They are given food on leaves, which they themselves have to throw away and purify the place. When I go there, I will have to abide by such practices. My relatives do that because the other caste people are very dirty—for months on they don’t take bath, they eat all kinds of things etc. They are literally untouchable. So caste continues to exist there. The gods there—particularly the naga devate [the snake god]—are very powerful and very particular about purity. They brook no breaking of such rules. Such state of purity cannot be disturbed. In Bangalore though, anything goes. Here I have no caste and anybody, as long as they are clean, can come into my house and I will eat with them.47

Thus, neither is the Brahmin seen to embody purity nor do the other castes embody impurity. The legitimacy of caste as a sentiment, clearly, is on the wane—norms of the purity–pollution complex no longer can legitimise the superiority of the Brahmin. What is more, the contemporary Brahmin recognises and even approves of it; but it is a qualified recognition and approval, in more ways than one.

Constructing the Other

In a very real sense, the category of the non-Brahmin is no longer available, even to the Brahmin. The ‘non-Brahmin’ stands

47 Interview with Mr Shivaprasad, 15 August 2000. The 42-year-old Shivaprasad is a Smarta. He runs a jeep for the Kannada film-shooting units. He is a member of the AKBMS, as he is of his jati association, the Shivalli Smarta Brahma Parishath.
disaggregated albeit invoked, both within and outside the discourse of the contemporary Brahmin. This sub-section reconstructs the figure of the non-Brahmin as configured by the Brahmin community, both as a constellation of discrete communities as well as a singular unified identity.

The ‘non-Brahmin’—approached primarily as a residual category and postulated as one who is not a Brahmin—is constructed as a figure who remains non-agential. As a respondent opined:

They don’t know anything because of lack of education, unlike Brahmins among whom everybody is educated and aware. So while it is very difficult to organise Brahmins, the non-Brahmins are being used as pawns in the anti-Brahmin game that is being played out by the politicians.\textsuperscript{48}

Indeed, many of them point to the respect that they, as Brahmins, are still accorded by the non-Brahmins in quotidian and ‘non-politicised’ interactions:

Those who attack Brahmins from public platforms for political purposes don’t really hate us. Why should anybody hate us? What makes Brahmins respectable is our single-minded devotion to gain knowledge and not power or wealth. If the Brahmins wanted wealth, they could have had it in

\textsuperscript{48} Interview with 48-year-old Mr Gopikrishna, 13 February 2000. He, a Smarta, is a musician, and makes a living as an accompanying artiste to a music group while also working as a temporary music teacher in a school. He has struggled to make a middle-class living in Bangalore. He lives in a rented house in a predominantly lower-middle class, non-Brahmin locality. This habitation often jolts him into contending with matters of being Brahmin in everyday circumstances. What complicates issues is the fact that he has a dark complexion, which, he says, has often made fellow-Brahmins doubt his very Brahminness. Lacking a kin network in Bangalore—he is a migrant from Davanagere, a town about five hours from Bangalore—he has found it difficult to establish his claims over being Brahmin. Thus, even as he blames the pernicious effects of reservations which denied him a permanent job in a government school, he is equally indignant about the ‘elite’ Brahmins who refuse to work for the upliftment of the community by helping Brahmins like him ‘who are in huge numbers’.
abundance as they had great influence over the kings. Look at Vishveshvaraiah. Gowdas, who today have become the major Brahmin-biting community, worship Vishveshvaraiah. Every Gowda house has a portrait of him. Why is that? Because he never thought about caste when he planned and built the KRS dam. It is precisely because of such an inherent disposition of Brahmins that we are being treated as karibevu soppu [a green, which is used in curries for flavour and is often set aside while eating]—use them for all their brains but when it comes to politics castigate them.49

This respondent also vouched for the continuing significance of the ‘aura’ that attaches to the Brahmin persona in everyday interactions:

When I was doing my graduation in Mysore, I stayed in a hostel. On the day of the exam, my roommate, a non-Brahmin, came and fell at my feet seeking my blessings so that his ability to memorise is enhanced. He said, ‘You are a Brahmin and I need your blessings’. I of course told him not to fall prey to such superstitions because I was a Brahmin only by birth and not by practice. How do you define him doing that then? As a slave of Brahminical oppression! Did he think of it as a superstition?

My SC colleague calls Brahmins ‘brahmapinda’, meaning that we have great intelligence. He says only Brahmins have equipped him to pass all the bank examinations. What do you say about that?

Further, since the non-Brahmin is seen to have been denied access only within the sacred realm, any attempt made by the non-Brahmin to ‘Brahminise’ is seen as legitimate and necessary. As an engineer who runs a successful spiritual centre in Bangalore teaching yoga and meditation to the general populace, proclaimed:

49 Interview with Mr Ravi, 20 April 2000. The reference to the KRS (Krishnaraja Sagar) dam is to the one built across the river Kaveri near Mysore that has transformed the formerly dry agrarian zone of the plains of the princely Mysore state into fertile lands, and which apparently has been a major benefactor of the Vokkaliga community.
My life's mission is to 'Brahminise' the entire world. I teach everybody, irrespective of caste, creed, sex, age, the Gayatri mantra—that mantra which has protected and stimulated the famous intellect of the Brahmin mind. That these qualities have nothing to do with the accident of birth is clear from the students I get. I can confidently say that some of the Muslims and SCs who come to my centre are better Brahmins than the so-called Brahmins.

Likewise, a respondent, who is a priest at a temple and oversees the performance of rituals at the residences of his clientele (which includes non-Brahmin families), ruefully pointed out that even as Brahmins are quickly giving up traditional practices, the non-Brahmins are taking them up with great devotion and respect.

Brahminism is not working today among Brahmins. In fact, the outsiders have become the insiders and vice versa. Lower castes want Brahminism but Brahmins themselves are least bothered. Lower castes have great reverence for our customs and they treat the priests with high regard. But Brahmins, particularly those who are rich, just don’t care. They look at it as a purely business deal. I think the society expects Brahmins to be in a state of purity and to be the flag bearers of our sanatana heritage. When they see Brahmins not up to the mark, that is when the ridicule begins and not when, as these Brahmin pseudo-intellectuals assume, we live up to it. Brahminical way of life is still greatly respected and held in high esteem. Indeed the number of lower-caste households who conduct satyanarayana pooje [worshipping Satya-narayana, a form of Vishnu] or some other vratas [religious...
vows] at homes has increased significantly in the recent years.  

Nevertheless, these respondents feel rather wronged and peeved at any extension of the image of the ‘denied non-Brahmin’ to the ‘secular’ settings of work and achievement. Among the most vocal of the respondents, a retired Wing Commander with the Indian Air Force formulated it thus:

The SCs will die as a 35-per-cent-community. The so-called ‘non-Brahmins’ will hang on to reservations because they know that they can’t compete with Brahmins. Brahmins were merely considered as isolationists. If you read Samskara [a Kannada novel written by U. R. Ananthamurthy], there you get to see that isolationism practiced by the Brahmins—they were physically distancing themselves from the others. But anyway why should I hobnob with a fisherman, I say? That question apart, anyway there are no such barriers now, no untouchability. So any talk of oppression and suppression now is complete nonsense. It is only making them so dependent on reservations that it has become a permanent crutch.

51 Interview with Mr Narayan, 26 August 2000. He is 34 years old and is a Smarta who came from a village near Udupi to Bangalore to take up the priest’s job in a temple. He was making these remarks in the presence of a non-Brahmin client who had come to consult on a horoscope for a matrimonial alliance.

52 Interview with the 69-year-old Smarta, Mr Vasudeva Rao, 5 March 2000. As his words sufficiently indicate, he showed no inhibition in articulating a contempt for anything and anybody non-Brahmin. Nothing of the utter contempt and anger he displayed against non-Brahmins and the state policies of social justice was visible in the newspaper articles that he had penned though, copies of some of which he made available to us. Having pursued a rather atypical calling for a Brahmin (as far as the community from Karnataka is concerned), he is still active as a management consultant to large private companies in Bangalore. He visited the AKBMS office for almost one whole year seeking a matrimonial alliance for his daughter through the centre that AKBMS runs. But, apart from that, he does not think much of these associations. He is active in Rotary and Lion’s clubs’ and the local residents’ welfare association.
Indeed, explaining the predominance of Brahmins in education and other modern spaces, a respondent opined that it has more to do with attitudes than with any explicit caste discrimination:

The attitude among the non-Brahmin parents was, ‘What will he do going to the school? Let him work as a coolie and earn some money.’ They had absolutely no interest in education. For instance, before the 1960s, government jobs came to the very doorsteps of even an SSLC pass. Why did only Brahmins go into government service? Now they [non-Brahmin parents] think: ‘anyway we have quota; why should we work hard?’ In fact, in a recent issue of Vipra Nudi, Harnahalli Rama-swamy [a Congress leader, a Brahmin] has narrated how a Gowda minister rued the fact that there were very few Brahmin teachers in village schools. Because when they were in big numbers, it was they who went to every house and insisted that the children be sent to school regularly. They took personal interest in those kids’ education. Now there are no Brahmin teachers and those who are there don’t bother. Teaching is just a job for them.\(^5\)

In so far as the non-Brahmin attack on the community itself is concerned, many respondents came up with a story from the Panchatantra. In fact, the invocation of this imagery across the respondents sampled is consistent and striking.

The Brahmins have become like the lamb of that famous story in the Panchatantra. A lamb was drinking water in the downstream. A wolf, coming from the direction of the upstream and looking out for food, caught the lamb and sought to justify its action on the ground that the lamb had polluted the water. The lamb pointed out that it couldn’t have polluted the water because it was at the downstream and the wolf at the upstream. For which the wolf had a ready answer: ‘if you have not done it, then your forefathers must have’ and devoured the poor lamb. This is the logic with which others work today. If I point out that I don’t discriminate, they will say ‘but your forefathers did!’ Now tell me why should I pay for the alleged mistakes of my

\(^5\) Interview with Mr Shivaprasad, 15 August 2000.
forefathers? For how long should I be paying for the history that I am supposed to carry on my shoulders?  

It is also along this representational axis that the disaggregation of the non-Brahmin—not just across distinct caste communities, but also within each such community—is foregrounded by our respondents, and often in order to highlight the misplaced nature of the anti-Brahmin assault:

Take a look at the cases filed under the SC/ST Atrocities Act. I am very sure that most of the cases will be against Vokkaligas, Lingayats and Kurubas, and there won’t be a single case against a Brahmin. So who is practicing caste today? It is these dominant castes against the lower castes. Is the Brahmin in any position to oppress others? But then why is the Brahmin singled out for attack?

Even more explicitly, the disappearance of the Brahmin from the very space of caste discrimination seems to be so complete for the contemporary Brahmin mind that the mantle of caste oppression is increasingly and exclusively ascribed to other caste communities. A respondent had a ready inventory on offer:

I have Dalit friends who tell me, ‘It is not the Brahmins who oppress us. Where are they now anyway?’ It is now primarily a conflict between the landlord castes and the landless Harijans. It is the Vanniyars versus Harijans in Tamil Nadu, Yadavs versus Harijans in Uttar Pradesh, Gowdas and Lingayats versus Holeyas here and so on. Where are the Brahmins?

54 Interview with Mr Lakshman (5 June 2000) a private college lecturer who has found it hard to get a permanent job as a teaching faculty. He believes that he lost out on a civil service job because of his Brahmin tag. He is 30 years old and is a Madhva. The imagery of pollution contained in the story is itself interesting, for it appears to invert the principle of purity–pollution on its head. Its significance, however, is uncertain.

