Chapter Six

Identities and Displacements: On the Selfhood of the Contemporary Brahmin

Although the schema of caste and its 'substantialisation' was served up in our introductory chapters as an overarching framework for both theoretical and empirical elucidation, we have hardly encountered the frame in our substantive chapters detailing the dynamics of Brahmin identity in contemporary Karnataka. The avoidance is somewhat deliberate, meant primarily to resist the totalising thrust of the substantialisation theme (without necessarily repudiating it either). We shall be tackling the latter theme in the light of our reconstruction in the concluding chapter. To be sure, a problematic stringing together notions of 'community' and of 'association' has been evolving, but again this is an axis we shall take up for more detailed discussion later. In keeping with this narrative strategy, our foregoing chapters detailing the dynamics of Brahmin identity in contemporary Karnataka have actively resisted patterns of theoretical determination. Broadly in the context of introducing some key fragments of the modern world of Brahmins, we were concerned to integrate and present the differential investments in the agency and category of being and becoming 'Brahmin' across three registers: namely, in the person of the Brahmin, at the level of organised complexes of action such as the caste association or even the public culture of print, and in the context of a longer (albeit modern and contemporary) history of non-Brahmanical othering. The registers themselves have not been sequentially arranged as such, with the chapters criss-crossing the distinctive profiles yielded by each of them.

The focus, of course, has translated into a concern with 'caste' as an axis of identity and identification; and it is this focus that the present chapter is meant to consolidate. An attempt is made here to reinforce the identity thrust of our foregoing pages, with the intent being to deliver upon the enunciatory space of the contemporary Brahmin self. Framed by a deep sense of being subject to siege and ambivalent about its own sense of belonging to a caste, the Brahmin self seeks to construct a coherent sense of its identity. While the foregoing chapters (that is, Chs. 3-5) sought to profile the parameters of identity and identification in terms of the community's 'others' (both those
internal to the Brahmin fold and external to it) and against the backdrop of its own organisational space, this chapter seeks to describe it more fully from the standpoint of the Brahmin person - situated within the individuated worlds of kin, family and friendship networks. The primary material that we will be using here is the interviews conducted with the Brahmin families themselves, although this will also be anchored by some of the considerations that have formed the focus of our previous chapters. Specifically, we shall be calling attention to the varied contestations that were staged between the 'pro-reform' Brahmins and the 'orthodox' Brahmins, and which often obtained simultaneously with and influenced by the non-Brahmin othering.

The field of this contestation allows us an entry point into understanding the ways in which the contemporary Brahmin selfhood manages to resolve itself into a secularised imagination. Indeed, even as we begin to speak to the Brahmins of today, the contest over who is suitable to represent the Brahmin self from among the different contending imaginations is resolved in favour of the secularising Brahmin persona. This resolution though has not meant that the Brahmin has been able to coherently answer the question of what is to be done about one's caste self, or, more pointedly, about the fact of being Brahmin. The equivocation with regard to their Brahmin-ness, the varied attempts to reimagine their caste selves, the differential investments in the self-identity of being Brahmin - all these contours of identity and identification find expression in this chapter. In short: we shall be bearing on the question of what it means to be a 'Brahmin' today. It is also fitting that our narrative should devolve on this question, having traversed aspects of the modern world of Brahmins in the foregoing chapters. The narrative, of course, has set up a whole new context for negotiating the bases of caste action, as indeed of caste as an axis of identity and identification.

Of ‘progressive’ and 'orthodox' Brahmins

By the early decades of the last century, the question of 'community reform' emerged as an important issue before the Brahmins. Brahmin men who were educated and were occupying secular positions of power were at the forefront of demanding that the community shed many of its practices that were seen as regressive and against the

1 To recall, one or more members of one hundred households - in all 135 persons - were interviewed for the purposes of this study. The details have been presented in Ch.2 above.
tide of the times. The opponents - represented by both Brahmin individuals as well as institutions like the Brahmin *mathas* - were dubbed as the orthodoxy. This confrontation, and the specific ways in which it was staged, proved crucial in providing an idiom for restructuring the possibilities of the modern Brahmin identity. The confrontation plots itself as an encounter between the 'orthodox Brahmin' and the 'progressive Brahmin', which culminated in successful validations of the space of the latter and often at the cost of the former. Of course, the justification for reform often did not exclusively originate in any modern ground of individuality, equality, emancipation etc.; it was also rooted within the justificatory ground of tradition. The point of divergence was on the ground of 'correct' interpretation of the tradition, and a decision about what the 'original meaning' of the tradition could be. The 'place' of the woman was often the site of this contestation, especially since the issues concerning Brahmin women and reform - whether it was the issue of age at marriage or of according women equal rights - always provided the non-Brahmin leaders a lever to gesture at the "double standards" adopted by the pro-reform Brahmins when it came to supporting the non-Brahmin cause.

During the late 1910s and early 1920s, there was an ongoing debate on the need to allow women to become members of the Mysore Representative Assembly. There were many members, including Brahmins, who were opposed to this rule. However, as the reports on the proceedings of the Assembly illustrate, the 'progressive' Brahmin was increasingly gaining legitimacy against the 'orthodoxy', and it was only a matter of time before his demand that women be allowed to contest for membership was accepted (as it did in 1927). The non-Brahmins though saw it as a conspiracy to increase the number of Brahmin members in the Assembly (Hanumanthappa Vol. II n.d.: 175-186). In a 1921 session, D. S. Mallappa, a Vokkaliga leader, was (as he claimed) "surprised" to see his Brahmin friends pleading earnestly on behalf of the women on the ground that they were backward and facilities should be provided to make them forward; and goes on to wonder why they should not have extended the same hearty support when the question of advancing the interests of backward communities came up for discussion in the Assembly (*ibid.*: 181). Paralleling this are the debates over the age at marriage, which gets articulated at different fora - from the Representative Assembly to the many *Shastrartha* (publicly conducted debates among the scholars on the 'correct' meaning of the Shastras) held before the different *matha* heads, as indeed 'progressive' Brahmin individuals.
confronting the institution of the matha and so on. What the issue primarily animates is
the clear decline in the authority of the institution of the Brahmin mathas. However, as
we shall see, the erosion of the authority of this institution does not simultaneously
announce the weakening of the legitimacy of the Shastras or the hold of the Shastras over
the definitions of appropriate (and inappropriate) conduct. The terms of conduct,
doubtless, are re-framed but do not become obsolete in their ability to provide meanings
and structures of legitimacy.

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

The particular issue of reform, namely, the age at marriage, was primarily a
concern of the Brahmin community. It was chiefly among the Brahmins that the age at
marriage was relatively very less, which had such consequences as the predominance of
young widows, significant rates of child mortality, and so on. The 1893 memorandum
presented before the Representative Assembly on the proposed Infant Marriages Act that
aimed at raising the age at marriage of both men and women had 81 Brahmins arraigning
against the passing of the legislation as compared to 33 who were in favour of it. The
major participants in this debate were Brahmin members of the Assembly, with the
proponents deliberating primarily on the high rates of Brahmin widows and their pitiable
conditions (Hanumanthappa Vol. I n.d.: 155-163). There were public meetings
discussing the issue in which the Shastras were taken to be the sole legitimating
authority. For instance, at a public meeting held in October 1893 and attended by 89
Brahmins and a single non-Brahmin, it was resolved that there was no objection in the
Shastras for prohibition of such [child] marriages (ibid: 158).

What is significant here is that the Brahmins championing the cause of women
were also at the forefront of opposing the non-Brahmin demand, as against the
'orthodoxy' which was consistent in its opposition to both. Indeed, it is often the leaders of this 'progressive' group that remain the primary 'other' for the non-Brahmin articulation. For instance, Tataiah was at the forefront of all such reform measures - widow remarriage, raising the age at marriage, extending the clause of compulsory education to girls. But he is also the single-most representative symbol of Brahmin will to deny the non-Brahmins their equitable share in the modern resources, as far as the non-Brahmins were concerned.

Tataiah was consistent in his support for the measures of ‘reform’ of the Brahmin community. In a prolific public life spanning close to half a century, Tataiah uses every opportunity presented before him to argue for such measures. He was most active in the debate on age at marriage too. The Mysore Star details, sympathetically, one such instance in which Tataiah argues against the 'orthodoxy' on the issue. In its issue of 30 May 1915, by way of a report titled Vivahacharche (Debate on Marriage), the Mysore Star relates the discussion that took place in the presence of a Madhva pontiff of the Uttharadi matha in an advocate's residence. In that meeting, reportedly, Brahmins of all denominations had gathered in great numbers. Tataiah headed the pro-reform side in arguing how the Shastras are there for the community and not the community for the Shastras; indeed that the Shastras have always advocated modifications according to the changing times, and that the tide of the times was for raising the age at marriage. He cites many of the sutras (classical injunctions) in making his case. Even as he loses out in the debate - in the sense of convincing those present - the moral authority that he had at his disposal was unmistakable. Significantly again, even the reformers’ group does not undermine the authority of the Shastras in regulating the conduct deemed proper for a

2 Hosting and felicitating pontiffs of those mathas to which a family owes its allegiance has been an important practice, and continues to this day. While the reaffirmation of one's allegiance to the mathas is the obvious intent behind such felicitations, it is also an occasion to assert one's own standing in the community and an attempt to tap the highly connected networks of the mathas for one's benefits. During the late colonial period, such occasions were also employed to discuss critical issues concerning the Brahmin castes to which families belonged. Significant among them were matters concerning the propriety of Samudrayaana (Crossing the Seas, a proscribed act for a Brahmin but which had to be rendered acceptable as there were more and more Brahmin men who were going to abroad for higher education), age at marriage, female education, etc. Such debates used to go on for weeks together, although the intensity of discussions has considerably declined in more recent times.

3 Conlon (1977) narrates, in greater detail, the conflict between the Saraswat caste and its matha again on the issue of reform.
Brahmin. The difference of opinion is primarily based on the correct modes of interpretation of these texts and their malleability in deference to the times.

While this is not by itself a testimony to the weakening authority of the Brahmin mathas vis-à-vis their subject communities, the fact is that the terms of deference were certainly becoming circumscribed and even circumspect. The trend coincides with the coming to be of a secularising Brahmin self, one who acknowledges the authority of both the institution of the matha and of its figurehead, the pontiff, but whose space of negotiation is by no means unequivocal. Indeed, the erosion of the authority of the Brahmin mathas was a sub-text that ran through the story of the Hale Karnatakas that we narrated in the fourth chapter. The fact that the mathāin question there was the Sringeri matha makes the point even more accentuated, for the latter is the defining institution for Smartha Brahmins and their identity. Its authority, the few available records but particularly the documents available in the matha supposedly point out, was not merely spiritual and symbolic; it both represented and is vested with a great deal of temporal power over the material lives of its subjects. Shastri (1997) indicates the extent of temporal power that the Sringeri matha exercised over the Smartha community. It apparently ranged from confiscation of property of the heir-less to buying destitute women and ostracising of families that have violated 'caste' prescriptions and proscriptions.

The following narration from DVG (1997: 479-82), which we shall cite at length, makes the point rather well. DVG is narrating an incident wherein a highly influential official in the British bureaucracy (a Smartha Brahmin) is debating with the Sringeri matha pontiff the issue of the imperially constituted Sarda Bill (1929)4 proposing a rise in the legal age at marriage. Even DVG, an intensely celebratory votary of the Vaidik Brahmins (who, for him, represented the true essence of Brahminhood)5, was clearly seeking a position that in many ways was at odds with the 'orthodoxy'. The official here is Right Honourable V. S. Srinivasa Shastri, a Privy Council Member, and DVG had accompanied Shastri on that trip to Sringeri.

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4 The reference is to the Child Marriage Restraint Act 1929, popularly known as the Sarda Act named after its chief architect Harbilas Sarda, a member of the Central Legislative Council in 1920s.

5 See his Vaidikadharmam Sampradaayast/iaru (The Followers of the Vaidikadharmam), a collection of his thoughts on figures who were undeterred in following the true Dharma of the Brahmins even in the face of overpowering influence of modernity (DVG 1997).
In the course of an audience, DVG reports the pontiff's expression of anguish:

It is very good that you came here at this point. ... It appears that there is a legislation that is being debated in the Imperial Council in Delhi and that it is called the 'Sarada Bill'. What has become of our times? Why name a legislation, which is totally disagreeable to Mother Sharada, after her? This anomaly has to be put a stop to. You are the one to do it, for you are a Privy Council Member and have access to the Viceroy in person. You should use your power to meet the Viceroy and put an end to this epilepsy called Sarada Bill.

Shastri suggests that since it is puja (prayer) time, they could discuss the matter the next day. The pontiff gives him a hymn to chant daily, and even as this is accepted by Shastri with grace the former is told that although he (Shastri) would not chant it, he will definitely keep it as a mark of respect. DVG is supposedly intrigued, and later enquires as to what is being meant. Shastri clarifies:

I do not even do the sandhyavandane [the daily ritual that a Brahmin male who has undergone the initiation ceremony is required to do] every day. It is already ages since I left it. Then how can I assure that I will chant this hymn everyday? Moreover, the hymn itself is nothing great. Don't we have hundreds of hymns like this one? What is so special about it? But the Gurupeeta [the authority vested in the position of the Guru, the matha pontiff really] has given it to me with some abhimana [patronising respect and love] and it is our duty to respect that sentiment.

The following day they discuss the Bill. Shastri reportedly gives a long response to the pontiff, and quoting the full conversation might be necessary for identifying the contours of the secular Brahmin self:

Shastri: You are referring to the Bill that seeks to increase the age-at-marriage for girls. I too, for one, hold the same opinion as is encoded in the Bill. A few years ago, when I was a member in the Madras Legislative Council, I thought such a change is necessary and had prepared a Draft Bill proposing the same. However ... my proposal did not make it. My opinion though has remained the same. Therefore, now when somebody else has proposed the same, how can I oppose? Not only that, in many of the marriages that have taken place in my own family, the bride had crossed the age that is now considered to be appropriate. Thus, it is not merely my thinking but also my action that is pro-modification. Due to all these, it is not proper for me to stop the Bill.

The naming of the proposed Bill as 'Sarada Bill' is neither to name it after the Goddess Sharada nor to hurl blasphemy at her. It is merely named after the proposer, whose name is Har Bilas Sarada. He is himself somebody who is greatly devoted to the Hindu religion; a good person too. He has authored a book in English titled 'Hindu Superiority', wherein he has presented a collage of the opinions of the European scholars praising the Hindu religion. Thus he is a man who takes pride in his religion. People have merely kept his name for the Bill that he is proposing.

Now the second point. I believe that the Shastras prescribe and advocate the marriage of only those who have reached the stage of puberty and not before. I have myself studied this prescription as found in the Shastras ... (and) they do not show any basis for the present practice of marriage before puberty. It has become a common practice that girls should be married off between the age of eight and ten but it finds no authentication in the Shastras. We can only guess
that this has come into practice due to some unknown historical pressure and thus is not ancient. Please see the hymns that are chanted during the ritual of marriage. [He reproduces the hymns]. Their meaning is clear. It is not something that is appropriate to be told to a girl of eight to ten years. It is appropriate only to an adult. One should also analyse the ritual of marriage. It says the couple should spend three nights together. [Quoting an injunction, he says] it means that the bride is ready to undergo this ritual at the time of marriage. This is what the *Gṛhya Sutras* say too.

