Chapter Five

The Bounds of Agency: Engaging the Space of Brahmin Associations

This chapter profiles and describes the space of the Brahmin 'caste' associations-from the pioneering efforts marking the early decades of the last century to the contemporary moment. We suggest that the space of the 'association' presents the modern Brahmin identity with a very crucial problem for negotiation. The caste association is conceptually an enunciatory space; and, as such, brings into sharp focus the equivocation that the Brahmin self exhibits under the conditions of the modern non-Brahminical othering. Our first two sections profile and examine the different kinds of Brahmin associations that exist in Karnataka. Beginning from the earliest attempts to organise Brahmins within the space and language of the caste association, an attempt will be made to detail the trajectory of these efforts over the last century. 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 is described here. This detailing will then dovetail into a third section that concerns the rather unique contours of the enunciatory space represented by Brahmin associations.

1 In retrieving the history of the efforts to mobilise Brahmans, we have scanned many of the newspapers and weeklies of the early twentieth century. There is however very little that these report regarding the existence and affairs of Brahmans associations of those times. Apart from these, the AKBMS published a book that sought to map the history of Brahmin associations in Karnataka. Titled Sanghataney Hadiyalli Brahmana Samaja: Brahmana Samaja Andu-Indu-Mundu [Brahmin Community on the Path of Mobilisation: Brahmin Community Yesterday-Today-Tomorrow] and published in 1988, the volume narrates the Akhila Mysooru Brahmana Mahasabha's activities and its conventions of the 1940s, and reproduces the speeches made there and relates the deliberations of these conventions. A volume (n.d.) that contains a report of the second Brahmin convention organised by the Akhila Mysooru Brahmana Mahasabha (in 1949), the rules and regulations of the Association etc. which was apparently published soon after the convention in 1949 was made available by the current General Secretary of AKBMS. Apart from these works, caste associations such as the Hoysala Karnataka Sangha have brought out souvenirs marking special occasions like celebrating fifty years of existence etc. which make fleeting remarks on their past. These too have been used here. The members themselves - including the office bearers - exhibit little knowledge of the history of the associations or about the compulsions that oversaw the establishment of their organisations. Consequently, while we have detailed information on some associations, in many other cases it is very scanty or even non-existent. Even in the case of the contemporary 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 our ability to be more exhaustive. It is under these compulsions that we seek to profile the Brahmin associations in Karnataka.
The fourth and final section is an attempt to delineate in broad strokes the relationship that the various associations share with the Brahmin community. Building on the historical description of the specific compulsions that animated the various Brahmin associations, this section seeks to demonstrate the tenuous relation that obtains 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.

I

Profiling Brahmin associations

We need to begin by noting that there exist two distinct kinds of Brahmin associations. There are those associations that claim a constituency over all the Brahmins irrespective of the internal differentiations and hierarchies (what we can term corporate associations). Alternatively, we have associations that are exclusive to single Brahmin castes (namely, single-caste associations). It could be suggested that the simultaneous existence of these two kinds, which incidentally also constitute forms of imagining the Brahmin community, represent a fairly unique state of affairs.

Corporate associations or associations which imagine and claim to represent a corporatised Brahmin community seek to actively override internal caste differentiations and distinctions. They 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 in the present context in order to fight against those who are seeking to marginalise the Brahmin community and place it under a state of siege. It is argued that any continued preoccupation with internal philosophical and ritualistic differences will only further weaken the community. These associations suggest that the internal differentiations retain meaning only within the confines of the household - for instance, in guiding the specific ways of performing the marriage ceremony or in conducting the annual death rites for the ancestors; but that in the public world, particularly in a context wherein the Brahmin community is under a state of siege, foregrounding such distinctions will only debilitate the community further. There are many such associations that exist in Karnataka.
The federating unit, the Akhila Karnataka *Brahmana* Maha Sabha (AKBMS), which seeks to represent all kinds of Brahmin associations, is the figurehead of such a viewpoint. It was established in the year 1972 (registered in 1974) and is permanently located in the city of Bangalore. It views all the Brahmin associations that function in Karnataka as its affiliates and most units in fact accept such a status. According to the AKBMS, there are more than 400 Brahmin associations at present in the state of Karnataka and it claims that 323 of these have taken its affiliation (*Vipra Nudi*, January-February, 2002). Many of these Brahmin associations participate in the conventions that the AKBMS conducts, while proclaiming their affiliated status on their letterheads and in official communications. The 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, with many of them predating the AKBMS but having now become its affiliates. What more, many such associations continue to get founded purely with local initiatives even to this day, and only as an after-thought or after persuasion by the AKBMS, they become its affiliates.

Apart from these associations, another such form of corporate associations is the locality-based ones that are in a great number in the city of Bangalore but also the other large towns. These associations - such as, for instance, the BTM Lay-out Brahmana Sabha or the Jayanagara Brahmana Sabha - have as their constituency the Brahmin population residing in that specific locality/neighbourhood in the city, again irrespective of the caste 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' that have been established within the large public and private sector industries and organisations intended as "employee welfare

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2 *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, adventurism, self-reliance and progressiveness in the community" (*Vipra Nudi*, August-November, 1996). The frequency of the journal depends upon the financial health of the AKBMS. For instance, during 2001-2002, owing to a severe financial crunch, it appeared only twice.
associations". Thus, there exist associations like the Hindustan Machine Tools Vipra Vrinda, Indian Telephone Industries Brahmin's Welfare Association and the Karnataka Rajya Sarkari Naukarara Brahmana Kshemabhividdhi Sangha (Karnataka State Government Employees Brahmin Welfare Association) These too seek to work for the welfare of the Brahmin community as a whole and decline to recognise the distinctions obtaining from within.

Finally, among these corporatised associations are those that are issue-focused. They function exclusively as matrimonial bureaus; some as financial institutions, helping the unemployed Brahmin youth to set up small scale or cottage industries; while some others focus exclusively on extending educational services etc.

Contrasting with these various types of corporate associations, on the other hand, are the many caste-specific associations which seek to represent particular Brahmin castes. Thus we have associations such as the Mulkadan Mahasabha, the Sri Akhila Havyaka Mahasabha, the Hebbar Srivaishnava Sabha and so on. Almost all these associations, except the Mulkadan Mahasabha (formed in 1991), were established in the first half of the twentieth century, most of them in the 1940s. The membership to these associations is restricted to the caste members. Many of these associations are affiliated to the AKBMS as well, indicating thereby an agreement on the latter's principle of Brahmin unity. Almost all these associations have their head offices in Bangalore; and, as should be obvious they predate the AKBMS, some by more than half a century.

In spite of these differentiations, the agenda before most of 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 in which these activities are conducted is reflective of the association's financial capability, the response from its supposed constituency (members as well as non-members), and the enthusiasm of its activists. Among the so-called 'religious' activities - the categorisation, note, 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 (codes of being and conduct) and the related anxiety that the Brahmin youth in particular is loosing out on its heritage of Brahmanya (Brahminness). This, it is suggested, is either on account of indifference on the part of Brahmins 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 those families that could not afford to conduct the ceremony by themselves. This is an important ritual event in the life of a male Brahmin, and the relatives and friends are usually invited. However, increasingly, it was felt by the activists that a significant number of Brahmin families postpone the conduct of the initiation ceremony till the occasion of the marriage of the individual concerned, a practice that is perceived as *un-Brahminical*. This is held to be further fuelling the already weakening interest in Brahminical rituals among the Brahmin families. Consequently, the associations no longer care about the financial status of the applicants; they are happy as long as families show interest in getting their sons initiated. 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 a ‘kalyanamantapa’ or a part of a temple premises (usually offered freely) to conduct the *Upanayana ceremony*.

The associations also conduct religious discourses on various holy scriptures by well-known scholars. They hold Vishnu/Lalita *Sahasranaama Paaraayanas* (chanting the thousand names of Gods, Vishnu or Lalita, over and again, on a particular day of the week, which is considered to be auspicious, 'healthy' and ‘calming’) and conduct the different Brahmin festivals and birth anniversaries of the Brahmin founding philosophers. All these activities take place in the local temple premises or in some member's residence. For all such activities, only the very old attend, with some spirited 'young' people (anybody before 50 years of age, that is) attending as an exception.

Under the label of 'socio-economic' activities, annual scholarships to the needy students are given after soliciting applications through the local press. These scholarships often do not amount to much, and is intended only as a statement of encouragement. So are the felicitation functions that are held annually to honour rank holders in SSLC, PUC.

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3 Indeed, the ‘appropriate’ time for a Brahmin boy to get initiated is at the age of eight years. In fact, a notice put up at the Poornaprajna Vidyapeeta, Bangalore 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.

4 Large halls, owned by private concerns but also by temples, *mathas* and caste associations, which are hired out for the conduct of marriages, *Upanayanas* and such ritual ceremonies.
and degree examinations. Annual financial assistance is given to the old, destitute women and priests, which are again fairly paltry sums.

The 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. 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 got 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. What is more, even the financial help that is given to the needy in the community is not very significant. For instance, AKBMS disbursed a 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).

Many associations, particularly the caste-specific ones, have for a very long period of time concentrated on the single-point agenda of enabling the young men from the community get educated. Most of the caste-specific associations, and some of the AKBMS district associations, run hostels in Bangalore, and some in Mysore and Shimoga, which cater primarily to students coming from their own community. In the last decade or so, many of these have been thrown open to Brahmin students from outside their caste fold, even as they are charged half the expenses spent on boarding (while it continues to be free for students from their own caste). Most generous donations made to such associations are for such educational endeavours. These associations solicit, and manage to get, endowment grants from members (but also non-members) to sponsor a day's food expenses in memory of somebody of their family. Indeed education continues to be singular of the initiatives towards which most of the members and non-members make contributions. The Brahmana Vidyarthi Sahaya Sangha of Bangalore and the Shimoga District Brahmins Association are perhaps the only two corporate associations that run hostels for Brahmins of all castes. *Anathalaya* (literally an orphanage) located in

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 ten were present during the convention.
Mysore is another such hostel. Many of such hostels situated in Mysore have been closed down in recent decades though. One of the caste-specific associations has recently started a working women’s hostel (the Sri Akhila Havyaka Mahasabha) and another (the Hoysala Karnataka Sangha) has recently begun a post-graduate hostel and both are located in the Bangalore city. Apart from these, almost all the hostels that have existed from before are meant for males.

The AKBMS has successfully launched three co-operative banks, primarily to add teeth to its endeavour to make the community self-reliant. Despite governmental regulations stating that caste associations cannot hold banks, the AKBMS has managed to keep sufficient control over these banks by ensuring that only Brahmins get elected as their directors. Even as 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’. The AKBMS has also started 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 individual will have to be accompanied by an application for a membership of the AKBMS. Even as this measure has helped to swell the membership numbers, according to the admission of the activists of the association themselves it has not ensured their participation.

The AKBMS, besides, 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. The Bangalore-centric tendency of the AKBMS is pointed at, with frustration and even anger, by many of the non-Bangalorean activists, particularly the North Karnataka ones. Even as such conventions indeed help individuals to forge a sense of community and unity, much of the enthusiasm witnessed do not carry long after the holding of such conventions. The caste-specific associations too conduct such mass-scale conventions though much more infrequently than the AKBMS, the location of which are not necessarily the major cities.

* Interviews with the activists of the Bidar Jilla Brahmana Sabha and the Dakshina Kannada Brahmana Sabha.
Some even conduct world conventions, some of which take place in Western countries. Enthusiastic associations also periodically conduct free medical camps, blood donation camps, sports days, cultural events etc., often marshalling resources from within.