55 Interview with Mr Subramanya, 30 January 2000.

56 Interview with Mr Harinarayana, 23 May 2000. A Madhva, the respondent is 50 years old. He teaches in a high school in Bangalore. His daughter recently married a Lingayat—an alliance about
What is more, the perceived marginalisation of Brahmins in the Indian political landscape only augments this feeling of obliteration from spaces that are seen as caste-marked:

The first Brahmin chief minister that Karnataka saw was only in 1980—that is a full 33 years after Independence! Brahmins just cannot win elections. Caste considerations are crucial in elections because our people [the general (non-Brahmin?) population] are uneducated and easily understand the language of caste. All that one has to say is, ‘Hey! He is our own; so vote for him’, and they will all go vote. Even if that fellow who wins does nothing to these people, again next time the same thing is repeated. So caste is kept alive and kicking.57

Again, pointing out that hierarchisation is built into the structure of participation in caste, many suggest:

See, caste awareness is inbuilt. For all that they talk about being Dalits and being oppressed because of their caste etc., let a Holeya drink at least water at a Madiga’s house. The government itself had allocated wells according to caste—this is Madigas’ well and this is Holeyas’ etc. When the Brahmins are shedding all these practices, the lower castes

which he had no reservations. He said: ‘They were in love. When she [my daughter] told me of her desire to marry him, I only said, “if you think you can lead your life with him, then go ahead. But also be certain that if it fails then everybody will shun you.” If the alliance is within the caste and then it fails, then relatives would be sympathetic. Of course, I will always be there for her. But relatives are important. Interestingly, it was the boy’s family that had major problems with the alliance. They were greatly reluctant but somehow I convinced them. Now anyway my daughter and son-in-law are staying separately. So the problems of adjustment that would have come up if she [daughter] were to stay with them are not there. The point anyway is that while the Brahmins are willing to forget and forgive [this was in reference to the attacks mounted by the non-Brahmin discourse about which he had just talked about] and treat everybody as equals, the others remain stuck with their caste loyalties.’

57 Interview with Dr Apoorva, 14 August 2000.
and the Holeyas and Madigas are holding on to them all the more dearly.\textsuperscript{58}

Even more insistently, it is pointed out that internal differentiations obtain within each non-Brahmin community:

Those SCs who have availed of the government benefits and become rich detach themselves from the community. They don’t want to be identified as SCs. They want to hobnob only with Brahmins; eat like Brahmins; speak like Brahmins. They perpetuate discriminations from within—only IAS officers’ sons and daughters avail of all the benefits. But the elite will go on making noises about being the oppressed and hold the poor Harijan as their mascot.\textsuperscript{59}

To be sure, this need (to other the other, as it were, even to remove the self from the space of caste, as they see it) does not take one away from the positive significations and enunciations that our respondents make of their identity of being Brahmins. In making these formulations of self, they continue to negotiate the perception of siege simultaneously. It is also the space within which caste identity and action as inhabiting different shades of the community-association dynamic can be vividly grasped.

\textit{Formulating a Sense of Self as Brahmin}

I am reminded of the word ‘parisuddhate’ [purity] when I imagine the meaning of the word Brahmin. I am proud to be a Brahmin; it is a clean caste and an intellectual caste, traits that have come in their blood. I don’t go out and make friends or interact with people only after making sure of their caste. I don’t even want to be overtly identified as and with Brahmins. In fact, I refused an invitation to become the chairperson of the Brahmin women’s

\textsuperscript{58} Interview with 46-year-old Madhva, Mr Sripathi, an agriculturist and a Congress party functionary residing in a village near Bangalore, 17 September 2000. We have encountered him already in Chapter 3, n. 42.

\textsuperscript{59} Interview with Mr Nagesh, 19 October 2000.
convention that the AKBMS organised recently. I did not even take part in the proceedings. But when I look at most of my friends they are all Brahmins. I have wondered about it. There has to be something that explains it but I fail to explain it.60

I am an artiste and I know no boundaries of caste, creed, nation or anything. I am beyond all that when I am on stage performing. But then when the attacks on the Brahmins became intolerable during [Devaraj] Urs’ time, assisted by people like Basavalingappa,61 people asked me to come into the caste. They said, first please concentrate on setting right your own house. I took part in initiating the AKBMS then. Other people then asked me—should they look at me as a Brahmin leader or as a caste-less artiste. Then I told them Ravana’s story. Rama before embarking on the battle with Ravana wanted the services of a Brahmin priest to conduct a *homa* [a sacrificial Brahminical ritual], seeking blessings of the gods for a victory. Hanumantha, Rama’s aide, solicited Ravana for a suitable priest. Then Ravana himself came to conduct the ritual, for he was himself a great and accomplished Brahmin. Being a Brahmin, he could not refuse to carry out the role ordained for him by the society, knowing well that a successful completion of the ritual will bring defeat to himself. I am Ravana, the real Brahmin, when I come on stage. If I find wrongs in Brahminism, I never mute my criticism, as people very well know it. But within the complex of my kula I am an ordinary Brahmin worried about the welfare of my fellow-Brahmins.62

The above enunciations from two Brahmins come from identifiably different standpoints on the question of an overt association

60 Interview with Ms Savitri, 30 June 2000.
61 A high profile Dalit minister in Urs’ cabinet, who was vocal about upper caste oppression and their ability to subvert Dalit/lower caste aspirations.
62 Interview with Mr Suvarnaiah (a Smarta), a popular dramatist and the founder president of AKBMS. Interview held on 21 May 2000. He is part of a family that has over the last three generations made a livelihood running a theatre company. Suvarnaiah’s plays, particularly those that satire on the contemporary politics and corruption, etc., have been staged by the company and proved greatly popular.
(or identification) with the category of the Brahmin, but they both capture the sense of ambivalence that constitutes the contemporary Brahmin self’s perception. While the former avoids (or refuses) any public identification with the fact of being Brahmin, the latter not only owns it up, but also does not flinch from giving the self-identification an assertive form in inhabiting the definitive space of a caste association. Nevertheless, both these articulations still feel compelled to ‘explain’ their Brahminness.

The ambivalence is not so much one of either/or vis-à-vis the category of the Brahmin—that is to say, whether to reject or own up that identity and identification. It is more in terms of negotiating with the given identity and all its attendant packages of history, memory, association, and affective investment. Many of the respondents, consequently, understand their ‘casteness’ as a given—something that they have to carry along whether they like it or not. As a 20-year-old, college-going respondent stated:

Even if I go and claim that I am an SC, nobody will accept that claim. Government will not give me the benefits that SCs get. It is possible that I could be leading the life of a Holeya. But I will have to die a Brahmin. Anyway, I was born a Brahmin and I am not repenting it. I would rather be a Brahmin because broader outlook is possible only for us. I am proud to be a Brahmin, of the heritage that the community has given to the entire world, of the Brahmin intellect and single pursuit of knowledge. I get respect from the Gowdas and Reddys for being a Brahmin, and I will try to stand up to what other communities expect of the Brahmins.63

Of course, as a young executive put it, ‘there is definitely a reluctance to say they are Brahmins’, since (as he observed) ‘the pressure is to say that we are also human beings like others’.64 All the same, ‘the positive things that this birth in a Brahmin family has given me far outweigh any debilitations that I am supposed to be suffering from for being a Brahmin’, suggests a

63 Interview with Mr Guru, 19 July 2000. He is a Madhva, pursuing his graduation studies in Bangalore.
64 Interview with Mr Sarathy, 12 June 2000. He, a 31-year-old Smarta, works as General Manager in a garment export firm.
psychology professor working in an undergraduate college in Bangalore:

It has given me samskara—those practices that have helped me evolve as a better human being. The way we dress, the food habits, our customs and rituals—they all instil a sense of discipline which is passed on from generation to generation. I attach great value to our practices—lighting a lamp before the god, performing puja, watering the doorstep each morning, etc.—we are brought up on those values. Not telling lies, speaking out our mind honestly—I am like that and because of that I have often found myself in trouble. But we are an intellectually evolved people; we shouldn’t stoop down to the level of other people. There are other customs—like distributing ellu [sesame seeds] during Sankranti festival and inviting people on the Krishnashtami day, etc.—that gives me an opportunity to meet people, which otherwise I would never, given the hurried everyday lives we live.

My husband though is a typical abrahmana [un-Brahmin-like] and he takes pleasure in announcing that he is not a Brahmin. He keeps ridiculing our customs and rituals. He says he lost his brahmanatva [Brahmin-ness] the day he ate chicken. But when he suggested that our son should be given non-vegetarian food, I just put my foot down and protested. He doesn’t need to break norms. It is nothing about Brahminism but about being gentlemanly.

\[65\] Interview with Ms Aruna, 3 May 2000. She is a 48-year-old Srivaishnava. She is very proud to be a Brahmin, and asserted so many a time during the interview. However, when asked to name the jati she belongs to and the matha to which her family is affiliated, she gave a rather confounding answer—‘It must be Advaita’. There is, of course no Brahmin jati called Advaita. It is a Brahminical philosophy whose followers call themselves Smartas. Nonetheless, when she returned the questionnaire filled, it mentioned her jati as Iyengars—the followers of the Srivaishnava tradition, a contestatory tradition vis-à-vis the Smartas. What is more, the definitions she offers for what is to be a Brahmin and, more importantly, for what is to lose it are interesting but largely shared. Defying vegetarian food restrictions is often held up as a signifier of having broken caste rules and become un-Brahminical.
Such positive enunciations of their Brahminness are legion. Almost all of them refer to the ‘samskara’ that their Brahmin context accords. It is understood both as a set of practices as well as a habit of the mind, which makes possible a disposition of the self that helps them to sustain their level of intellect and purity. It is this samskara that is held up as the criteria distinguishing them sharply from those who are born into other caste communities. But it is also a state that leaves them debilitated in facing up to an external world that has begun to play by new rules. In most of the narratives of the respondents, this samskara is at once genetic as well as learnt. It is affirmed:

It is all in the genes. Knowledge has come naturally to the Brahmins. Like they say, ‘huttu guna sutroo hogolla’ [the character that came with birth will not erase even if burnt]. For others, keenness for knowledge has to be learnt, unlike for the Brahmin. Not everybody can chant the vedic mantras because their tongues are not supple as it is for a Brahmin.66

Alternatively, as the psychology professor cited above suggested, it is also learnt in the family, as part of growing up. Thus, samskara, most often held up as the ‘distinction’ separating Brahmins from the rest of society, is what makes them so. In consequence, many remain upset by those ‘Brahmins who bend backwards to show they are not Brahmins’, as a respondent on a visit from the US to her parents in Bangalore chose to express it,67 likewise:

Some Brahmins may have thought that their birth as Brahmins itself is a crime. They think they have to convince the society that they are like any other human being and are not Brahminical.68

66 Interview with Mr Sadashivaiah, 1 March 2000.
67 Interview with Ms Poornima, 12 May 2000. She is a 31-year-old Madhva. She married a north Indian (Uttar Pradesh) Brahmin—previously her colleague in the software development firm she worked in—much to the discomfort of her family. However, during the interview, her mother said, ‘We didn’t mind as long as he was from a Brahmin family. The marriage took place in accordance with both traditions.’
68 Interview with Mr Balan, 17 July 2000.
Just as the limits of this ‘backward bend’ remain hazy even for those who articulate it, the anxieties regarding fellow Brahmins themselves breaching the boundaries of identity and identification remain high. The object of this sense of anxiety needs to be distinguished from those behavioural modifications that get legitimised. Accordingly, even as the community is acknowledged to have undergone transformatory shifts in the recent history, much of such redefinition and repositioning is legitimised within the rubric of ‘changing with the times’. Even if the preceding generation articulates such changes as discomforting, they still were not seen as questioning or rebelling against the community norms. Thus, when the respondents’ talk of a fellow Brahmin as being a ‘rebel from within’ or having gone beyond the boundaries of Brahminhood, one should take care not to assume that they themselves measure up to any given construction of who a Brahmin is or what is to be Brahminical and so on. For instance, not wearing the sacred thread, and breaking food, commensal and touchability restrictions are all now accepted by a large number of Brahmins, including the caste activists as ‘normal’. But it was not so during the previous generation. Kannada litterateur U. R. Ananthamurthy—not only his works were seen as being anti-Brahmin by the community but also his marriage to a Christian was a necessary confirmation of this intent of breaking out—is invoked by a significant number of respondents as the iconic representation of that rebel. However, as a respondent put it:

Now Samskara [Ananthamurthy’s novel, which created a great deal of resentment among the Brahmins when published for what was seen as a slander] is normalised. It doesn’t create any ripples or hits one as being anti-Brahminical.69

Interestingly, what marks out conduct as an act of breach is if they come attached as an announcement, explicitly voiced statements of intent, an intent, that is, of ‘breaking away’. Otherwise, it is acknowledged that each generation defines, albeit not in any formal manner but in recognisable ways, what constitutes rebelliousness. Such definitions are bound to vary across the class

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69 Interview with Mr Muralidhar, 20 March 2000.
status, age composition and the specific trajectory of the family in question. However, breaking the endogamy barrier—boundaries of marriage now encompass all Brahmin jatis, although perhaps still excluding the Saraswat and other such widely recognised ‘illegitimate’ Brahmins—continues to be seen as an important act of breaching that is still largely illegitimate.