**The Pontiff:** We have not seen the *Gṛhya Sutras*.

**Shastri:** That is because the *GṛAya Sutras* are irrelevant to the life of a *Sanyasi* [renouncer] like you. But the present contention belongs to the sphere of *Grihastha* (householder) Dhanna, and therefore I think *Gṛhya Sutras* ought to guide us in the matter.

**The Pontiff:** That appears to us to be an important point. We will get back once we read the *GṛAya Sutras* (DVG 1997: 479-82).

There are several crucial elements that mark the secular Brahmin self in the above narration. Firstly, the differential position that Shastri is articulating for himself vis-a-vis the pontiff. He is no longer the obedient subject that unquestioningly bows before the authority figure of the Guru. But it is also a subjectivity of silent and yet firm deference vis-a-vis the Guru that Shastri keeps intact, honouring the authority, if not the particular figure, occupying that position. He even thinks of ingenious ways to avoid the pontiff from coming across as incompetent - as, for instance, the suggestion that the Guru, being the renouncer, is perhaps not aware of the issue that concerns the householder. Secondly, and following from the first point, he is somebody who can question the Guru and still hold ground. Note also that Shastri is not questioning the legitimacy of the Shastras in determining community life and affairs. In fact, he is arguing his case precisely on the grounds of a 'correct' and thus more 'authentic' reading of the Shastras. He is not bringing modern justifications of individual choice etc. to forward his argument on the need for favouring adult marriages.

It is one of the clearest expositions of the emerging Brahmin self, particularly because it is transposed against the terms of a 'traditional' characterisation. Indeed, many individuals such as Shastri are much more "informed" about their Brahminness than those inhabiting the authority structures of *matha* or the priesthood, even as they remain unsure about owning up that identity. They make articulate defences of the entity and identity of being Brahmin, and many even do so with generous citations from the scriptural texts. Their newer contexts allow and even spur many of them to be reflexive about their identities. There is a keener, more critical and argumentative self-perception of their Brahmin selfhood, which, as we shall see, also comes across in the perceptions of
the families and individuals interviewed as part of this study. It is not a mere identity that is taken on, but one that is variously and critically received; refashioned, for sure, as a response to the larger processes of secularisation, non-Brahmin othering and the variegated demands that other contending self-perceptions seem to be making on them. A. N. Murthy Rao (encountered earlier on in the fourth chapter, p. 180 above) expresses a similar incredulity in his autobiography (1990) while making a stronger point about the institutions of *mathas* and orthodoxy. He observes:

> It is the pontiffs and religious leaders who can objectively analyse tradition to guide the community in its perception and negotiation with it. Moreover, their word carried greater weight then [he is referring to the early decades of the last century]. But even in them a social consciousness had not developed. Even they thought that 'tradition' is itself 'religion' and were anxious to protect it. They, often, did not even bother to find whether the scriptures authorised the tradition and the prevailing customs. ... I would expect our religious Gurus to be well versed in all the scriptures. Or at least that they defer taking positions until after they have had a close look at the authority of the scriptures. It even surprised me that the pontiff had not even known about Har Bilas Sarada for his name was routinely mentioned in the newspapers then. It appeared to me that those who have taken sanyasa, even if it be the pontiffs, should not lose interest in the outside world so completely (1990: 52-4)

Similarly, the 'progressive' Brahmin persona shared an increasingly ambiguous relationship with the 'sacred' Brahmin - particularly that construction of the Brahmin self that was seen to embody the oppressive regimes of the caste as a social system. This ambiguity was itself radically textured and encompasses a range. While, for instance, Kailasam (1884-1946), known as the father of modern Kannada theatre, was contemptuous of what he described as the "priest-craft", DVG is more sympathetic albeit setting an agenda before what he characterises as *Vaidika* (priestly) Brahmins. It would be interesting to map the contours of this negotiation through precisely the figures of Kailasam and DVG.

An England educated geologist, T. P. Kailasam reportedly led the life of a maverick, and that too for a Brahmin of his generation. Coming from an influential Iyer family of Mysore, Kailasam gave up a bright career with the government to lead an aimless life writing plays in Kannada and English. While all his Kannada plays were contextualised to the middle class Brahmin families of his times - and therefore can be seen to be reflections on the contemporary state of the community - his English plays were primarily about characters from the *Mahabharatha* epic. Somebody clearly not
drawn into the politics of his day (even while being greatly impressed by Gandhi),
Kailasam can be, if anything, put under the category of a 'reformist'.

While most of his Kannada plays are about the contemporary Brahmin community, the one titled *Nam Brahmanke* [Our *Brahminness*], encountering the space of conduct of the annual death rites (the *Shraddha*) of the wife of a Brahmin High Court judge, is the most pugnacious. Its subtitle (which is in English) is "A Satirical Farce to titilate and ventilate To day - Orthodoxy". The "place, language and situation" of the play is, as it affirms, ‘modern’. The famous proclamation from the *Bhagavadgeeta*, claimed to be made by Lord Krishna, namely,

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Chaathurvarnyam mayaa srishtam
Gun a Karma Vibhaagashaha
[I created the four-fold Varna division
Based on Quality/Character and the Deeds]
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is prominently positioned along with the list of the characters, and frames the intent behind the play. There are three short poems, in free verse - the first and the last is in English by Kailasam himself and the middle one in Kannada by Sali Ramachandra, a poet.

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

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Brahmins today are a gone case, falling prey to the lust of consumption (*Bhoga*)!
Become the butt of ridicule of all, slaving after money!
It was *Then*, renunciation was their greatest wealth!
The renouncers are indeed the rich in the world; indeed, the kin of the world!

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Gang North, gang South, gang West, gang Hast,
The foulest foe of man indeed,
This pest!!... inhuman beast... this priest!
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6 All the citations that follow in the text are from the collection *Kailasam Kritigalu* (Collected Works of Kailasam) edited by Thipperudraswamy (1987: 475-505).
The quote from the *Bhagavadgeetha* and the above three verses set the stage for a no-holds barred and thoroughly vituperative indictment of the Brahmin *va/dikas* (priests) of his day. The story builds on the resourcefulness of the Brahmin family-priest in not merely chopping the rituals to suit the requirements of the busy judge and his college-going, cricket-enthusiastic son, but also in cooking-up rituals for commonplace actions like the of lighting a cigarette. Incidentally, the priest himself is a failure in his pursuit of modern education, having been a classmate of the judge during early schooling. Of course, he does all this for money, *without* an iota of regard for the image of the Brahmin Then which the foregoing middle verse alludes. At one level, it is the 'downfall' of the idealised Brahmin (in particular, the *Vaidik* Brahmin) that this play bemoans; lamenting, in its terms, the degradation of a 'creed' into 'greed', of ‘priesthood’ into ‘priestcraft’. But at another level, this priestly degradation is counterposed against a secularising Brahmin self that is represented in the figures of the judge and his son and daughter. The latter are all on a mission of reconfiguring their Brahmin self, one that entails ambiguities in their identification of being Brahmin but which is in no sense a dismissal of such identification. The judge and his children all seem to be reconfiguring the terms of identity from their own locations, even as they share a similar ground in the need to be reflective about the process.

All this can be legitimately seen as Kailasam setting an agenda before the Brahmin community of his times - an agenda that is as much framed by the non-Brahmin critique as it is by the larger trajectories of secularisation and *individuation*. Indeed, almost every Kannada play that he wrote can be retrieved as an agenda-statement, wherein the need to become 'modern' is feverishly emphasised even as that 'modernity' is itself deeply implicated in and made responsible for one's Brahminness. The judge's son is clearly indignant of the purity-pollution principles undergirding caste. He wonders, while getting a shave done from the family barber, whether at least after death and in heaven his grandfather would be allowed to shake hands with the barber's

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7 To be sure, Kailasam's plays nowhere foreground the non-Brahmin othering *self-consciously*, nor does such a frame present itself distinctly by means of a reading of the plays in themselves. For instance, in the play under consideration, some of the integuments for a mapping of the Brahmin self are provided by a Christian friend and the Muslim servant rather than by any non-Brahmin 'Hindu' characters. Nevertheless, some of Kailasam's other incidental remarks - a witticism that has acquired a *near-folkloric* status in the Kannada cultural firmament - point to a sensibility that is very alive to this larger thematic of non-Brahmin othering within which 'caste' seems to be operating in the Karnataka (and south Indian) context. These remarks have been variously collated in reminiscences, collections etc.
grandfather when they meet. Moreover, he has to play a cricket match in an hour's time when the family cook (a Brahmin) comes to remind him that it is the Shraddha day of his dead mother and that he needs to take a purificatory bath. The son replies:

Bath?! Yes of course/ Mother's Shraddha... Say A/Constantoo... father's Court too say C/ more constantoo!! But my Cricket matchoo say B'... most constantoo/ I should be ready by e/even/ But all three becoming Constant is absurdoo/ Therefore one of the three must become variable! Nigh Court cannot be moved; Cricket fieldoo(fixture; so a/so the matchoo/ It is impossible to put off the mother's Shraddha; so, all the three have to be constant! Therefore ... fourth factor taking bath ... must be variable! Just get me the moguta[a piece of cloth made of silk, which at all times remains pure]. I will just wear it and be ready... for the Ceremony!

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

The widowed daughter of the judge, pursuing her postgraduate studies⁹, undertakes another disavowal of the "orthodoxy" of the Brahmins. She takes her Christian friend home in order to prove that Brahminism, as it is practised, has become a slave to the principle of "Greed! Thy name is 'Orthodoxy'". However, when confronted by the view of her Christian friend that 'Hinduism' has degraded itself by creating the caste system, she embarks on the most unambiguous covering-up of the question of caste. The daughter clarifies that caste was not meant to be a system, but a "Divinely deliberated organization" conceived for the "well-being of the society" by Lord Krishna. Elucidating the point, she states:

CASTE ORGANIZATIONOO... ACCORDING TO THE Bhagavadgeetha OBTAINS TO-DAY ... IN EVERY PART OF THE WORLD, EXCEPT IN INDIA! I shall explain it to you. The

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⁸ The middle class Brahmin characters in all of Kailasam's Kannada plays generously use English words and sentences in their Kannada. The English words are made to work as Kannada words, by adding "u" or "oo" at the end. For instance, "constant" becomes "constantoo" and "impossible" becomes "impossible-u". In the quotation, the English words and sentences in the original are italicised.

⁹ Which is a statement against the Brahmin orthodoxy of his times, for the widowed daughter is sent for higher studies.
Benthamite cry of "the greatest good of the greatest number" is of a very recent origin. This is but a feeble echo of the "sarvejanaaaha sukhinobhavanthu" ... the Vedic dictum that reverberated from one end to the other of this earth! The basis of the relation of the individual entity ... to the communal entirety ... is to so use the talents that God has given him for ITS good, in requital of his receiving the benefits from the community as an approved unit thereof!! Thus, if you have nothing but brains, becoming a Brahmin ... if you have more muscles than brains, becoming a Kshatriya ... even if you don't have either ... as Milton said "They also serve who stand and wait" ... if you till the land, becoming a Shudra ... serving the talents that God has endowed to the society is the only human's duty!! THUS NO PARTICULAR CASTE IS SUPERIOR TO ANY OTHER CASTE. See, now with the war raging [the reference is here to the Second World War], every man who fights ... is a 'Kshatriya' irrespective of his birth; every priest who prays that "Well befall the right" and cheers the fighter is a Brahmin. Every tiller ... sower ... reaper ... cook ... merchant ... that provides the "sinews of war" is a Vaishya or a Shudra!! This is the ancient organization of caste that Lord Krishna made!! Now to the caste system that is peculiar to our India ... It is the subtlety of priest-hood, which, turning into priest-craft, has dominated the ninety two percent of illiterate Indians to the extent of giving lie to Lord Krishna's organization by making the small detail of Location of Birth in society to determine one's caste, while THE LORD KRISHNA, HIMSELF A NON-BRAHMIN BY BIRTH, INSTITUTED FOR ALL TIME THE TRUE CRITERION OF REAL CASTE; NOT THE INTEGRANT INDIVIDUAL'S LOCATION OF BIRTH IN SOCIETY!, BUT HIS PARTICULAR VOCATION'S WORTH FOR SOCIETY! NOT ACCIDENTAL BIRTH, BUT INTRINSIC WORTH!! (capitalised in the original).

Thus caste system is held to be an aberration, while caste as organisation is a principle that marks all societies. Lord Krishna - a non-Brahmin by birth, as pointedly referred to 10 - made the caste identity of an individual determined by his vocation, while the "priestcraft" - authored by those who claimed Brahminhood by birth - has worked to make the accident of birth the determinant of one's caste identity. As we shall see later, this is pretty much the same frame that informs the self-recuperation of their Brahmin selfhood that most of the respondents worked with during our interviews. Kailasam does not have his characters ask the further question about what one is to make of the "accident of birth" in a Brahmin family and not, say, in a Shudra family, although our respondents seek to work through this puzzle by foregrounding a notion of samskara - that is, a culture of upbringing as indeed of a genetic make-up that is seen as being unique to the Brahmins. We shall be taking up the terms of this delineation later on in the chapter; Kailasam though returns to another ground for a refashioning of the Brahmin identity.

10 Framing him as a "non-Brahmin" as against the other probable modes of recuperating his identity - of being a Yadava or a Kshatriya, for instance - brings into perspective the over-determining impact the non-Brahmin articulation on the imaginary of the times.
Having noted the explanation, the Christian friend is even more confounded as to why the family continues to observe events like the shraddha, and in the process "foster hollow orthodoxy ... despite [its] contempt for the now-meaningless abracadabra and jargon of mantrams and tantrams of ... the priest-craft.” The judge then offers to answer her - both “by proxy” as well as directly. By way of the former, he asks the old Muslim servant why he did not go home after his night duty at the judge’s place. The old servant, with a quivering voice and tears welling up, evidently overcome by grief, says in Urdu:

Though my feet were dragging me homewards in the morning, my mind was unwilling, sir. The cook reminded me that today is Madam’s shraddha. I have been brought up by the grandmother, the elder Madam and the younger Madam [judge’s grandmother, mother and wife respectively]. I just can’t forget that sir. Therefore, I couldn’t get myself to go away.

The judge then turns to the Christian friend and clarifies:

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

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

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

Now, if Kailasam was willing to dismiss and disown the contemporary ‘degenerate’ state of the Brahmin "priestcraft", DVG is more sympathetic and willing to accommodate the priests in the imagination of the community. Indeed, it appears that the latter was in some sense responding to Kailasam himself, for he employs the term "priestcraft" which is Kailasam's very own. In his memoirs of Shastri that we called attention to earlier, DVG narrates the following episode. In a Brahmin gathering, when a high-ranking Brahmin government official ridiculed the priests saying that they had no knowledge of the Shastras and that they offered their services in a mechanistic manner, Shastri is known to have retorted:

Tell me, how much do you pay your hajaama fa rather contemptuous way of addressing a barber, in fact the caste profession itself for his services? It is a Paavali in the earlier system of measure of currency, a Paavali was equivalent to the present quarter of a rupee, isn’t it? Now, how much do you offer the priest as Dakshine? It’s a Paavali again, is it not? Why is that you, who do not expect any great scholarship from your hajaama in return for a Paavali, expect it from the poor Brahmin priest? Leave that aside - if you are so keen in religious matters, how much time do you spend in a week reflecting upon religious or scriptural issues? (DVG 1997: 436-7).

