Chapter Seven
Overview and Conclusions: Agency and Identity in the World of Brahmins

It will readily be admitted that a *generalised* matrix of theoretical and substantive concern and a *particularised* focus drawing on and dwelling within a given socio-historical field do not form the terms of a binary opposition. One might even imagine a continuum between the two. In this, our concluding chapter, we propose to tie together the various theoretical, methodological and empirical considerations forwarded by this work. Indeed, as we pointed out at the start of our previous chapter, the study has all along striven to resist a totalising thrust, to subsume and contain the field of articulation into rough *enclosures*. Our substantive chapters especially seemed to be tracking relatively independent courses. This is as it should be, tracking as we were the dynamics of identity and identification within and across fields of agency characteristic of particular caste subjects. But to leave the issues there, in an imponderable state, would be to restrict the possibilities of this investigation.

We need to bring the several threads constituting this study into a form of facilitative closure. This chapter, at once an overview of the tracks pursued and a *suggestion* about its potential, is an effort in this direction. Accordingly, the first section reconstitutes our points of departure, while the next three, offering an overview of the substantive chapters, reconstructs the considerations that we have proposed, if disparately, all along our delineation. Exploring the limits of the thesis of substantialisation through a recounting of the narrative of the 'Brahmin' identity, in the second section we suggest that a framework that accommodates the crucial aspect of identification is in order. The third and the fourth sections work towards structuring such an account, implicating the ideas of secularisation and individuation and the contending logics of 'community' and 'association'. The fifth and final section charts a potential trajectory that caste studies might pursue.
I
Reconstituting our point of departure

Some years ago, at the start of a project that has overseen three volumes of exciting work, the British social theorist, W. G. Runciman (1983) lists four levels at which we may come to understand a phenomenon:

• **Reportage**: a sequence of events or happenings that are observed and narrated in a socio-historical space;

• **Explanation**: why the events in question happened the way they did and its after effects - the choices of the actors involved being set against the backgrounds of history, social structure, and political economy;

• **Description**: what it felt like to be caught in that moment, and in the process reconstructing broadly the human significance of those events;

• **Evaluation**: what is right and wrong with the ways of living and feeling that the events encode; can there be lessons to be drawn from them?

Ideally, our study of the dynamics of Brahmin identity in contemporary Karnataka should have tried to advance an understanding at all these levels, both independently and consecutively. But it obviously has not, without necessarily being slack for all that. Even more pointedly, these levels have been pretty mixed up in our narration, confounding the terms of reportage with those of description, explanation with evaluation.

The effort, clearly, has been to produce an account that would strictly not be subsumable under a monographic format. To be sure, such a monographic constraint would have been equally facilitative of the terms of our investigation, although it would have slanted the investigation differently (besides necessitating methodological protocols that are not quite the same as the ones incorporated by this study) In formulating our research problem, we were ever mindful of the larger theoretical and ideological matrix undergirding caste studies, and interested not to reproduce its biases. At the same time, we were very clear that sociological and historical studies have not been sufficiently attentive to what is happening to caste in 'upper caste' contexts; indeed, that the perceptual bases of particular caste subjects and of caste action today need more nuanced theoretical and empirical elucidation.

At any rate, the parameters of evaluation undergirding our study have been passed over in the density of the narration; and our effort here, as already mentioned, is to bring the data put together in the foregoing pages to some kind of evaluative closure. This
point, among other things, brings us to an issue that had been furtively mentioned in the chapter on method (Ch.2), namely, the problem of normativity. For, all too often (and especially so in the recent years) articulations within and outside caste studies have been concerned to deliver solely upon the twin axes of the contestation and legitimation within caste. Even the literature on the substantialisation of caste (see pp. 33-8 and 52-4 above) has been prone to this tendency. But more importantly, from the standpoint of our study, the question of the Brahmin has been overdetermined by this mode of normative contextualisation, with the figure of the Brahmin privileged or arraigned herein (as the case may be) acquiring the shape of an evaluative principle rather than as a reference to real people with such a self-identification. In fact, it would not be an exaggeration to assert that in the recent scholarship on caste, 'Brahmin' as an embodied person or community is conspicuously absent. The latter is invoked more as a representative of the 'past' of caste or as a value or symbol that represents the hierarchical and systemic elements of the 'traditional' caste system. What is important is that, on either count, the 'Brahmin' is rendered absent from the 'present' of caste. In training our attention on the contemporaneity of the modern Brahmin therefore - contextualised of course to a regional context - we are concerned to reverse the axes of contestation and legitimation within caste: to substitute for the absent figure of the Brahmin in the latter frame a specific focus on the agency and selfhood of the Brahmin within caste.