Many of the large Brahmin associations have a matrimonial wing keeping records of prospective alliances. The office-bearers claim that this is an activity that receives greater response than the other ones. These matrimonial wings are usually placed under the supervision of the Women's Wing. The one run by the AKBMS has regular visitors numbering to about twenty on an average, every Monday, Wednesday and Friday afternoons and the second Saturday of every month, when it is open. It restricts itself to providing contact addresses to the aspirants of the prospective families and suggests that the families carry out negotiations on their own. The information that is available with the association includes a photograph, educational qualifications, date of birth, elementary details of the horoscope, occupation and income, height, 'sub-sect', parents' name and address, and finally 'requirement of the bride/groom'. The association insists that if any marriage were to 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 that take place, and, if at all, they get to know, it will be usually when another applicant calls on such families soliciting a matrimonial alliance.

But, apparently, approaching a caste association to look for a matrimonial alliance is a deferred option as interviews with most of our respondent families disclosed. There was just one instance among these families that kept up a sustained contact for over a year with the AKBMS matrimonial wing looking for a match for their daughter. Most of the matrimonial alliances within the respondent families are fixed by the individual professionals who do this for a livelihood or someone who catalogues such information as a matter of 'social service', or, most significantly, through word of mouth. Even active members keep the association option to the last while looking for matrimonial alliances.

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7 For instance, the Havyaka Awakening - World Conference was conducted in Gokarna, an important religious centre in coastal Karnataka, in April 2002. The Millennium Konkani Sammelan (a millennium convention of the Gowd Saraswat Brahmins) was held in Chicago, Illinois in July 2000.

8 Interviews with activists of the MGSK Vadhu-Varanweshana Kendra, Bangalore and of the Tejaswini Brahmana Mahila Seva Sangha of the AKBMS.

9 Interview with Mr. Vasudeva Rao, 05/03/2000. This person is a retired Indian Air Force Wing Commander, who spent most of his working life outside Karnataka. He now works as a management consultant in Bangalore.
The MGSK Vadhu-Varanweshana Kendra, Bangalore is a Brahmin association that is exclusively working as a matrimonial bureau. It is of recent origin (established in 1998), but over the last four years has conducted monthly marriage conventions every month under the auspices of various Brahmin associations - primarily in Bangalore but also all over the state. The conventions take place on a Sunday, usually in the premises of a temple. In the three such conventions that this researcher attended, the number was fairly impressive, each with about 50 to 75 alliance seeking families.¹⁰

Primarily, only the federal association, the AKBMS, conducts events that are called political. These are not many; neither are they sustained and regular. For instance, before the last general elections, AKBMS convened a programme to which the representatives of most of the political parties were called, demanding that Brahmins in their parties be selected as candidates to stand for elections. Resolutions are also passed urging the state to give more number of Brahmins chairmanships to the different Boards and Corporations. More privately though, most of the activists support and even canvass for the Bharatiya Janatha 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 the members, activists and sympathisers in Brahmin associations as well as the affiliates of the Sangh Parivar. Even the ‘natural’ affinities shared by the spectrum of articles published in the journals such as Vipra Nadi (published by the AKBMS) with the ideological predilections of the Sangh Parivar leaves no one in doubt about the relationship.

There are occasional efforts by Brahmin associations to harness caste loyalties for purposes of canvassing for the BJP. An instance of this was provided during the recent (2002) by-election for the prestigious Kanakapura Lok Sabha seat. Pamphlets were being distributed at the Poornaprajna Vidyapeeta soliciting voters to cast their vote to the BJP candidate by an ostensibly non-caste based, secular organisation called the Jaagrutha Matadaara Vedike (Awakened Voter Forum) of Shimoga. The pamphlet in itself did not speak from and on behalf of a Brahmin subject-position. It merely exhorted the reader to

¹⁰ In fact, in its monthly conventions the association restricts the afternoon session exclusively for widow/ers and the physically challenged people.

¹¹ A Madhva religious educational institution in Bangalore, run by a math based in Udupi, offering courses that ranges from two years to fourteen years. But more importantly, it also houses a temple and a community hall that is rented out to the Madhva families for the conduct of ceremonies, functions etc. and thereby is a nodal centre which draws a significant number of people on a daily basis.
vote for the BJP candidate. Thus it could have been distributed anywhere, as it indeed was. But there was an accompanying notice, written on the notice board, titled *Vote and Celebrate Madhva Birth Anniversary* which drew the connections. This notice was also by the same forum. It read:

A humble request with the revered Madhva kinsmen...

21/02/2002, Thursday, "Madhva Birth Anniversary Celebrations"

On that day itself is the Kanakapura By-election.

As the celebration of the Madhva birth anniversary is our sacred duty, so is the duty to vote. Therefore, let us celebrate birth anniversary of Madhva only after casting our vote.

Do not forget, 21/02/2002 is the polling date - Vote only for the right candidate (notice put up at Vidyapeeta on 17/02/2002).

Note that the notice does not say whom to vote for, even as the pamphlet distributed does not say anything about Madhva birth anniversary celebrations. But the visitors to the institution will not miss the connections being established. However, such canvassing undertaken by Brahmin associations is far and in between.

The associations, such as the Hindustan Machine Tools Vipra Vrinda and the Karnataka *fiq'va Sarkari Naukarara Brahmana Kshemabhivriddhi Sangha* (Karnataka State Government Employees' Brahmin Welfare Association), which work for the welfare of the Brahmin employees of the organisation concerned, too have very similar agenda before them. They too conduct mass *Upanayana* ceremonies, offer scholarships etc. But their ability to take up cases from the work sphere is extremely circumscribed. Most of such associations 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, for instance. 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.12

This, in summation, is the range of activities that a Brahmin association undertakes during a calendar year. But of course, the endeavour to organise Brahmins within the modern space of caste associations has a history of almost a century now. By

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12 Interviews with the President and the General Secretary of the State Government Employees' Brahmin Welfare Association; and also with a member of the Hindustan Aeronautics Limited Brahmin Employees Welfare Association.
the initial decades of the last century, many initiatives to form Brahmin associations were already in place. While the caste-specific Hoysala Karnataka Sangha, representing the concerns of the Hoysala Karnatakas, was founded as early as 1908, many corporate Brahmin associations emerged during the 1920s, as did some caste-specific Brahmin associations. The Hebbar Sri Vaishnava Sabha was established in 1918. *Jaya Karnataka* (10 March 1925), a weekly, mentions a proposed attempt to organise the Brahmins of Dharwad in 1925. *Mysore Star*, during the 1910s, periodically reports the coming into being of many associations, particularly those that were *caste-specific*. 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*.13 The others, in particular the localised corporate associations, seem to have died a quiet death.

It was in the decade of the 1940s that a revival of sorts was recorded, with a considerable number of Brahmin associations emerging during this period. In 1940, Dharwad witnessed a Brahmin convention called the Akhila Karnataka Brahmana Sammelana (Murthy 2000: 250-1). The Akhila Mysooru Brahmana Mahasabha (seeking to organise the Brahmins of the Princely Mysore State) held two conventions ~ the first in Tumkur in 1944 and the second in Hassan in 1949 (Venkatanarayana 1988). Both these sought to work with a corporatised imagination of the Brahmin community. The decade also saw the emergence of many caste-specific associations, for reasons difficult to determine. The Sri Akhila Havyaka Mahasabha is founded in 1942; the Badaganadu Sangha gets established in 1943, the very year when the Hoysala Karnataka Sangha gets revived after decades of inactivity. The year 1945 also sees the establishment of the Sri Madhva Yuvaka Sangha, Uluchukamme Brahmana Mahasabha and the Bettadapura Sankethi Sangha. Such abundance is matched only by the more recent decades of the 1980s and the 1990s, when most of the locality-based, organisation/institution-specific associations emerged in great numbers, along with the many district and *taluq* associations that the AKBMS forged. Each of the *caste-specific* associations that were founded in the 1940s survives to this day.

13 The editorial in the souvenir brought out on the occasion of the golden jubilee celebrations of the Hoysala Karnataka Sangha in 1995 mentions these facts. It also reproduces the speech of the founding president made on the occasion of the establishment of the Sangha in 1908 (Venkatasubbiah 1995: 9-11).
Looking at the history of these efforts to organise Brahmins, it is evident that caste-specific associations have demonstrated a proclivity to sustain themselves over fairly long periods of time (many for over half a century). This continuous existence is of course marred by periods of inactivity, internal dissent etc., but these associations have all survived. On the other hand, the corporate associations that sought to imagine a constituency that included all the Brahmins have been more unstable and more prone to being rendered non-existent. The 1925 Dharwad endeavour, the Akhila Mysooru Brahmana Mahasabha of the 1940s and the 1940 Dharwad convention, all these corporate initiatives seem to have become extinct immediately thereafter. Further, the Mysore initiatives of the 1940s show no awareness of the Dharwad convention of 1940 which in fact sought to talk in terms of the entire Brahmin fold of Karnataka. In fact, between the 1940s and 1970s there appears to have been no major initiatives in mobilising the Brahmins at the level of the state as a whole. The first such association which has had a fairly long existence is the AKBMS. Registered in the year 1974, it continues to survive till date, though with visible marks of fatigue, often threatening to get consumed by frequent lay-offs from activity.

II

Re-examining the initiatives in the associational mode: the case of the AKBMS and other caste-specific associations

In seeking an explanation for the rather curious coexistence of the corporate and caste-specific associations and their differential capacities of sustenance and endurance, this section is devoted to a historical rendering of the varied logics and distinctive trajectories of Brahmin agency (as emblematised in the associational mode). We begin with the pioneering efforts of the 1940s and devolve upon the contexts in which the AKBMS emerged. The axis of this re-examination is then counterposed to the trajectory and concerns of the caste-specific associations.

The registers of self that animate the associational activities of the 1940s point to the deeply contested space that the association seeks to inhabit. Primarily, the Brahmin persona that was resurrected in the wake of the non-Brahmin challenge had to be vested with greater moral force, energy and legitimation. In doing so, this self-imagination 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. Accordingly, the first resolution passed at the Dharwad Convention of 1940 was that the “Brahmin class has a special responsibility to protect the Sana tana Samskrit”. Indeed, the President of the convention had this to say:

The ultimate goal of the Brahmin class is to work to realise the dictum, Sarvejanaahaa 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 Brahmanatva (Brahminness) that is there available to us at birth, through our character (cited in Murthy 2000: 250-1)

This statement is a good demonstration of the tensions that animate the space of 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 is at once invoking 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, the 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 the 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 who are 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. This setting of a limit is important, for otherwise the associational space would itself be rendered useless.
To state the point differently - but also in order to highlight another definitional
limit constituting the Brahmin association - the association cannot disown the Brahmin
community in the ways that, say, the individual, secularising Brahmin could. It 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 frontalised and defended. Thus, the space of the
association makes it inevitable that it confront the challenge posed by the non-Brahmin
othering in the most direct manner possible. The founding statement of the Akhila
Mysooru Brahmana Mahasabha, 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 and to the entire society
is ensured, a permanent organisation called the Akhila Mysooru Brahmana Mahasabha, inclusive
of the religions of Smartha, 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. So is it a division of labour that the community
works out for itself? That is to say, is it the case that when the habitation of secular space
and the strategies of the self thereof are insufficient to address the spectrum, the space of
the association gets to be founded? A neat 'division' though does not obtain. Even as
caste association activists are clearly distinguishable from the individual, secularising
Brahmins, the former continue to partake of elements from many spaces. In occupying
such a 'precarious' space, the association has not only to convince a wary state and the
non-Brahmin articulation, it also has to engage an equally reluctant Brahmin self.