In fact, DVG proposes an eight-point charter (ibid. 370-1) in order that the Brahmin priests could improve their "pathetic economic status" and also, more importantly, remove the contempt of being called the practitioners of "priest-craft". The charter, broadly, emphasises the need to reconcile the two Brahmin personas, with the priests being advised to determinately stick to their calling (one that ought to remain a service, which does not seek returns even in times of duress such as the contemporary times) while the secular Brahmin is implored to preserve the value of the way of life of the Vaidika (priestly) Brahmin by according the latter an exalted status. DVG even seeks to deploy the imagination of being Hindu in arguing for the importance of such Brahmins:

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

The negotiations over the space of being and becoming Brahmin were thus multiple and varied. We have been encountering - in the foregoing but also in the previous chapters - the secularising Brahmin self across the spectrum of negotiations that the Brahmin identity is forced to contend with. The secularising Brahmin self attempts to reconfigure its *Brahminness* so as to more adequately respond to the demands of the modern situation, and in the process actively strives to displace and marginalise competing constructions of the Brahmin self. The contestation, as we have seen, is as much against the external ‘others’ that seek to categorise it as it is against the other competing internal ‘others’ that seek to authorisedly speak on behalf of the Brahmin. There are some reminders with regard to this play of identities impinging on the personhood of the contemporary Brahmin that need mentioning, before we proceed to an analysis of the self-descriptions of the respondents themselves. They have to do with the limits of representability, of the legitimacy of these identity manoeuvres in the eyes of the Brahmin community as a whole and of its textured nature.

One is the gentle proscription that *speaking on behalf of,* most certainly in the case of the modern Brahmin self, need not translate itself into or become equivalent for *speaking as (leave alone speaking for)* the Brahmin. This is linked up with an associated point, namely, that even as the secularised Brahmin self is consciously seeking to distance itself from given, pejorative imaginations -often but by no means exclusively linked to the non-Brahmin othering - the selfhood that get to be postulated is not thereby an alienated subjectivity. It is not a simple rejection of the Brahmin identity *tout court,* not even a refusal to inhabit or even take on that space. The reworking of the self-perception of being Brahmin is a *legitimated* enterprise - in that the refusal to follow everyday caste rules or question the traditional structures of authority is all within the limits of tolerance. What is not within the limit however is the breaking of the rule of endogamy, an act that continues to remain the clearest statement of dissent. However, as a respondent pointed out (cited later in the chapter) the limits of tolerance keep shifting.

Another reminder has to do with the fact that the emergent Brahmin self is not by itself a monolithic and coherent entity that encompasses all those Brahmin individuals who undergo a process of secularisation and individuation. Even within this space, we
come across a textured and differentiated spectrum, with individuals negotiating with their own self-identification of being Brahmin in different ways. The heterogeneity that marks this emergent self can be seen as a testimony to the deep impact that modernity has had on the Brahmins. Nonetheless, even as we take note of its heterogeneity, one could identify the larger matrix that unifies and renders this self a sociologically identifiable entity. It is in the direction of such an identification that we shall move in the sections that follow.

II

Regrouping the strategies of Brahmin selfhood

Recuperating from our discussion thus far, the primary strategies of the self that the Brahmin works with can be mapped as the following. The persona of the contemporary Brahmin that comes to be thus posited lends us a determinate sense of the enunciations of the respondents as they seek to reflect on their identity of being Brahmins.

Firstly, the Brahmin begins to articulate himself in the modern condition as being a 'self under siege'. Even as the secularising Brahmin would like to be seen as operating in spaces that are beyond the pale of caste signification, the vehemence of the non-Brahmin articulation forces him to confront his 'Brahminness' as the prime marker of self-identification. As the South Indian Brahmin official whom we encountered in the beginnings of the fourth chapter (pp. 151-2) suggested, this self under duress (or siege) sees no hope for its future, particularly since the modern state itself is seen to be enthusiastically complicit in the processes of othering the Brahmin. More acutely, as we saw in the last chapter, the associational endeavours foreground and feed off such imaginations of a self under siege.

Secondly, the Brahmin self accepts, to a great extent, the image of the 'oppressor' that the non-Brahmin articulation builds for it. The Brahmin actively participates, as we saw in the case of Kailasam for instance, in othering itself. Of course, such a self-evaluation comes to Brahmins even independent of the non-Brahmin articulation; for, the intellectual resources that the two were drawing from were largely the same, namely, the modern grounds of reflexivity and accountability in the public sphere. Accordingly, the

11 Note this section compresses much that is derived from the previous chapters and the present ongoing one.
construction of a 'past' that was abominable because it was seen to have been organised around the 'caste system' is shared by both; and, what is more, both see the 'oppressor Brahmin' as a 'degenerate Brahmin' in that the former represents a distortion of what was originally a well-intended system of identification and principle of organisation of social life. However, the contemporary Brahmin denies this 'oppressor' status a structural coevalness in time, in that it is claimed that although Brahmins have been generally oppressive, it is no longer the case that they are so. The Brahmin's own life situation of secularisation and indviduation suggests to him the impossibility and the undesirability of successfully enforcing the caste norms upon oneself and on others.

Thirdly, feeding off and into the foregoing, the Brahmin - both at the register of his individual self and at the level of the association - also sets up a distinction between the 'ideal' Brahmin (the idea of being Brahmin) and the 'real' (the empirically available Brahmins, with all the frailties and corruptions of being human) and argues for the former space of conduct and identification. Here the Brahmin is turned into a value (or valuation) that is detached from the fact of birth. It is asserted that merely because a person is born into a Brahmin family does not automatically render him a Brahmin; indeed that in order to become a Brahmin, the individual should acquire an inventory of qualities. Consequently, anybody (irrespective of where he is born) can become a Brahmin, and the birth-acquired Brahmin identity is just that - a mere label. What matters therefore is whether one has the qualities becoming of a Brahmin, and not whether one is born a Brahmin. The Brahmin identity is thus universalised detaching it from its several or particularising specificities.

Fourthly, following from all the above, the emergent Brahmin self seeks to keep its caste identity under constant erasure or at least seeks to displace and marginalise it in its modes of self-retrieval and self-perception. Since the identity of being Brahmin is increasingly made to take on a normative and evaluative load, the descriptive axis of the label is made to look like either marginal or redundant. Thus, as the Headmaster Nanjundaiah (cited in the fourth chapter, p. 152) states, its descriptive value is nothing more than being a "list" of people - a mere 'association' rather than being a 'community'. What then is made to take centre stage in the Brahmin self-imagination is its secularising function - of being Indian, Kannadiga or even Hindu at one level and of being a bureaucrat, lawyer or teacher etc. at another. This in many ways also enables a recuperation of the Brahmin self as a mere associational affinity even as one can and
ought to ideally aspire to Brahminness in its ideal sense. The ambit of this articulation resolves many of the tensions that the Brahmin persona is forced to address in the contemporary context, even as it restructures the modern Brahmin identity in important ways — making possible certain enunciations and forbidding others, even rendering some more legitimate than others and some more normatively defensible than others.

One can, for sure, profitably make sense of the emerging contours of this identity and identification as constituting a will-to-legitimate, especially in the face of contestation. For, as we have tried to demonstrate particularly through the course of the fourth chapter and beyond, the secularising attributes of the Brahmin situation did act as a highly utilitarian cultural resource that was put to use in the emerging public sphere of print and officialdom. The position(s) that the Brahmin had begun to inhabit largely as a result of his status as one mediating tradition and modernity had endowed him with great capacities to articulate such realities to the remaining population. The non-Brahmin articulation was definitely a queering of this pitch, but as far as the status of being Brahmin was concerned this was a position of power that was at once ubiquitous and far-reaching. The attempt to speak from a position that is, as it were, *de-casted* almost always gave it the power of an universal self-definition, and which often forced the non-Brahmin articulation into defending (what from the Brahmin viewpoint seemed to be) its sectarian agendas. As we saw, the non-Brahmin articulation as well as other caste communities did perceive and resent such a mediating role presumed by the Brahmin, but were not always successful in avoiding the restrictions of that enclosure.

Nonetheless, it is greatly important to recognise that these processes impinging on caste action were even beyond the ability of the Brahmin to mediate and contain. What is more, it is this inability that explains the deeply ambivalent relationship that the Brahmin entertains vis-a-vis his own casteness - with the identification of being Brahmin, that is. Thus, even as he seeks to mediate the realities of the others, his own sense of being gets mediated and transformed. He too finds himself to be an inexorable part of the very process that asks questions about his own casteness. The terms of this interrogation would also come from 'the others' of the modern Brahmin self - primarily the consistency of the non-Brahmin construction and the changing role of the state. We here suggest ways of making sense of this range of action-patterns that obtain within the space of the modern Brahmin identity. Broadly, it would be within the terms of this architectonic that one should receive the narrations and self-descriptions of modern

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contemporary Brahmins, the more precise contours of which we shall present in the sections that follow.

Subjected to such processes, most Brahmins strive to avoid speaking as a caste subject. Their caste identification is circumscribed to the 'private' realm, being acknowledged as important only when discussing matters pertaining to marriage, for instance, or while detailing individual decisions to either give up or conform to the daily rituals ordained for Brahmins. This is all the more stark when we witness almost all the Brahmin intellectuals and the public persona writing and articulating, even at the height of the non-Brahmin movement, an almost complete silence vis-a-vis that challenge, which in many ways sought to make the Brahmin take on his caste self as his primary identity. In fact, there is very little of consequence that is said about the non-Brahmin challenge in their writings. While individuals like Kailasam and B. M. Srikantaiah never brought themselves to engage frontally with the non-Brahmin articulation, Tataiah, for one, was willing to take on the non-Brahmin challenge more directly. However, all these personages were all seeking a space that they thought would be beyond the influences and imperatives of caste.

In a manner of speaking, they were always-already secularised owing to the spaces they inhabited. Even the most assertive public defenders of the Brahmin cause, like Tataiah, remained distinct from the enunciatory space of the Brahmin caste association activist. This is an important distinction, for while a caste association activist is definitionally required to not only speak on behalf of the caste self but also as the caste self, this is a positionality that the secularising Brahmin is unwilling to take as his own. What’s more, as we sought to disclose in the previous chapter, even the space of the caste association had to be re-forged and re-articulated by the Brahmin for the very idea of a Brahmin association was being rendered illegitimate at their point of inception. The new spaces that the Brahmin individuals found themselves in provided them with fresh markers of self-identification, and it is these identities that they foreground while negotiating with the non-Brahmin challenge and their own positionality of being Brahmins. Nonetheless, the very fact that most such secular spaces were peopled almost exclusively by Brahmins themselves renders the secular self that emerges as one that is deeply Brahmin-ised; and it is such a naturalisation of secular spaces as one's own that also works to erase the casteness of such spheres. Accordingly, for the modern Brahmin any suggestion that he is still acting as a Brahmin - as a caste self - comes as a surprise,
an accusation. The caste identity, as far as he is concerned, is merely a "list" (an associational sense of belonging, which holds no moral authority either over him or for him) to which he, purely by the accident of birth, belongs.

Irrespective of such strategies to marginalise the significance of his caste self and displace it on to the terrain of an associational identity, there are other compulsions that oblige the Brahmin to come to terms with a Brahminness translated as a sense of being a community - that is, as a moral collective that constitutes one's primary reservoir for meaning-making and also obtains as the chief provider of material resources. On the one hand, these compulsions are concretised by the imperatives of the non-Brahmin othering, since for the latter the Brahmin represents a focal point of both moral collective and associational hegemony. On the other hand, the Brahmin's own life trajectories emblematises aspects of existence which, more often than not, entail spaces marked out as distinctively or exclusively Brahmin. These manifold demands on the Brahmin self leads the modern Brahmin to remain definitionally equivocal vis-a-vis his Brahminness. Interestingly therefore, there is no singular, unified and coherent Brahmin self that emerges as a response to such challenges. The Brahmin self inhabits a contradictory and ambivalent space, drawing upon a spectrum that implicates both senses of community and senses of association. Note the point is not that each Brahmin individual can be plotted somewhere along this spectrum; not even that each such individual deliberates, according to the demands of the context, to inhabit one sense rather than the other. The ambivalence is more fundamental than that. One comes across rather blatant instances of the will to hegemonise, but equally frequently there are instances wherein the Brahmin remains truly unsure as to what to do about a Brahminness that the modern normative order despises so completely.

It is this embedded equivocation, an oscillating sense of self, which we witness in the narrations and self-descriptions of our respondents. The rest of the chapter is a description of this, and brings to a head the dynamics of identity that we have representing in the foregoing pages and chapters. More frontally, we engage the question of what it is to be a Brahmin today - a question informed by the contexts we have been recapitulating and testifying to secular processes of transition and self-identification within the community. The focus will be on the differential investments that they make on the category and identity of being Brahmin, as well as on the varied reasoning that is
offered by way of negotiating between the self and its others. The delineation is divided into shorter sections, each informing and interjecting the others.

II

On being and becoming Brahmin: the oscillations of the respondents

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

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

"Blame it on Brahmin" is the catch-all mantra in the country today. The atmosphere is so vitiated that for anything and everything that is affecting the society, Brahmin-bashing is taken to be an adequate explanation. We have a proverb in Kannada that reflects this state very well - *anishtakke//a s/ianeeshvarane kaarana* [For all ills, *Shani* {a god, but one with an innate propensity for harm} is responsible]. Brahmins are reduced to the state of being the *shani* of this society.\(^{12}\)

The sense of being a scapegoat, an identity therefore under siege contains many facets and is often articulated as being total and incessant. An erudite respondent described in detail the various ways in which Brahmins are being attacked:

The attack comes from various directions and threatens the community in all walks of life. We are a community that is excessively dependent on education to eke out a livelihood and that is why we are predominantly middle class. But because of the reservation policy, Brahmin students, even if they score 90 percent, fail to get into professional courses, which render their future very bleak. Brahmin students are even systematically discriminated against - they are given fewer marks so that they can never make it to the top ranks. I see it happening in my own college and also when I go for annual evaluation to the university. There is a collective conspiracy all around to exclude

\(^{12}\) *Interview* with Mr. Subramanya, 30/01/2000. As already disclosed in Ch. 3 (fn. 47), the respondent is a - inactive - member of the AKBMS. He came to Bangalore in the early 1970s seeking to further his career in music and has been a Bangalorean ever since. Even as he actively repudiated the significance of caste - in his personal life, as indeed in the affairs of the public - he was very keen on knowing the researcher's caste background — not only whether he is a Brahmin but also to which caste among Brahmins he belonged. He showed a rather deliberate knowledge about the particular castes of the Brahmins he spoke of, and was keen to make it a point to mention it each time. Of course, he insisted that he gathers such information for curiosity. Himself a Smartha Brahmin, he was a veritable fund of stories, anecdotes, origin stories etc. concerning the different Brahmin castes.
Brahmins from the mainstream. The idea is simple - deny education to Brahmins, and you have strangulated the community. We neither have money nor the acumen to do anything else. We cannot become rowdies or racketeers because our upbringing doesn't allow that. Where does one go?

Politically we are decimated. Being a mere three to four percent of the population, we can never hope to have any say in democracy. Because democracy is basically oppression of the minorities. And we are so conscientious about the country that we are very bothered about population explosion - family planning is a major success in our community making us a fast dwindling entity. In two centuries or so, there will not be any Brahmins left in this country. Muslims can go on producing children and make our Hindu country Islamic, but Brahmins who are the protectors and perpetuators of the great sanatoria dharma [the ancient religion - primarily referring to Brahmin-centric Hinduism] are getting decimated. The so-called Dalits and non-Brahmins, instigated by the unscrupulous politicians, are targeting us for anything and everything. They think that we have oppressed them for the last 2000 years and that it is payback time. There is only venom against us in society.