Along the contours of this substitution, besides, one is also actively resisting the temptation of framing the Brahmin problematic in terms exclusively of domination - as indeed one of hegemony. To be sure, the framework of a 'will-to-dominance' is all-too-easily grafted for the purpose of a study of the Brahmin community¹, while in fact any excessive and exclusive reliance on such a framework can prove to be delimiting. It could indeed, when framed in the context of a longer historical narrative, offer exciting and novel insights regarding the institutionalisation of caste through the figure (real and nominal) of the Brahmin. And, what is more, one could see this as a window into several questions - about the ways in which Brahmins are reinventing their power and domination over the caste society; the will to dominance as representing a secularisation of the contemporary Brahmin self; their continuing predominance in matters of cultural

¹ See, for a particularly forceful instance of framing the Brahmin in such an axis, the chapter titled 'The Brahmin in the Tamil Country in the Early Twentieth Century' in Geeta and Rajadurai's work on the Tamil Nadu Non-Brahmin movement (1998).
and social capital; their much talked about ability to adapt to newer challenges or, more crudely, the figuration of the "cunning Brahmin", and so on. Ultimately, however, the framework of dominance is seriously delimiting and restrictive in a very primary sense, in that it refuses to give the subject - the Brahmin - a voice of his/her own. Any sociological analysis framed thus is seriously compromising of the scholarly rigour. It is almost as if a certain normative standpoint has to be taken and vindicated even before the research is undertaken.

One could, for all that, recognise the fecundity and value of reaching such normatively ordered conclusions about the contemporary Brahmin; but foreclosing a conclusion by prefiguring it is methodologically dubious and politically jaundiced. Accordingly, it is a doubly qualified normative axis that we have been working with all along. On the one hand, we have sought to 'caste', as it were, a social space that is often represented as moving towards a trajectory that is either outside caste or non-caste determined. On the other hand, we are quick to contain the normative implications of this over-determination, as also of the easy characterisations of such a move. This mixed positioning is also one of the grounds on which we avoided taking on a 'social movements' framework of appraisal to understand the dynamics of the contemporary Brahmin identity.

All the same, this study has tried to bear the results of a conviction that 'caste' - both as a substantive social framework and as a category of analysis and appraisal - ought to remain a legitimate and unavoidable preoccupation for the discipline of sociology in India in its attempts to make sense of Indian social realities. This conviction remains notwithstanding - or perhaps, because of- the recent veering away of the practitioners of the discipline from studying caste - both in its traditional and modern avatars. This drift has had to do with a confluence of historical as well as epistemological reasons, which have not been comprehensively mapped. Of course, the discipline has learnt crucial lessons in the process of diverging away from the more immediate invocations of caste that it has had to live with. However the desire to dissociate has almost driven the discipline to the point of jettisoning caste studies altogether, for which there appears to be very little justification. The predominant disposition seems to be one of inscribing and determining the relevance of caste in certain locations of life and not in others. Our refrain has been that even as the discipline needs to guard itself against essentialist and gate-keeping conceptions of caste, it cannot afford to repudiate a sociological and
anthropological focus on caste, as indeed caste-mediated phenomena. All this formed the focus and content of our initial chapters - particularly the first but also the second.

The methodological protocols animating our study of the Brahmin identity, therefore, have in no way sought to depart from the trajectories - historical and contemporary - of caste studies. We have all along sought to innovate from within this ground, while actively ensuring that the innovation remains consistent to this space. Now, recasting the 'presents' of caste in the languages of self-representation and identity-formation - at least in the ways in which we have delineated them - seems to suggest a way out. What is important is that it is not logically necessary for one to presume ethnic-like formations of caste as partaking of the processes of identity and identification. Not only do we need to bring into focus the spaces beyond caste - in terms of alternative identity "choices" available - for the purposes of understanding caste action, we must also remain sensitive to the logic and demands of caste structure and signification. The latter especially are open to varied and differentiated meanings and negotiations.