Defining aberrant forms of conduct cuts across a wide spectrum—from breaking food restrictions to commensal strategies, ‘hobnobbing with fishermen’, publicly speaking against and writing critically of the community, etc. But, as I said, it has to be enacted as a public statement, as a statement of intention to breach. A successful industrialist who has worked extensively with the AKBMS defined the basis of caste action and the attendant anxieties thus:

Brahmin symbolises a value. So when somebody says, ‘He eats chicken in spite of being a Brahmin’ that did not constitute ridiculing of the Brahmin. That basically reflected an anxiety on the part of the larger community that the value the Brahmin community symbolised is being sacrificed. The others want us to set an example for them and the society and when the Brahmins don’t measure up to such expectations, they target us. Reading it as an attack against the Brahmins has been the greatest mistake that we have committed.70

Again:

Brahmins themselves are responsible for this targeting. In the name of getting modernised, they drank [liquor] with the Gowda, ate [meat] with the Muslim and announced that they don’t believe in caste. We’ve ourselves given up caste.71

Consequently, therefore:

Though there is a sense of guilt amongst us, atoning for it won’t help either them or us. I am a Brahmin, so I am a Brahmin—that is all. There is no use going to other jatis and doing all that they do. You go drink [liquor] and eat mudde

70 Interview with Mr Sadashivaiah, 1 March 2000.
71 Interview with Ms Aruna, 3 May 2000.
[a dish made of ragi, a staple diet of the agricultural families and therefore identified with the Vokkaligas/non-Brahmins of southern Karnataka], and they will only sneer at you and say that there is degeneration among the Brahmins. How will that bring about social equality?…Brahmins have tried to reach out to other people but that has not helped anyone. OK! Leave it—as an individual do whatever you want to do.72

Indeed, as a respondent, a Sanskrit scholar, pointedly ventured to say:

Just before you came for the interview, I performed agnikarya [a ritual that the initiated Brahmin males are supposed to perform during the sandhyavandane, but has almost become an exception]. Did I insult anybody by that? But the leftists among us want to believe so. An average Brahmin is as uninformed about Brahminism as any outsider. So he wants to believe that calling oneself a Brahmin, helping a fellow-Brahmin, speaking on behalf of the heritage of the Brahmins, identifying with the community—are all communal and orthodox. There is an onslaught from within the community which is much stronger than that which is coming from the others. What these pseudo-secularists don’t know is that outsiders respect me precisely because I value my heritage and attempt to follow them.73

As we can see, definitions of breach or identification of aberrant forms of conduct still largely get marked off a presumed Brahmin figure, one who keeps to his/her rituals, commensal and food rules. And yet, what render these acts either acceptable or otherwise are the stated (or imagined) intentions that mark their enactment. Although most of the respondents did not see themselves as

72 Interview with Mr Prakash, 22 July 2000.
73 Interview with Mr Vinayaka, 15 April 2000. He is a 35-year-old Smarta. An engineering graduate, he is now completely into Sanskrit studies and is an exponent of satavadhana (a Sanskrit game, testing the ability to attend to a hundred queries simultaneously). He gives public performances of his skills in that game. He has emerged as a recognised articulator of the glories of the Indian/Hindu heritage and is a regular invitee in public events, TV shows etc. He also participates in Brahmin associational conventions as a resource person or speaker.
meeting the requirements of that presumed figure of representation, they were not exactly those that one would characterise as standing outside (nor were all seen by fellow-Brahmins as being so). For instance:

In me you will see a rebel. In the first 13 years of my life, I was what is referred to as a ‘good’ Brahmin—doing sandhya-vandane, etc. But I found that it had limits. Conformity always means choking and being non-creative. I found that Brahminism had lost its ability to be mobile and thus had become static. That is when I found Ramakrishna Matha, Chinmaya Mission, yoga, meditation, etc., more liberating, of which I am a follower for the last 30 years. But our community is contented in conducting pujas, homas etc., forgetting the vedas and upanishads which they think is nothing but a lot of complicated rituals.\(^{74}\)

Since this enunciation does not seek to voice an intent that stands out amidst the general flux of statements, and indeed seeks to reimagine the problematic of what is to be Brahmin—and accordingly seems to stand resolutely within—the respondent who is making this statement will not be seen as a rebel. Even as the contemporary Brahmin sees him/herself clearly outside the given notions of what is to be a Brahmin—

I stay in the outskirts [of the city] like a true Brahmin ought to. I would have felt suffocated and restricted living in a Brahmin agrahara. I hate their rituals. For instance, they say the Gayatri mantra should not be uttered for the non-dvijas [non-Brahmins generally] and women to hear. That is nonsense. I have gathered 60–70 people (without asking about their caste) and taught them the mantra, so that they can chant it whenever they want its energy. Not that they showed any great enthusiasm for it. But still I am a rebel within the community. Not many so-called Brahmins understand me. A Brahmin in the real sense is supposed to stay outside the thick of things but still be a teacher to the society. Thus I represent the community figuratively too.\(^{75}\)

\(^{74}\) Interview with Mr Diwakar, 10 April 2000.
\(^{75}\) Interview with Mr Nagesh, 19 October 2000.
—it is not as though fellow Brahmins do not understand or empathise with the terms of such self-identification.

It is this sanctioned image of a self that is sincerely and genuinely attempting to transform itself according to the demands and sensitivities of the times that renders the continued othering of the community incomprehensible to itself. What fortifies such a difficulty is the construction of the past of the community exclusively in terms of a scriptural imagination that positions the Brahmin as one who had always treated ‘this worldly’ pursuits—economic and political—as being an anathema, dictated solely by a passion for knowledge. It is not surprising, therefore, that most of the respondents foreground the image of a ‘poor’ Brahmin as constituting an adequate representation of the community.

Why do you think that almost all the folktales, puranas, stories that your grandmother told you begin with the statement, ‘There lived a poor Brahmin in a village’. Doesn’t it tell you that that has always been the case with the Brahmins? Of course, emperors and kings would fall at his feet, seeking his blessings and advice. Every king had a Brahmin as his chief advisor. But still the Brahmin chose to remain poor. Why doesn’t he become the king himself? He is respected precisely because he doesn’t aspire for the worldly, materialistic things. It is the only culture which took ‘sarve janaha sukhino bhavantu’ [may everyone be happy] as its lifeline. What does every Brahmin pray for while performing sandhyavandane? Not ‘give me that or this’ or ‘let my son get a computer science seat’ or ‘let my daughter get a good match’, etc. He beseeches Gayatri to light the lamp of knowledge that exists within him—‘Dhee yo yonah prachodayath’. That is why our community has been held in high regard by the rest of the society, withstanding even the sustained politically-motivated rant against them.76

The reproduction of this enunciatory position, one that we would like to believe has been rather important to Brahmin self-representation through recent history, is consistent. It frontalises an image of the poor Brahmin who, in spite of being vested with

76 Interview with Mr Suvarnaiah, 21 May 2000.
unparalleled brilliance and intellect, in spite of being very close to the powers that be throughout history, has consciously remained outside the structures and institutions of power and wealth. Accordingly, the figure of Dronacharya, a character from the epic Mahabharata who is the unmatched guru of the Kuru dynasty but who remains in a state of abstention and penury, is time and again invoked to represent the Brahmin community. The imagery is one of Drona in a state of helplessness to provide even milk to his infant son Aswatthama, and this gets to be posited as a historical, ideal and even personalised image of the Brahmin condition:

Indeed the downfall of the Brahmin began when Dronacharya, no longer able to see the plight of his family, went on to accept the offer to become the Guru of the Kuru dynasty. As Kailasam once remarked: ‘The moment Brahmin called gold suvarna [(of) good colour], his Brahminness began its downslide’.77

Further compounding perceptions of the illegitimacy of the attack against Brahmins is the imagination—one that we have encountered all along—of a generalised self as a product of active making, the self as an achievement. Broadly, in the terms of this representation, the self becomes a Brahmin; it is not Brahmin. Such a positioning of the self enables the postulation of the figure of the Brahmin as being largely incidental to the ‘accident of birth’. Thus, it is maintained that anybody can become a Brahmin and that many in the past did become—from the sages of yore to the more recent B. R. Ambedkar and K. R. Narayanan (the former President of India, a Dalit) who were all by birth non-Brahmins78—although the probability (as held by our respondents) is mostly that only Brahmins by birth will attain Brahminhood. A respondent was categorical:

Not all the great sages of Upanishads were born in the Brahmin jati. But they all became great Brahmins. Moving towards the cosmic, towards the Brahma is what makes one

77 Interview with Mr Subramanya, 30 January 2000.
78 Indeed, the number of respondents who invoked Ambedkar as an example of the ‘real’ Brahmin was significant.
a Brahmin and even to this day society respects such individuals. My life is itself an instance of that. My life mission is to give Brahminism to all and that is the primary intent of the Indian heritage—to make the entire universe Aryan. The real concern of our society is to make everybody a Brahmin.79

Even if this missionary zeal is non-existent in many others, the thought does:

Why do you make the accident of birth a denominator? Many SC/STs could be and are good Brahmins. Look at Ambedkar—he is a true Brahmin unlike many of the so-called Brahmins themselves. I wanted K. R. Narayanan to become the president not because of his caste but because of his merit. If I were to be at the level at which Gowdas are today, I would have said he is not ours and if I were to be at the level of Harijans, I would have said he is ours. But since I know the ideal of Brahmin, I would call him a true Brahmin.80

This gesture to universalise the state of being Brahmin is abetted by the increasing success that the Hindu Right (and its vituperative and hateful discourse against the Muslims) is witnessing in the recent years—a phenomenon which the contemporary Brahmin views with a certain sense of relief and triumph. As a respondent put it:

This is something Brahmins said from the beginning—'Others are trying to weaken our Hindu dharma by pitting one against the other. The problem is not the Brahmin; look elsewhere for it.' Now they [the non-Brahmins] are realising it. We said this when the British were here; we are saying now when the Muslims are taking all the benefits now. Before Independence, before they realised the reality, British had completely plundered us leaving us a poor nation. Now mullahs [referring to Muslims derogatorily] will squarely divide us if we don’t realise it. The only encouraging thing is that they [the non-Brahmins] have slowly begun to support Hindutva.81

79 Interview with Mr Ramachandra, 13 September 2000.
80 Interview with Mr Nagesh, 19 October 2000.
81 Interview with Mr Ravi, 20 April 2000.
By thus imagining the self to be Hindu, as inhabiting a Brahminical Hinduism pitted against an aggressive and invading Muslim, the problematics of a certain inherited caste self is sought to be elided. There is accordingly a resolution of the Brahmin–non-Brahmin contestation into a perceived need for Hindu unity.

They have all realised that we cannot quarrel amongst ourselves, which in the past has allowed invaders to rule over us. The realisation that we are all Hindus is seeping in. Otherwise how will you explain Dravidian parties [of Tamil Nadu] which had Brahmin bashing as their one and only issue, accepting a Brahmin woman as their leader and even chief minister [referring to J. Jayalalita], and supporting BJP now?\(^{82}\)

Of course, this intended resolution of the contestation does not mean that the ‘non-Brahmin’—be it as representing a politics and an ideology, or even as straightforward caste communities—ceases to become important in the self-construction of being Brahmins. This is evident in the enunciations that we have mapped throughout this chapter.