This latter dimension of encountering a reluctant Brahmin self we shall take up
later. For the moment, it is important to note that 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. The anchoring ground that ties up the various resolutions (ten in all)
passed at the convention was the need to negotiate with the non-Brahmin challenge. For
instance, after the customary deferences to the King and the *mathas*, and having sounded out the need for Brahmins to forge a united front, the fourth resolution passed at the 1944 convention states:

The Brahmin class sincerely believes that the highest tenets of the Vedic religion and its sacred goals are essential for the superiority of human life and for the well being of the world. 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 (Akhila Mysooru Brahmana Mahasabha n.d.: x)

Moving on to more specific issues, the two resolutions that followed implored the King;

It is a basic tenet, accepted by all civilised communities that under all circumstances seeking of education is a fundamental right of every citizen. The same is applicable to Brahmins too. The Convention requests the government and all people that the Brahmins be provided every possible access to get educated. The Convention suggests, with humility, that the Brahmins should get all the benefits, which others get from the government; that a Brahmin student should not be denied educational facilities merely because of his caste. And finally that it is the duty of the government to ensure that every meritorious student irrespective of his caste and Varna gets an equal opportunity to pursue education. Also, the Convention requests the Maharajah that, given that jobs are being cut down, Brahmins should get access to the job-oriented schools so that they can cultivate independent livelihoods.

Brahmins have no complaints regarding the Mysore government ensuring adequate representation to all communities in government services without affecting the efficiency of the bureaucracy. However the Convention respectfully suggests that once appointed all the promotions will have to be based solely on the candidates' efficiency, merit etc. and not on any difference of Brahmin and non-Brahmin (ibid. x-xi).

The Pontiff of the Vyasaraja *matha*, a Madhva institution, inaugurating the Second Convention in 1949 summed up, in some detail, the task before the community. Exhorting that the Convention in essence work for 'world peace' (since, as is claimed, that is the object of *Brahmanyād*), the pontiff moves on to delineate the agenda before the Convention. Quite clearly locating the community as being under siege and simultaneously being keen to dispel the 'fears' of the Other regarding the motives behind the Brahmin efforts to mobilise, he begins by noting the importance of *Thrimathastha* (three traditions) Brahmins coming together, sinking all their differences. Characterising the times as "communal", the pontiff allays the fears expressed by some Brahmins who argued that such conventions could only aggravate the already entrenched anti-Brahminness. Likewise, it is mentioned that the Convention can never be seen as a
"communal" one, because Brahmins, who have remained enemy-less throughout history, are only trying to regain the "lost trust" in order to get back to the task of working for "World Peace". Reasserting and reassuring that Brahmins represent no danger to anybody, he is very clear that Brahmins can never fight for political spaces with others. Invoking time and again the scriptural idea of the Brahmin who wilfully refuses to take up positions of authority, he suggests that the day the Brahmin forgot the importance of the knowledge of *adhyathma* (spiritual/other worldly) his downfall began. Given that every Varna had a pre-ordained task to perform in society, the Brahmin is said to have had no competition as far as learning was concerned. But the advent of western education, acting as an easy passport to positions of authority and wealth, is held to have easily corrupted the Brahmin. It is also alleged to have brought in competition and a denial of rights to the Brahmins, leading to the present state in which the community finds itself in no position to eke out a living. Thus the agenda before the convention is looked on as fairly straightforward - the participants of the Convention are "not thirsting to indulge in philosophical debates on the right interpretation of the Shastras but merely gathered to discuss the economic, social and commonly endorsed religious matters" (ibid. 3).

The President of the convention too charts a similar trajectory. Affirming the characterisation of the community as one under siege, a call is made for critical introspection:

It is pitiable that things have come to such a pass that the Brahmin society has to hold conventions to ensure its existence and development... In the days when the Brahmin was immersed in the Karma ordained by the Vedas in working for the welfare of all in the world, he had the devoted respect of not merely the Brahmin community but that of all others. Times have changed. The day the Brahmin left aside such ordained and appropriate task to take up, for his livelihood, a service occupation, his growth was stunted. Even as it was not apparent in the beginning, once the rate of the decline hastened it became more and more visible. To my limited knowledge, the solution lies in the Brahmin performing, with devotion, the task that is specified by the Vedas, enhancing his *Brahmavarchassu* [The power of the self gained by the acquisition of knowledge]; in not desiring taking to service occupations; by leading an independent life (ibid. 19).

But setting the agenda in these ways immediately subverts the logic of community upliftment and welfare, so that in oscillating between the imperative to speak on behalf of the Brahmin community "as is, where is" and the compulsion to circumvent the non-Brahmin othering, an eclectic range of issues is brought forward for the gathering to consider:
1. Need to impart those tenets of Brahminism that are common to all the three philosophies and ensuring 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 reproduced in *ibid*: 18-33).

The remarkable continuities that one notices in the articulations and concerns of the Brahmin associations over the decades is therefore significant. This can be seen in the trajectory of the AKBMS. Before describing it however we will have to understand the larger socio-political context in which the AKBMS came to be constituted. In fact, this larger frame provides the setting for the contemporary phase of Brahmin mobilisation, beginning from the 1970s, across the state.

The context in which the AKBMS came into existence marks a watershed in Karnataka politics and caste equations. It was a context in which the trope of a ‘community under siege’ as an adequate representation of the condition of Brahmins could find a near universal acceptance within the community. In a manner of speaking, ‘Mandal politics’ 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 (belonging to a tiny OBC caste, but one to which the Mysore royal family was also attached) as the first non-Vokkaliga, non-Lingayath Chief Minister of Karnataka had confounded political equations, while also upsetting the stable political dominance of the Lingayaths.14 His socio-political vision had serious implications for the Brahmin community. Specifically 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 any visions of political prominence on their part were merely hallucinations of grandeur (at least at the state-level). However, a fairly successful land reforms measure and the famous Backward Class Commission Report prepared by L. G. Havanur (1975) lent a great deal of credence

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14 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.
to the long sustained visions of victimhood that the Brahmin community entertained about its own self. The modern state as the 'Other' was finally given a 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 in the princely state of Mysore and the Nagana Gowda Committee (1961)), the Havanur Commission was the first to enjoy quasi-judicial powers of summoning witnesses and collecting the 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 is 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. Even the Havanur report, despite its quasi-judicial powers, mentions the obstacles encountered in collecting data from the bureaucracy. Indeed, a biography of Urs notes:

When Havanur began to collect data from government departments, non-co-operation from them started. The upper castes who were occupying all the top positions of the government began to waste time by offering lame excuses to all the requests from the Commission ... Havanur, perturbed by being unable to start work even after four months of the appointment of the Commission, presented details to the Chief Minister of the willful tardiness shown by the officers and requested him to grant the Commission judicial status [to which the CM agreed]. Soon after, a memo was sent to all the departments that the Commission has to be supplied with all the information that it seeks and those who do not comply with the order will be punished. A notification was also issued stating that the Commission has to be provided with all the facilities during its touring of the state (Shetty 2000: 96-7).

That the bureaucratic indifference survives to this day is vouched by a former Chairperson of the Karnataka Backward Classes Commission, Ravivarma Kumar, who remarked:

Our Commission presented the Government with a proposal to conduct a statewide census for the purposes of preparing our report. This project was supposed to collect far more information and data about the population than the decennial census does and at a far cheaper cost. This data would have given us a clear picture of the status of each community in the state so that one could
have arrived at a non-controversial, judicially acceptable manner of computing backwardness of different communities.

The reception from the government, from the Chief Minister onwards, to the idea was very positive and encouraging as it was felt that a comprehensive survey would give us a clear picture of the relative status of the communities. But the file never moved from one desk to the other ... The bureaucracy stalled the initiative completely. Not that the project was rejected. I never got any intimation stating that it is rejected but neither did I receive any information on the progress of the file. For three consecutive budgets, the proposal was kept pending. But then we had to submit the Report. We went ahead without any such comprehensive data at our disposal. What more, we were not even allowed to conduct a revision of the list of backward classes communities. Finally all we did was to deal with applications and requisitions.

This is not the first time it has happened. Many of the previous Backward Classes Commissions have aired similar grievances.

The effects of such sluggishness have proved to be rather drastic. The target of many academic and even judicial critiques of these reports and of the government orders thereon is precisely the lack of reliable data and the suspect measures of projection relied upon. Every Backward Classes Committee/Commission report has been challenged in a court of law, more often than not with success.

The Havanur report and the land reforms initiatives continue to act as important metaphors in the discursive field that the Brahmin associations inhabit. In what follows, we describe the history of the AKBMS. In its three decades of existence, the AKBMS has filed cases against the implementation of the Havanur and the subsequent Backward Classes Commissions' reports. It brought out booklets seeking to expose their 'inconsistencies' and 'unjust' conclusions, lobbied with political leaders to garner support, and even attempted to form a confederation of the communities designated as 'forward' to fight a common battle. A hostile state, the increasing inability of the community to regulate its policy directions, misgivings about an extending reservation policy, has all worked to accentuate these perceptions. The stated unwillingness of Brahmin individuals in positions of public authority and power to speak on behalf of the community has only rendered the perception of siege much more real and immediate.

In the year 1971, a small group of enthusiasts founded Brahmana Yuvaka Sangha in Bangalore. They were certain that the Brahmins are a community held under an unjustifiable siege by unscrupulous politicians and the government, and thus are in a dire need of organising and unifying so as to be fighting for their rights. The Yuvaka Sangha

15 Interviewed by researcher on 23/03/2001
decided to hold a daylong state convention in 1972 in Bangalore. The perceptions of siege, the always-already rendered illegitimacy of the space 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 afternoon session of the convention, he had to face a black flag demonstration by Dalit organisations, forcing him to quickly assuage feelings of suspicion and apprehensions regarding the motives behind the convention:

Brahmins getting organised is not wrong. Their 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 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 the representative of the state participating in a Brahmins' convention. This opposition has been consistent forcing the politicians to be wary of attending such gatherings. The convention nevertheless resolved to establish the Akhila Karnataka Brahmana Maha Sabha, and a standing committee was formed to oversee the initiative. This group formulated the founding principles of the AKBMS - of 'Samskara', 'Sanghatane' and 'Svavalambane'. The AKBMS now exhorts that these ought to be the guiding threads for all the Brahmin associations:

*Samskara* [Culture]: Even as one is born a Brahmin, the real *Brahmanva* [Brahminness] is acquired only through good conduct and qualities, learning the Vedas, the strict following of the everyday rituals.

*Sanghatane* [Organisation]: Even as we preserve our *Brahmanva*, in order that we protect ourselves and our rights-duties in socio-economic milieu, coming together in order to organise ourselves is crucial.

*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 in order that we become self-reliant.

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' are to be carried out (AKBMS - Sixth All Karnataka Brahmins' Convention Souvenir, 1989).

The terrain charted by these guiding principles indicates the structuring agenda that is in many senses given for the Brahmin association to work with. The imperative to address the status of being an 'other' is reflected in each of the three statements of intent.
The very first principle itself, as one would recognise, is an acknowledgement of the contested status of the Brahmin being. Even as the very emergence of the association presumes an empirically available, naturally given community with distinct and recognisable boundaries, the contexts in which it finds itself forces it to reframe even this very basic question. Thus the fact of birth which would have sufficed the requirement of a caste association is further complicated: one could have taken birth in a Brahmin family, but the Brahminness needs to be earned through the enactment of the code of conduct prescribed. 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 of existence 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. Of course, every activist interviewed tended to dismiss the complications that are structured in the contradictory nature of the space that the Brahmin association is forced to inhabit.

After two years of hibernation, the AKBMS was registered in 1974. With the organisation coming into its own, the Brahmana Yuvaka Sangha that preceded it seems to have become inactive. The first major issue that the association 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 recommendations of the Commission. The AKBMS, significantly, started functioning from the premises of the Badaganadu Sangha, a Smartha Brahmin caste 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, not merely by becoming its president but more importantly by providing the AKBMS with the much needed intellectual flagship and dynamism. He wrote and published booklets on the present 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.