Indeed, a defining characteristic of the now burgeoning literature on identities and identification is its insistence on conceiving the same as being dynamic, processual, multiple and historical. Predictably, most of the scholars working in this framework have consciously attempted to veer away from any *primordialist* understanding of identities and towards a 'constructionist' account of them. Thus, for this constructionist strand, identity is not given, is not "is"; "it must always be established" (Jenkins 1996: 4) and therefore "can only be understood as a process. As 'being' or 'becoming'" (/did). The following description from Hall (1990), one of the most influential theorists within this literature, represents and encompasses this approach very well:

Cultural identity ... is a matter of 'becoming' as well as 'being' ...It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. ...Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a mere 'recovery' of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past (Hall 1990: 225).

Evidently, the specific ways in which we have framed the question of identity and identification has tried to depart from the 'constructionist' appraisal, without completely denying it all the same. It is instructive to identify caste both as a social identity and an identity choice that is available to individuals and groups in India. It may nevertheless
not be sufficient to reiterate that identities - even caste ones - have to be approached and grasped in relational terms, for all too often castes in a substantive sense have broken with (or attempted to undermine) the relationality constituting them.\(^2\) The strength of this insistence is that it helps us to approximate to caste as an axis of identity and identification, at once given and constructed. Broadly, this is what we were getting at in the section "On identity and identification and the question of othering” in our second chapter (pp. 55-8 above).

Such a mediated understanding has been foundational to our focus on the dynamics of a particular caste community over a period of time, as well as facilitative of further grafts upon the space of identity as well. It not only avoided attaching any primordiality to the 'casteness' of the Brahmin community as such, but in historicising it also allowed us to situate it in a larger field in which other such identities and identifications were attempting to categorise and reorder the space of its operation. Underwriting these complex negotiations has been the way in which self-fashioning takes place, often marked out as a project of self-realisation - the idea of becoming Brahmin - and yet coupled with a sense of the external categorisation grounding the sense of self - the self-identity of being Brahmin. Broadly, this is what we were getting at in the course of our substantive chapters (Chs.3-6) reporting, describing and in a manner of speaking explaining and evaluating the problematics of Brahmin identity in contemporary Karnataka.

Comprehending identity and identification in these ways - indeed as being a fundamental resource for individuals and communities to engage in sociologically interesting behaviour - prepares us to centralise caste as the prism through which one can get at the action patterns that individuals and the 'community' (संस्कृत: समाज) in India inhabit and exhibit. This is a crucial point for, as we think our thesis has shown, the invocation of a caste identity as a representation of the self is not a given - at least not in the case of the contemporary Brahmins. They have to be, in a manner of speaking, coerced into enunciating from that standpoint since the relationship they share with their ‘Brahminness’ is constitutively ambivalent and even contradictory. What this must entail for our accounts of self-fashioning and the concomitant grasp of identities and

\(^2\) Broadly, this is what Dumont was gesturing at in fashioning the construct 'substantialisation of caste’ to record changes in the nature and structure of caste entities. See pp. 33-4 above for an elaboration. We shall return to discuss this axis in the light of our presented data.
identifications is that the fashioned 'identity' must necessarily be situated and approached in a field which is dynamic and shifting. Even more categorically, the point that identity must always constantly strive to be established\(^3\) brings to fore the agency that is involved in the formulation of a (caste) identity. The latter involves active enunciations as well as repudiations - in short, ambivalences - which the caste subjects foreground in their relationship with parts of their own 'self' and the 'other(s)' they negotiate. These negotiations keep open the varied possibilities of assertive identification and active denial vis-a-vis one's casteness, and need thematisation in and by the scholarship.

II

**Recounting the narrative of the ‘Brahmin’ identity**

The foregoing points both recapitulate and reconstitute aspects of the ground on which the study went about mapping the dynamics of the Brahmin identity in contemporary Karnataka. The question arises as to the specifics of the dynamics itself. Broadly, in keeping with the architectonic traced above, we examined aspects of the non-Brahmin categorisation of the Brahmin identity (as indeed the modern state's complicity in such a categorisation), emphasising in particular the figurative aspects of the 'Brahmin' response (both within the fold and outside, as for instance in the case of the Lingayaths [see pp. 159-75 above]). Even as we attempted to show that the non-Brahmin othering of the Brahmin identity has had enduring effects on the ways in which the contemporary (or modern) Brahmin has identified him/herself and the differential recuperation and foregrounding of his/her self thereon, we were also concerned to deliver on the limits of this 'othering' and get at the resources and constraints that the Brahmin self depends upon in order to respond to the othering.