All these ingredients—of the branded status of the Brahmin self, of the idea of samskara, indeed the re-invocation of the scriptural imagination of the Brahmin persona in seeking to universalise it, as also the self-assertion of being Hindu—inhabit an articulatory space that is definitionally oscillating between a sense of ‘community’ (approximated as a moral collective sense of belonging) and a more fluid space of associational endeavour and self-articulation. I shall seek to engage this oscillatory space

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\(^{82}\) Interview with Mr Vittal, 12 November 2000. Mr Vittal, a Madhva aged 62 years, is a resident of Barkoor, a town near Udupi. He retired as a head master of the high school in Barkoor, the nearby town. He has been an active participant in the Barkoor Brahmana Sabha. In fact, an overwhelming number of the respondents expressed explicit sympathies with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the Hindu right-wing party, and its other more strident affiliated wings such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP). By and large, they had all over the last decade or so consistently voted for the BJP in both state and central elections.
more fully in the next, concluding chapter, while also striving to formalise a ‘community–association’ dynamic as constituting the contours of Brahmin identity in contemporary Karnataka. I shall also be elucidating a revised historical focus for the sociology of caste to pursue in the years to come.
Agency and Identity in the World of Brahmins

In this concluding chapter, I tie together the various theoretical, methodological and empirical considerations forwarded by this work. The study has all along striven to resist a totalising thrust, to subsume and contain the field of articulation into rough enclosures. The substantive chapters especially seemed to be tracking relatively independent courses. This is as it should be, tracking as we were the dynamics of identity and identification within and across fields of agency characteristic of particular caste subjects. But to leave the issues there, in an imponderable state, would be to restrict the possibilities of this investigation.

There is a need to bring the several threads constituting this study into a form of facilitative closure. Accordingly, the first section reconstitutes the points of departure, while the next three, offer an overview of the substantive chapters and reconstruct the considerations that have been proposed, if disparately, all along our delineation. Exploring the limits of the thesis of substantialisation through a recounting of the narrative of the ‘Brahmin’ identity in the second section, I suggest that a framework that accommodates the crucial aspect of identification is in order. The third and the fourth sections work towards structuring such an account, implicating the ideas of secularisation and individuation and the contending logics of ‘community’ and ‘association’. The fifth and final section charts a potential trajectory that caste studies might pursue.
Reconstituting the Point of Departure

It might appear that the different and distinct levels of comprehending a phenomenon that W. G. Runciman (1983) differentiated and delineated have all been pretty mixed up in my narrative, confounding the terms of reportage with those of description, explanation with evaluation. The effort, clearly, has been to produce an account that would not be strictly subsumable under a monographic format. To be sure, such monographic constraint would have been equally facilitative of the terms of my investigation, although it would have slanted the investigation differently. In formulating the research problem I was ever mindful of the larger theoretical and ideological matrix undergirding caste studies, and interested not to reproduce its biases. At the same time, it was clear that sociological and historical studies have not been sufficiently attentive to what is happening to caste in ‘upper caste’ contexts; indeed, that the perceptual bases of particular caste subjects and of caste action today need more nuanced theoretical and empirical elucidation.

At any rate, the parameters of evaluation undergirding this study have been passed over in the density of the narration; and my effort here, as already mentioned, is to bring the data put together in the foregoing pages to some kind of evaluative closure. This point, among other things, brings me to an issue that had been furtively mentioned in the beginning chapters, namely, the problem of normativity. For all too often (and especially so in the recent years), articulations within and outside caste studies have been concerned to deliver solely upon the twin axes of the legitimation–contestation and domination–resistance within caste. Even the literature on the substantialisation of caste has been prone to this tendency. But more importantly, from the standpoint of this study, the question of the Brahmin has been overdetermined by this mode of normative contextualisation, with the figure of the Brahmin privileged or arraigned herein (as the case may be) acquiring the shape of an evaluative principle rather than as a reference to real people with such a self-identification. ‘Brahmin’ is invoked more as a representative of the ‘past’ of caste or as a value or symbol that represents the hierarchical and systemic elements of the ‘traditional’ caste system. What is important is that, on either count, the ‘Brahmin’ is rendered absent from the
‘present’ of caste. In training attention on the contemporaneity of the modern Brahmin, therefore, I am concerned to reverse the axes of contestation and legitimation within caste: to substitute for the absent figure of the Brahmin in the latter frame through a specific focus on the agency and selfhood of the Brahmin within caste.

Along the contours of this substitution, besides, I am also actively resisting the temptation of framing the Brahmin problematic exclusively in terms of domination—as indeed one of hegemony. To be sure, the framework of a ‘will-to-dominance’ is all-too-easily grafted for the purpose of a study of the Brahmin community, while in fact any excessive and exclusive reliance on such a framework can prove to be delimiting. It could indeed, when framed in the context of a longer historical narrative, offer exciting and novel insights regarding the institutionalisation of caste through the figure (real and nominal) of the Brahmin. And, what is more, one could see this as a window into several questions—about the ways in which Brahmins are reinventing their power and domination over caste society; the will to dominance as representing a secularisation of the contemporary Brahmin self; their continuing predominance in matters of cultural and social capital; their much talked about ability to adapt to newer challenges or, more crudely, the figuration of the ‘cunning Brahmin’, and so on. Indeed, all along my recuperation of the Brahmin trajectories across different registers, I attested to the importance and validity of pursuing such questions. Ultimately, however, the framework of dominance is seriously delimiting and restrictive in a very primary sense, in that it refuses to give the subject—the Brahmin—a voice of his/her own. Any sociological analysis framed thus is seriously compromising of the scholarly rigour. It is almost as if a certain normative standpoint has to be taken and vindicated even before research is undertaken.

One could, for all that, recognise the fecundity and value of reaching such normatively ordered conclusions about the contemporary Brahmin; but foreclosing a conclusion by prefiguring it is methodologically dubious and politically jaundiced. Accordingly, it is a doubly qualified normative axis that I have been working with all along. On the one hand, I have sought to ‘caste’, as it were, a social space that is often represented as moving towards a trajectory that is either outside caste or non-caste
determined. On the other hand, one is quick to contain the normative implications of this over-determination, as also of the easy characterisations of such a move. This, in itself, is an important corrective to the recent trajectories of caste studies. Even as I critically interrogate the dominant predisposition of inscribing and determining the relevance of caste in certain locations of life and not in others, I have also positioned my study away from the over-determining positioning of the caste question exclusively in terms of domination—contestation, a tendency that has witnessed a surge since the 1990s.

This study has sought to fashion a different framework even while trying to bear the results of a conviction that ‘caste’—both as a substantive social framework and as a category of analysis and appraisal—ought to remain a legitimate and unavoidable preoccupation for the discipline of sociology in India in its attempts to make sense of Indian social realities. In doing that, recasting the ‘presents’ of caste in the languages of self-representation and identity-formation—at least in the ways in which I have delineated them—seemed to suggest a way out. Not only do we need to bring into focus the spaces beyond caste—in terms of the alternative identity ‘choices’ available—for the purposes of understanding caste action, but we must also remain sensitive to the logic and demands of caste structure and signification. The latter especially are open to varied and differentiated meanings and negotiations.

Indeed, a defining characteristic of the now burgeoning literature on identities and identification is its insistence on conceiving the same as being dynamic, processual, multiple, and historical. Predictably, most of the scholars working in this framework have consciously attempted to veer away from any primordialist understanding of identities and towards a ‘constructionist’ account of them. Evidently, the specific ways in which I have framed the question of identity and identification has tried to depart from the ‘constructionist’ appraisal, without completely denying it all the same. It is instructive to identify caste both as a social identity and an identity choice that is available to individuals and groups in India. It may not, however, not be sufficient to reiterate that identities—even caste ones—have to be approached and grasped in relational terms, for all too often castes in a substantive sense have broken with (or attempted
to undermine) the relationality constituting them. The strength of this insistence is that it helps us to approximate caste as an axis of identity and identification, at once given and constructed.

Such a mediated understanding has been foundational to my focus on the dynamics of a particular caste community over a period of time, as well as facilitative of further grafts upon the space of identity as well. It not only avoided attaching any primordiality to the ‘casteness’ of the Brahmin community as such, but in historicising it also allowed me to situate it in a larger field in which other such identities and identifications were attempting to categorise and reorder the space of its operation. Underwriting these complex negotiations has been the way in which self-fashioning takes place, often marked out as a project of self-realisation—the idea of becoming Brahmin—and yet coupled with a sense of the external categorisation grounding the sense of self—the self-identity of being Brahmin. Broadly, this is what I was getting at in the course of the substantive chapters reporting and describing (also explaining and evaluating) the problematics of Brahmin identity in contemporary Karnataka.

Comprehending identity and identification in these ways—indeed as being a fundamental resource for individuals and communities to engage in sociologically interesting behaviour—prepares us to centralise caste as the prism through which one can get at the action patterns that individuals and the ‘community’ in India inhabit and exhibit. This is a crucial point for, as I think my study has shown, the invocation of a caste identity as a representation of the self is not a given—at least not in the case of the contemporary Brahmins. They have to be, in a manner of speaking, coerced into enunciating from that standpoint since the relationship they share with their ‘Brahminness’ is constitutively ambivalent and even contradictory. What this must entail for my accounts of self-fashioning and the concomitant grasp of identities and identifications is that the fashioned ‘identity’ must necessarily be situated and approached in a field which is dynamic and shifting. Even more categorically, the point that identity must always constantly strive to be established brings to fore the agency that is involved in the formulation of a (caste) identity. The latter

1 But, of course, overstating the plastic nature of (secular) identities is both unwarranted and indefensible. More on this below.
Being Brahmin, Being Modern involves active enunciations as well as repudiations—in short, ambivalences—which the caste subjects foreground in their relationship with parts of their own ‘self’ and the ‘other(s)’ they negotiate. These negotiations keep open the varied possibilities of assertive identification and active denial vis-à-vis one’s casteness, and need thematisation in and by the scholarship.

Recounting the Narrative of the ‘Brahmin’ Identity

The foregoing points both recapitulate and reconstitute aspects of the ground on which the study went about mapping the dynamics of the Brahmin identity in contemporary Karnataka. The question arises as to the specifics of the dynamics itself. Broadly, in keeping with the architectonic traced above, I examined aspects of the non-Brahmin categorisation of the Brahmin identity (as indeed the modern state’s complicity in such a categorisation), emphasising in particular the figurative aspects of the ‘Brahmin’ response (both within the fold and outside, as for instance in the case of the Lingayats). Even as I attempted to show that the non-Brahmin othering of the Brahmin identity has had enduring effects on the ways in which the contemporary (or modern) Brahmin has identified him/herself and the differential recuperation and foregrounding of his/her self thereon, I was also concerned to deliver on the limits of this ‘othering’ and get at the resources and constraints that the Brahmin self depends upon in order to respond to the othering.

As the third chapter demonstrated, the self-realisation of being and becoming Brahmin also obtains in many respects independent of the othering and its ways of categorising. The Brahmin self—and the community at large—has, over time, borne the brunt of the larger processes of urbanisation, secularisation, and corporatisation; and an assessment of this impact cannot be gained from an exclusive focus on the non-Brahmin’s ways of recuperating and defining the Brahmin. Even more pointedly perhaps, the sting in the latter (that is, the non-Brahmin) only confirms the proactive transitions within the Brahmin community as a whole, while lending a purely reactive edge to the non-Brahmin articulation. Moreover, self-identity or identification in our register is neither exclusively in terms of a self-conscious
activity of imagining one’s own contours in a dialogue with the ‘other/s’; nor is it, by that same token, determined necessarily by its own contexts. As we saw in the course of the substantive chapters, Brahmins continue to retrieve and put to use the ‘scriptural/traditional’ imagination of the idea of the Brahmin in negotiating with ‘modern’ demands. The narrative of the self, therefore, both within and across castes (and especially so, one suspects, for the Brahmin identification) forever exhibits an excess that cannot always and completely be explained in terms of its dialogic relation with its other/s or in terms of its own self-recuperation in particular contexts. The process is more enduring than ephemeral, even as it is subject to change and transformation. Therefore, there is a need for more full-blooded appraisals of the modes of investing in the idea of the ‘Brahmin’. This study is but a fragment of an unfolding prognosis.

The foregoing might seem a paradoxical formulation. Let me try to recount it from within the narrative presented by this study. My narrative has sought to work itself out, simultaneously, at three levels/registers. While this was broadly reflective of my data sources, it has also served as a kind of grid for locating the dynamics of the Brahmin identity. These three registers have entailed various spaces of enunciation, both communitarian and individualised, each feeding off and into the category of Brahmin. Indeed, these registers are constitutive of the processes by which the dynamics of the modern Brahmin identity plays itself out, and accordingly, are not strictly translatable as mere sources or conduits of information about Brahmin castes.