Furthermore, many respondents in the course of conversations pointed to the "demeaning" representation of the figure of the Brahmin in popular cultural constructions. This is an issue that the AKBMS has also fought against intermittently. What hurts them the most, a respondent pointed out, is the fact that many a time it is Brahmins themselves who participate in such constructions:

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

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13 Interview with Mr. Padmanabha, 24/03/2000. Forty eight years old, Mr. Padmanabha is a Madhva Brahmin hailing from North Karnataka, and teaches biology in a Lingayath-owned under-graduate college in Bangalore.

14 Interview with Ms. Spandana, 15/08/2000. Spandana, a thirty eight year old Shivalli Madhva (married to a Shivalli Smartha) is a housewife. Her husband is self-employed with uncertain income levels. She is a graduate and previously worked in a secondary school.
The foregoing is only a glimpse of the more intensely articulated reflections of the experience of siege. What further deepens this mentality, as the above cited respondent points out, is the inclination on the part of many Brahmins themselves to participate in othering the Brahmin self and to refuse to own up their Brahmin identity. But as we have been asserting and will become apparent, this refusal to own up the self and identity of being Brahmin is inherent to the contemporary Brahmin self - even to those who articulate deeply felt perceptions of siege. The difference could only be a matter of level or range, depending on the definitions of ‘Brahminness’ that one works with. A seventy-year-old respondent marks out the ‘beginnings’ of this moment of siege:

It is when the ‘economic’ takes over that the crisis for the Brahmin community began. We, as a community, were always bothered only about the pursuit of knowledge and the society recognised it by giving us the Rajashraya [Shelter of the kings] through Brahmadevas [gifts of land] and other such gifts. And obviously we were never expected to look after the lands, or engage in any manual labour directly. There was a group of people who were asked by the society to do that. Everything was thought of in terms of the whole. The tiller thought, "He doesn't till; it is I who should till the land". Nobody questioned the basis of Chaturvarna [the four-fold varna scheme] because it was the most natural thing to do. Neither did the Brahmin feel superior because he was a scholar, nor did the Shudra think that he was lowly because he was tilling the land. But then the partitional thinking got in, and the 'everybody is equal' logic came about. So the others began to think, “If he doesn't till the land and I do, why should he be the land-owner and not myself?” This logic spread to other spheres of life, aided by the British's policy of divide and rule and later by our very own politicians who saw an easy scapegoat in Brahmins to further their careers.

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

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

This respondent, a sixty-two year old Srivaishnava Brahmin, is a retired officer of the state-owned life insurance behemoth, the Life Insurance Corporation of India. Typifying his generation of Brahmin men, he migrated from his village near Hassan early in his life to Bangalore pursuing his college education. After the completion of his degree, he

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15 Interview with Mr. Srirangan, 16/04/2000. As already indicated in the previous chapter (fn. 28), 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.

16 Interview with Mr. Prakash, 22/07/2000. We have already encountered this respondent in Ch. 3 (fn. 34).
joined the LIC from where he has retired recently. The translation of the capital resources available at the disposal of the family too has been remarkably typical of the larger trajectory of the community itself. While the respondent's parents were agriculture dependent (nonetheless as non-direct participants), he translated those resources into education and government employment for himself. He owns a house in a middle class locality in Bangalore. Being a beneficiary of the welfare state's governance agenda, the next generation in his family has successfully benefited from subsidised education and has now transcended its dependence on the state. Two of his sons are based in the US, while the third one works as a journalist with a national daily in Bangalore. Now retired, the respondent regularly visits his sons abroad. Thus although his eloquent delineation of the contemporary moment of "crisis" of the Brahmin community that we cite below apparently has very little to do with his own life situation, he evidently shares the space of perception of a siege along with his fellow-Brahmins. The respondent however has remained an inactive member of the Hebbar Srivaishnava Sabha for long.

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

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

I consciously used the word 'prisoners', for they now [in today's life] work more as a restriction than as a facilitator. When I see other communities, like the Vokkaligas or Lingayaths, the characteristic of their community is to be a go-getter. And in the present context because of that, I feel, they are able to get on much better than us.

Education has remained, from times immemorial, the only pursuit for the Brahmins - the one and only thing that they have pursued with passion ... It used to work just fine earlier. Population was less and so was competition. They used to work hard, be intellectually unmatched and set very high standards for themselves and the society. But that doesn't work in all ages. The demand of the times is one of flexibility. And that is where I think other communities have scored over us. Brilliance and education have not remained the exclusive property of our community. There are brilliant people among Gowdas [those belonging to the Vokkaliga fold] too. And they have something else too. If you get the first rank in the CET [the Common Entrance Test that the Karnataka Government holds for entry into professional (engineering and medicine) colleges] then
fine. If not, give Rs 50,000/- as donation, and join. We have no such capacity. If you cannot get the first rank, than you are dead and I have seen absolute duds among Brahmins. While a Gowda would say, "OK, if you can't get a rank, then open a provision stores!" the Brahmin will tell his son, "It is your karma that you couldn't get a rank. You will have to repay that!" And that will be the end of his life. He begins to blame himself for being born a Brahmin, and his family starts feeling guilty. We have become like that pandita of Panchatantra.\footnote{The reference is to the parable in the Panchatantra in which a scholar (a pandita) boasts with the boatman about his multifaceted scholarship. Midway through the stream the boat begins to sink; and when the boatman enquires whether he knows how to swim, the scholar replies in the negative. The boatman, pitying the uselessness of all the erudition that the scholar has gained, swims to safety.} Earlier, there was a belief that if you give a Brahmin a job he will do it honestly and sincerely. And the Brahmins reciprocated such trust. Now all that is gone. Look at the Bangalore City Corporation, where you find less and less Brahmin officers ... If you become an engineer, you can keep digging like a bandicoot. Now no morals exist there. I am not saying those who are there are bad, but they are not brought up with those values. A Brahmin engineer cannot become corrupt to such an extent. Even if he does, his values start eating him up with guilt unlike others who think that there is a lot of public money and they must get their share of the booty. It is a kind of torture for us - that way of life is not right but this way of life cannot happen. We still think, we are Brahmins and so things must be delivered to us. But that era is over.

We have become like the proverbial horse wearing a bind. The bind allows the horse to see only one path, the one that is straight ahead - both metaphorically and literally. When that path either comes to an end or is strewn with too many hindrances, the horse, because of the bind, neither can physically see that there are other paths too; nor, even if it does, is very comfortable in pursuing them (ibid).\footnote{Interview with Mr. Diwakar, 10/04/2000. Mr. Diwakar, 60 years, owns a small-scale industry in an area which was till recently perceived to be the outskirts of Bangalore city. He has been the President of the confederation of small-scale industries of Karnataka. He is active in the effort to publish and popularise Vedas in Kannada and Karnataka, and has also been an active participant in various classical music fora in the city.}

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

The Dharma of this era is economic. Today finance speaks from the position of authority, but the Brahmin's position of authority came only from religion. This is a period of transition during which the Vyakhthidharma [Dharma of the person] of the Brahmin is clashing with the Lokadharma [Dharma of the times or era]. We are like the Brahmin who sports cropped hair but there will be a tuft hidden inside that.\footnote{18} What gets instituted here is a very strong notion of self as community - the self-identity of being Brahmin being accorded with an inalienable sense of a moral collective, a social morality that is the basis of self-description and meaning-making in life. This notion of the self is so foundational and rooted that the Brahmin persona fails comprehensively to modify and change according to the changing rules of the external
world. The resultant sense of siege can also be characterised, therefore, as springing from an inability on the part of the Brahmin persona to meet the new demands that are placed on it. There is something intrinsic, even if the object of conscious socialisation, that bears on the circumstance of being Brahmin - namely, the transmission of (and into) a samskara. But this process now finds itself difficult to navigate through the external world, which has begun to play itself out by new rules. This 'new' normative world, supposedly, has come into existence without any agential intervention on the part of the Brahmin self. The Brahmin persona and its normative framework, whose value and status had been accepted by the society at large, are no longer either legitimate or being legitimated by the present.

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

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

Interview with Ms. Savitri, 30/06/2000. As already mentioned, she is a well-known Kannada writer; and has had an urban existence all through her life, her father having been a government official in Mysore.
All the same, for many of these individuals, the sense of siege is not a personalised perception - in the sense that they, as individuals or even as persons located in a given familial or kin network context, do not feel beleaguered about their own life situations. The sense of siege is then primarily about the idea and identity of Brahminhood, about bearing or carrying the weight of that identification itself. Of course, when it gets actualised into personal contexts, it is also then circumscribed into specific individuals occupying recognisable contexts. Thus, for instance, the articulation:

The crisis is primarily because Brahmins are not getting government jobs. Education is now available to all and there is competition. And by giving reservations according to caste and not looking at economic background, Brahmins further lose out. So those Brahmins who couldn't compete with others and create opportunities for themselves feel a sense of crisis. I have seen it in my legal profession itself. Recently there were recruitments held for vacancies in the lower level judiciary, and many of the Brahmin candidates did not qualify. Of course, many other non-Brahmin candidates who fared much worse than these people got through because of reservations. Then those who did not get the job said, "Oh, we are Brahmins and that is why we were denied". The crisis is for individuals like them who are average performers but cannot make a decent living because of policies like reservations.

But the moment of the present is yet constructed as being fundamentally opposed to the very idea of the Brahmin. Not surprisingly, this moment is also cast as being overdetermined by its casteness, and obtains as an important reminder of the resilience of caste in public life. The contemporary moment, it is repeatedly pointed out, does not allow them to obliterate the significance of caste, even as the latter is asserted as a goal towards which they (our respondents chiefly) strive hard and in a genuine spirit. More accurately, it does not allow them to treat their 'Brahminness' as a diminished emotive

She has been an active participant in different civic associations from very early on in her life. This engagement though excludes the space of the caste associations. Being a conscious decision - "I did not want to have anything to do with caste", she emphatically declared in the course of the interview - it made her refuse even an invitation to be the Chairperson of the Karnataka Brahmin Women's Convention that the AKBMS organised in the year 2000. These choices - of association and dissociation - indicate towards the boundaries that the secularising Brahmin self drew, and still draws in defining the question of what is to be a caste self. Clearly, it is not that she is participating in any unequivocal rejection of her Brahminness, of being a Brahmin self. Indeed many of the traditional significations marking the Brahmin persona - legitimated by notions of purity - were invoked in her narrative. In fact, in the course of the interview, she uttered many times over "I am proud to be a Brahmin. The word 'Brahmin' brings to my mind images of purity", and the marks of this self-identification also obtain in the statement quoted in the main text.

20 Interview with Mr. Shivaram, 12/04/2000. This respondent is a retired civil court judge and a practicing advocate. Though a member of the Mulkanadu Maha Sabha, he prefers to be active in the activities of the Ramakrishna Mission since it does not "make much of one's caste" but "seeks to inculcate true Brahminical values in all irrespective of their caste".

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and meaning-generating identity - to render, as it were, their Brahmin identity as a mere "list" to which they belong, an *associational* attribute they happen to have. As our respondents see it, the identity of being Brahmin that they carry is the primary tool of recognition as far as the outside world is concerned. Thus:

> See... I am reminded of my caste when I have to fill up an application form, any form that is related with the government that is. You apply for a government job, school or college admission, loan from a bank, apply for a promotion - see it is only these places which ask for your *jati*, reminding me that I am a Brahmin. Otherwise, nobody asks me what my caste is or I don't ask people their caste before I sit next to them.  

And again, in this instance a Smartha housewife, that:

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

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

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

Thus the respondents seek to project the 'external' world around them as requiring that they make sense of their lives and life-worlds primarily and exclusively as being Brahmins - from the standpoint of being fully embodied as caste selves. And yet, this demand is being received as inimical to a sense of self that the Brahmins - our

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21 Interview with Mr. Ravi, 20/04/2000. He is a Madhva Brahmin aged about 50 years. He is a clerk with a nationalised bank. He is an active founder member of a locality-based Brahmin association in Bangalore.
22 Interview with Ms. Seeta, 30/01/2000. She is 58 years old and, as already pointed out, is a housewife. She came to Bangalore along with her husband, who was seeking to improve his career prospects. She is not a member of any caste association.
23 Interview with Mr. Nagesh, 19/10/2000. Mr. Nagesh is a Smartha Brahmin, aged 59 years. He retired as a senior clerk in the Life Insurance Corporation of India.
respondents primarily - seem to be (pre-) possessing or at least voicing, one that oscillates between a conception of identity approached as a communitarian attribute and as an associational identification. On the one hand, it is antithetical to that sense of self which seeks to derive a moral universe from a putatively ascribed Brahminness - self as community - and which, in a transformed idiom, now constructs (or accepts) the Brahmin as an oppressor, an usurper of life-opportunities. On the other hand, it stands in sharp contrast to an inclination to render the idea of caste as a mere associational sense of belonging which is taken on (like being a journalist or engineer) without any moral or normative hold over that self-identification. Consequently, the beleaguered status of the contemporary Brahmin self, one that is pretty marked out in the self-descriptions of our respondents.

The 'Brahminness' that they see themselves as vested with is at once peripheral and central to their selfhood, and it is the terms of this equivocation that is sought to be further amplified in the following. Let us chart the space of denial, geared towards avoiding unambiguously inhabiting the identity space of being Brahmin. As we have shown, and as we shall further see, in describing their relationship with that identity space, our respondents seem to issue off a process of labelling.

"We are 'branded Brahmins'/We are branded as 'Brahmins'"

The relationship that modern-day Brahmins (and not just, one would think, our respondents, although the latter seem to offer particular maps of a more generalized subjectivity) have with their identity is marked by an unwillingness to take on the subject position that the status of being a Brahmin accords them. By arguing for a certain dynamic and mobile conception of the caste system in some pre-era, when Brahminhood could be conferred if and only when certain characteristics came to mark the person in question, they seek to distance themselves (both spatially and morally) from the memory, history and location of the Brahmin subject-position. Thus it is only in the post-of any such era (which roughly translates into the contemporary moment of Brahmin subjects, the existential and lived moment, that is) that the status and identity of being 'Brahmin' is held to be tacked on to the question of birth (or descent) and separated from personal exemplary attributes of the individual. Most of these subjects, significantly, go on to deny for themselves the Brahmin identity that is "thrust" upon them. In fact, a significant
number of our respondents termed this latter process as "labelling" ("They labelled us as Brahmins"\textsuperscript{24}) or "branding" ("We are branded Brahmins"\textsuperscript{25}).

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

Thus, as already mentioned, in describing their own status as Brahmins, the respondents coined various characterisations like "the branded Brahmins", "the labelled Brahmins", "the so-called Brahmins" and so on. One respondent, while mapping an agenda for this researcher, suggested that a petition should be filed in the Supreme Court on the official identification of the community:

My own observation of the present-day Brahmins tells me that they cannot be called Brahmins by any stretch of imagination. And I am pretty certain that your study will also reach the same conclusion. Then, once you complete your thesis, you must approach the Supreme Court with a Public Interest Litigation.