Of course, as our chapter (# 3) recounting a broad history of the modern world of Brahmins sought to demonstrate, the self-realisation of being and becoming Brahmin also obtains in many respects independent of the othering and its ways of categorising. The Brahmin self - and the community at large - has, over time, borne the brunt of larger processes of urbanisation, secularisation, and corporatisation; and an assessment of this impact cannot be gained from an exclusive focus on the non-Brahmin's ways of recuperating and defining the Brahmin. Even more pointedly perhaps, the sting in the

\(^3\) But of course overstating the plastic nature of (secular) identities is both unwarranted and indefensible. More on this below.
latter (that is, the non-Brahmin) only confirms the proactive transitions within the Brahmin community as a whole, while lending a purely reactive edge to the non-Brahmin articulation. Moreover, self-identity or identification (the process of having an identity) on our register is neither exclusively in terms of a self-conscious activity of imagining one's own contours in a dialogue with the 'other/s'; nor is it, by that same token, determined necessarily by its own contexts. As we saw in the course of our substantive chapters - that is, Chs. 3-6 - 'Brahmins' (of course, sectarian differences and caste classifications are important) continue to retrieve and put to use the 'scriptural/traditional' imagination of the idea of the Brahmin in negotiating with 'modern' demands. The narrative of the self, therefore, both within and across castes (and especially so, we suspect, for the Brahmin identification) always exhibits an excess that cannot always and completely be explained in terms of its dialogic relation with its other/s or in terms of its own self-recuperation in particular contexts. The process is more enduring than ephemeral, even as it is subject to change and transformation. Therefore there is a need for more full-bloodied appraisals of the modes of investing in the idea of the 'Brahmin'. Our study is but a fragment of an unfolding prognosis.

The foregoing might seem a paradoxical formulation. Let us try to recount it from within the narrative presented by our study. Our narrative has sought to work itself out, simultaneously, at three levels (or registers, as the chapter on method briefly posited it). While this was broadly reflective of our data sources - those gathered from the caste associations, from the historical recuperation of the non-Brahmin othering and the Brahmin's negotiation with it, and finally from the Brahmin individual her/himself - it has also served as a kind of grid for locating the dynamics of the Brahmin identity. These three registers (or levels) have entailed various spaces of enunciation, both communitarian and individualised, each feeding off and into the category of being and becoming Brahmin. Indeed, as our substantive chapters would have disclosed, these registers are constitutive of the processes by which the dynamics of the modern Brahmin identity plays itself out, and accordingly are not strictly translatable as mere sources or conduits of information about Brahmin castes.

4 Of course, we shall keep returning to it in the sections that follow, sometimes tacitly and sometimes explicitly. More frontally, it would entail juxtaposing claims of 'community' and modes of 'association' in an ambiguous logic of confounding totalities - of an 'association' aspiring to be community and a 'community' unable to shed the dimensions of its associational life. More on this, especially in Sect. IV.
All the same, both in our narration and with reference to the ground, these registers remain indistinct and always work off and into each other. For instance, the enunciatory space of the caste association often makes itself visible through the non-
Brahminical othering of the Brahmin, even as the Brahmin persona at an individual level constructs itself in negotiation both with the dynamic of the association and with the othering. This intertwining of the registers across which the Brahmin self and identity articulates itself is something one has to remain alert. Besides, to the extent that the contemporaneity of the Brahmin identity and identification is here being approached historically - implicating the entire course of the twentieth century - it was clear from the very outset that one of its constitutive motifs, of being a community (or an identity) under siege, had to be historicised. Likewise, our initial forays into and interactions with the caste association activists brought home the point about the inextricable ways in which Brahmin enunciations were conjoined with a non-Brahmin history of othering as indeed with individual Brahmans' secularised narratives of the self.