All the same, both in my narration and with reference to the ground reality, these registers remain indistinct and always work off and into each other. For instance, the enunciatory space of the caste association often makes itself visible through the non-Brahminical othering of the Brahmin, even as the Brahmin persona, at an individual level, constructs itself in negotiation with both the dynamic of the association and with the othering. This intertwining of the registers across which the Brahmin self and identity articulates itself is something one has to remain alert. Besides, to the extent that the contemporaneity of the Brahmin identity is here being approached historically, it was clear from the very outset that one of its constitutive motifs, of being a community (or an identity) under siege, had to be historicised.
Likewise, my initial forays into and interactions with the caste association activists brought home the point about the inextricable ways in which Brahmin enunciations were conjoined with a non-Brahmin history of othering as indeed with individual Brahmins' secularised narratives of the self.

Quite clearly, an effort has been made to graft a historical trajectory onto an ethnographic present. The recuperation of the narratives of the Brahmin self would apparently have been impossible if the historical axes were not to be foregrounded. But the demand also followed in the wake of another theoretical suggestion—about mapping the nature and sources of caste action today. Indeed, as the first two chapters have disclosed, this would entail coming to terms with the thesis of the 'substantialisation' of caste. As Fuller (1996) has suggested, it is productive to view substantialisation as a 'self-contradictory' process. This self-contradictoriness is embodied in terms of both the increasing differentiation within each caste (even as it gets substantialised) and the propensity for relational hierarchical values to remain salient in the private, domestic domain, while being displaced by 'substantialist' ones in the public domain. This is a useful way of recuperating the operative dimensions of the process of substantialisation. However, in light of the delineation of the dimensions of the contemporary Brahmin identity in this study, one sees that the nature and sources of caste action today are much more muddled than the neat divisions and 'phases' that the concept of substantialisation is able to muster.

At any rate, the point about the 'displacement' of caste values as being the primary mode of recuperating one's casteness (hinted at by Fuller) is undeniably witnessed among Brahmins. They articulate the significance of caste as being relevant only in a past that they imagine or remember as their own. What is more, this imagination of caste in ritual hierarchy-centred terms is almost always deployed in order to convince themselves—as well as the observer/outsider—that they now are indeed outside caste, even non-caste-d selves. More pointedly, compared to their own foregoing generations, this assertion begins to appear like a truism, for the transformations that each generation opens out to seem radical and foundational. Each generation believes that its succeeding generation is either losing out on its heritage or that it is adjusting according to the demands of the times, depending
upon the disposition of the individual evaluating such changes—but more of the former than of the latter. Interestingly, however, this positively imagined past is carefully distinguished from a negatively evaluated Brahmin-centric caste system. The privatisation of caste—the tendency to see caste and its rules, meanings and normative legitimacy as being relevant and salient only within the confines of the home, or more accurately a private world—is also a strategy that the Brahmins adopt in looking at and making sense of their casteness. Nevertheless, the point that Mayer (1996) makes regarding beliefs and attitudes that emanate from relational hierarchical status values being coded as statements about cultural difference seems a better approximation, which too finds corroboration in the instance of Brahmins.

But the picture is hazier than these recuperations suggest. Beteille’s analysis of the urban middle classes and Fuller’s enthusiastic affirmation of the same only confounds it further. In an essay that is punctuated with subtle assertions, Beteille sees caste (in the context especially of the urban middle classes) as a residue from a past that has lost much of its significance in reproducing structures of inequality; rather, it is the institution of family that is in many important ways replacing caste (Beteille 1991: 20). Beteille also makes much of the differentially endowed cultural and social capitals across families in determining the patterns of inequality (ibid.: 24–25). Given the data that I have worked with, it appears that Beteille is overstating his case. Not only does there appear to be a successful reproduction of inequality—understood in terms of access to critical resources and life-chances—based primarily on caste distinctions, there are also severe and extensively shared sentiments of disapproval against breaching the rule of endogamy (restricting, thus, the possibility of the varied forms of capital from becoming available to ‘outsiders’). I have of course suggested the ways in which the boundaries of endogamy are changing in contemporary times among the Brahmins—from being restricted to the individual jatis to any which family so long as it belongs to the (commonly recognised) Brahmin fold. Nonetheless, the preferences are still to observe jati endogamy rather than ‘community’ endogamy, even if the grounds of legitimation have shifted from ritualist assertions to those mounted on ‘cultural compatibility’.
Moreover, in a very important sense, family is where caste gets its most effective mode of embodiment and reproduction:

In any case, to say that ‘family’ is now becoming more important is not of itself to indicate any sea-change since family pedigree is precisely what caste has always been about. (Quigley 1994: 37)

Apart from the continuing significance of endogamy, this study has also attempted to point out that even the everyday fields of interaction of the respondents—spaces that are ostensibly secularised—are overwhelmingly contained within the Brahmin fold. This is a point that Sivaprasad’s study (1987), albeit on a different register, too corroborates. These interactive fields might have, in normative terms, very little to do with the fact of one’s casteness. For instance, these individuals or families might not deliberately choose to seek out and interact with each other solely because they are Brahmins. And what is more, given their contexts—largely urban and middle class—they are today faced with greater choices and networks of interaction. But the fact that they still cluster around and look up to each other for a sense of security and comfort is a testimony to the resilience of ‘caste’ in providing a moral and meaningful frame through which to make sense of one’s lifeworlds. One can still gather a coherent and unifying structure of ideas and feelings that binds and formulates the contemporary Brahmin community.

In his 1996 work, Beteille is far more guarded, even as he largely makes the same assertion. He argues that both dimensions of caste—those of quotidian practices and of morality—are unmistakably losing their legitimacy. This is definitely the case, he asserts, in the case of the urban middle classes, even if for the rural ‘cultivators, artisans and others’ they might still be more legitimate and meaningful. He suggests that caste is no more a ‘complete system’ that it was before. Thus:

Until the nineteenth century, Hindu intellectuals could argue with force and conviction about the significance and value of caste. Their counterparts of today, who are still mainly upper caste, have lost the capacity not only to explain and justify caste, but even to describe it coherently. (Ibid.: 162)
And that:

[C]aste distinctions were considered significant and legitimate by most members of society, and particularly by those belonging to the upper castes whose descendents in contemporary India are precisely the ones who are most ambivalent and troubled about its meaning and legitimacy today. (Ibid.: 160–61)

Accordingly caste today is a ‘truncated system’ (ibid.: 161). The future of caste lies with politics, and not in being a moral frame regulating the everyday lives of the urban middle classes and a resource for meaning making. For the latter, caste is a cloak, a readily available and easily understood language, a metaphor to talk about other, more significant and relevant signifiers of status—such as education, occupation and income. The implications of these claims are made explicit by Fuller (1996: 16–17) as he summates Beteille:

[T]o extend Beteille’s argument further than he explicitly does so himself—status distinctions may be expressed in the language of caste, but they may no longer pertain to caste hierarchy, which has lost all its legitimacy, or even to caste as an array of culturally distinct groups which has become largely irrelevant in comparison with mainly class-based cultural variations.

On these terms, thus, the retrenchment of the urban middle classes ‘belonging to the upper castes’ from the normative and even quotidian space of caste is doubly complete. Not only do they loath the increasing ‘casteism’ in the political arena (in which ostensibly the future of caste lies) they also consider it morally reprehensible to think and act in terms of their caste identities. But if politics is going to overdetermine the trajectories of caste and if any caste, which begins to populate the space of the urban middle classes, will definingly move away from caste, then what remains of ‘caste’? Indeed, how do the Brahmins I spoke with, read about, and observed match up to these claims? If politics is where caste’s present and future lie, then evidently Brahmins will have very little role to play in the process. Neither do they have the numbers to retain their significance nor is the ‘politics of
patronage' that supposedly enabled them to thwart the logic of representation from taking fuller effect successful any longer (see Jaffrelot 2003). What is more, Brahmins themselves increasingly realise this: not only do they articulate their retrenchment from the space of politics as a direct fall-out of the growing ‘casteism’ in the polity (like the ‘urban middle classes’ of Beteille do), they also put to work a distinctly non-substantialised, definingly relational idea of being a Brahmin in making sense of their own retrenchment. They suggest that the ‘Brahmin’ has never been meant to occupy seats of power—even as he is the most knowledgeable and has always wielded unquestioned influence over the powers-that-be. They point instead to the continuing dominance of the community in positions of decision-making—such as the higher echelons of the bureaucracy, academia, judiciary, the ‘knowledge economy’, etc.—in order to recreate a classical (scriptural?) and structurally-ordained Brahmin. So, even while being out of the space of caste and politics in an empirical sense, is the Brahmin in it or not?

Further, if Brahmins are literally and metaphorically outside the space of politics—supposedly the most dominant space for the survival of caste as an institution—then what is happening to the other, more ‘traditional’, spaces of influence of caste? If it is endogamy, then the Brahmins seem to jealously guard it. If it is strictures founded on rules of ritual purity, it has weakened and yet assumed a different shape, a different legitimacy. In some of the testimonies presented in Chapters 3 and 6, the respondents were in no way jettisoning the sacralised imagination of the Brahmin. In seeking to reinterpret the ‘given’ idea of the Brahmin, they were according it a newer legitimacy as indeed deploying it as a significant cognitive resource to make sense of their worlds. If it is a social network or a ‘habitus’ within which lifeworlds are constructed and on which dispositions, tastes and structures and frames of action are built, then ‘casteness’ continues to be a significant, if not the sole, resource for the Brahmins. Further, do they mean by caste, jati or varna? In many ways, it is both.

The substantive chapters of this study, accordingly, have been an attempt at gaining a measure of the perceptual space of particular caste subjects and of caste action today. The non-Brahmin retrieval of the Brahmin as the ‘other’—not merely for its own self but also as embodying the very anti-thesis of the
normative frame of being modern—has had very deeply felt effects on the formation of the contemporary Brahmin self. Indeed, in constitutive ways it is this othering that renders the oscillation on the scales of identity and identification which the Brahmin experiences as a more urgent and real one. Nonetheless, even as the non-Brahmin challenge acts as a crucial resource for the formulation of a coherent modern Brahmin identity, and brings home to the Brahmin the urgent need to speak as a secular (or ‘non-caste’) voice, it does not exhaust this enunciatory space. The intersections in the space of ‘voice’ too are definitive of the making of the modern Brahmin identity. I showed in Chapter 4, the varied ways in which this concatenation of voices has meant a series of shifting identifications. The internal contestations, the challenges from outside that interrogate both the secularising function of the Brahmin as well as the continued signification of the ritual status that s/he wields—it is in responding to these often oxymoronic pulls that a deeply ambivalent Brahmin identity emerges.

As the later chapters (5 and 6) disclose, the non-Brahmin othering has remained enduring. That is to say, it did not subside with the ‘resolution’ (by way of a regime of quotas) of the non-Brahmin challenge in the 1920s. It has remained critical, even to this day, to all the registers of Brahmin identity that I have presented. The associational efforts, right since the pioneering efforts, have consistently engaged in a dialogue with this state of being othered. Not the least, even at the level of the individuals and their families, this othered status has been foundational in structuring the ways in which the self as Brahmin is evaluated and related with. Being a caste self gets articulated on all these registers as a burden—a burden that has been unfairly imposed on the self. Indeed this, coupled with its unique ‘secularising’ experience—its exposure really to the modern space of jobs and education—should have been the most pressing reason for this caste community to complete the journey (that Beteille and Fuller chart as the immanent trajectory of caste) towards a total unmaking of even the substantialised avatars of caste. That this has not happened among the Brahmins and that they, on the contrary, in many ways continue to use their ‘caste’ knowledge and experience as indeed the caste identity in their narratives of self is obvious from my rendering of the dynamics of the Brahmin identity.
So, then, is the continued deployment of the caste idiom a mere case of obfuscation or even an active instance of misrecognition by the Brahmin that is deployed only because there is a reassurance of the familiar in it? It is apparent that it is more crucial and grounded to the contemporary Brahmin self than that. The Brahmin continues to make use of ‘casteness’ as a critical resource in formulating a sense of self. Of course, the significations of being Brahmin, the meanings and investments that are made in the category of Brahmin, have all undergone significant transformations over the course of the last century. Also, these transformations have been definitely in the direction of an increasing dilution of the normative hold of the ritual status-centred frame of caste. Even the quotidian caste practices—such as the rules of commensality and touchability—are steadily being delinked from the definitions and adequacy of Brahminhood. The performance of practices such as the sandhyavandane is increasingly left to individual discretion; families are indeed becoming the regulatory (or otherwise) institutions in either maintaining or shedding the Brahminical practices. Notwithstanding all such changes, these cannot be taken to mean an unequivocal break from the ‘past’. Through the testimonies of my respondents, I presented the complex ways in which many such practices as indeed their normative legitimacies feed back into the lives of the community.