You go to the court and tell them that since most of the Brahmins do not perform sandhyavandane [the daily ritual that the Brahmin males post-initiation are required to carry out] three times a day like the Muslims offer their namaz (prayer); since most of them do not wear their sacred thread; since most of them drink alcohol and eat meat; since they sit with the untouchables without caring for the norms of purity-pollution; since they no longer pursue knowledge for its own sake and contrarily pursue education to get a job; since they use abusive language like others; since many of them have taken up all kinds of proscribed occupations like working in shoe

\textsuperscript{24} Interview with Mr. Santhosh, 12/02/2000. He is a Madhva Brahmin, aged 45 years, and works as an accounts officer with a garment export company.

\textsuperscript{25} Interview with Mr. Kumaraswamy, 14/04/2000. As previously mentioned (Ch.3, fn.49), he is a 62 year old Smartha Brahmin. He retired as an accounts officer from a multi-national company located in Bangalore. He has been an active participant in the activities of the AKBMS, his own caste-specific association and the locality association.
companies; since their women wear jeans and work as models or even film stars; since they, instead of lighting the lamp as our tradition ordains, put out candle lights while celebrating their birthdays and so on so forth - this community should not be labelled as Brahmins. Merely because they are born in Brahmin families they do not become Brahmins. You can consult any *shastra* on this and it will tell you the same. And since this community is no longer Brahminical and does not follow any of the practices that make it Brahmin, they cannot be called as Brahmins. Therefore their rights should not be snatched away from them in the name of their caste.²

Echoing a similar sentiment was another respondent, a journalist:

I don't perform *sandhyavandane* everyday, leave alone my children's or grand children's generation. And that is the basic minimum one should do to be identified as a Brahmin. My grandchildren don't even know the caste the others say they belong to! If you talk about their sects, their *mathas* etc. they would be completely blanked out. Then what is the point in keeping this label on our head, which only works to our disadvantage? Then why do you call us Brahmins, only to suppress us?¾

In this wake, since they themselves are insufficiently Brahmin, our respondents assert that the label of *Brahminness* imposed are aimed primarily at debilitating them. Such an othering, they complain, continues to be attempted even after the Brahmins themselves have come a long way from the stereotypes that shore up the labelling. Even further, it is asserted that these negative representations are deployed in specific contexts and spaces in order that they serve the goal of defining Brahmins exclusively through their caste identity and, what is more, being constantly reminded of being so. For instance:

I first realised that I am a Brahmin and belong to a community that is discriminated against when I was denied a B.Com. seat in spite of having all the necessary qualifications. A fellow with 45 percent got in ahead of me. It was then I was made aware of my caste.²⁸

Likewise, here is a doctor comparing her work environment with that of her husband in reflecting on her status of being a Brahmin:

I work in a government hospital. The sense of being targeted is more acute. See, I was denied a promotion because an SC got it. I didn't feel strongly about it but wherever reservation is an issue, there it hits you. Government is so pro-them that you tend to feel threatened. Of course, beyond my own individual feelings, I think reservation is unfair to society at large because merit is

²⁶ Interview with Mr. Kumaraswamy, 14/04/2000. Biographical details are in the preceding footnote.
²⁷ Interview with Mr. Vishnumurthy, 26/10/2000. Fifty one year old Mr. Vishnumurthy is the editor of a local daily in Mysore. He is an active member of the Mysore *Jilla Brahmana* Sabha and the Mulkanadu Maha Sabha.
²⁸ Interview with Mr. Srinivasan, 25/10/2000. A 33 year old Srivaishnava Brahmin, he works as a human resources executive with a multinational company in Bangalore. A recent migrant to the city (one and a half year before), all his education has been at Chennai.
not given its due. It is driving Brahmins away from the government institutions. They are now thinking: go to places where merit matters. Our own institution is witnessing that - Brahmins are leaving one by one. Others, on the other hand, can't talk properly, can't speak English properly. So they would find it hard to get a job outside. The institution has suffered; there is a lack of excellence. One doesn't want to stretch oneself and improve because the positions are guaranteed, promotions are time-bound. They should also be worthy of their positions. It is increasingly becoming a mediocre institution. Even in terms of the work environment, my SC colleagues do not become friendly, are not open and transparent; in fact, is far easier to communicate with a Brahmin colleague. Ethically too they are not up to the mark which may be because of their upbringing unlike Brahmins.

But my husband works for a multinational company. For him, his caste doesn't matter. Nobody asked him for his caste while applying or in his entire working life. It just doesn't enter his mind at all.  

Circumscribing caste, privarising and erasing

Accordingly, most of the respondents suggest that outside of these spheres, caste - both as a principle of recognition and as a structure of legitimation - does not exist or should not matter. In fact, such a suggestion takes one or both of the following forms: that caste remains significant only within the privatised zones of family, matrimony etc. and/or that outside the sphere of government, caste is rendered insignificant and irrelevant and that it is the state which for its own reasons of expediency has kept caste alive. As one respondent, a senior journalist with an English newspaper, argued:

I come across people who are very critical of our practices like wearing the sacred thread or performing sandhyavandane etc. I myself have left all that for quite sometime now. But these religious practices are private and no one should get disturbed by it. Every caste has its own set of practices and nobody seems to get hassled by others continuing to practice them. And, moreover, community practices and ways of living are guaranteed by the constitution.

Another even delinked the issue of caste from those practices that are invariably seen as emanating from one's caste location:

My everyday beliefs, practices are personal and have got nothing to do with jati. And if you take a closer look, there is no uniformity among Brahmins too. Such beliefs and practices are diverse

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29 Interview with Dr. Rathna, 08/08/2000. She, a Smartha Brahmin, works for a specialised medical institution in Bangalore.

30 Interview with Mr. Balan, 17/07/2000. Mr. Balan is an Iyer Brahmin, who has lived a large chunk of his professional life in Bangalore. Being a political and investigative journalist, he displayed a keen sense of awareness of the contemporary state of the Brahmin community in relation to the other caste communities and its relationship with the state. Accordingly, even as he is not a member of any caste association, he believes in the need for their existence - if only as a scarecrow.
within the community - say, for instance, among the Iyengars and the Smarthas. Cleanliness, rituals, food habits are all personal and have no caste monopolies.

What seems to be propelling such assertions is also the larger context of an increasing legitimacy attaching to discourse of Hindutva. This context enables another universalisation of the persona of the Brahmin, the terms of which is heralded as being available to anybody provided they take an interest in it. Since this is a theme to which we shall turn later on in the chapter, its discussion can be deferred. More pointedly, however, it can be pointed out that the strides - perceived to be remarkable - registered by the community in the new professional spaces opened up by a liberalising economy unfettered by government and the constraints of reservation has convinced the respondents that such spaces are unimpeded by the logic of caste. They seem to believe that this new economy will play a leading role in restoring their rightful place in society. The trend towards transnationalisation of the community called attention to in the chapter introducing the modern world of Brahmins (Ch. 3) - "Nobody asks your caste when you are applying for a visa. And once you leave India, you will forget your jati"32 - has also fuelled a sort of righteous indignation at the state of affairs and a renewed sense of assertion.

Let the Shudra shakti celebrate and rejoice its ascendance in the government, in government offices, in politics. It has not missed anybody that these are precisely the things that are beginning to rot. Let them pay the price for ejecting the Brahmin unfairly. They want democracy - so let the 96% decide for themselves and forget about the remaining four per cent. Let them rejoice becoming "Government Brahmins".33

The phrase "Government Brahmins" - or the “sarkari brahmanari” in Kannada - is incidentally a coinage that is used by many of the respondents. It is used to refer to the dalits and other backward castes that have entered educational institutions, jobs in government services etc. through reservation quotas. For the respondents, they are the 'Brahmins' within the space of the government, receiving patronage of the administration on the ground of inheriting a certain caste identity (like the Brahmins themselves who were patronised by the kings earlier). The phrase packs a lot of derision and usually

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31 Interview with Mr. Nagesh, 19/10/2000. Personal details presented in fn. 23 above.
32 Interview with Ms. Savitri, 30/06/2000. For personal profile, see fn. 19 above.
33 Interview with Mr. Ravi, 20/04/2000. Personal details in fn. 21.
invites disdainful laughter in a Brahmin conversation.\textsuperscript{34} This renewed sense of assertion and confidence is made possible by an ability to articulate a position beyond the nation-state, as a means of consolidating its social, symbolic and economic capital:

In the Silicon Valley there is no reservation. If you have merit, you will survive; otherwise you don’t. ... Here you might de-recognise us on the basis of our caste, but we will always remain indispensable because of our brains. Why is Narayanamurthy drafted in the Bangalore Agenda Task Force [an ambitious project to develop Bangalore on the lines of Singapore], why is his opinion sought after for every policy initiative? When we were begging, everybody was anti-us; but now it is reversed.

You cannot forever rule the society with a crown, but it is possible with knowledge. And who else but the Brahmin is the knowledge centre? Who else but Brahmins have pursued knowledge for its own sake? The new economy they say is a knowledge economy. Advocating the power of knowledge, the new economy is again coming back to seek out the Brahmins.

Nevertheless, it is also the presence of a history of othering and its continuing significations that they have to contend with. A large number of the respondents themselves perceive the community in ways that are similar to the non-Brahmin articulation - namely, Brahmins as the fountainhead of the hierarchical system of caste, as perpetrators of inequality, the ultimate casteists, and so on. But they produce significant spins on this representation, in particular, by instituting a series of displacements ("not me, not here, not now" etc.). For the respondents, then, the quintessential 'Brahmin, the Oppressor' does not exist any longer.

\textit{Internalising or resisting the external categorisation?}

Most of the respondents take the imagery of Brahmin oppression as an irrefutable fact of history, but actively seek to distance their own location and themselves from this figure. Even the act of retrieval of this 'oppressive Brahmin' is not uniform. Some

\textsuperscript{34} A Dalit Kannada writer used this phrase - Government Brahmana as the title of his autobiography, primarily as an act of assertion and challenge against the derision. See Malagatti 1994; see also Siddalingaiah 1996.

\textsuperscript{35} Interview with Mr. Sadashivaiah, 01/03/2000. As already disclosed (Ch. 5, fn.29), 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 (which we also referred to in chapter five). The reference to Narayanamurthy in the voice just cited is to the chief mentor and brain behind Infosys, the Indian software company that has registered a great deal of success (as well as generating mythologies about itself). The company, as indeed Narayanamurthy, is perhaps the contemporary icons of the community. The number of respondents and caste journals that invoked his and his company's name has been significant.
retrieved this fact of caste discrimination as natural and inevitable in the times they occurred:

It is definitely possible that the Brahmins have oppressed. It is a human instinct that anybody with power tried to oppress those without and the others did not resist. It might have happened long ago. I have not seen it, I have not done it; neither have my father or grand father. But why accuse only Brahmins for caste exploitation? Every caste would have exploited every other caste below itself.

But now those things are no longer there, and are definitely impossible in cities. I go and eat at many of their places because they are not like the Holeyas and Madigas [untouchable or dalit castes basically] of earlier times. They are clean and even call our priests and our cooks on the occasions of the conduct of rituals.

For most others though, the exploitation was illegitimate and unacceptable, at least by today’s standards:

I myself have witnessed my mother in law rinse the vessels washed by the maidservant. That was unnecessary. Earlier it seems they even had rules about the distance to be maintained between the low castes and the Brahmins. That was unfair.'

However, a number of caveats follow. It is claimed that in the present, 'caste' as a social principle structuring reality has lost its relevance and legitimacy; and that if it continues to, as a respondent put it, “rear its ugly and repulsive head” then it is solely due to the votebank politics. While some call attention to the "fact" that those oppressed in the name of Brahminism were "pseudo-Brahmins", some others point out that the "discrimination" and the "denial" were only within the space of the sacred and not the secular sphere. References also get to be made about the need to make a distinction between "influence" and “domination” – that Brahmins wielded more of the former than the latter - and that one ought to judge practices only in terms of the "times" in which

36 Interview with Ms. Spandana, 15/08/2000. For personal details, see fn. 14 above.
37 Interview with Dr. Apoorva, 14/08/2000. The 35-year-old respondent is a Smartha Brahmin working in a government owned specialised hospital in Bangalore. She is not a member of any caste associations but the local Brahmin association did approach her family for membership. She and her husband have not become members only because they "don’t find time to participate". But she knows the Brahmins families around well enough because she calls them for arishina-kunkuma widely prevalent practice among Brahmins wherein the Brahmin mutthaide (married and non-widowed) women of the neighbourhood are called on auspicious days to partake the appropriate symbols of the mutthaide status - turmeric powder and vermilion (arishina-kunkuma). In fact it is these routinised ritualistic affairs that are still widely practiced which generate and preserve neighbourhood caste networks and are indeed a strong and reliable network in times when help is needed - from occasions like marriage to times of crisis. These informal networks work more reliably than formal associational or institutional networks such as the caste associations and the mathas.
38 Interview with Ms. Swapna, 10/08/2000. She, a Madhva Brahmin aged 22 years, is a resident of a village near Shimoga. She is pursuing a post-graduate degree in Mangalore.
they obtain. All such constructions play an important role in formulating a picture of the "past", one relating to the community, for the respondents.

It all dates back to 2000 years ago when lots of interpolations happened. The vested interests within the Brahmin community like the self-styled scholars and pontiffs, twisted the original essence of Hindu Dharma. To further their own interests, they misinterpreted the *Varnashrama Dharma* into a system that accords primacy to the accident of birth. Lots of superstitious rituals were invented that did not have any sanctity in the Vedas, only to exploit the non-Brahmins who were not only ignorant but also innocent. That is when the others began to talk about Brahmins being "cunning, calculated, selfish, conservative people". But these were actually pseudo-Brahmins masquerading as Brahmins.

A former activist of the AKBMS proposes a more subtle distinction that would be required if one has to grasp the past of the Brahmin:

While trying to understand the Brahmin and his history, we have to make a distinction between what I call an "influence over" and "domination". While the Brahmin's role was understood as the former all along and was accepted as such by everyone including the non-Brahmin, the latter understanding is only recent.

Brahmins exercising "influence over" the society was only natural if you take into consideration the preoccupations of the community. They were the only learned class, who were devoted to the acquisition of knowledge. Look at their occupations - they were village teachers, priests, astrologers etc. So what else would one expect but an influence over the other castes? It is only in the fit of things that the Brahmins exercised a great deal of control. Obviously, there would have been black sheep among them who would have used this trust and confidence for selfish means, but why blame an entire community for that?

Understanding the legitimate influence that the community exercised over the rest as a practice of "domination" is only recent, and is put to only political uses. The fact that even those who abuse us on political platforms, the politicians, come to us for advice and counselling demonstrates that. Take any political leader worth his name; his personal assistants will all invariably be Brahmins.40

Thus the benign and legitimate influence the Brahmans exerted over the rest of the society, one that was duly accepted by the others, is transformed into a fact of domination and exploitation merely by a change in perception. Such retrievals of the past of the community bear striking resemblance to the early nationalist deployment of the orientalist constructions of the Aryan (and later British) benevolent civilising mission.41

Even more pointedly, a respondent asked:

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39 Interview with Mr. Nagesh, 19/10/2000. A profile is in fn. 23.
40 Interview with Mr. Muralidhar, 20/03/2000. He is a 42 year old Smartha Brahmin, working as an office manager in an academic institution in Bangalore. He took active part in the activities of the AKBMS in the early 1980s, particularly in seeking to mobilise Brahmins from across the state.
41 See Dirks (1996), Trautmann (1997), and Upadhyya (2002) for an account of the various uses that the orientalist knowledge was put to.
But what is wrong in Brahmins dominating? They have not made any mass executions like Hitler did. They have not grabbed land. Brahmins from the beginning were selfish about only one thing - their quest for knowledge, moksha (personal salvation). It is precisely this attitude that nothing else but knowledge is power that brought them respect. They have never been rulers in the entire history of India. And no miniscule community, which makes up a mere four percent of the population, can command the remaining 96 percent to give it respect. If the others respected the Brahmins, if the British took them in all high positions, the others will have to explain why they did it and not the Brahmins. You cannot blame the Brahmins that they occupied all the positions.