The second state level convention of the AKBMS, held in 1978, again at the premises of another established caste-specific association, Babburkamme Seva Sangha in Bangalore, primarily focussed on the question of self-reliance in the wake of the government order implementing the Havanur Commission report. Even as the problems dogging the question of Brahmin unity and the need to revive the Brahmin heritage (the Sanathana Dharma) were deliberated upon, the primary focus was the question of extending the contours of reservations. In the fourth convention of the AKBMS, held in 1983, the then Chief Minister Ramakrishna Hegde (a Havyaka 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 in deciding to attend this convention. But I still decided to come here 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).

Gundurao, the former Chief Minister\(^{16}\), though was more unequivocal:

I will never hesitate to identify myself as a Brahmin. Today everything happens on the basis of caste. It is therefore meaningless to say no to caste. Let all castes get united and fight for their rights. We should also develop ourselves by focusing primarily on economic issues (ibid.: 37).

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

This is all nonsense. Nobody will come and ask you whether you have qualified yourself to become a Brahmin. For all purposes, the state calls us Brahmins and discriminates 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. Hegde has always dilly-dallied and was never committed to the Brahmin cause like Gundurao was.

\(^{16}\) He and Ramakrishna Hegde are the two Brahmin Chief Ministers that the post-independence Karnataka has seen.

\(^{17}\) Interview with Mr. Venkataramana, 12/05/2000. He, a sixty year old Smartha Brahmin, is a former employee of the state-owned Indian Telephone Industries, Bangalore.
Likewise, a former president of the Mulkanadu Mahasabha was plain:

We can't go on conducting interviews to recruit the so-called "real Brahmans". 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 Brahmans and asking them to take a test. Particularly in our current 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 Brahmans.

These quixotic engagements notwithstanding, it may be useful to throw a cursory glance at the relationship that obtains between the federating organisation, the AKBMS, and its affiliates. The AKBMS claims to represent the Brahmin community in Karnataka, a claim that is largely accepted by the other Brahmin associations (as reflected in many of them accepting and proclaiming themselves as affiliates of the AKBMS). This acceptance is particularly true of Brahmin associations that are corporate in nature. The entire district Brahmin associations and the taluq associations, wherever they exist, are affiliates of the AKBMS. Further, almost all locality-specific associations functioning in the cities of Bangalore and Mysore too are attached to the AKBMS, as are organisation/institution-based associations (most of which exist only in the city of Bangalore). It is the caste-specific associations that do not willingly pronounce this fact of affiliation. Most of these, as already pointed out, precede the founding of the AKBMS and even enjoy a more stable foothold than the latter. The associations - particularly the district and taluq associations - that were founded at the initiative of the AKBMS remain the weakest and the most inactive. The caste-based associations and such associations that

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18 Interview with Mr. Narasimha Shastri, 15/07/2000. He, a Smartha Brahmin, retired as a top-level manager with a leading brewery in Bangalore.

19 The equivocation that the Brahmin politicians have displayed vis-a-vis the association is largely thinning out now. The current Union Minister from Karnataka - Anantha Kumar of BJP - makes no efforts to hide his Brahmin identity as he attends even small functions like a book release organised by the Brahmin associations. Even state cabinet ministers are now more forthcoming in associating themselves with such 'caste activities'. The two cabinet ministers in the present state government - R V Deshpande and B K Chandrashekhar - are active participants in the activities of the AKBMS. The present opposition leader in the upper house of the state legislature - K H Srinivas - is an active member of the AKBMS and the Havyaka Mahasabha. The person who headed the administrative reforms committee instituted by the current state government, Harnahalli Ramaswamy, is also an active participant in the AKBMS's activities. Incidentally, all these individuals are members of the upper house. Gundurao's son is perhaps the only Brahmin duly elected as a member of the Lower House in the state politics today. Such equivocation is even lesser among the Brahmin women politicians. In fact, many of the women leaders of Bangalore-based Brahmin associations have enduring ties with political parties - particularly the Congress Party - and many are even part of the officialdom of these parties.
took birth due entirely to the initiative of some self-driven individual or group of individuals, on the other hand, are the most active.

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 the AKBMS. It is also quick in assuring that affiliation does not take away the autonomy of the individual associations and that it is only meant to foster unity among the Brahmins and to project a formidable strength to the outsiders. The current president of the AKBMS\(^{20}\) had the following to say to the members:

I am not happy with the work that has been accomplished during the last 15 months that I have been the president. Even as I am devoting all my resources towards my responsibility as the President, the inability to carry the community in its entirety along with the association has remained a limitation. It does not look like the currently existing associations - both old and new (including the sect-specific ones) - have fully accepted the AKBMS. Each such association, within its limitations and within their sphere, 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 the fact that most of these associations accept that they are affiliated, clearly the AKBMS has had very little regulatory power in their affairs, even in regulating its own relationship with these associations. In comparative terms, caste-specific associations are far more stable and economically sound than the AKBMS. Most of these associations own large pieces of land right in the middle of the business district of the city of Bangalore, with expansive buildings in place. Most have commercial complexes too, which will generate a significant monthly income through rents. Many also have 'community halls' (kalyanamantapas) which are rented out to families belonging to the caste (not exclusively though; for most give it out to all Brahmins, and some even to the non-Brahmins) to conduct life-cycle events such as weddings at far

\(^{20}\) A long time activist of the Brahmin mobilisational efforts, Mr. Srikanth 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 association seeking to represent the concerns of the Bettadapura Sankethi caste to which he belongs. This gesture is interesting in the sense that the AKBMS even to this day does not have an office space of its own. This simultaneous existence of activists in both caste-specific associations and community ones is important to note.
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 the middle class families but are also usually unavailable when needed. 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 and non-permanently.

Perhaps reflecting this asymmetrical status, the caste-specific associations are wary about looking at themselves as affiliates of the AKBMS. The latter has always found it difficult to match up to the stability of caste-specific associations - not just financially, but also in terms of finding and sustaining a band of active and enthusiastic members. In fact throughout its initial years, the AKBMS was forced to feed off these associations. It still works out of a building that is owned by the Sringeri matha. In fact, the AKBMS is at present going through a severe resource crunch owing to its ongoing project of building a multi-purpose complex in Bangalore. It has never failed to surprise AKBMS office-bearers that such an unambitious project should debilitate the association so comprehensively. Besides, it is finding it difficult even to get along with its usual and relatively inexpensive routines like publishing the monthly Vipra Nudi, 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. One group is represented by the outgoing president, who initiated the project, and the other by the incumbent one aided by the founder president of the association. The outgoing president was accused of impropriety and illegality in taking loans by pledging the endowments, which led to a very real threat of the association becoming completely pauperised.

It has remained a wonder to many Brahmin activists that the AKBMS should find it so hard to complete even such small projects. The thought is heightened particularly when smaller units like the Theerthahalli Brahmana Sabha (a taluq level Brahmin association, affiliated to the AKBMS) or even the Uttara Rajajinagara Brahmana Sabha (a locality-based association in Bangalore) have been successful in creating even bigger assets. Its sustained inability to become financially stable provoked the current General Secretary of the AKBMS to come up with an interesting metaphor during the recent State Level Brahmin Association Office-bearers’ Convention that was organised by the AKBMS (during October 13-14, 2001). Comparing the financial status of the AKBMS with that of many of its affiliates, he said: "It is rather like today’s situation found in
many a Brahmin household. The salary of the 'software son' is unimaginably incomparable to the pension that his father draws". He went on to plead, "Please do not send the parents to the *Vriddhashrama* (old-age home).

The AKBMS has in all 13,651 members (13,473 life members and 178 patron members) on its rolls, and 323 affiliate associations located all over Karnataka, as on 20/01/2002 (*Vipra Nudi*, January-February 2002). Almost in every meeting, through every pamphlet printed and in every issue of the association's 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 "lakhs of people".  

Over six years, that is, between 1996 and 2002, almost 5500 members were inducted, registering almost a seventy per cent jump in the 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 its members.

The associational endeavours usually receive a pronounced lukewarm response from their constituents and, as we have seen, the matter is an eternally articulated source of concern. The AKBMS has nonetheless been a prime mover in floating the All-India Brahmin Federation (AIBF), which aspires to co-ordinate 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: 37-8). The federation continues to exist - its executive committee meetings are reported in *Fipra Nudi* from time to time - but with very little activities conducted under its banner.

These facts about the space of agency notwithstanding, what further complicates the agenda before a Brahmin association is the internal differentiations that mark the category of the Brahmin itself. As we sought to indicate in the previous chapter,

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21 *Adhyakshara Nudi* (Words of the President) in *Fipra Nudi*, July-September 2002. Since caste enumeration was given up in the decennial census since 1941, much of the claims made by the different and contesting parties are primarily guesswork, as we have mentioned before. The AKBMS office-bearers often 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 in regard to the Brahmin 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" (*Fipra Nudi*, November 1996). Forty lakhs translates itself into nearly 10% of the state's population!
contestations from within have been an important dimension that the modern Brahmin identity has had to contend with. These contestations also play themselves out within the space of the Brahmin association. Here too, the instance of the Saraswats brings to the fore the interesting dynamics at work. The reception that the other Brahmin castes have accorded to the Saraswats has not been uniform. Even to this day, marriages between Saraswat families and the other Brahmin families are much more an exception than between (say) a Madhva and a Smartha family. Their claim to Brahminhood is still strongly under dispute, particularly in the coastal districts of Karnataka. However, it is the reception they have received vis-a-vis Brahmin associations that point to what is perhaps an important dimension. 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 corporate Brahmin identity. The wariness is mutual, and has a complex profile. The AKBMS, in its last governing body, 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 (the coastal region where the Saraswats are a dominant caste), an affiliate and local representative of the 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 is unhesitating in accepting them as Brahmins, and in fact does not think that it is an issue to be even discussed, 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.

There is thus many an element at work here. At the level of the community as a whole, Brahmins might not be incensed or refuse to take on board the Saraswat claim to Brahminhood. But a non-Saraswat Brahmin family will not be very keen on proposing a

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22 Interview with the General Secretary of the Udupi taluq Brahmana Sabha, 25/02/2001. The Udupi taluq, which was part of the erstwhile Dakshina Kannada district, has now been made into a district. The remaining part of the former district is now the Mangalore district. However the Dakshina Kannada District Brahmins Association continues to exist, covering both the districts and the Udupi taluq Brahmana Sabha has not changed its name.
marriage with a Saraswat family. Within the space of the association, the latter are accepted (even though the numbers are not many); 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 Smartha dominated space, and most of its office-bearers are Smarthas. No corporate Brahmin 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 'caste-cluster' is not a problem unique to the Brahmans. Even the Vokkaligas but more strikingly the Lingayaths have very complex internal differentiations and hierarchies. However, unlike Brahmans, in these latter communities the internal, hierarchised entities did not form caste associations; and where they did, these have not survived. This brings us to a crucial feature that marks the space of the Brahmin association - the existence, really, of caste-specific associations. Even as the Akhila Mysooru Brahmana Mahasabha and the Akhila Karnataka Brahmana Mahasabha of Dharwad were one-off attempts that failed to survive, almost all the caste-specific associations, some of which even preceded these corporate Brahmin associations, have not only survived to the present but also flourished. As we suggested above, they have a better economic standing and have been remarkably successful in being active, particularly when compared to the corporate Brahmin associations. One quick clarification is in order here. What we have just mentioned should not be taken to mean that the Brahmin caste associations have been great stories of forging identities and successful mobilisation of their caste constituents. Indeed, one can see rather similar exhortations and complaints emanating from both corporate and 'caste' associations, particularly regarding low levels of membership, the lack of enthusiasm on the part of the youth, and so on.