Such oscillations also mark the space of the Brahmin association. In presenting the various kinds of Brahmin associations, I demonstrated the continuing significance of the non-Brahmin challenge in bringing to life and legitimacy the space of corporate Brahmin associations. It is also this challenge that enables the proliferation and enduring existence of jati-specific associations. The non-Brahmin articulation of the Brahmin identity renders the very idea of a Brahmin association an illegitimate one even before it takes birth. It is precisely in seeking to negotiate with this state of imminent illegitimacy that the associations seek to constantly move between claims of community and associational solidarity. While defending the idea of the Brahmin association, activists are forced to foreground an agenda that perceives the persona of the Brahmin as a value, one that had to be achieved—even by the Brahmins themselves. More sharply posed, this means that the Brahmin identity as a mere
associational solidarity can and ought to be transformed into an inalienable sense of community. But this positioning, I also argued, undercuts the very logic of caste associations, which definitionally demand a putative and immanent casteness, of being born a Brahmin whose existence remains irrespective of the individual relationship with one's casteness and the attendant demands. The histories of Brahmin associations—particularly the corporate ones—have always had to endure this vacillation or, more accurately, oscillation.

Such deeply embedded and embodied dilemmas obtain most critically in the persona of the contemporary Brahmin individual. Continuing to be marked by the non-Brahmin (but now also the Dalit/Bahujan) othering, the Brahmins foreground a dominant sense of burden in evaluating their caste identity and location. The primacy that the 'other' seeks to attach to it (that is, Brahmin) is sought to be vigorously denied by articulating the identity proffered by caste as being incidental or peripheral to its existence. It is, to recall a term used by a Brahmin in the journal Mysore Star, merely a 'list' to which they all belong by default. However, and all too paradoxically perhaps, the logic of this retrieval is undercut by thick notions such as samskara (character and codes of conduct) that uniquely and exclusively endow the Brahmin with his/her 'Brahminness', and a consequent logic of immanence attached to it. Such recuperations of the caste self as inhabiting the space of 'community' is most forcefully articulated when the respondents speak of a self under siege—a 'siege' that is not always the making of the non-Brahmin but a more fundamental mismatch between the logic of the times and an inexorable ethics of the self. The narratives of identity and identification that the contemporary Brahmins place on record are again, thus, defined by an oscillation between 'community' and 'association' sense of self.

Can all this be understood by situating ourselves within the framework of 'substantialisation'? The answer broadly is in the negative. Most importantly, the thesis of substantialisation renders caste action determined and deterministic, in that it carries a certain assumption of hardness and internal homogeneity attached to it. Consequently, it does not allow for an equivocation vis-à-vis one's casteness. It also carries an evolutionary idea of how castes transform, of a passage of caste from 'structure' to 'substance'. Clearly, an account that allows the caste actors to
remain responsive to the structure of caste even as they make new meanings out of their caste identities, is in order. In the sections that follow, I work towards an architectonic of such an account, implicating secularisation and individuation and the contending logics of ‘community’ and ‘association’.

Of Secularisation and Individuation: Explanatory Sketches

For more than two centuries, philosophers and social scientists have predicted the death of God and the decline of religiosity. It may not be possible to review all these arguments here, most of which can be subsumed under the heading ‘secularisation’ or ‘desacralisation’. A popular hypothesis postulates a negative relationship between economic wealth and (church) religiosity. According to the Bible, it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to get to heaven. In taking up this old idea, one might expect that religiosity increases under deteriorating economic conditions and declines under improving economic conditions. Others have attributed a different meaning to the same principle and derived from it a long-term trend. In particular, Inglehart (1990) argues that traditional religion satisfies the need for shelter and safety, but the unprecedented wealth of post-war Western societies has, for the first time in history, satisfied these basic needs, thereby destroying the basis of church religion. Thus, whereas in the early stages of industrialisation materialism and church religiosity co-existed, the traditional forms of church religiosity are expected to gradually wither away in advanced industrial societies. In contrast, Stark and Bainbridge (1985) have argued that religion will persist because it provides ‘general compensators’ for not directly satisfiable desires.

According to a second approach, the decline of church religiosity is largely due to the development of ‘occidental rationality’. Weber is often credited with outlining the basic features of this process (Collins 1986 has the details; see also Weber 1978). Obviously, underlying the whole process of Western rationalisation is the belief that the world is calculable, predictable and controllable (cf. Wilson 1976). These beliefs, it is held, apply as much to the physical world as to the psychological and social
Western rationality disenchant the world because God is no longer required in explanations of natural and social phenomena, each of which are seen as the outcome of this-worldly processes. Moreover, the basic tenets of a rational science may come into conflict with the requirements of religion (see also Schluchter 1981).

Other authors stress the effects of functional or structural differentiation (Dobbelaere 1985; Luhmann 1995) on secularisation and individuation. Functional differentiation, it is claimed, has produced societal subsystems that have become increasingly specialised in their functions, and some have also developed rational organisations. Doubts are expressed whether religion still has a societal function in a rational world, especially since control is assumed to be no longer based on religious or moral principles. What is more, it is held that religion may even be a menace to modern, rational institutions. Accordingly, functional rationality typical of a societalised environment may conflict with the value rationality of religion, which is community-oriented (Fenn 1972). Thus, secularisation is claimed to be more than a social–structural process. Indeed, as Peter Berger has maintained, ‘(i)t affects the totality of cultural life and ideation, and may be observed...most important of all, in the rise of science as an autonomous, thoroughly secular pers-pective on the world’ (1967: 107).

Following on from these arguments, others claim that the religious subsystem has not only lost its function at the macro level, but that religious and other beliefs are also transformed at the individual level. Since science and the technologies dependent on it make up the major part of modern education, it is held that the content of learning is de-sacralised (Wilson 1976: 68, 128). Indeed, as Emile Durkheim suggested, the more general and vague God becomes, the more removed. He is from this world and the more ineffective (1964: 168–69). The same could be held for traditions associated with belief in an entire sacred realm, so that in a society where role relations have become impersonal and segmented, observance of the sacred seems an anachronism.²

² For a contrary view, see of course the later Durkheim, especially The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life (1965).
These formulations link the idea of secularisation at the macro level to changes at the micro level. The link between the ‘impersonal society’ and the sacred as an abstract notion is set within this framework because the impersonal and specialised character of rationally-organised institutions seems to be a typical experience of modern citizens. In fact, one may extend the idea of individuation associated with modernity in this context. Broadly, the individuation thesis about the transformation of beliefs and practices under conditions of modernity has been elaborated within the framework of neo-functionalism. At its core, the thesis is rooted in the assumption that, in contrast to the non-modern (or pre-modern), religious and other matters can be decided by autonomous individuals. Since individuated subjects as self-respecting persons demanding dignity and equal concern from others can satisfy their needs and aspirations from a large basket of competing religious and non-religious offers, their belief system (as also the structure of their practice) becomes a kind of patchwork of heterogeneous elements. More sophisticated sociological arguments use complex notions of collective identity and identity construction to address this state of affairs. In traditional societies, it is argued, a homogeneous lifeworld gave people their identity; whereas, in ‘modern’ times, people live in a kind of disengagement, with the lifeworld of family, neighbourhood, community and formal and informal association becoming dissociated from the social system and its subsystems. Typical of this dissociation is the privatisation of the space of belief in the world of the subsystems (Luhmann 1998). In advanced modernity—sometimes referred to as postmodernity—individualisation is assumed to extend into the lifeworld, and a de-traditionalisation of the lifeworld is held to occur (Giddens 1990: Ch. 5). This, it is claimed, has led to a ‘liberation’ in which people faced the new experiences of having to make their own decisions, their own choices, and to build their own identity.

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3 For the content and thrust of neo-functionalist reasoning, see Alexander (1985). Luhmann (1998) has much to say on the individuating dimensions of modernity, as also Giddens (1991); while for the Indian context, see Alam (1999b). For a more comprehensive, even if theoretically subtle, overview of modernity and its theorising in India and elsewhere, see Hegde (2000).
(Beck 1992). Collective identities are held to no longer obtain, and fixed identities may only survive in older generations.\footnote{Contemporary events of course seem to suggest otherwise. Particularly after 11 September 2001, the world seems a transformed place with contesting imaginations and indeed the postulation of fixed collective identities.}

It should be clear, then, that although ‘secularisation’ has been used to designate a process of long-term change involving specifically religious beliefs, value orientations, and institutional functioning, it could be made to yield a perspective on individuation as well. What is more, secularisation nuances (in the sense of adding dimension to) the process of individuation. Approaching secularisation from this perspective has two advantages. First, by analysing long-term change in beliefs and practices, it becomes apparent that changes in norms and values often cannot be reduced to the emergence of some new preferences or needs. Rather, ‘religious’ change (if one were to so restrict secularisation) may be better understood as a complex process of re-interpreting old, even abstract, value concepts. Second, conceptualising secularisation as a process of changing interpretations of value concepts and thereby connecting up with individuation emphasises the role of intellectuals and institutions in the process of change. Since the translation of values into coherent sets of preferences and norms requires special skills, the task is frequently assigned to ‘experts’ or specialised institutions. As long as they have a monopoly of interpreting norms and values, they may also influence the pace of religious and purely secular change. However, it is important to analyse not only the influence of institutions on changes in beliefs and practices, but also to investigate the consequences of institutional decay (indeed, and not often seen as so, an aspect of individuation). More particularly, is the loss of institutional power accompanying secularisation also accompanied by increasing value pluralism and value instability (read, individuation), as many conservative authorities suspect?

In sum: interest in the secularisation process can translate into a concern with not only aspects of religiosity, but also changes in behaviour, changes in beliefs and a concern with whether moral
norms are more heterogeneous among people emancipated from insititutionalised practices (whether these be connected with particular religions or not). Accordingly, ‘secularisation’, although a term used to designate changes in religious behaviour—the decline in church religiosity, for instance—can be extended to capture a wider gamut of changes in non-religious or purely secular realms as well. The latter scale of changes is connected particularly with the processes of modernity and modernisation, so that ‘secularisation’ may be approached as marking out further dimensions within a modern logic of the individuation of identities and selves.

Much has been made of secularisation of caste in invoking the persona of the secular/ising Brahmin in the previous chapters. Of course, as the delineation above makes it amply clear, the concept of secularisation has primarily, if not exclusively, been deployed to animate debates on the relationship that obtains between religion and society in a modernising context, and what is more in the Western context. The overpowering debate on secularisation has largely missed the attention of Indian sociologists. In the Indian context, it is ‘secularism’ and not secularisation that has occupied the minds of the academia, particularly recently in the wake of what has been called the ‘communalisation’ of society. This seems singularly unfortunate because, as I have been maintaining off the explanatory sketches recounted above, the debate on secularisation is open to the conceptual possibility of acting as a grid on which any discussion of a social formation negotiating with ‘traditional’ identity markers in a modernising context can be mounted. Moreover, it can also facilitate a charting of the processes of individuation within identities and identifications as well. The same, however, cannot be said of the Indian debate on secularism.

This is unfortunate, for secularisation as a concept and as standing for a social process could be profitably used outside the sphere of religion—for instance, as I have attempted to talk of (and about) the ‘secularising’ Brahmin. Through this figure, I have sought to frame the varied, often contending, pulls and pressures that a caste self experiences in a context which increasingly seeks to legitimate itself by de-legitimising aspects of a ‘traditional’ (albeit changing) scheme of things. This is as much a secularising demand, as the demand to secularise vis-à-vis one’s religious
affiliations and affectations. Indeed, as it is being increasingly accepted in the debate on secularisation, the demand to ‘secularise’ need not and has not effected a complete erasure of ‘traditional’ identifications or even their significance in people’s lives. Thus, even as the Brahmin self copes up with the demand to secularise, it in many crucial ways remains ‘Brahmin’, a sacred signifier. Even as one admits to this possibility, however, it should not lead us either to dismiss the influence that the demand to secularise exerts on the caste self or, in relation to our problematic, constrict the ability of the Brahmin self to mediate its effects completely on its terms and with success. It is a window into these processes of negotiation that we have sought by implicating the idea, indeed the figure, of the ‘secularising’ Brahmin self. To be sure, secularisation is a process that all castes have been negotiating, but Brahmins, given the historical processes both embedding and disembedding the specific instances of this fold, seem to present an acute instance of the process. The demand to secularise has also been especially stringent for the Brahmins because, invariably, the non-Brahmin ‘other’ seeks to over-sacralise the persona of the Brahmin in its recuperation. ‘The Brahmin’ came to symbolise all that the ‘traditional’ caste order stood for and legitimised. This often leads the Brahmin self to engage in a complex process of reconfiguring its identity—a process that involves simultaneous acts of denial and recuperation.