Further, in what is perhaps a constitutive manoeuvre, a distinction is posited between a religious, priestly space of “denial” and a secular space of accommodation:

In so far as religion is concerned, we have been exclusivist and controlled everybody powerfully and been manipulative. The priestly class has been largely responsible for this. For instance, an astrologer would scare an illiterate non-Brahmin out of his wits. But I wouldn’t agree that the non-Brahmins have been denied in other spaces like education. In fact, we have been extremely helpful in paying their fees and with practices like Varanna.43

The respondents, accordingly, are quick to point towards their own individual pasts in documenting how denial was exclusively in the realm of the sacred and not in other realms. It is also insisted that even the former priestly form of restriction is steadily loosening out:

My father [who worked as a teacher in a school in a village near Mangalore] was a liberal. He used to lake non-vegetarian food. He never followed rituals. He was known more as a teacher than as a Brahmin. He was never bothered about caste and he never attended Brahmin sabhas (congregations). He was active in the local Bhajana Mandali (a prayer congregation in which devotional songs are sung by the assembled) instead. He had no restrictions on his students coming home and all caste students used to come in. It was his mother who used to ask those kids their caste; and my mother’s mother [whenever she came visiting] used to purify the place once they left. But as far as other things are concerned, my father really went out of his way to help all his students. In fact even the two old conservative women sometimes used to feed the poor students in the afternoons. I think Brahmin dominance in education and bureaucracy etc. can only be explained as a natural and ingrained urge to seek education among them and its absence among others.

42 Interview with Mr. Ravi, 20/04/2000. A profile is in fn. 21.
43 Interview with Mr. Nagesh, 19/10/2000. A profile is in fn. 23. The practice of Varanna was detailed in the third chapter.
44 Interview with Ms. Anuradha, 03/08/2000. Again, as already mentioned (Ch. 3, fn. 48), the 32 year old Anuradha is a Namboodiri Brahmin. She is a journalist working with a newspaper in Bangalore, married to another journalist who is a Syrian Catholic Christian. A recent migrant to Bangalore, she was a resident of a village near Mangalore.
Another respondent too qualified the figure of the "oppressive Brahmin" with the following:

I think, to some extent, it is true that the Brahmin community has been exploitative. They went too far on madi-mailige [purity-pollution] for instance in temples. Everybody used to come to temples and the Brahmins discriminated against them. We see it in films, isn't it? Others will feel sad. They will tolerate to the extent they can. But when they become a group they revolt. Rituals and notions of cleanliness should of course be there, but shouldn't be taken too far. But they did not deny them access to education or anything like that.

The above riders are very crucial for the identity that the Brahmins construct for themselves and for the 'Others' today. The willingness to recognise caste as a set of ritualised practices, distinct and separate from its secular and material content, to even 'take responsibility for' (or 'atone') the discrimination against the non-Brahmins, while positing the same as in the past and largely absent in the present - all these represent a framework of negotiation in which a series of displacements are effected upon the space of self. More frontally, there is a tendency to position the self within a schema of what we referred to earlier as 'not me, not here and not now'.

Caste, understood exclusively in terms of ritual practices and hierarchy, is located outside themselves and even outside the community itself. As a respondent asserted:

If a Brahmin is expected to live like a Brahmin ought to, he cannot survive. Ninety five percent of today's Brahmins are not Brahmins; likewise the Vokkaligas. We have lost all qualities to be Brahmins. Caste is now no more than an identity or a designation, merely giving one a sense of community. I did not take it, I can't give it up. It is with me, even if I don't want and deserve that label.46

It is significant that the respondents understand by terms such as caste and caste structure a 'system' that draws its sustenance and legitimacy from a complex of relationships between primordially-defined entities based on the principle of purity and pollution. They fix caste as a system to a particular period in history - indeed, as an aberration - that neither exists prior to this period nor post- this period, that is, in the

45 Interview with Ms. Pooja, 17/07/2000. As previously noted (Ch. 3, fn.44), she is a 21 year old Smartha Brahmin pursuing her under-graduate course in Bangalore. Her family migrated to Bangalore from a village near Shimoga recently. Pursuing a women studies course and keen to articulate those ideas in evaluating her caste self as indeed of being a woman, she was vehement in stating how Brahmin women are more liberated than the other caste women. This, she felt was primarily due to the high educational levels among the Brahmin men but also due to the Samskara that is ingrained in them from childhood to treat women with respect.

46 Interview with Mr. Nagesh, 19/10/2000. A profile is in fn. 23 above.
present. Thus caste as a systemic relationship between primordial entities is characterised as neither sanctified by the heritage nor useful and legitimate for the present. Not even the various Brahmin associations, which are ideally the most direct embodiments of a sense of community that one can get within the Brahmin discourse, seem to contradict this picture. There are of course self-representations that complicate the space of this characterisation, as in the following set of claims:

Our *s<sub>hastras* prescribe that we should, to the maximum extent possible, have relations and interactions with only those who belong to our own *varna* - that is, people who possess our own level of purity - or with those who are of a higher order. The classical texts clearly warn us that it is harmful to interact with the lower orders.

But some of us don’t like the practices of the Brahmin community; they are not willing to follow them. They don’t want *japa*[ritualised daily prayer prescribed for a Brahmin male post-initiation ceremony], *janivara*[the sacred thread] or *shraddha*[the annual rites for the departed ancestors], *samskara*[codes of conduct] ... They do not have the practices of purity-pollution. They mix Brahmins with Shudras and *Musalman*[Muslims] even during religious occasions like marriage and *upanayana*[initiation ceremony for Brahmin males]. If the community goes along the dictates of such people, then our *Brahmanya*[Brahminness] will be destroyed in 20-30 years, as it happened among the Saraswat Brahmins...

But still they want the use of our temples when they need it, the *purohit*a[priest] should come running when and if they call him. They are keen that their Brahmin identity is guarded - I am Brahmin, my children are Brahmins, I want kin relations only with Brahmin clans etc. They will never give up the uses of the Brahmin institution.

The above are statements from K. V. Karanth’s booklet *Devasthanaga/Sadupayoga* [The Proper Use of Temples], part of a series of tracts that he wrote during the 1980s and published them himself. All his works enunciate and accept the legitimacy and relevance of caste as a system based on the principle of a hierarchised complex of purity-pollution. As can be deduced from the remarks cited, he takes a sharp position against the processes of secularisation that is underway in the caste system. Consequently, it was surprising that many of our respondents referred approvingly to his works during the interviews, even as they affirmed that they had themselves come a far way from those prescriptions. The point really is that caste practices will not be

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47 This, the claim that is made vis-a-vis the Saraswat Brahmins, is an interesting one but we have no leads to pursue it any further.

48 The edition of the book that we have had access, and from which we have just cited (pp. 27 and 98-99), is dated 1993, but this work and his other publications were published before this date. None of these new editions carry the original date of publication. His other works include *Namma Brahmanya: Loukika*
legitimised as appropriate in an unqualified manner, and not definitely as a public enunciation. Such equivocations as those that tack caste to some place (or some era) are inevitable:

I am from Dakshina Kannada [southern Karnataka]. We have relatives there and we also go to visit the pilgrimage centres there. There, even to this day, Brahmins don’t let other caste people into their houses. They are given food on leaves, which they themselves have to throw away and the place has to be purified. When I go there, I will have to abide by such practices. My relatives do that because the other caste people are very dirty - for months on they don’t take bath, they eat all kinds of things etc. They are literally untouchable. So caste continues to exist there. The gods there - particularly the Naga Derate [the Snake God] - are very powerful and very particular about the madi [purity]. They brook no breaking of such rules. Such state of purity cannot be disturbed. In Bangalore though, anything goes. Here I have no caste and anybody, as long as they are clean, can come into my house and I will eat with them.

Thus, neither is the Brahmin (in and of himself) seen to embody purity nor do the other castes embody impurity. The legitimacy of caste as a sentiment, clearly, is on the wane - norms of the purity-pollution complex no longer can legitimise the superiority of the Brahmin. What is more, the contemporary Brahmin recognises and even approves of it; but as has been seen it is a qualified recognition and approval, in more ways than one.

**Constructing the other**

In a very real sense, the category of the non-Brahmin is no longer available - even to the Brahmin. The 'non-Brahmin' stands disaggregated albeit invoked, both within and outside the discourse of the contemporary Brahmin. This sub-section reconstructs the figure of the non-Brahmin as configured by the Brahmin community, both as a constellation of discrete communities as well as a singular unified identity.

The 'non-Brahmin' - approached primarily as a residual category and postulated as one who is not a Brahmin - is constructed as a figure who remains non-agential. As a respondent opined:

They don’t know anything primarily because of lack of education unlike Brahmins among whom everybody is educated and aware. So while it is very difficult to organise Brahmins, the non-

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49 Interview with Mr. Shivaprasad, 15/08/2000. The forty two year old Shivaprasad is a Smartha Brahmin. He runs a jeep for the Kannada film shooting units. He is a member of the AKBMS, as he is of the caste-specific association, the Shivalli Smartha Brahmana Parishath.
Brahmins are being used as pawns in the anti-Brahmin game that is being played out by the politicians.

Indeed, many of them point to the respect that they, as Brahmins, are still accorded by the non-Brahmins in quotidian and 'non-politicised' interactions:

Those who attack Brahmins from public platforms for political purposes don't really hate us. Why should anybody hate us? What makes Brahmins respectable is our single-minded devotion to gain knowledge and not power or wealth. If the Brahmins wanted wealth, they could have had it in abundance as they had great influence over the kings. Look at Vishveshvaraiah. Gowdas, who today have become the major Brahmin-biting community, worship Vishveshvaraiah. Every Gowda house has a portrait of him. Why is that? Because he never thought about caste when he planned and built the KRS dam. It is precisely because of such an inherent disposition of Brahmins that we are being treated as *karibevu soppu* ['a green, which is used in South Indian curries only to give it a flavour and is often set aside while eating'] - use them for all their brains but when it comes to politics castigate them.

This respondent also vouched for the continuing significance of the 'aura' that attaches to the Brahmin persona in everyday interactions:

When I was doing my graduation in Mysore, I stayed in a hostel. On the day of the exam, my roommate, a non-Brahmin, came and fell at my feet seeking my blessings so that his ability to memorise is enhanced. He said, "You are a Brahmin and I need your blessings". I of course told him not to fall prey to such superstitions because I was a Brahmin only by birth and not by practice. How do you define him doing that then? As a slave of Brahminical oppression? Did he think of it as a superstition?

My SC colleague calls Brahmins 'Brahmapinda', meaning that we have great intelligence. He says only Brahmins have equipped him to pass all the bank examinations. What to do you say about that?

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50 Interview with Mr. Gopikrishna, 13/02/2000. He is a Mulkanadu Smartha Brahmin and is 48 years old. He is a musician, and makes a living as an accompanying artiste to a music group, while also working as a temporary music teacher in a school. He has struggled to make a middle class living in the city of Bangalore, which most of his community members take for granted. He lives in a rented house in a predominantly lower middle class, non-Brahmin populated locality in Bangalore. This habitation often jolts him into contending with matters of being Brahmin in everyday circumstances. What complicates issues is the fact that he has a black complexion, which, he says, has often made fellow-Brahmins doubt his very Brahminness. Lacking a kin network in Bangalore - he is a migrant from Davanagere - he has found it difficult to establish his claims over being Brahmin. Thus even as he blames the pernicious effects of reservations which denied him a permanent job in a government school, he is equally indignant about the 'elite' Brahmins who refuse to work for the upliftment of the community by helping Brahmins like him "who are in huge numbers".

51 Interview with Mr. Ravi, 20/04/2000. A biographical note is in fn. 21 above. The reference to the KRS dam is to the one built across the river Kaveri in Mysore that has transformed the formerly dry agrarian zone of the plains of the princely Mysore state into fertile lands, and which apparently has been a major benefactor of the Vokkaliga community.
Further, since the non-Brahmin is seen to have been denied access only within the sacred realm, any attempt made by the non-Brahmin to “Brahminise” himself is seen as legitimate and necessary. As an engineering graduate who now runs a successful spiritual centre in Bangalore teaching Yoga, meditation, the Gayathri Mantra etc. to the general populace, proclaimed:

My life’s mission is to 'Brahminise' the entire world. I teach everybody, irrespective of caste, creed, sex, age, etc., the Gayathri Mantra - that mantra [religious chant] which has protected and stimulated the famous intellect of the Brahmin mind. That these qualities have nothing to do with the accident of birth is clear from the students I get. I can confidently say that some of the Muslim and SCs that come to my centre are better Brahmins than the so-called Brahmins themselves are.

Likewise, a respondent, who is a priest at a temple and oversees the performance of rituals at the residences of his clientele (which includes non-Brahmin families), ruefully pointed out that even as Brahmins are quickly giving up traditional practices, the non-Brahmins are taking them up with great devotion and respect.

Brahminism is not working today, among Brahmins themselves. In fact, the outsiders have become the insiders and the insiders have become the outsiders. Today lower castes want Brahminism and Brahmins themselves are least bothered. Lower castes have great reverence for our customs and they treat the priests with high regard. But Brahmins, particularly those who are rich, just don’t care. They look at it as a purely business deal. I think the society expects Brahmins to be in a state of purity and to be the flag bearers of our sanadhi/nana [religious heritage]. When they see them not up to the mark, that is when the ridicule begins and not when, as these Brahmin pseudo-intellectuals assume, we live up to it. Brahminical way of life is still greatly respected and held in high esteem. Indeed the number of lower caste households who conduct Šatyanārayana pooj[e] [a ritualised prayer meeting invoking Lord Vishnu] or some other vratas [religious vows] at homes has increased significantly in the recent years.

Nevertheless, these respondents feel rather wronged and peeved at any extension of the image of the "denied non-Brahmin" to the 'secular' settings of work and achievement. Among the most vocal of the respondents, a retired Wing Commander with the Indian Air Force formulated it thus:

52 Interview with Mr. Ramachandra, 13/09/2000. He is 41 years and is a Smartha Brahmin. His spiritual centre is widely recognised, and was referred to this researcher by many other respondents as representing the true spirit of Brahminism. He articulated, accordingly, a skepticism towards Brahmin associational efforts, for they are satisfied with the criterion of birth and do not bother about making individuals Brahmins. Nonetheless, this skepticism did not amount to a rejection of such endeavours because he not only attends major conventions of AKBMS and other Brahmin associations as a resource person, but also expressed a strong agreement with their objective of uniting Brahmins and its urgent need.

53 Interview with Mr. Narayan, 26/08/2000. He is 34 years old and is a Smartha Brahmin who came from a village near Udipi to Bangalore to take up the priest's job in a temple. He was making these remarks in the presence of a non-Brahmin client who had come to consult on a horoscope for a matrimonial alliance.
The SCs [Scheduled Castes] will die as a 35 percent community. The so-called 'non-Brahmins' will hang on to reservations because they know that they can't compete with Brahmins. Brahmins were merely considered as isolationists. If you read *Samskara* [a novel written by the Kannada author, U. R. Ananthamurthy], there you get to see that isolationism practiced by the Brahmin caste - they were physically distancing themselves from the others. But anyway why should I hobnob with a fisherman, I say? That question apart, now anyway there are no such barriers, no *untouchability*. So any talk of oppression and suppression now is complete nonsense. It is only making them so dependent on reservations that it has become a permanent crutch.