Quite clearly, an effort has been made to graft a historical trajectory onto an ethnographic present, which only made the task of consolidating the results of our inquiry in a monographic format that much more difficult (if not impossible). The recuperation of the narratives of the Brahmin self, in the specific ways accomplished by this study, would apparently have been impossible if the historical axis - the operationalisation of the demand to historicise caste - were not to be foregrounded. But of course the demand also followed in the wake of another theoretical suggestion - about mapping the nature and sources of caste action today. Indeed, as our first two chapters disclosed, this would entail coming to terms with the thesis of the 'substantialisation' of caste. As Fuller (1996) has suggested, it is productive to view substantialisation as a 'self-contradictory' process. This self-contradictoriness is embodied in terms of both the increasing differentiation within each caste (even as it gets substantialised) and the propensity for relational hierarchical values to remain salient in the private, domestic domain, while being displaced by 'substantialist' ones in the public domain (ibid. 12-3 has the details). This, undoubtedly, is a useful way of recuperating the operative dimensions of the process of substantialisation. However, in the light of our delineation of the dimensions of the contemporary Brahmin identity and identification, one sees that the nature and sources of caste action today are much more muddled than the neat divisions and 'phases' that the concept of substantialisation is able to muster.
At any rate, the point about the 'displacement' of caste values as being the primary mode of recuperating one's casteness (hinted at by Fuller) is undeniably witnessed, as we saw in chapter six particularly, among the Brahmins. They articulate the 'significance' of caste as being relevant only in a past that they imagine or remember as their own. What is more, this imagination of 'caste' in ritual hierarchy-centred terms is almost always deployed in order to convince themselves - as well as the observer/outsider - that they now are indeed 'outside' caste, even 'non-caste-d' selves. More pointedly, compared to their own foregoing generations, this assertion begins to appear like a truism, for the transformations that each generation opens out to seem radical and foundational. Each generation believes that its succeeding generations is either "losing out on its "heritage" or that it is "adjusting according to the demands of the times" depending upon the disposition of the individual evaluating such changes - but more of the former than of the latter. Interestingly however, this positively imagined "past" is carefully distinguished from a negatively evaluated Brahmin-centric caste system. The privatisation of caste - the tendency to see caste and its rules, meanings and normative legitimacy as being relevant and salient only within the confines of the home, or more accurately a private world - is also a strategy that the Brahmins adopt in looking at and making sense of their casteness. Nevertheless, the point that Mayer (1996) makes regarding beliefs and attitudes that emanate from relational hierarchical status values being coded as statements about cultural difference seems a better approximation, which too finds corroboration in the instance of Brahmins.

But the picture is hazier than these recuperations suggest. Beteille's analysis of the urban middle classes and Fuller's enthusiastic affirmation of the same only confounds it further. In an essay that is punctuated with subtle assertions, Beteille sees caste (in the context especially of urban middle classes) as a residue from the past that has lost much of its significance in reproducing structures of inequality; rather, it is the institution of family that is in many important ways replacing caste (Beteille 1991: 20). Beteille also makes much of the differentially endowed cultural and social capitals across families in determining the patterns of inequality (ibid: 24-5), but interestingly proffers hardly any evidence to buttress his claims (a problem that dogs his 1996 and 2002 too). Given the data that we have worked with - concerning our respondents and their networks but also the data that the backward classes commissions have brought to the fore - it appears that Beteille is overstating his case. Not only there appears to be a successful reproduction of
inequality - understood in terms of access to critical resources and life-chances - based primarily on caste distinctions, there is also severe and extensively shared sentiments of disapproval against breaching the rule of endogamy (restricting thus the possibility of the varied forms of capital from becoming available to the 'outsiders'). We have of course suggested the ways in which the boundaries of endogamy are changing in contemporary times among the Brahmins - from being restricted to the individual Brahmin castes to any which family so long as it belongs to the Brahmin fold. Nonetheless, as we suggested in the third chapter, the preferences are still to observe 'caste' endogamy rather than 'community' endogamy, even as acceptance and legitimation in terms of (say) "as long as they are Brahmins, we don't mind" is growing and even if the grounds of legitimation have shifted from ritualist assertions to those mounted on "cultural compatibility".

Moreover, in a very foundational sense, family is where caste gets its most effective mode of embodiment and reproduction:

In any case, to say that 'family' is now becoming more important is not of itself to indicate any sea-change since family pedigree is precisely what caste has always been about (Quigley 1994: 37).

Apart from the continuing significance of endogamy, we also attempted to point out that even the everyday fields of interaction of our respondents - spaces that are ostensibly secularised - are overwhelmingly contained within the Brahmin fold. This is a point that Sivaprasad's study (1987), albeit on a different register, too corroborates. These interactive fields might have, in normative terms, very little to do with the fact of one's casteness. For instance, these individuals or families might not deliberately choose to seek out and interact with each other solely because they are Brahmins. And what is more, given their contexts - largely urban and middle class - they are today faced with greater choices and networks of interaction. But the fact that they still cluster around and look up to each other for a sense of security and comfort is a testimony to the resilience of 'caste' in providing a moral and meaningful frame through which to make sense of one's lifeworlds. One can still gather a coherent and unifying structure of ideas and feelings that binds and formulates the contemporary Brahmin community.