Nevertheless, how does one understand the continued sustenance of these associations? Besides, what is one to make of the better performance, even if in relative terms, of the Brahmin 'caste associations'? These questions are significant, and could be answered thus. The spaces of the Brahmin corporate associations, we have seen, have had to definitionally work with an already delegitimised category of the Brahmin. But no such animosity from the others - nor even embarrassment about an identity - appears to obtain within the space of the caste-specific association. Even as most of these associations came up in the decade of the 1940s, curiously 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 did help such initiatives in keeping their ‘Brahminness’ invisible was the relative anonymity that these identities carried outside the Brahmin space. None of these associations pronounced their Brahmin identity in their names or in their emblematic statements, and even in their constitutions. It is not clear whether this was a deliberate move or not. But the point is that, being relieved of the burden of representing and articulating the concerns of the 'Brahmin community', caste-specific associations do not feel the need to speak on behalf of a besieged community identity.

The single-point agenda on which most of these associations have come into being is that of education - more particularly, of the need to make available spaces in the cities of Bangalore and Mysore for its students to stay and pursue higher education. It is quite stunning to witness an almost obsessive concern with this agenda within caste-specific associations. Many of them have hostels, which provide accommodation and boarding facilities to students coming to Bangalore and Mysore for higher studies (most admit students only from the pre-university stage). Till recently, most of these hostels were exclusively meant for their own caste-specific students. After sustained persuasion from corporate Brahmin leaders, most such hostels have begun to admit students from other Brahmin castes too.

In this wake, it must be pointed out that the most important distinction to be made between the caste-specific Brahmin 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 the caste association. The differential demands placed by the two types of Brahmin associations' become apparent when one juxtaposes the ‘statements of intent' governing either. While none of the caste-specific associations feel the compulsion to talk of or on behalf of a 'community under siege', the latter seems to obtain as the fundamental trope on which the Brahmin corporate associations legitimate their existence. Thus, not even once in the souvenir of the Hoysala Karnataka Sangha, published on the occasion of its completion of fifty 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. This is in

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23 The golden jubilee celebrations took place in 1995. As we have 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).
fact true of all such caste-specific associations. Significantly, such a switching of codes also obtains within the articulation of a single caste activist. While conducting the affairs of the caste-specific 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 community association.

It is within these trajectories that Brahmin associations have come to be in the contemporary Karnataka context. Clearly, in perspective is the enunciatory space of the Brahmin associations, both corporate and single-caste, the delineation of which is the focus of the next section.

IN

**The enunciatory space of the Brahmin association**

Caste associations are undeniably a modern space. Paradoxically enough, 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 - and not lead as in other situations - most of the non-Brahmin caste communities into inhabiting this space. The Vokkaligas, Lingayaths, and the many partners in the non-Brahmin alliance had established their community associations by the first decade of the twentieth century. Many of them have had an uninterrupted existence since then, with the Vokkaliga and Lingayath associations, largely in tandem with their community *mathas*, emerging as important players in the state polity during the post-independence period. Alternatively, as our foregoing sections have revealed, the first such determined effort on the part of the Brahmins to form ‘corporate’ associations (that is to say, associations speaking on behalf of the Brahmin community as a whole) came only in the 1940s. Besides, the other distinct feature that characterises the trajectory of the Brahmin associations is the 'caste-specific associations' established by particular Brahmin castes, many of which have survived for over half a century now. This is apparently quite unlike the tendencies that have obtained in the non-Brahmin castes, wherein the compulsion has been to corporatise (at least at the level of forming associations). Associations based on internal caste identities did not emerge among these communities, and where they did they have not survived for any noticeable length of time.

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 we make of this process. Our prognosis of course is limited to the
Brahmin fold and its associations, and encounters an aspect of what we are terming is their enunciatory space. We shall discuss, firstly, in broad strokes the mandate that structures the possibilities and non-possibilities of the space of the caste association; and then go on to outline the specific pre-structured discursive ways in which the problematic of the caste association confronted (and continues to confront) the Brahmin community.

By and large, caste associations are primarily an 'assertion' in the sphere of 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 - such as the nationalist discourse, for instance - within the emerging civil society in the late colonial period sought to delegitimise ‘caste’ as a legitimate resource for identity-making and as a rallying ground for interest-articulation. It is nonetheless crucial to point out that the state did not follow the dictates of the civil society in this matter. The modern Indian state (going by its aspirations as articulated in the Indian Constitution but prefigured before in the colonial authority) stood firm against the demands of the civil society that caste be an anathema in equations of governance and in policy matters relating to welfarism. It 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, over the last one-century or so, to articulate a demand for, and to some extent even 'experience', equality. A delineation of this process is not what is to be attempted here. However the point we are drawing attention to is that it is this legitimacy that the state bestowed, which allowed castes to mobilise and corporatise themselves as part of their quest for mobility and identity. Caste associations have been an important medium of this quest.

The demand for equitable and representative distribution of modern resources - particularly those of education and employment - has been the most constitutive reason for the emergence of caste associations. Interestingly though, many of the 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, and many caste associations emerged 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. In the context of Karnataka, for instance, the founding of the
Akhila Bharata Veerashaiva Mahasabha by the Lingayath elites in 1904 actively foregrounded these concerns as its grounds of justification. While we cannot get into a detailing of this specific trajectory - some indications though can be had in our discussion of the Lingayath contestation of the Brahmin in the previous chapter - the point here is that ritual contestations, primarily geared towards status upgradation, were also an important reason for the emergence of caste associations. However, where Brahmin caste associations are concerned, the ground seems to shift, partly a consequence of the fact that the space and the language of caste associations is invariably non-Brahmin with the 'Brahmin' explicitly invoked as the usurper of modern resources. Perhaps an elaboration is in order here.

Where caste associations emerge primarily to contest the caste-regulated unequal distribution of resources (symbolic and material) and 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 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 space of the caste association were (and are in many ways) inherently unavailable for the Brahmins. The question of upgradation of ritual status, obviously, was 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. In short: the agenda that came to animate the space of the caste association was in some senses always-already unavailable to the Brahmin.

Even more so, 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. As late as 1972, when the first conference that oversaw the constitution of the AKBMS and inaugurated the contemporary phase of Brahmin associational efforts was held in Bangalore, it had to bear the brunt of a black flag demonstration organised by the different Dalit organisations and
some other 'progressive' groups.\textsuperscript{24} Even the fifth state convention of the AKBMS, held in Hubli in April 1984, invited such public protests. This visible face of confrontation, it appears, has something to do with the unique position that the Brahmin community found itself in a context when all other communities were forging themselves as legitimate 'caste' identities. These identities were legitimate for the purposes of deployment vis-à-vis the modern idioms of upliftment, development and so on. What is more, by the initial decades of the last century, when many caste associations take birth in Karnataka, the idea of the 'Brahmin' was already under siege, making it not only more difficult but also undesirable for a great many number of Brahmins to articulate their concerns inside the idiom of caste associations.

Since the space of 'caste association' 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 definitionally 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 should be publicly articulated. However such posturing have also got to act out in a social field that is already, in many senses, given. Most crucially, it is a field that is already saturated with notions and positions vis-a-vis Brahmins, Brahminism etc., and largely negative ones at that. Thus even belligerent postures will have to contend with such already formulated and powered discourses. This is a problem that is rather unique to the situation of Brahmins.

Brahmin caste associations, therefore, have had to painstakingly build a case for their existence. While the internal class hierarchies - the register of the "poor Brahmins" - does 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 the non-Brahmin communities largely) of the legitimacy of this register. A sense of siege - of the Brahmin under duress - has emerged as the single-most defining ground of justification for the Brahmin associations.

\textsuperscript{24} Interview with Mr. Venkataram, 12/01/2000. He is one of the senior most activists of the contemporary phase of Brahmin mobilisation. He has been one of the moving forces behind the establishment and sustenance of the AKBMS. He is also the current General Secretary of the AKBMS, a post he has held before.
Furthermore, it is the emerging urban middle class and the modern educated elite that take the lead in the formation of caste associations in the case of all other caste communities. The Brahmin ‘caste activist’, on the other hand, is fairly distinct, even if within the range of positionalities that we have been encountering across the prism of the secularising Brahmin. Even as publicly spirited individuals such as Alur Venkatrao and Tataiah - the latter figure we shall come to presently - state in unambiguous terms their sympathies for the Brahmin cause, they cannot be identified as caste association leaders; indeed they never become the office-bearers of any of these associations. The Brahmin association’s cadre, leaders etc. had to come from elsewhere.

The instance of Tataiah is particularly instructive in illustrating this point. For a greater part of it’s almost two decades of existence, the non-Brahmin assertion in the Mysore State projects 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. But it is equally striking that he does not seek to establish caste associations for Brahmins. Neither have there been instances of him taking official positions in any such existing associations. While Tataiah’s instance is the most illustrative, it is true of many others too. As we shall see in the next section, Alur Venkatrao was also unhesitant in making known his sympathies for the Brahmin community under siege; his articulation, nonetheless, is consistently outside the space of the association. He seeks to speak like an outsider, anarbiterator, a judge while weighing the pros and cons, the needs and compulsions of setting up Brahmin associations.

25 M. Venkatakrishnaiah - better known as Tataiah - was a greatly 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 Party, a recognised reformist within the Brahmin circles, and so on. His extraordinary career -spanning almost two generations of the Brahmin community during which it witnessed tumultuous happenings - begins with the Mysore Brahmin vs. Madrasi Brahmin conflict and ends, with his death, in the late 1930s with the ascendance of the fortunes of the Indian National Congress in the Mysore State. Most significantly, through out his public involvement, he continued to be a chief exponent of the Brahmin cause in the face of a spirited and effective non-Brahmin challenge. He was instrumental in founding many institutions, with the most visible being the famous Mysore Anathalaya and the Sadvidya Patashala (both located in Mysore and still surviving), which were catering overwhelmingly to the Brahmin youth but in terms of their posturing open for all. See Sitaramaiah (1996) for a biographical note on Tataiah. Not only do many Brahmins themselves identify these institutions as catering to their community, but during the interview with the present Secretary of the Anathalaya that was done as part of the fieldwork for this study, the latter too claimed the same. The Secretary is even an Executive Member of the AKBMS. In fact, Anathalaya premises in Mysore and its functionaries are an important base for the present Brahmin association activities in Mysore today.
Interestingly, as we have seen, even for those individuals who worked as activists, the associational space is an ambivalent one. The fundamental contradiction that this space has to cope with is that even as it definitionally and inevitably has to speak for and as a community, it simultaneously has to negotiate with the modern antipathy to that very community. Given this state, the most foundational ground of justification that the Brahmin community associations work off is this 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 justifies their emergence, it also lends the necessary symbolic and material resources of motivation too. 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, as we shall describe, a spirited negotiation with that construction - taking some of its elements as its own, rejecting others, and reformulating the terms all along. Another way of handling this ambiguous space of the association is indicated by the sustained existence of the caste-specific associations, most of which decline to submerge their identities into the corporatised, internally homogenised whole called the Brahmin community.

All in all, the emergence of the ‘corporate’ Brahmin associations since the 1920s follows the establishment of such associations among other non-Brahmin communities in Karnataka. In almost all the founding statements of such associations there are explicit references to the dimensions of the non-Brahmin othering, and a quivering, fateful acknowledgement of the unmistakable sympathy that the state (colonial and post-colonial) exhibited towards such articulations. Indeed, the non-Brahmin articulation and its ideology certainly provided ample ground for Brahmin associations to work on, and the idea of the Brahmin had to be fortified accordingly. The narrative structuring the idea of a community under siege, therefore, is a complex one, responding at once to the non-Brahmin retrieval of the Brahmin figure, presenting an evaluation of the state of the Brahmin community, and offering an internal negotiation with the secularising Brahmin self that is rather uncomfortable with the belligerence that structures the standpoint of the Brahmin association.