Indeed, explaining the predominance of Brahmins in education and other modern spaces, a respondent opined that it has more to do with attitudes than with any explicit caste discrimination:

The attitude among the non-Brahmin parents was, 'What will he do going to the school? Let him work as a coolie and earn some *money*.' They had absolutely no interest in education. For instance, before the 1960s, government jobs came to the very doorsteps of even an SSLC pass. Why did only Brahmins go into the government service? Now they [non-Brahmin parents] think: 'anyway we have quota; why should we work hard?'

In fact, in a recent issue of *Vipra Nudi*, Harnahalli Ramaswamy [a Karnataka Congress leader, a Brahmin] has narrated how a Gowda minister rued the fact that there were very few Brahmin teachers in village schools. Because when they were in big numbers, it was they who went to every house and insisted that the children went to school regularly and took personal interest in those kids' education. Now there are no Brahmin teachers and those who are there don't bother. Teaching is just a job for them.  

In so far as the non-Brahmin attack on the community itself is concerned, most of the respondents came up with a story from the *Panc/iatantra*. In fact, the invocation of this imagery across the respondent sampled is consistent and striking.

The Brahmins have become like the lamb of that famous story in the *Panc/iatantra*. A lamb was drinking water in the downstream. A wolf, coming from the direction of the upstream and looking out for food, caught the lamb and sought to justify its action on the ground that the lamb had polluted the water. The lamb pointed out that it couldn't have polluted the water because it was at the downstream and the wolf at the upstream. For which the wolf had a ready answer: "if you

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54 Interview with the 69 year old, Smartha Brahmin, Mr. Vasudeva Rao, 05/03/2000. We have already encountered him in the previous chapter (cf. fa. 9). He, as his words sufficiently indicate, showed no inhibition in articulating a contempt for anything and anybody non-Brahmin. Nothing of the utter contempt and anger he displayed against non-Brahmins, the state policies of social justice etc. was visible in the newspaper articles that he had penned though, copies of some of which he made available to this researcher. Having pursued a rather atypical calling for a Brahmin (as far as the community from Karnataka is concerned), Mr. Vasudeva Rao is still active as a management consultant to large private companies in Bangalore. He visited the AKBMS office for almost one whole year seeking a matrimonial alliance for his daughter through the centre that AKBMS runs. But, apart from that, he does not think much of these associations. He, nonetheless, is active in Rotary and Lion's clubs' and the local residents' welfare association.

55 Interview with Mr. Shivaprasad, 15/08/2000. A profile is in fn. 49 above.
have not done it, then your forefathers must have” and devoured the poor lamb. This is the logic with which others work today. If I point out that I don't discriminate, they will say but your forefathers did! Now tell me why should I pay for the alleged mistakes of my forefathers? Till how long should I be paying for the history that I am supposed to carry on my shoulders?56

It is also along this representational axis that the disaggregation of the non-Brahmin - not just across distinct caste communities, but also within each such community - is foregrounded by our respondents, and often in order to highlight the misplaced nature of the anti-Brahmin assault:

Take a look at the cases filed under the SC/ST Atrocities Act. I am very sure that most of the cases will be against Vokkaligas, Lingayaths and Kurubas, and there won't be a single case against a Brahmin. So who is practicing caste today? It is these dominant castes against the lower castes. Is the Brahmin in any position to oppress others? But then why is the Brahmin singled out for attack?57

Even more explicitly, the disappearance of the Brahmin from the very space of caste discrimination seems to be so complete for the contemporary Brahmin mind that the mantle of caste oppression is increasingly and exclusively ascribed to other caste communities. A respondent had a ready inventory on offer:

I have Dalit friends who tell me, ”It is not the Brahmins who oppress us. Where are they now anyway?” It is now primarily a conflict between the landlord castes and the landless Harijans. It is the Vanniyars versus Harijans in Tamil Nadu, Yadavs versus Harijans in Uttar Pradesh, Gowdas and Lingayaths versus Iloleyas here and so on. Where are the Brahmins?58

56 Interview with Mr. Lakshman (05/06/2000) a private college lecturer who has found it hard to get a permanent job as a teaching faculty. He believes that he lost out on a civil service job because of his Brahmin tag. He is 30 years old and is a Madhva Brahmin. The imagery of pollution contained in the story is itself interesting, for it appears to invert the principle of purity-pollution on its head. Its significance however is uncertain.

57 Interview with Mr. Subramanya, 30/01/2000. A biographical note is in fn. 12.

58 Interview with Mr. Harinarayana, 23/05/2000. A Madhva Brahmin, the respondent is fifty years old. He teaches in a high school in Bangalore. His daughter recently got married to a Lingayath - an alliance about which he had no reservations. He said: ”They were in love. When she [my daughter] told me of her desire to marry him, I only said, 'if you think you can lead your life with him, then go ahead. But also be certain that if it fails then everybody will shun you. If the alliance is within caste and then it fails, then the relatives would be sympathetic.' Of course, I will always be there for her. But relatives are important. Interestingly, it was the boy's family that had major problems with the alliance. They were greatly reluctant but somehow I convinced them. Now anyway my daughter and son-in-law are staying separately. So the problems of adjustment that would have come up if she [daughter] were to stay with them are not there. But the point anyway is that while the Brahmins are willing to forget and forgive [this was in reference to the attacks mounted by the non-Brahmin discourse about which he had just talked about] and treat everybody as equals, the others remain stuck with their caste loyalties.”
What is more, the perceived marginalisation of Brahmins in the Indian political landscape only augments this feeling of obliteration from spaces that are seen as caste-marked:

The first Brahmin chief minister that Karnataka saw was only in 1980 - that is a full 33 years after Independence! Brahmins just cannot win elections. Caste considerations are crucial in elections because our people [the general (non-Brahmin?) population] are uneducated and easily understand the language of caste. All that one has to say is, 'Hey! He is our own; so vote for him', and they will all go vote. Even if that fellow who wins does nothing to these people, again next time the same thing is repeated. So caste is kept alive and kicking.59

Again, pointing out that hierarchisation is built into the structure of participation in caste, many suggest:

See, caste awareness is inbuilt. For all that they talk about being Dalits and being oppressed because of their caste etc., let a Holeya drink even just water at a Madiga's house. The government itself had allocated wells according to caste - this is Madigas' well and this is Holeyas' etc. When the Brahmins are shedding all these practices, the lower castes and the Holeyas and Madigas are holding on to them all the more dearly.

Even more insistently, it is pointed out that internal differentiations obtain within each non-Brahmin community:

Those SCs who have availed of the government benefits and become rich detach themselves from the community. They don't want to be identified as SCs. They want to hobnob only with Brahmins; eat like Brahmins; speak like Brahmins. They perpetuate discriminations from within – only IAS officers' sons and daughters avail of all the benefits. But the elite will go on making noises about being the oppressed and hold the poor I larijan as their mascot.

To be sure, this need (to other the other, as it were, even to remove the self from the space of caste, as they see it) does not take one away from the positive significations and enunciations that they (our respondents) make of their identity of being Brahmins. In making these formulations of self, they continue to negotiate the perception of siege simultaneously. It is also the space within which caste identity and action as inhabiting different shades of the community-association dynamic can be vividly grasped.

59 Interview with Dr. Apoorva, 14/08/2000. A profile is fn. 37 above.
60 Interview with 46 year old Madhva Brahmin, Mr. Sripathi, an agriculturist and a Congress party functionary residing in a village near Bangalore, 17/09/2000.
61 Interview with Mr. Nagesh, 19/10/2000. A profile is in fn. 23 above.
I am reminded of the word “parishuddhate” [purity] when I imagine the meaning of the word Brahmin. I am proud to be a Brahmin; it is a clean caste and an intellectual caste, traits that have come in their blood.

I don't go out and make friends or interact with people only after making sure of their caste. I don't even want to be overtly identified as and with Brahmins. In fact I refused an invitation to become the Chairperson of the Brahmin women's convention that the AKBMS organised recently. I did not even take part in the proceedings. But when I look at most of my friends they are Brahmins themselves. I have wondered about it. There has to be something that explains it but I fail to explain it.

I am an artiste and I know no boundaries of caste, creed, nation or anything. I am beyond all that when I am on stage performing. But then when the attacks on the Brahmins became intolerable during [Devaraj] Urs' time, assisted by people like BasavalingapPa, people asked me to come into the caste. They said, first please concentrate on setting right your own house. I took part in initiating the AKBMS then. Other people then asked me - should they look at me as a Brahmin leader or as a caste-less artiste. Then I told them Ravana's story. Rama before embarking on the battle with Ravana wanted the services of a Brahmin priest to conduct a homa [a sacrificial Brahminical ritual], seeking blessings of the gods for a victory. Hanumantha, Rama's aide, solicited Ravana for a suitable priest. Then Ravana himself came to conduct the ritual, for he was a great and accomplished Brahmin himself. Being a Brahmin, he could not refuse to carry out the role ordained for him by the society, knowing well that a successful completion of the ritual will bring defeat to himself. I am Ravana, the real Brahmin, when I come on stage. If I find wrongs in Brahminism, I never mute my criticism, as people very well know it. But within the complex of my kula [lineage] I am an ordinary Brahmin worried about the welfare of my fellow-Brahmins.

The above enunciations from two Brahmins come from identifiably different standpoints on the question of an overt association (or identification) with the category of the Brahmin, but they both capture the sense of ambivalence that constitutes the contemporary Brahmin self's perception of itself. While the former avoids (or refuses) any public identification with the fact of being Brahmin, the latter not only owns it up, it also does not flinch from giving the self-identification an assertive form in the shape of

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62 Interview with Ms. Savitri, 30/06/2000. A profile of this respondent can be had in fn. 19 above.
63 A high profile Dalit minister in Urs’ cabinet, who was very vocal about upper caste oppression and their ability to subvert Dalit/lower caste aspirations.
64 Interview with Mr. Suvarnaiah, a popular dramatist and the founder president of the Akhila Karnataka Brahmana Maha Sabha. Interview held on 21/05/2000. He is part of a family that has over the last three generations made a livelihood running a theatre company. Suvarnaiah’s plays, particularly those that satirise on the contemporary politics, corruption etc., have been staged by the company and proved greatly popular.
inhabiting the definitive space of a caste association. Nevertheless, both these articulations still feel compelled to 'explain' their Brahminness.

The ambivalence is not so much one of either/or vis-à-vis the category of the Brahmin - that is to say, whether to reject or own up that identity and identification. It is more in terms of negotiating with the given identity or category and all its attendant packages of history, memory, association, and affective investment. Many of the respondents, consequently, understand their 'casteness' (of being a Brahmin, say) as a given - something that they have to carry along whether they like it or not. As a 20 year old, college-going respondent stated:

Even if I go and claim that I am an SC, nobody will accept that claim. The government will not give me the benefits that SCs get. It is possible that I could be leading the life of a Holeya. But I will have to die as a Brahmin. Anyway, I am born as a Brahmin and I am not repenting it. I would rather be a Brahmin because broader outlook is possible only for us. I am proud to be a Brahmin, of the heritage that the community has given to the entire world, of the Brahmin intellect and single pursuit of jnana [knowledge]. I get respect from the Gowdas and Reddys for being a Brahmin, and I will try to stand up to what other communities expect of the Brahmins.

Of course, as a young executive put it, "there is definitely a reluctance to say they are Brahmins", since (as he observed) "the pressure is to say that we are also human beings like others". All the same, "the positive things that this birth in a Brahmin family has given me far outweigh any debilitations that I am supposed to be suffering from for being a Brahmin", suggests a psychology professor working in an undergraduate college in Bangalore:

It has given me samskara - those practices that have helped me evolve as a better human being. The way we dress, the food habits, our customs and rituals - they all instil a sense of discipline which is passed on from generation to generation. I attach great value to our practices - lighting a lamp before the god, performing pooja, watering the doorstep each morning, etc. - we are brought up on those values. Not telling lies, speaking out your mind honestly - I am like that and because of that I have often found myself in trouble. But we are an intellectually evolved people; we shouldn't stoop down to the level of other people. There are other customs - like distributing elli [sesame seeds] during Sankranthi festival and inviting people on the Krishnashtami day etc. - which gives me an opportunity to meet people, which otherwise I would never given the hurried everyday lives we live.

My husband though is a typical abrahmana [un-Brahminlike] and he takes pleasure in announcing that he is not a Brahmin. He keeps ridiculing our customs and rituals. He says he lost his

65 Interview with Mr. Guru, 19/07/2000. He is a Madhva Brahmin, pursuing his graduation studies in Bangalore.
66 Interview with Mr. Sarathy, 12/06/2000. He, a 31 year old Smartha Brahmin, works as General Manager in a garment export firm.
Brahmanathva [being a Brahmin] the day he ate chicken. But when he suggested that our son should be given non-vegetarian food, I just put my foot down and protested. He doesn't need to break norms. It is nothing about Brahminism but about being gentlemanly.\textsuperscript{57}

Such positive enunciations of their Brahminness are legion. Almost all of them refer to the ‘\textit{samskara}’ that their Brahmin context accords. It is defined both as a set of practices as well as a habit of the mind, which makes possible a disposition of the self that helps them to sustain their level of intellect and purity. It is this \textit{samskara} that is held up as the criteria distinguishing them sharply from those who are born into other caste communities. But it is also a state that leaves them debilitated in facing up to an external world that has begun to play by new rules. In most of the narratives of the respondents, this \textit{samskara} is at once genetic as well as learnt.

It is all in the genes. Knowledge has come naturally to the Brahmins. Like they say, “\textit{huttu guna suttroo hogollà}” [The character that came with birth will not erase even if burnt]. For others, keenness for knowledge has to be learnt unlike for the Brahmin. Not everybody can chant the Veda mantras because their tongues are not supple as it is for a Brahmin.\textsuperscript{68}

Alternatively, as the psychology professor cited above suggested, it is also learnt in the family, as part of growing up. Thus, \textit{samskara} which is most often held up as the ‘distinction’ separating Brahmins from the rest of society is what makes them so. Consequently, many remain upset by those “Brahmins who bend backwards to show they are not Brahmins”, as a respondent on a visit from the US to her parents in Bangalore chose to express it.\textsuperscript{69} Likewise:

Some Brahmins may have thought that their birth as Brahmins itself is a crime. They think they have to convince the society that they are like any other human being and are not Brahminical.

\textsuperscript{57} Interview with Ms. Aruna, 03/05/2000. She is a 48 year old Iyengar Brahmin. She is very proud to be a Brahmin, and asserted so many a time during the interview. However, when asked to name the caste she belongs to and the \textit{matha} to which her family is affiliated, she gave a rather confounding answer - “It must be Advaitha”. There is, of course no Brahmin caste called Advaitha, which is a Brahminical philosophy whose followers call themselves Smarthas. Nonetheless, when she returned the questionnaire filled, it mentioned her caste as Iyengars - the followers of the Srivaishnava tradition, a contending and contestatory tradition vis-a-vis the Smarthas. What is more, the definitions she offers for what is to be a Brahmin and, more importantly, for what is to lose it are interesting but largely shared. Defying vegetarian food restrictions is often held up as a signifier of having broken caste rules and become un-Brahminical.