More importantly, the theme of the secularisation of caste accents the processes of the ‘substantialisation’ of caste (if any). In negotiating with the demand to secularise—that is, to subject itself to an overt delegitimisation or even a privatisation of the space of caste-mediated belief and practice—and consequently in seeking out newer grounds of justification, caste entities move towards becoming aggregative formations founded on a will-to-
power. The moot point however—and this is where, to reiterate, we think the thesis of ‘substantialisation’ confronts its limit—is whether this process is ever complete in that it comprehensively obliterates the terms of an older moral order. And, if it does not, then whether it obtains merely as a cloak (a metaphor?) seeking to mask or even to actively misrecognise what is really something else? Clearly, there is more to the processes of secularisation and individuation than what the substantialisation theme can command.

**The Logic of ‘Community’ and ‘Association’**

To be sure, one can accept much of the preceding analysis without adopting the whole conceptual framework. Even though one may be uneasy about the notions of identity-construction and individuation—an unease that is even more accentuated for contexts such as the Indian one, where the plasticity of identity and identification need not imply elasticity—hardly anyone disputes that individuals are now confronted with a larger number of alternatives in the lifeworld than in the past. Clearly, the contention that the Brahmin, both as a community and as a mode of identification available to a shifting but determinable group of individuals, families and kin/jati networks, is constructed gets adequately demonstrated in the recuperation offered in the foregoing chapters. Both as an identity and mode of identification, it gets to be appropriated, deployed, erased, and contested by the given agents, even if subject to the contextual and historical limits of action. We have seen all along how the modern Brahmin story cannot be told in isolation from, most crucially, the narratives of governmentality, modern antipathy to the ‘caste system’, the uses that diverse caste communities across local caste hierarchies put such reordering of ethics and ethos to, and the apparently inexorable and thereby naturalised processes of urbanisation and becoming modern. To invoke a Bourdieu-an notion, in the field of ‘caste under conditions of modernity’, the forces in operation are all acting on each other and in turn on the total dynamic, remaining in constant flux and transformation. Of course, this is a narrative that we are all now accustomed to encounter, even if the specific instance of the Brahmin itself had not been told till
now. Perhaps, with recounting of the Brahmin trajectory now, even if contextualised to the case of Karnataka, one more piece has fallen in place in the puzzle of making adequate sense of the configurations of caste action in the modern moment.

Yet, as I tried to suggest in the introduction, the study strove to achieve something more than accomplishing a contributory ethno-history whose task was a mere filling-in of details while the framing protocols, devices and modalities remained the same and were even pre-given. The very decision to focus on the Brahmin community was to see whether the predominant frame within which the thematic of caste is being investigated in recent times could accommodate the Brahmin case without having to make minor or structural changes to its configuration. I have shown the ways in which the Brahmin case unsettles the comforts of the familiar. I have argued that the Brahmin instance introduces complexities that cannot be resolved by the increasingly predominating twin registers that are pressed into service in making sense of contemporary caste—viz., of legitimation–contestation and domination–resistance. The latter unmistakably, even if unwittingly, work with an imagination of caste-d persons and communities as conscious, rationalistic, will-centred subjects who make deliberate (and deliberated upon) choices and decisions based on the resources they have, after weighing the pros and cons. In this scheme of things, as mentioned in the introduction while discussing Gupta (2004), it is always the individuals and groups who act upon their contexts and the prevalent values and ethics they privilege, and it has little appreciation of the contexts themselves setting limits to the range of human actions. Of course, insisting on this point is neither to posit a return to a Durkheimian social determinism nor to dismiss the more recent correctives arguing the need to foreground the constructed and agential nature of human endeavours.

But, and this is important, as my study of a particular range of caste subjects has revealed, the availability of options both determines and is determined by the relative homogeneity and stability of structurally ordained beliefs and practices. It is this duality of determination that has to be captured, and I strive to do so in terms of a schema of ‘community’ and ‘association’. While the schema is a derivative of the results encoded by my study of the dynamics of Brahmin identity in Karnataka, in documenting
the latter I now seek to present it as an encompassing framework undergirding the whole investigation. What is more, while the Brahmin instance might have been opportune—even opportunistic—in making my case, I am even keen to posit this as a model that is apposite to understand the contemporary state of caste, across contexts and irrespective of the particular caste context one is investigating. It is towards an explication of this schema that I shall now turn. In the process, a key motif of my investigation, namely, the idea of the secularising Brahmin, will find further elaboration.

In grafting the entire spectrum of caste-based invocations, recuperations, enunciations, and significations onto a logic of community and association, one is drawing on the inspiration provided by Ferdinand Toennies’ (1955) classic statement on the subject of *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft*. For Toennies, all social formations evolve from a state of ‘community’ (that is, *gemeinschaft*) to one of ‘association’ (*gesellschaft*). He seemed to deploy these concepts less as formal or formalised types than as terms designating forms of social relations. This perception itself had its echoes in most of the classical sociological thinkers like Durkheim, Marx and Weber. But often such perceptions work on a presumption of determinacy—the terms ‘community’ and ‘association’ taken to represent contrasting types of social organisation—and are often served up against an evolutionary backdrop. Surely such a mode of characterisation is problematic, and it should be evident that I, in invoking Toennies, neither partake of his model nor scale transitions by means of an evolutionary schema. Social theorisation has evidently come a long way.

The intent behind the invocation of the ‘community-and-association’ schema, nevertheless, lies simply in its ability to gesture in the direction of the contradictory bases of caste action today—their oscillation between contrasting senses of ‘community’ and ‘association’. The sense of community, of a being-in-common, invokes, as Toennies and many others following in his wake have suggested a certain transcendent character, a

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*Upadhya (2001), albeit on a different register, details the career of the concept in social theory.*
recognition that obtains on a moral collective plane beyond the calculations of contract and interest. Although enmeshed in social relations, ‘community’ is taken to be the primary resource of legitimacy and normativity in those relations, and thus obtains as an involuntary, inalienable and accordingly ‘natural’ commitment or solidarity offering the participants a collective sense of belonging. As the popular dictionary definition spells it out, community is a state of ‘joint ownership of liability, being shared and being held in common’ (Concise Oxford Dictionary 1976: 204). It is, in short, a thick notion. The idea of ‘association’, on the other hand, seems a much thinner one, and can be usefully deployed as a form of identification and/or recognition that is more malleable and open to change, contestation and disavowal. It is an axis that is much softer and subject to the vagaries of individuation and individuals. In being the very antithesis of ‘community’, it stands for a voluntary, deliberated choice to associate.

In suggesting that the contemporary state of caste identity and identification can be approximated as a definitional oscillation between the two states—embodied by the terms community and association (which, it is important to note, are not mutually exclusive to each other), I demonstrate the possibilities of transcending the current closures that contemporary caste studies face. But before getting on to this tack, there is a need to firm up what the substantive chapters have been registering, namely, the idea of the secularisation of caste, and the attendant notion of individuation, as obtaining within the Brahmin fold.

The contemporary Brahmin ‘community’—used here as a shorthand symbol for a particular, numerically defined, grouping—in very important senses foregrounds the prevarication of being a ‘caste’ today. The ‘traditional’ moral order is plainly not going away. Even as it has lost legitimacy in many ways in the views of the Brahmins, their retrieval of it is in no way marked by summary rejection. The negotiation with the fact of being

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7 Of course, the personification of ‘community’ can obtain at various levels, including that of association, as deployed here. But the key to ‘community’ is its transcendent character—that distinguishes the community from what might otherwise be called an association, be it a group, locality, family or even political society. For a thought on this, see Frazer (2000 passim).
Brahmin—especially, of being a caste self that was/is driven to respond to a very active and fundamental ‘othering’ (silently from within, but overtly from without)—can be mapped as oscillating between the senses of ‘community’ and ‘association’ as disclosed above. By ‘oscillation’ I do not mean that Brahmins at any given point of time would deliberately decide to invoke one sense over the other; nor is it meant to bring into focus a sort of schizophrenic self. The idea I am keen on foregrounding is, as mentioned earlier, a duality of determination—that caste (as a structurally ‘given’ resource of identity and identification) both determines and is determined by the creative ways in which a people who possess it as a socio-cognitive resource put it to use in organising their lifeworlds and derive an ontological sense of security. This is also a point I made above while explicating the idea of the secularisation of caste—that even as the Brahmin is subject to the transformative processes of the latter kind, these do not leave him/her dispossessed of the sentiments and structures of caste (in a word, of being ‘Brahmin’). What is obtaining is an active process of negotiation in which each transforms the other and gets transformed in turn.

Evidently, this framework cannot be superimposed uncomplicatedly onto the thesis of substantialisation. But the thesis can be rendered more flexible, open-ended and usable by bringing in the Dumontian notion of levels. In reformulating and extending the thesis of substantialisation through an introduction of the dynamic of community and association, I have sought to point to the simultaneity of caste being (in terms of the Dumontian register) both relative and substantive to individuals and groups alike. It is thus also a suggestion to remain sensitive to the different levels at which ‘caste’ is—or particular castes are—undergoing transformation. What happens at the level of castes as relational social groups need not necessarily reflect what is happening within a caste or even to individuals who are, as it were, caste-d. Indeed, on another important register, one could even suggest that under conditions of modernity, the most substantialised avatar of caste is in the realm of its governmentalisation, evidenced most definitively in the space of associations that were presented in Chapter 5, as also in the pronouncements of the state and its agencies, and the Brahmin testimonies of self in their wake.
‘Caste as community’ is often deployed to signify the state in which one’s casteness—of being a caste self—remains the primary, if not the sole, universe of meanings and legitimacy. Conversely, ‘caste as association’ is made to stand for a state in which casteness signifies a mere aggregation—a loose conglomeration, an association which might not be binding, either morally or emotionally; perhaps standing in for a mere reassurance of the familiar.

The terms of this dichotomisation could nonetheless be made to work on behalf of the substantialisation thesis. Dirks interestingly, but only fleetingly, uses these terms when he attempts to make sense of the process of substantialisation:

Caste may no longer convey a sense of community that confers civilizational identity to the Indian subcontinent, but it is still the primary form of local identity and, in certain contexts, from Dalits to Brahmans, translates the local into recognizably subcontinental idioms of association far more powerful than any other single category of community. (Dirks 2002: 7)

This is another productive way of retrieving the ideas of ‘community’ and ‘association’ underscoring this investigation. However, the formulation remains too closely wedded to Dumont’s thesis—ironically enough Dirks remains an important luminary in the post-Dumontian approaches to caste—in that it invests the ‘idioms of association’ with a hardness, a substantive-ness betokening our sense of community. The formulation that I foregrounded following Toennies was one in which the idioms of association are definitionally amorphous and peripheral as opposed to those of the community.  

Again, the self-contradictory nature of the process of substantialisation that Fuller refers to can be redeployed so as to make sense of the very structure of oscillation that the perceptual space of Brahmins exhibits. However, this ‘self-contradictory’ is much more fundamental to the contemporary Brahmin identity than a mere ‘privatisation’ of the space of caste or even the increasing differentiation that obtains within each caste in terms of class, status and power (as identified by Fuller). What is more,
retrieving this state of being that the Brahmin finds her/himself in the grip of as a contradiction might also be misleading.

Pointedly, such contradictory bases of caste action are rendered much more central and acute in the state of being Brahmin. Thus, paradoxically enough, the ‘burden’ of being a caste self is probably the most acute in the Brahmin—a feature that was unmistakably visible in the respondents’ narratives about themselves and their families. At any rate, resolving the demands of this historical moment has not been unequivocal; nor has it been complete. The Brahmin persona in responding to the non-Brahmin othering has not unambiguously disowned the identity and identification of being Brahmin. On the contrary, it has sought to actively bring into its formulations of self the ‘given’ significations of associational worth and community belonging.