Complicating the ontological space of the Brahmin association's response too is its perception of the institution of the modern state itself. The nation-state, invariably, is the principal agency on which caste associations make demands. Their primary axis of negotiation is with the state, and not with other caste communities and their associations.
The caste associations seek to make the state responsible to their demands of upliftment, community development, and social welfare. However, the Brahmin associations, quite unlike all other caste associations, look upon the state as its principal 'other'. The Brahmin associations have over the years primarily imagined the state as an institution that is deliberately working against the interests of the community. They have increasingly come to perceive their community as being victimised by the state 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 the formation of corporate caste associations across the state.

An acute sense of the siege that many Brahmins have felt in recent times can be had from an article titled 'Brahmins: A Critical Study' that appeared in the October 1990 issue of *Vipra Nadi*. The tone as indeed the contents of this article lends us a frame to chart the historical profile of the Brahmin associations in Karnataka. Arguing that the main cause of the contemporary "Brahmin degradation" lies in the fact that the Brahmins refuse to mobilise themselves, basking in the past glories, the article perceives an unmistakable "conspiracy" underway to "eradicate" Brahmins:

Hitherto Brahmins were great because of their deeds. But today they lack even the basic qualities to merit the very name Brahmin. They are only trying to exploit their original and past glories.

In a language that defies commentary, and vitriolic in its expression of discontent, the article goes on to state that non-Brahmins planned along with their politicians to create an atmosphere wherein the Brahmin community as a whole was suppressed:

Deliberately Brahmins were denied their prospects in government services ... in short, they were tyrannised ... The non-Brahmins still believed and even today they believe that this hibernation will end one day and the Brahmins will again charge at them with renewed energy and vigour. [So they felt an urgent need to] eradicate Brahmins forever. So a conspiracy was conceived as to how best this could be accomplished. The plans were discussed, methods were devised, tact and diplomacy were thought of and finally the best way to get rid of the plague called the Brahmin was launched in the form of reservations ... So in a cool and calculated manner the Brahmins were slowly and surely eliminated ... [But still] the Brahmins did not realise that their community was going to face extinction ... [Next the non-Brahmins] planned to improve their stock by a process of miscegenation. It was by a slow process of encouraging the boys of the non-Brahmin community to marry the girls of the Brahmin community, [which] caused some brilliant children as well as some dunces ... [Not satisfied] they planned for the annihilation of the very Brahmin community. They instigated the unscrupulous politicians to pass such legislations as to humiliate...
and torment the Brahmin community to such an extent as to force the Brahmins to commit suicide. I presume that the non-Brahmins might even have plans for a mass genocide of the Brahmin community. [Therefore it is time that the Brahmin is awakened in order to] above all spiritually make him strong and efficient to wage a Dharmayuddha [Holy War] against the tormentors and oppressors of the Brahmins.

Let us pray to God Almighty to save the Brahmin community.

Another such expression is the poem reproduced below. Interestingly, it makes for an even more assertive and confident posturing of the self, while also giving expression to the all-pervading trope of a ‘community under siege’.26

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?
Shed that habit of yours - of hating us.
How much of anger you entertain, against us?
Can't you tolerate if we come up in life?
Please tell us - what is our crime?
Go ahead, ask your own soul that ...
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.
Alas, taken over you indeed is some loss of mind!
What harm have we brought upon you?
Then why do you seethe in your mind?
 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 tuft; tear up our Janivara [the sacred thread]
Spew venom at us, just because we are Brahmins.
Pushing us down, even as you got work done from us,
On to a thorny bed of oppression, and censure.
Even with merit, we have no status or position.
How much do we tolerate this dishonour?
We burn from inside, cry in silence
Loosing on many an occasion, getting grounded ...
Sitting without resistance, we now know for certain,
We die a silent death in all this hullaballoo.
Forget it - we don’t need your chains of salutations,
Only to heap, upon them, incredible abuses.

26 The poem is reproduced in Jaagriti, a souvenir brought out by the AKBMS in 1994 on the occasion of its seventh state Brahmin convention held in Bangalore.
We have merit - why then do we need anybody's pity?
Should men with moustache27 need the pity called reservations?
Do not bother - We need neither your prestations nor alms
We have the Dhee Shakthi [Inner Strength] - that is our greatest protection!
You say, “We won't let you live”
And we will live a life of greatness.
O evil Dushyaasanas, out to snatch away our honour and pride
Will we just sit with folded hands and watch? We will become Balabheemas Beware!
Beware!

Clearly then, and uniquely so, the space of the association comes to the Brahmin as a contested zone. Its existence is sought to be justified in terms of the need to protect the Brahmin self from a state of siege. In the process, it has to convince not only the others but also its own constituency that the siege is unjustified and needs to be publicly repudiated. The section that follows complicates the relationship that the community at large comes to share with its associational effort.

IV
Between association and community

In the year 1925, Alur Venkatrao, a figure we have encountered in the previous chapter (pp. 166-7 above), wrote:

To improve the material conditions of Brahmins, an association has been founded in Dharwad. The association is planning to immediately call a convention of the Brahmins of Dharwad to discuss this issue. Since this is an important issue we wish to write two words on it.
Now in the entire world, Brahmins arc rendered havenless. They, on the one hand, are unwanted by the people and, on the other, have become the recipients of the wrath of the government. To themselves they have become unfit for concern. They are neither welcomed in the Congress nor are they respected by the law and regulations. While it is true that, to some extent, the times are to be blamed for such a state, to a great extent, it appears to us, their loosing of Brahmanya is the main cause. Thus, regaining the lost Brahmany ought to remain the principal duty of the Brahmins ...

The superiority of Brahmins will neither be based on worldly authority or on material affluence but merely on their Dharma of service to the world. The individual who has gained this Dhanna - irrespective of his religion, his caste - can capture the entire world. When such is the case, what is there to say when an entire class earns such a Dhanna? Brahmins should not take on superiority (shreshthathva). The world should accord it to them. How exalted is the task of preparing such a class of people! How happy is it!
But, how does the 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

27 It is a translation of a colloquial expression, wherein the moustache symbolises the masculine virility, strength. Thus all the reservation-beneficiaries are equalised to women, a ‘potent’ abuse in itself.
tandem, it is clear that the Brahmin class is only reaching its nadir. The greater are the heights reached, the deeper is the fall. Brahmins' *vrtti* (self/divinely-ordained task) is of Service to the World; Shudras' *vrtti* is that of Service to the Self. With such a similarity between the two, it was but natural that once the Brahmin became the Fallen, he took up the Shudra *vrtti*. Now that this service calling is obstructed, the God has given the Brahmin an opportunity to uplift himself. The whole world is keenly observing the Brahmin as to how he uses this opportunity. Earlier many, beginning with Buddha, using their brains attempted to obliterate the Brahmin class. Later the Muslims attempted the same with arms. But the Brahmin class has retained its identity in spite of these physical and psychological attacks. Compared to those challenges, the challenge of today is nothing great. However, given that poverty has increased greatly, the class cannot even combat the smallest of crises. In the 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 the question of *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*. 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 *papa* (sin) of destroying the society by luring it with the desires of this worldly pleasure. Other castes too have begun to uplift themselves. Thus there is no harm in Brahmins doing the same. (*Jaya Karnataka* 10 March 1925)

This statement, cited at some length, represents the ground from which the secularising Brahmin sought to relate 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. He shares the perception of the contemporary Brahmin community as being in a state of siege. And yet, Venkatrao himself will not become an active constituent of the Brahmin association. He is already standing outside it and is seeking to take an 'objective' assessment of the possibilities of the Brahmin association. Moreover, he can 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. Thus anybody who acquires *Brahmanya* can become a Brahmin. But he is also very 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 have "obstructed" the pursuance of callings that "serve the self" - evidently, by containing the Brahmin predominance in the government services and other such spaces - this is, for him, an "opportunity" that the Brahmin ought to use to regain his *Brahmanya*. Thus even as
Venkatrao recognises the need for alleviating the "material condition of the Brahmins", he is quick to remind the leaders of the "primary mission of the community" - the "Dhanna of providing service to the world" without seeking returns.

This difficulty of not being able to speak of an agenda that is unhesitatingly and exclusively focused on bettering the material lives of the Brahmins is ingrained in all articulations made from the space of the Brahmin association. Thus even if the very justificatory ground of the caste association demands an unhesitating foregrounding of what can be termed the material agenda, the demand seems to carry an extra load in the case of Brahmins. There are, to be sure, many pragmatic statements that we come across in the pages of *Vipra Nudi*, which cogently argues for an "agenda of the possible". More specifically, charting out such an agenda, an article entitled 'What Should the Brahmin Association do?' states:

There is a consensus that, beginning from activities such as conducting Sanskrit classes, mass initiation ceremonies, religious lectures, the Mahasabha should be in such a position as to help in greater matters such as Brahmins' education, economic upliftment, and social development. The consensus is also that it is not doing any of these things. But those who give innumerable suggestions do not contribute at all to our efforts. So what can be done? The only activity that is possible is the help that we can give to the poor and the middle class among the Brahmins. What could be of direct help is helping students, arranging loans for the association members, and helping the poor socially. For this we should undertake a finance mobilisation project. We should use the religious functions organised to mobilise the Brahmins for social causes but that is not happening. It has become a fashion to suggest that we should start engineering and medical colleges but it is highly impractical. Since the association has the help of only the poor and the middle class, with a sprinkling of the rich, the only possible agenda is of helping monetarily the students, the widows, the destitutes, and the Vaidika Brahmin. (*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 scriptural imaginations of the Brahmin persona. But the constituency it seeks to stand up for and help out apparently will have no use of 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 expressed his unhappiness thus:

Why do you think an individual approaches a Brahmin association? Without doubt, it is at a point of desperation. As far as my experience tells me, caste associations are the last resort of an individual — whether it is to get his daughter married or to avail of 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 the Brahmanathwa, 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 in active in the Jayanagara Brahmana Sabha, I used to insist on focusing on such things*

Another highly respected and active AKBMS activist delved on a related point:

One of our major problems is that of getting the youth to take interest in their caste welfare and its culture. Everybody recognises all this too willingly but refuse to recognise the causes for it. 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 of opportunities, have no idea about realising their dreams. Daily students, young men like that 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 into their fold. I am not decrying the conduct of rituals or religious ceremonies or anything like that but we have to think of expanding our horizons of vision. I have been, with some others who share this view, trying to emphasise this orientation for so many years now, but I have not been very successful.”

However, significantly, most of the respondents interviewed for the purpose of this study - except the activists - shy away from participating in the associational activities. Indeed, for the many that have membership of some association, the choice is not a deliberate one. That is to say, they did not decide to become a member and 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 an ephemeral one. In fact, most of the respondents - except again the activists or those with close kin who take a proactive interest in such matters - have never attended a convention or a meeting of the caste association. Likewise, there is a widespread feeling of dissatisfaction about the ways of working of the existing associations. The latter are accused of focusing on ‘unnecessary’ issues like conducting religious functions, celebrating the birth anniversaries of the three Gurus etc. Most of our respondents were clear about the need for Brahmin associations, but were insistent that the agenda of these associations should be one of "development" of the community rather than one of

28 Interview with Mr. Srirangan, 16/04/2000. This respondent, a Srivaishnava Brahmin, continues to work as a tax consultant and an insurance agent. He was an active founder member of a Brahmin association of his locality. One of his sons married a non-Brahmin girl some ten years ago, and the respondent still feels embittered about it. His other two sons are married within the caste.