In his 1996a, Beteille is far more guarded, even as he largely makes the same assertion. He argues that both the dimensions of caste - those of quotidian practices and of morality - are unmistakably losing their legitimacy. This is definitely the case, he asserts, in the case of the urban middle classes, even if for the rural "cultivators, artisans
and others" they might still be more legitimate and meaningful. He suggests that caste is no more a "complete system" that it was before. Thus:

Until the nineteenth century, Hindu intellectuals could argue with force and conviction about the significance and value of caste. Their counterparts of today, who are still mainly upper caste, have lost the capacity not only to explain and justify caste, but even to describe it coherently (ibid: 162).

And that:

If caste distinctions were considered significant and legitimate by most members of society, and particularly by those belonging to the upper castes whose descendents in contemporary India are precisely the ones who are most ambivalent and troubled about its meaning and legitimacy today (ibid: 160-1).

Accordingly caste today is a "truncated system" (ibid: 161). The future of caste lies with politics, and not in being a moral frame regulating the everyday lives of the urban middle classes and a resource for meaning making. For the latter, caste is a cloak, a readily available and easily understood language, a metaphor to talk about other, more significant and relevant signifiers of status - such as education, occupation and income. The implications of these claims are made explicit by Fuller (1996: 16-7) as he summates Beteille:

To extend Beteille's argument further than he explicitly does so himself- status distinctions may be expressed in the language of caste, but they may no longer pertain to caste hierarchy, which has lost all its legitimacy, or even to caste as an array of culturally distinct groups which has become largely irrelevant in comparison with mainly class-based cultural variations.

On these terms thus, the retrenchment of the urban middle classes "belonging to the upper castes" from the normative and even quotidian space of caste is doubly complete. Not only do they loath the increasing “casteism” in the political arena (in which ostensibly the future of caste lies) they also consider it morally reprehensible to think and act in terms of their caste identities. But if politics is going to overorternine the trajectories of caste and if any caste, which begins to populate the space of the urban middle classes, will definately move away from caste, then what remains of ‘caste’? Indeed, how do the Brahmins we spoke with, read about, and observed match up to these claims? If politics is where caste's present and future lie, then evidently Brahmins will have very little role to play in the process. Neither do they have the numbers to retain their significance nor is the "politics of patronage" that supposedly enabled them to thwart the logic of representation from taking fuller effect successful any longer (see Jaffrelot 2003). What is more, Brahmins themselves increasingly realise this, as we saw.
in our sixth chapter: not only do they articulate their retrenchment from the space of politics as a direct fall-out of the growing “casteism” in the polity (like the "urban middle classes" of Beteille do), they also put to work a distinctly non-substantialised, definitely relational idea of being a Brahmin in making sense of their own retrenchment. They suggest that the 'Brahmin' has never been meant to occupy seats of power - even as he is the most knowledgeable and has always wielded unquestioned influence over the powers-that-be. They point instead to the continuing dominance of the community in positions of decision-making - such as the higher echelons of the bureaucracy, academia, judiciary, the 'knowledge economy' etc. - in order to recreate a classical (scriptural?) and structurally-ordained Brahmin. So, even while being out of the space of caste and politics in an empirical sense, is the Brahmin in it or not?

Further, if Brahmins are literally and metaphorically outside the space of politics - supposedly the most dominant space for the survival of caste as an institution - then what is happening to the other, more traditional, spaces of influence of caste? If it is endogamy, then the Brahmins seem to jealously guard it, as we saw in chapter three (see particularly the fourth section). If it is strictures founded on rules of ritual purity, it has weakened and yet assumed a different shape, a different legitimacy. In some of the testimonies presented in the third and sixth chapters, the respondents were in no way jettisoning the sacralised imagination of the Brahmin. In seeking to reinterpret the 'given' idea of the Brahmin, they were according it a newer legitimacy as indeed deploying it as a significant cognitive resource to make sense of their worlds. If it is a social network or a 'habitus' within which lifeworlds are constructed and on which dispositions, tastes and structures and frames of action are built, then 'casteness' continues to be a significant, if not the sole, resource for the Brahmins. Further, do they mean by caste, jati or varna? In many ways, it is both.