Of course, the possibilities of disowning the caste identity and attendant significations exist before individual Brahmins, perhaps to an extent that was hitherto unavailable. This is particularly since the moral force behind the codes of conduct originating from the fact of being Brahmin have been diluted (without losing their imperativeness), but also since such choices have begun to obtain from within other identities and identifications that a person takes as his or her own—be it class, occupation, or quite simply the fact of change.\(^9\) Non-Brahmin othering, if anything, only heightens and even demands such a repudiation. But that precisely is the point—that in spite of the apparent ‘burden’ and in spite of the availability of alternative ways of imagining the self, the Brahmin does not engage in summarily evicting his/her casteness. Or, stating it differently, that the caste identity continues to be resilient enough to remain a significant resource for both meaning-making and making possible coherent action.

In Chapter 3, I presented a schematic historical trajectory of the Brahmin community of Karnataka to argue that the specific ways in which the community underwent the processes of

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\(^9\) We need to consistently remind ourselves of caste’s historicity that we made much of in the course of the introductory chapter. Such statements of comparison—‘now’ compared to the ‘past’, etc.—must remain alert to the historical rootedness of such time frames, and not indulge in constructing timeless pasts as against a momentously transformative present.
urbanisation and modernisation structured the very possibilities in which the modern Brahmin identity retrieved itself. To be sure, a great deal of scholarly work rests content with recuperating the Brahmin mostly as an embodiment of a will-to-power and of a will-to-speak-as a secular self, which are of course true but only partially so. I did narrate the Brahmin’s predominance in what were increasingly becoming key spaces in generating social and cultural capitals, the different ways that were deployed in consolidating this dominance while denying the same to the others, the remarkably successful reproduction over generations of this position of dominance, and so on. These unique trajectories place the Brahmin in a position to emerge as a secular self that ostensibly partakes very little of the casteness that is vested within.

Nonetheless, it is not often that scholarship has commented upon the dimensions of this positionality for the very selfhood of the Brahmin, one that is seeking to formulate a legitimate identity for itself in the modern situation. This has meant allowing a space for the Brahmin to reflect upon his/her own state of self. In doing so, I have looked beyond literature on the non-Brahmin movement and the data produced by the state, and turned to the narratives of the Brahmins themselves—present in different forms such as autobiographies and reminiscences, debates in the late colonial press but most importantly in the narratives of self that the respondents elucidated. It is by allowing such voices to speak out that we have come to realise that the story of the modern Brahmin identity is not a simple one of hegemony, whether abetted by a will to secularise or not. Conceptualising ‘caste as secular self’ (at least in the ways the extant scholarship has sought to position the problem; see, for an important formulation, Dhareshwar 1993) does not allow for a concomitant dynamics of a ‘self under siege’ that the Brahmins experience; nor, importantly, does it account for the demands of secularisation itself. For, it is fairly easy, at this historical moment in any case, to recognise and even delineate the ways in which the Brahmin becomes perhaps the only possible secular self given the ‘natural’ convergences that historically obtained (and were made possible) between the modernisation of the Brahmin selfhood and the making of a secular/national, modern citizen-subject. But, current trajectories of caste scholarship are rendering it increasingly difficult to even ask the question of what the demands to be secular does to the Brahmin,
or for that matter, any caste self that seeks to take on the secular subject position. While the Dumontian confidence that change (in the form of substantialisation) is entertained only at the secondary levels needs rethinking, the more recent and apparently settled scholarly certitude, of caste becoming a secular mark of identity, which once the process of modernisation runs its course will be rendered sociologically and socially meaningless and useless (see Gupta 2004: esp. xix–xx; Beteille 1991, 1996), is hardly productive. In the latter schema, which takes on all the chaotic ambiguities of the notion of ethnicity, how we will distinguish between the many markers of individual/communitarian identities is not clear.

The Brahmin dynamics, clearly, has to do with the availability of a description—from within the narratives foregrounded by this study, it has to do not only with a sense of siege, but also the confounding logics of ‘community’ and ‘association’ that I have been alluding to—and requires also an imagination of agency. The substantive chapters have each presented a complex process of negotiation with the demands of the new normative order and the Brahmins own unique positioning in that order—a positioning that is at once dominant and embattled. Lest it be misunderstood, I need to reiterate the point again. The recuperation of the self as a secularised one has been constitutive of the Brahmin’s ability to be resilient even in the face of an articulate othering. But as witnessed through the course of this exposition, the modern Brahmin self has also been at a loss in coming to terms with its casteness. The agency of the Brahmin has fundamentally been an ambivalent one—at times deeply dependent on its ‘Brahminness’ representing the logic of ‘community’ and at other times willing to or drawn to repudiate the very state of being Brahmin, representing the movement towards the logic of ‘association’. In bringing to life this complex identity and identification, Brahmins do not summarily retrench old values and meanings. Instead, they engage in a process of re-interpreting such resources in the context of the world they find themselves in.

Of course, the question of the availability of a description and the attendant requirement of an imagination of agency is more complex than what my formulations above have sought to record. This is because, again, in keeping with the contending logics of ‘community’ and ‘association’ instantiated by my narrations, the
dynamics of the Brahmin field is also a matter of an ‘association’ aspiring to be community and a ‘community’ unable to shed the dimensions of its associational life. Quite clearly, the demands of secularisation, as bearing upon and borne by Brahmins, entail classifications and identifications that defy Toennies’ dichotomy between gemeinschaft and gesellschaft. The anxieties and dilemmas writ large over the space of Brahmin associations implicate a question about losing out the concept of community and the boundaries and membership that go with it. The challenges before the space of Brahmin castes and their associations are clear. Without hard boundaries circumscribing a community and a clear notion of its membership, how does one articulate a sense of agency? And yet, if the secularising experience that particular Brahmin castes have been privy to is further crystallised, would it not be the unmaking of both a community and the peculiar facets of its associational life?

Surely there cannot be determinate answers to these precise questions. All the same, it has been primarily in order to steer clear of the partial retrievals of the modern Brahmin self, while remaining active to the singular significance of the demands of secularisation on the spaces of caste action, that I foreground the dynamics of community and association. It is nowhere an unambiguous, conscientious steering away from casteness or a sense of ‘community’; nor, on the other hand, is it a simple story of associational peculiarities and communal belonging. It is in some sense both: of nested boxes and complex networks, the fact really of community and association respectively. Consequently, it needs reiterating that the ‘community–association’ dyad by itself cannot do all the work of explanation, as indeed summarise the precise ways in which caste structure and sentiment successfully forge complexes of action and get people to act on behalf of and in terms of a ‘casteness’ that they carry around as their own. For instance, the spaces of caste associations (the problems notwithstanding) demand a harder sense of identification with the category of being and becoming Brahmin. Paradoxically enough, these very spaces even while apparently speaking in terms of and drawing their legitimacy from a ‘systemic’ identity serve to undercut that very identity. What is more, the logic of this cross-cutting identification also serves up the ground for a resistance to the very space of the association. Even as a ‘collective’
Thus one will have to strive to complicate the formulation of the ‘community–association’ dynamic. Identities in order to be socially meaningful cannot be eternally in a state of oscillation; they have to be working towards freezing this movement—to invest a certain sense of stability and seeming permanence to the oscillation. If identities do not appear unequivocal, unruffled and unambiguous, they cease to be of any worth. Often the axis of identity and identification embodied in and by individuals and communities mediates the oxymoronic pulls of a sense of community, on the one hand, and of association on the other. Accordingly, the caste location serves at every point as both a medium and the outcome of the mediation between community and association. In obtaining thus, it persuades individuals and groups to act and think in terms of those identifications that they share and others provide. This can obtain even as ambivalence reigns large over the matrix of caste identification.

It is nevertheless important to emphasise that the logic of ‘community’ and ‘association’ seeks to foreground the experiential and agential dimension of caste-mediated totalities. Particularly, in addressing this logic across the various registers of Brahmin identity, this study has consistently recuperated a Brahmin self that is engaging itself in an act of reflexively enunciating its space. It is perhaps one of the routes to undertake the journey of making sense of caste action in our times, which successfully steers clear of the normative pitfalls characterising contemporary discussions of caste—scholarly and otherwise.

**Integuments for a Sociological Ethnography**

As already mentioned, the work that has been represented here is not an ethnographic study in any classical manner. It shies away from claiming any ‘totality’ in its comprehension of the subject of inquiry and from recuperating itself in a monographic form. This, for sure, is an important step in disabusing the method of its anthropological biases, and to make it deployable in more complex settings that sociology has claimed as its own. The onus of this
study has been on capturing aspects of the world experienced by secularising Brahmins.

The Brahmin identity and agency in contemporary times are obviously unfolding in much more complex locales than those addressed by classical anthropological studies. There are, consequently, a plethora of questions that a sociological ethnography\(^\text{10}\) of the Brahmin community would have to contend with, some of which this study has sought to foreground and help elucidate. The challenge, of course, is more context-specific studies in contemporary settings, sufficiently disaggregated to make sense of the patterning of caste action and identity choices obtaining today. Quite clearly, we need to get at the evidence—innovations at the level of method, in the sense of experimenting with techniques of data collection. But we also need to hone our tools of argumentation, something that can follow independent of a fine-tuning of the methods of data collection. Ideally, we need to be stringing these two imperatives, although commanding our methods need not be the same as giving sense to arguments.

Broadly, in keeping with this imperative then, I would urge the following from within the spaces foregrounded by my study of the dynamics of Brahmin identity in contemporary Karnataka. More than simple ethnographies of particular Brahmin communities, we also need to be crafting the possibility of a sociological ethnography between and across Brahmin castes in different regional contexts. Although I have hesitated in presenting my investigation in these very terms, there is a model of sociological ethnography to be contended here. All the same, we must concede that it needs more effective positioning and methodological innovation. But more substantively, a sociological ethnography of the Brahmin community in Karnataka would require that the theme of ‘substantialisation of caste’—or, more accurately, on our terms, the secularisation of caste—be broached as an unfinished project of caste in modernity. Thus, if substantialisation or secularisation is the modern condition of caste, then the process needs to be adduced to in sociological and ethnographic descriptions in all its textures. It also logically

\(^{10}\) See, for an interesting and productive positing of the idea of 'sociological ethnography', Goldthorpe (2000: Ch. 4).
follows that in the transformations being wrought upon this condition, ‘caste’ even as a substantivised or secularised identity and entity might lose its critical purchase. The framework of a sociological ethnography would need to be attentive to these possibilities. On a different register, yet, the more recent and fashionable interest in identity-theorising and politics is far too obsessed with its retrieval of the idea of caste as social identity as an always-already resource of empowerment and assertion. Evidently, this axis of appraisal is not sufficiently sensitive to the problems of identification and of the specific ways in which a caste identity fluctuates in its self-recuperations. The formation and survivability of a social identity can and ought to be conceptualised as a product of a simultaneous project of self-realisation in which autonomy plays a crucial role along with a process of negotiation with ‘others’, all this taking place in the context of a horizon of value and shared allegiances, even a community of belonging historically registered and cognitively mapped.

This must entail that caste as a system-induced identity marker, a horizon of value and shared allegiances, serves to stabilise what this study has presented as the dynamic of ‘community’ and ‘association’ as obtaining within the Brahmin fold. Caste identities (like any social identity), for reasons of their own self-maintenance and perpetuation, seek to accord themselves a state of permanency and eternity. In doing so, they strive to demonstrate their immutability and character to be unruffled by contextual and historical pressures. Indeed, they have to succeed, in order to survive, in making those individuals and communities which embody such identities to act on their behalf and in their name. Now, while any strictly synchronic study of caste communities will drive home this point, a sociological ethnography of this dynamic can serve to complicate this presumption. ‘Casteness’ (of being a caste self, that is), even as it serves to contain the ‘community–association’ dyad, is equally subject to the pressures and pulls of this dynamic.

Accordingly, the primary impulse animating such a sociological ethnography would have to be making sense of the contemporaneity of caste. The present study has sought to stand as a lowest common denominator of caste’s contemporaneity. Hopefully, it has demonstrated the legitimacy of the conviction
that caste continues to be significant as a crucial frame of self-understanding and categorisation and accordingly as a parameter of socially meaningful action in India. If this claim is accepted, then sociology—of all the social science disciplines—cannot run away from this fact.


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