29 Interview with Mr. Sadashivaiah, 01/03/2000. Mr. Sadashivaiah (about 60 years) is a successful industrialist and has been an important adviser to AKBMS in the recent years particularly on matters of preparing the Brahmin 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 the AKBMS organised in 1997.
conducting rituals, convincing the community to become "Brahminical" and so on. A respondent echoing the dominantly shared perception said:

We don't need associations to focus on instilling of Brahminical values. Individual families themselves will always inculcate the \textit{samskara} that is appropriate to the Brahmin. Every family teaches its children to respect elders, perform the daily rituals. And almost every family strictly adheres to the conduct of [life-cycle] events. Besides, for such things we have \textit{mathas} and temples all over.

The agenda before associations is unambiguously clear. They have to work towards helping out poor Brahmins in some useful way. In our context when Brahmin youth are not getting government \textit{jobs}, the associations should focus on helping them to become self-employed. They should give poor merited Brahmin students scholarships so that their future is secured. They should 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 Brahmins. So that should be the focus of the associations.\footnote{Interview with Ms. Priyamvada, 26/10/2000. She, a 53 year old Madhva Brahmin, is a professor of Kannada in a degree college in Bangalore. 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 Indian classical music and has practiced it for most of her life. It was this passion that resulted in a divorce, by which time she had three children. Her husband and his family firmly believed the music is not for Brahmin women (a belief that was strong and shared till say some two generations ago) and constantly abused her for her interest to pursue music. When she took divorce, her parents were not willing to take her back. She, along with her three children, decided to make a life all by herself. She rather courageously pursued her studies and against all odds 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 the "Brahminical conservatism" (her words) which refused to accommodate her passion for music, remains nevertheless positive about her 'Brahminness'. For instance, while talking about her experiences in her college, she said: "When a new batch comes in, I can recognise, instantaneously, who among them are Brahmins and who aren't. You can see a keenness and commitment among the Brahmin students and, as they would have been imparted the \textit{samskara} at home, they have great respect for the Guru. Others are just the opposite. And in a class which has 110-120 students, you can attend to only a few. So naturally the Brahmins benefit. This happens across the subjects [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 much. This explains why it is always the Brahmin students who get \textit{ranks}." We explore more fully aspects of this perceptual space in the next chapter.}
having reached a stage wherein 'objective' structures begin to ensure their running and sustenance. Perhaps a crucial point that is not often recognised is the centrality of individuals in the lives, the trajectories and often even the longevity of caste associations. It is important to recognise that most of these associations are run in a democratic spirit, with formal rules and regulations and structures in place. Most have written constitutions, and most of them have elections duly conducted during their general body meetings (GBM), although most of the posts go uncontested. The larger associations submit their accounts for an audit with professional auditors, the results of which are again placed before the general body for its approval.

Indeed, many of the GBMs turn acrimonious with some determined member insisting on what the office bearers of the association would see as an "unimportant" and "inconsequential" matter. For instance, during one of the recent annual GBM of the AKBMS, a member insisted on knowing why the auditors have signed before the balance sheet is presented (in the memo sent to the members announcing the GBM) while they are supposed to sign after. Most of the questions that are asked in such GBMs are of this order, and more often than not the conductors of the meeting duly brush them aside.

There will, in many of the large associations, be some members who take these reports and meetings earnestly and get into arguments and debates. But the crucial point is that these associations run as collectives, retaining a character that is autonomous of its individual members. This is indeed true of such associations that are large and, even more so, those that are financially healthy. The caste-specific associations are instances of this, although the AKBMS too retains a sense of autonomy vis-a-vis the individual members. Most of the other Brahmin associations have their lives strung around one individual or a set of them. These include the district and taluq Brahmin associations that owe their very establishment to the AKBMS. Many of these associations are a testimony to the self-generated inspiration and commitment of such individuals towards the well being of the community. They are motivated primarily by a shared sense of frustration and moral anger against the outside world for treating the community - one which, in their eyes, has done great service to the society and the nation - in such an unjustified manner. 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.

Many of the Brahmin associations across the state reflect a similar pattern. The president of any such association will usually be a locally significant industrialist, hotelier
or a retired government employee of a high rank. Most of them will be figureheads who lend an aura of respectability and, more often than not, will be the primary financial contributors to the different activities of the association. However, the critical mobilisational work of the association is accomplished by another set of individuals (in many cases, a single individual). These occupy the middle rungs of the associational hierarchy - more often than not, the general secretary's position - and the figureheads are almost entirely dependent on them for organisational support as well as assistance in articulating subject-positions. The bout of activity-inactivity, which every Brahmin association undergoes, is directly proportional to initiative displayed by these individuals. The following testimony of a former activist belonging to a locality-specific Brahmin association in Bangalore indicates towards the crucial roles that individuals play in the logistics of an association:

A group of five or six of us [all men, but from different Brahmin castes and all above at least 50 years] came together sometime 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. We were united by the vision that Brahmins needed to come together, forgetting their internal differences, in order to assist our beleaguered community. 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 Samoohika Upanayana [mass initiation] programmes, we organised a range of religious activities like talks, film screenings, pilgrimages, publishing booklets on the significance of rituals etc. But what brought us unparalleled 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 for the association.

However, we were all 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 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.

Interestingly most of the pioneering activists of the Brahmin associations (during the 1920s and 1940s) were advocates. Thereafter, however, the activists are predominantly self-employed in sectors that are largely non-institutional. Even as the bitterness that government and quasi-government employees have avoided getting involved with Brahmin associations is expressed, the leaders themselves forward their success in largely non-state spheres as 'testimonies' for the fact that Brahmins can and will survive despite neglect from the state.

Interview with Mr. Kumarswamy, a 62 year old Smartha Brahmin (14/04/2000). As already disclosed (Ch. 3, fn.49), he retired as an Accounts Officer with a multinational company in Bangalore. He has been an active participant in the caste associations for the last two decades.
Even after this **frustrating** experience with this association, he still attends AKBMS meetings, GBMs, conventions **etc**., although his association is kept to the barest minimum. He has, all the same, become far more wary of jumping into the projects of Brahmin association unhesitatingly. However, he has taken up the initiative of forming an association of the tiny Brahmin community that he belongs to, one hailing from the coastal district of Udupi. He apparently feels more comfortable in such an intimate setting wherein he interacts with his own kin networks to a great extent, and within which he has an unquestionable reputation for integrity and commitment. But his is an isolated case of undying enthusiasm. Many of his friends who got frustrated with internal bickering and feuds never came back to any association.

In sum, then, caste associations are efforts of a voluntaristic kind. They are neither born with a moral authority nor by default receive the allegiance of the community. Here it is important to compare an institution that bears such legitimacy, the Brahmin **mathas**, with the caste associations. In the context of the Brahmin fold, the **mathas** have played a crucial role in organising and regulating the affairs of the communities that owe loyalty to them. They act, **definitionally**, as non-voluntary frames of divinely ordained authority, whose regulative powers go to the extent of proscribing and ostracising individual families and even entire castes seen to have transgressed group norms. Even as such powers are no longer vested with the **mathas** and, what is more, have undergone changes in respect of community perceptions and expectations, they continue to enjoy a great deal of goodwill, and the pontiffs are still presumed to possess great abilities. This goodwill is enough to ensure a state of material affluence, with most of the Brahmin **mathas** known to be very rich.

Caste associations have no such divine sanction. The leaders of such associations are 'secular' members, whose authority comes not from a divinity vested on their part but from a modern, democratically framed structure of rules and regulations; and which lasts for a **pre-determined** period of time. The goodwill of its constituency has to be gained, and is not given. Neither do these associations have any powers of proscription, which the **mathas** did enjoy and exercised till recently. The normative hold that Brahmin caste associations have over their constituent communities is negligible; they are at the disposal of the community and not the other way round. For instance, an individual may receive favours from an association - like getting some monetary aid from the AKBMS.
However, this does not translate itself into a bond or an agreement that his/her family remain loyal either to the association or to the community itself. This leads many association leaders to complain rather bitterly about ‘being used’. Thus, it is a partial and selective interaction (largely as decided by the family or the individual in question and not the other way round) that the constituency chooses to have with (its) caste associations.

Furthermore, the domains of functioning of the *mathas* and the caste associations have had to be sorted out, even to begin with. In the second convention of the Akhila Mysooru Brahmana Mahasabha (1949), the Sosale Vyasaraja *matha* pontiff in the course of his inaugural address refers to some objections regarding the need for caste associations when the community has *mathas* to govern itself. The pontiff puts to rest doubts regarding the intent behind the formation of the Mahasabha:

> [The Mahasabha] firmly believes that the convention has no intention whatsoever to snatch away the sole authority and responsibility remaining with the pontiffs in matters religious. 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 the attempt to undertake social reforms in the Brahmin community? Moreover, isn’t it known to this convention that, if at all its resolutions are anti-dharma, then the pontiffs have the authority to modify them? (Akhila Mysooru Brahmana Mahasabha n.d.: 5).

Notwithstanding such clearly stated lines of division, the relationship between the *mathas* and the corporate Brahmin associations continues to be one of unease. Every major Brahmin convention, meeting or function that is held in the public begins in the presence of some important *matha* functionary; almost always, efforts are made to get pontiffs representing all the three traditions. They are brought to the venue amidst great fanfare, and their presence is made all the more majestic by according them the central place of authority in the conduct of the programme. The ritual conduct specified when a *Loufaka* (the Brahmin who pursues a non-sacred/secular calling) 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 AKBMS (or any such corporate Brahmin association) imagines and draws its representability from a united, even if internally heterogeneous, Brahmin community. The intent to equalise apparently puts many a *matha* head into a zone of discomfort. Even as recently as 1990, a Udupi Dvaitha (Madhva) *matha* head called for a debate on the issue of Dvaitha superiority over the Advaita philosophy, drawing sharp reactions from the office bearers of the AKBMS. The President of the
AKBMS noted that in a context wherein the efforts to organise the community is tardy and proving to be extremely difficult, such statements will have adverse effects. According to him, "the challenge by the Phalimar [one of the eight Madhva mathas based in Udupi] 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, which a high-profile activist of the AKBMS edited (Prakash Rao 1981), the matha heads who differed with the association's insistence on Brahmin unity were squarely criticised.

Again, it is not that all the matha heads are averse to the idea of Brahmin unity or are critical of the position that the three philosophies are “in essence” the same. At least as a public stance, many of the Brahmin pontiffs seem to agree on the need for Brahmin unity. 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 on the basis of the apparent distinctions is growing. You ought to, in no ambiguous terms, order that all the Brahmins be united and impress upon your followers that they are all one and the same (Venkatanarayana 1988: 16).

However, association activists are not willing to mince words in more private settings. Of the 35 activists interviewed during the study, only three thought that Brahmin matha heads are indeed interested in obliterating differences in order to forge Brahmin unity. Of course, a few others, in a more conciliatory vein, 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. But an overwhelming majority of the activists interviewed were unequivocal in criticising the 'divisive' nature of the mathas.