\textsuperscript{68} Interview with Mr. Sadashivaiah, 01/03/2000. For a profile, see fn. 35 above.

\textsuperscript{69} Interview with Ms. Poornima, 12/05/2000. She, a Shivalli Madhva, is 31 years old. She married a north Indian (Uttar Pradesh) Brahmin - previously her colleague in the software development firm she worked in - much to the discomfort of her family. However, during the interview, her mother said, "We didn’t mind as long as he was from a Brahmin family. The marriage took place in accordance with both traditions. The customs were really very different."

\textsuperscript{70} Interview with Mr. Balan, 17/07/2000. For a profile, see fn. 30 above.
Just as the limits of this "backward bend" remain hazy even for those who articulate it, the anxieties regarding fellow-Brahmins themselves breaching the boundaries of identity and identification remain high. The object of this sense of anxiety needs to be distinguished from those behavioural modifications that get legitimised. Accordingly, even as the community itself is acknowledged to have undergone transformatory shifts in the recent history, much of such redefinition and repositioning is legitimised within the rubric of "changing with times". Even if the preceding generation articulates such changes as discomforting, they still were not seen as questioning or rebelling against the community norms. Thus when the respondents' talk of a fellow-Brahmin as being a 'rebel from within' or having gone beyond the boundaries of Brahminhood, one should take care not to assume that they themselves measure up to any given constructions of who a Brahmin is or what is to be Brahminical and so on. For instance, not wearing the sacred thread, breaking food, commensal and touchability restrictions etc. are all now accepted by a large number of Brahmins, including the caste activists as being 'normal'. But it was not so during the previous generation. Kannada litterateur U. R. Ananthamurthy - not only his works were seen as being anti-Brahmin by the community but also his marriage to a Christian was a necessary confirmation of this intent of breaking out - is invoked by a significant number of respondents as the iconic representation of that rebel. However, as a respondent put it:

Now Samskara [Ananthamurthy's novel, which created a great deal of resentment among the Brahmins when published for what was seen as a slander] is normalised. It doesn't create any ripples or hits one as being anti-Brahminical.

Interestingly, what marks out conduct as an act of breach is if they come attached as an announcement, explicitly voiced statements of intent, an intent, that is, of "breaking away". Otherwise, it is acknowledged that each generation defines, albeit not in any formal manner but in recognisable ways, what constitutes rebelliousness. Such definitions are bound to vary across the class status, age composition and the specific trajectory of the family in question. However, breaking the endogamy barrier - boundaries of marriage now encompasses all Brahmin castes, although perhaps still excluding the Saraswat Brahmins - continues to be seen as an important act of breaching that is still largely illegitimate.

71 Interview with Mr. Muralidhar, 20/03/2000. For a profile, see fn. 40 above.
Defining aberrant forms of conduct cuts across a wide spectrum - from breaking food restrictions to commensal strategies, “hobnobbing with fishermen”, publicly speaking against and writing critically of the community, etc. But, as we said, it has to be enacted as a public statement, as a statement of intention to breach. A successful industrialist who has worked extensively with the AKBMS defined the basis of caste action and the attendant anxieties thus:

Brahmin symbolises a value. So when somebody says, “He eats chicken in spite of being a Brahmin” that did not constitute ridiculing of the Brahmin. That basically reflected an anxiety on the part of the larger community that the value that the Brahmin community symbolised is being sacrificed. The others want us to set an example for them and the society and when the Brahmins don’t measure up to such expectations, they target us. Reading it as an attack against the Brahmins has been the greatest mistake that we have committed.

Again:

Brahmins themselves are responsible for this targeting. In the name of getting modernised, they drank [liquor] with the Gowda, ate [meat] with the Muslim and announced that they don’t believe in caste. We’ve ourselves given up caste.

Consequently, therefore:

Though there is a sense of guilt amongst us, atoning for it won’t help either them or us. I am a Brahmin, so I am a Brahmin - that is all. There is no use going to other jatis and doing all that they do. You go drink [liquor] and eat mudde [a dish made of ragi, a staple diet of the Vokkaligas of southern Karnataka], and they will only sneer at you and say that there is degeneration among the Brahmins. How will that bring about social equality? ... Brahmins have tried to reach out to other people but that has not helped anyone. OK! Leave it - as an individual and at the individual level do whatever you want to do. 74

Indeed, as a respondent, a Sanskrit scholar, pointedly ventured to say:

Just before you came for the interview, I performed agnikarya fa ritual that the initiated Brahmin males are supposed to perform during the sandhyavandane, but has almost become an exception]. Did I insult anybody by that? But the leftists among us want to believe so. An average Brahmin is as uninformed about Brahminism as any outsider. So he wants to believe that calling oneself a Brahmin, helping a fellow-Brahmin, speaking on behalf of the heritage of the Brahmins, identifying with the community - are all communal and orthodox. There is an onslaught from within the community which is much stronger than that which is coming from the others. What

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72 Interview with Mr. Sadashivaiah, 01/03/2000. For a profile, see fn. 35 above.
73 Interview with Ms. Aruna, 03/05/2000. Biographical details in fn. 67above.
74 Interview with Mr. Prakash, 22/07/2000. Biographical details on pp. 267-68 above.
these pseudo-secularists don’t know is that outsiders respect me precisely because I value my heritage and attempt to follow them.

As we can see, definitions of breach or identification of aberrant forms of conduct still largely get marked off a presumed Brahmin figure, one who keep to his rituals, commensal and food rules. And yet, what render these acts either acceptable or otherwise are the stated (or imagined) intentions that mark their enactment. Although most of the respondents did not see themselves as meeting the requirements of that presumed figure of representation, they are not exactly those that one would characterise as standing outside (nor were all seen by fellow-Brahmins as being so). For instance:

In me you will see a rebel. In the first thirteen years of my life, I was what is referred to as a 'good' Brahmin - doing sandhyavandane etc. But I found that it limits. Conformity always means choking and being non-creative. I found that Brahminism had lost its ability to be mobile and thus had become static. That is when I found Ramakrishna matha, Chinmaya Mission, Yoga, meditation etc. more liberating, of which I am a follower for the last thirty years. But our community is contented in conducting poojas, homas etc., forgetting the Vedas and Upanishads which they think is nothing but a lot of complicated rituals.76

Since this enunciation does not seek to voice an intent that stands out amidst the general flux of statements, and indeed seeks to reimagine the problematic of what is to be Brahmin - and accordingly seems to stand resolutely within - the respondent who is making this statement will not be seen as a rebel. Even as the contemporary Brahmin sees himself or herself clearly outside the given notions of what is to be a Brahmin -

I stay in the outskirts [of the city] like a true Brahmin ought to. I would have felt suffocated and restricted living in a Brahmin agrahara [broadly, neighbourhood, but a usage restricted to Brahmin households]. I hate their rituals. For instance, they say the Gayathri mantra should not be uttered for the non-dwijas [non-Brahmins generally] and women to hear. That is nonsense. I have gathered 60-70 people (without asking about their caste) and taught them the mantra, so that they can chant it whenever they want its energy. Not that they showed any great enthusiasm for it. But still I am a rebel within the community. Not many so-called Brahmins understand me. A Brahmin in the real sense is supposed to stay outside the thick of things but still be a teacher to the society. Thus I represent the community figuratively too.

73 Interview with Mr. Vinayaka, 15/04/2000. He is about 35 years old and is a Smartha Brahmin. An engineering graduate, he is now completely into Sanskrit studies and is an exponent of a Sanskrit game called Shatavadhana. He gives public performances of his skills in that game. He has emerged as a recognised articulator of the glories of the Indian/Hindu heritage and is a regular invitee in public events, TV shows etc. He also participates in Brahmin associational conventions as a resource person or a speaker.
76 Interview with Mr. Diwakar, 10/04/2000. For a note on the respondent, see fn. 18 above.
77 Interview with Mr. Nagesh, 19/10/2000. For a profile, see fn. 23 above.
- it is not as though fellow-Brahmins do not understand or empathise with the terms of such self-identification.

Conceiving their **Brahminness** in such open-ended terms, they find it difficult to reconcile with the othering that they encounter as a community. Indeed, it is this sanctioned image of a self that is sincerely and genuinely attempting to transform itself according to the demands and sensitivities of the times that renders the continued othering of the community incomprehensible to itself. What fortifies such a difficulty is the construction of the past of the community exclusively in terms of a scriptural imagination that positions the Brahmin as one who had always treated "this worldly" pursuits - economic and political - as being an anathema, being dictated solely by a passion for knowledge. It is not surprising, therefore, that most of the respondents foreground the image of a 'poor' Brahmin as constituting an adequate representation the community.

Why do you think that almost all the folktales, **puranas**, stories that your grand mother told you begin with the statement, "There lived a poor Brahmin in a village". Doesn't it tell you that that has always been the case with the Brahmins? Of course, emperors and kings used to fall at his feet, seeking his blessings and advice. Every king had a Brahmin as his chief advisor. But still the Brahmin chose to remain poor. Why doesn't he become the king himself? He is respected precisely because he doesn't aspire for the worldly, materialistic things. It is the only culture which took 'sarve janaahasukhino bhavanthu [welfare of all] as its lifeline. What does every Brahmin pray for while **performing japa** [meditation]? Not "give me that or this" or "let my son get a computer science seat" or "let my daughter get a good match" etc. He beseeches the Gayathri to light the lamp of knowledge that exists within him - "Dhee yo yonah prachodayath" That is why our community has been held in high regard by the rest of the society, withstanding even the sustained politically motivated rant against them.

The reproduction of this enunciatory position, one that we would like to believe has been rather important to the Brahmin self-representation through recent history, is consistent. It frontalis an image of **the poor Brahmin** who, in spite of being vested with unparalleled brilliance and intellect, in spite of being very close to the powers that be through out history, has consciously remained outside the structures and institutions of power and wealth. Accordingly, the figure of Dronacharya, a character from the epic **Mahabharatha** who is the unmatched guru (teacher) of the Kuru dynasty but who remains in a state of abstention and penury, is time and again invoked to represent the

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78 Interview with Mr. Suvarnaiah, 21/05/2000. Our fn. 64 above has the relevant biographical details. To recall, Mr. Suvarnaiah is the founder president of the AKBMS and a popular dramatist.
Brahmin community. The imagery is one of Drona in a state of helplessness to provide even milk to his infant son Ashwatthama, and this gets to be posited as a historical, ideal and even personalised image of the Brahmin condition:

Indeed the downfall of the Brahmin began when Dronacharya, no longer able to see the plight of his family, went on to accept the offer to become the Guru of the Kuru dynasty. As Kailasam once remarked: "The moment Brahmin called gold suvarna [of good colour], his Brahminness began its downslide".

Further compounding perceptions of the illegitimacy of the attack against Brahmins is the imagination - one that we have encountered hither and thither - of a generalised self as a product of active making, the self as an achievement. Broadly, in the terms of this representation, the self becomes a Brahmin; it is not Brahmin. Such a positioning of the self enables the postulation of the figure of the Brahmin as being largely incidental to the "accident of birth". Thus, it is maintained that anybody can become a Brahmin and that many in the past did become - from the sages of yore to the more recent B. R. Ambedkar and K. R. Narayanan (the former President of India, a Dalit) who were all by birth non-Brahmins - although the probability (as held by our respondents) is mostly that only Brahmins by birth will attain Brahminhood. A respondent who runs an institution that teaches meditation, yoga etc. to all and sundry was categorical:

Not all the great sages of Upanishads were born in the Brahmin jati. But they all became great Brahmins. Moving towards the cosmic, towards the Brahma is what one makes a Brahmin and even to this day the society respects such individuals. My life is itself an instance of that. My life mission is to give Brahminism to all and that is the primary intent of the Indian heritage - to make the entire universe Aryan. The real concern of our society is to make everybody a Brahmin.

Even if this missionary zeal is non-existent in many others, the thought does:

Why do you make the accident of birth a denominator? Many SC/STs could be and are good Brahmins. Look at Ambedkar - he is a true Brahmin unlike many of the so-called Brahmins themselves. I wanted K. R. Narayanan to become the President not because of his caste but because of his merit. If I were to be at the level at which today Gowdas are, I would have said he is not ours and if I were to be at the level of Harijans, I would have said he is ours. But since I know the ideal of Brahmin, I would call him a true Brahmin.

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79 Interview with Mr. Subramanya, 30/01/2000. For a profile, see fn. 12 above.
80 Indeed, the number of respondents who invoked Ambedkar as an example of the ‘real’ Brahmin was significant.
81 Interview with Mr. Ramachandra, 13/09/2000. Some aspects of personal biography are in fn. 52 above.
82 Interview with Mr. Nagesh, 19/10/2000. Background details are in fn. 23.
This gesture to universalise the state of being Brahmin is abetted by the increasing success that the Hindu Right is witnessing in the recent years - a phenomenon which the contemporary Brahmin views with a certain sense of relief and triumph. As a respondent put it:

This is something Brahmins said from the beginning - "Others are trying to weaken our Hindu dharma by pitting one against the other. The problem is not the Brahmin; look elsewhere for it." Now they [the non-Brahmins] are realising it. We said this when the British were here; we are saying now when the saabaru [a derogatory term referring to Muslims] are taking all the benefits now. Then, before independence, before they realised the reality, British had completely plundered us leaving us a poor nation. Now mullahs [again referring to Muslims derogatorily] will squarely divide us if we don't realise it. The only encouraging thing is that they [the non-Brahmins] have slowly begun to support Hindutva.

By thus imagining the self to be Hindu, as inhabiting a Brahminical Hinduism pitted against an aggressive and invading Muslim, the problematics of a certain inherited caste self is sought to be elided. There is accordingly a resolution of the Brahmin-non-Brahmin contestation into a perceived need for Hindu unity.

They have all realised that we cannot quarrel amongst ourselves, which in the past has allowed invaders to rule over us. The realisation that we are all Hindus is seeping in. Otherwise how will you explain Dravidian parties [of Tamil Nadu] which had Brahmin bashing as their one and only issue, supporting BJP now?84

Of course, this intended resolution of the contestation does not mean that the 'non-Brahmin' - be it as representing a politics and an ideology, or even as straightforward caste communities - ceases to become important in the self-construction of being Brahmins. This is evident in the enunciations that we have mapped through out this chapter.

All these ingredients - of the branded status of the Brahmin self, of the idea of the samskara, indeed the re-invocation of the scriptural imagination of the Brahmin persona in seeking to universalise it, as also the self-assertion of being Hindu - inhabit an articulatory space that is definitionally oscillating between a sense of 'community'

83 Interview with Mr. Ravi, 20/04/2000. A personal profile is given in fn. 21 above.
84 Interview with Mr. Vittal, 12/11/2000. Mr. Vittal, a Madhwa Brahmin aged 62 years, is a resident of a village near Udupi. He retired as a Head Master of the high school in Barkoor, the nearby town. He has been an active participant in the Barkoor Brahmana Sabha. In fact, an overwhelming number of the respondents expressed explicit sympathies with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the Hindu right-wing party, and its other more strident affiliated wings such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP). By and large, they had all over the last decade or so consistently voted for the BJP in both state and central elections.
(approximated as a moral collective sense of belonging) and a more fluid space of associational endeavour and self-articulation. We shall seek to engage this oscillatory space more fully in the next, our concluding chapter, while also striving to formalise a “community-association” dynamic as constituting the contours of Brahmin identity in contemporary Karnataka. Needless, we shall also be elucidating a revised historical focus for the sociology of caste to pursue in the years to come.