In a sentiment that is often expressed in almost every single Brahmin articulation, mathas are accused of being too rigid, unresponsive and self-absorbed. It is pointed out that the Lingayath and the Vokkaliga mathas have made stupendous progress in terms of

33 Published during its third convention held in Bangalore in 1981
responding to the varied contemporary needs of their communities; indeed that they have, over the decades, built up impressive institutions of higher learning - in particular, of professional education like engineering and medical colleges.\textsuperscript{34} Equally crucially, it is held that they have been successful in emerging as key actors in the political arena, attracting a great deal of patronage and goodwill from the political leadership and successive state governments. Thus, even as Lingayath and Vokkaliga mathas are seen to draw their legitimacy from being religious institutions, 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. Pointing out that none of the Brahmin mathas have opened a professional college of education or responded to the economic needs of the disadvantaged Brahmin families, it is argued that the problem is not one of economics since many of the mathas are exceedingly rich and influential. Indeed, the memorandum that was referred to above devotes most of its attention towards impressing upon the mathas to take on such a role. Invoking the trope of a 'community under siege', the memorandum states:

In times such as ours, wherein the atheists have grown stronger, our beliefs and customs are ridiculed under the garb of rationality, it is secure to see you [the mathas, that is] very much like the elephants which make their own way in the forest, taking up sanyasa with great loyalty towards our great heritage. However we wish that you should keep in mind the goal of \textit{lokakalvana} [the material interests] as much as that of \textit{atmoddara} [the needs of the soul], so that you could guide us in the urgent task of rescuing the Brahmin community from the great difficulties that it is passing through. Many of our mathas, which were instrumental in taking care of our cultures, are rendered unable to perform such a task, primarily due to the adversities of our times. It is nonetheless heartening that at least some of them continue to be in a good financial position primarily owing to the continued patronage extended by their followers ... In the belief that it is the most immediate need of our times to cater to the needs of the 90% of Brahmins who are below the poverty line, we bring the following six-point charter to your attention \textit{(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 Brahmin mathas to help the community, establishment of financial institutions to help individuals become self-reliant, and working towards Brahmin unity. The specific contents of the charter notwithstanding -

\textsuperscript{34} The Lingayath mathas have a longer history overlapping with but not exactly paralleling the Brahmin ones. The Vokkaligas, on the other hand, have just one matha and it was established fairly recently with the
and often echoed in association fora - it is important to note that apart from a few educational institutions established by some of the Udupi Madhva mathas, the response has been one of stoic silence.

Interestingly, many Brahmins contend that this silence also marks the activities of the caste associations themselves. The latter too are accused of whiling away their time in conducting Brahminical rituals, while completely neglecting the ‘real’ agenda of economically and educationally uplifting the community. Indeed, the demand that Brahmin associations open engineering and medical colleges is at least half a century old. But even as they have recognised the need for such institutions of learning, there does not seem to have been any concrete steps taken in this direction (a fact that invites sighs of despair and words of frustration from many of the Brahmins).

The point, note, is not that the mathas, caste associations and their constituents lead mutually exclusive and autonomous lives. They indeed depend on each other for the resources of self-definition and other identification. There is consequently 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. While these broadly translate into considerations that we shall be taking up in the next chapter, the immediate point that one can be making is that the actual participation of the community at large in the activities of the associations is highly restricted. There is a real 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. Almost every convention or meeting of the different Brahmin associations that we attended during the fieldwork period exhibited a profile of participants that is strikingly similar. There is a great deal of cross-membership at the level of office-bearers, with the latter holding positions of authority in both the corporate and caste-specific associations. Most of the active members, across associations, are rather old (at least in their fifties and above). Any meeting, function or even convention and conference will invariably witness this composition. Almost all major associations have Youth Committees, which again are patronised by individuals who are in their late-thirties or early-forties. Most of the participants are men, with a sprinkling of women. Again, most of the associations have Women's Committees, which objective primarily of setting up educational institutions.
are in effect an after-thought and clearly demarcated in terms of the agenda that they are to serve. These committees are made responsible for the running of the matrimonial bureau, holding cooking classes, etc. By the late 1980s, most of the associations had brought in modifications in their constitutions so as to accommodate two women members in the Executive Committees. Generally these positions fail to attract aspirants and the committee nominates and coerces two 'active' women members to the fray.

The **AKBMS** also has one Vice President's post reserved for women. It has an affiliate trust, the Tejasvini **Brahmana** Mahila Seva Sangha, which is managed by and works exclusively for Brahmin women. The Hoysala Karnataka Sangha and the Akhila Havyaka Mahasabha have had women presidents. Notwithstanding all this, women's participation is very low compared to the men. The space of the caste association, therefore, is definingly male. In a strict formal sense, all Brahmin associations are open to women and the membership registers of the associations indeed list a far greater number of women than are seen to be participants in the various meetings, conventions and activities. However, the very need to constitute 'women's wings' in associations' point to the fact that women needed to be 'added' to what is an otherwise naturally 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 given association. There are very few women who have taken up "community work" on their own, and have gained respect for their work, articulation and ability to lead. These women have taken the 'male route' to the leadership of such associations. They have pursued a successful career 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 space of the association is attributed by almost all to one predominant reason. In the words of a formerly active member of the AKBMS:

> You must highlight this point in your work. The reason for the failure of Brahmin associations in mobilising the Brahmins on a united platform 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 as in the other communities. 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, as far as I can see, is both positive and negative. On the positive side, you are assured that Brahmins will never become communal minded and act in a fundamentalist mode.
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 the 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 for instance. 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.

This negligible participation of the Brahmins at large does not mean that the community and the associations exist in two exclusive zones of imagination. The following description of the way in which the AKBMS has sought to respond to the policy of reservation suggests that there is a ground that the community and the associations share.

To be sure, 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 reservations as a policy is quickly losing its very effectiveness owing to the liberalisation of the economy), the Brahmin community has come a long way in negotiating with reservations. Three distinct phases of this negotiation can be mapped - those of rejection, negotiation and irrelevance. It must be emphasised that these phases are not mutually exclusive, for it is possible to draw a connection between the three modes of response. What has to be kept in mind here is that these three 'moments' (or modes of response) also fairly maps out the process of Brahmin negotiation with the question of the discourse of modernity itself.

To recall a facet of our last chapter, when reservations were first mooted in the princely Mysore State, the Brahmin community reacted to it with a sense of utter disbelief. For a community that had an unquestioned monopoly over modern education and thus on employment, the idea and the principle of positive discrimination was unfathomable. The position that the Brahmin spokesmen took is one of bitter opposition. However, the belligerent mood of rejection had to be soon retracted. By the time the first convention of the Akhila Mysooru Brahmana Mahasabha was held in 1944, the community had come far from the initial position of stubborn resistance. The convention,

35 Interview (12/03/2000) with Mr. Vamanamurthy, a sixty-two year old Smartha Brahmin who was previously active in both his locality Brahmin association as well as the AKBMS.
for sure, pleaded with the Maharaja to reconsider the existing reservation policy so that only 'merit' could be made the criterion in the spheres of education and employment. But more frontally much of the deliberations at the convention focussed on the need for the Brahmin families to shed their exclusive reliance on government jobs and to focus their resources outwards. It called upon the community to take up independent vocations, and to begin looking beyond the government for its survival. The moment of active negotiation with reservation had begun.

Indeed, in much of the literature that such associations have produced over the years on reservations - as also in the various memoranda submitted to the state and judiciary - nowhere is the position simply one of negation. The Brahmin approach vis-à-vis reservation has been two-pronged. On the one hand, it was made unambiguously clear that the opposition to the policy was not one of principle but primarily one of implementation. Thus, almost every statement from the associations and, to a great extent, from the community itself began by making it clear that the opposition is not to the policy of reservations per se. It is even suggested that the community understands the need to provide special opportunities to individuals from 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 (what is termed) the 'indiscriminate' increase in the reservation quota resorted to by the state governments; the 'arbitrary' implementation of reservations in promotions; the 'studied' 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 traces of self-interest and are often couched in universal terms. The community is not asking to be recognised as a backward caste, but is rather concerned to highlight the implications of such reports and government orders extending reservations on (to echo many a Brahmin activist) "the well being and development of the nation". Thus in a memorandum presented to the central and state governments in February 1978 concerning the "injustice done to Brahmin Community"

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36 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. But note the arguments that follow in the text.
by the government orders implementing the Havanur Commission report, the AKBMS is vehement:

The Brahmin caste is socially and educationally advanced. But economically, it is 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 desire special treatments or privileges or concessions or advantages over other castes. 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).

Even as the memorandum appeals that the government orders be revoked and the practice of caste enumeration be revived in census operations, it nonetheless suggests that the government appoints a fresh commission that is "more representative" and competent.

By 1986, however, in response to the Venkataswamy Commission report (the Second Karnataka Backward Classes Commission, appointed in 1983), the position of the 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, as Brahmins, have never asked for our community 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 percent should be reserved for merit and the remaining for reservation legal, logical, and rational? That is, the point is clearly that reservation should not exceed 50 per cent. We have not asked for 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 etc., it is the latter charter of permanent measures that represents a complex positioning of the community vis-a-vis the state and its agendas. 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. Moreover, 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 will have to realise that there are limits to our fight against the government. Therefore, along with our fight, we have to open our own educational institutions and begin to think beyond government jobs, in agriculture, industry, trade et al, particularly since only 2% of the entire state's population is employed in government services ... Even as we try to get ourselves educated, it is not desirable that we struggle for government jobs alone.

3. In the endeavor to start such institutions, our Math heads, industrialists, well-off individuals will 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 Kshemaabhudyaya Sangha [All Karnataka Welfare Association] will have to assume a leading role ...

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. Particularly, 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 overtly 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 will succeed in any field ... It is the driving Mantra of the convention that, hereafter, it is only self-reliance that is the right path that exists before the 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 sympathise with the argument that the communities, which for historical reasons were left behind in education and employment, need to increase their representation in these fields. 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 very important that we fight
against such unfair and unjustifiable policies of the government, it is equally important to realise and adjust our strategies in the changing social and economic contexts.

Various caste activists view the convention that was held over five days in Bangalore as a historic moment in the history of Brahmin mobilisation. Structured in the model of a exhibition fair, it contained stalls acquainting Brahmin youth with the diverse opportunities for self-employment that are available along with offers of financial assistance. The latter are invariably arranged through the two successfully running co-operative banks established by the AKBMS - the National Co-operative Bank and the Vishveshvaraiah Co-operative Bank. Last year a woman's co-operative bank was also established at the initiative of the AKBMS.

By the 1990s, nevertheless, the phase of ‘irrelevance’ had made its entry. The following is the text of an article that was published in Vipra Nudi, in its September 2000 issue. Audaciously titled even for a caste periodical - Wake Up, Brahmin/ You are Unconquerable!! The Field of the Meritorious, the Computer Softn are 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 percent of this field...

Even before the angry eyes of the government and the politicians fall on it, it is generating billions worth foreign exchange and according an important place for the country in the eyes of the world... Even as it is a matter of pride that our boys are getting greater opportunities, it is sad that their services are being put to use by foreign countries.

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 percent of ranks at the SSLC and PUC levels are taken by Brahmins and also that they dominate the computer field. It is indeed the sad story of our times that the evil-minded politicians, with the sole intention of choking the brilliant Brahmins who are in the lead everywhere, are bringing reservations in more and more fields. But it is the greatest achievement of the 21st century that the Brahmins, recognised as the most superior in the Varna hierarchy, are evading all such obstacles and are monopolising the computer field.

Even as the politicians attempted to contain the computer field by providing reservation in government colleges, it grew in mammoth proportions much beyond their ability to contain. It is indeed the defeat of the ‘reservation politicians’ that in foreign countries only merit is being recognised and not reservations.

This field, which can grow without any hindrance for the next 15 years, can bring the greatest of respect for India in the eyes of the world. The Brahmin families, which were economically backward, can sport a smile of contentment... However, in spite of all this, Brahmin 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 Gayathri, the mother of all that is meritorious and brilliant (Vipra Nudi, September 2000, emphasis in original).

Indeed many such articles have appeared in Vipra Nudi, particularly in the latter half of the last decade, each giving testimony to the growing confidence of the Brahmins in the policies of liberalisation and the emerging new economy. The perception, of course, is not restricted to the participants in the space of the association; even those unconnected with association affairs lend voice to such perceptions. In fact, it is the wider perceptual field characterising the contemporary Brahmin that is the focus of 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. We shall be doing so by juxtaposing the respondents' narratives with the descriptions foregrounded in this and the previous chapters.