Our substantive chapters, accordingly, have been an attempt at gaining a measure of the perceptual space of particular caste subjects and of caste action today. The non-Brahmin retrieval of the Brahmin as the 'Other' - not merely for its own self but also as embodying the very anti-thesis of the normative frame of being modern - has had very deeply felt effects on the formation of the contemporary Brahmin self. Indeed, in constitutive ways it is this othering that renders the oscillation on the scales of identity and identification (which the Brahmin experiences) a more urgent and real one. Nonetheless, even as the non-Brahmin challenge acts as a crucial resource for the
formulation of a coherent modern Brahmin identity, and brings home to the Brahmin the urgent need to speak as a secular (or 'non-caste') voice, it does not exhaust this enunciatory space. The intersections in the space of 'voice' too are **definitive** of the making of the modern Brahmin identity. We showed - in the fourth chapter - the varied ways in which this concatenation of voices has meant a series of shifting **identifications**. The internal contestations, the challenges from outside that interrogate both the secularising function of the Brahmin as well as the continued signification of the ritual status that he wields - it is in responding to these often oxymoronic pulls that a deeply ambivalent Brahmin identity emerges.

As our later chapters (five and six) disclose, the non-Brahmin othering has remained enduring. That is to say, it did not subside with the 'resolution' (by way of a regime of quotas) of the non-Brahmin challenge in the **1920s**. It has remained critical, even to this day, to all the registers of Brahmin identity that we have presented, be it the space of the caste association, the testimonies of Brahmin individuals and their families, and the reflective commentary of its literateurs and official subjects. The associational efforts, right from the pioneering efforts of the early decades of the last century to the present, have consistently engaged in a dialogue with this state of being othered. Not the least, even at the level of the individuals and their families, this othered status has been foundational in structuring the ways in which the self as Brahmin is evaluated and related with. Being a caste self gets articulated on all these registers as a burden - a burden that has been unfairly imposed on the self. Indeed this, coupled with its unique 'secularising' experience - its exposure really to the modern space of jobs and education - should have been the most pressing reason for this caste community to complete the journey (that Beteille and Fuller chart as the immanent trajectory of caste) towards a total unmaking of even the substantialised avatars of caste. That this has not happened among the Brahmins and that they, on the contrary, in many ways continue to use their 'caste' knowledge and experience as indeed the caste identity in their narratives of self is obvious from our rendering of the dynamics of the Brahmin identity.

So, then, is the continued deployment of the caste idiom a mere case of obfuscation or even an active instance of misrecognition by the Brahmin that is deployed

On this, more below in the next section that we have titled 'of secularisation and individuation: explanatory sketches'.
only because there is a reassurance of the familiar in it? It is apparent that it is more
crucial and grounded to the contemporary Brahmin self than that. The Brahmin continues
to make use of his 'casteness' as a critical resource in formulating a sense of self. Of
course, the significations of being Brahmin, the meanings and investments that are made
in the category of Brahmin, have all undergone significant transformations over the
course of the last one century. Also, these transformations have been definitely in the
direction of an increasing dilution of the normative hold of the ritual status-centred frame
of caste. Even the quotidian caste practices - such as the rules of commensality and
touchability - are steadily being delinked from the definitions and adequacy of
Brahminhood. The performance of practices such as the sandhyavandane is increasingly
left to individual discretion; families are indeed becoming the regulatory (or otherwise)
institutions in either maintaining or shedding the Brahminical practices. Endogamy
however still holds its legitimacy, jealously guarding the boundaries of the community
from getting breached. Notwithstanding all such changes, narrated in the course of the
third chapter, these cannot be taken to mean an unequivocal break from the 'past'.
Through the testimonies of our respondents, we presented the complex ways in which
many such practices as indeed their normative legitimacies feed back into the lives of the
community.

Such oscillations also mark the space of the Brahmin association. In presenting
the various kinds of Brahmin associations - probably a unique feature that obtains only in
the case of the Brahmins - we sought to demonstrate the continuing significance of the
non-Brahmin challenge in bringing to life and legitimacy the space of the corporate
Brahmin associations. It is also this challenge that enables the proliferation and enduring
existence of caste-specific associations. The non-Brahmin articulation of the Brahmin
identity renders the very idea of a Brahmin association an illegitimate one even before it
takes birth. It is precisely in seeking to negotiate with this state of immanent illegitimacy
that the associations seek to constantly move between claims of community and
associational solidarity, but which, in this enunciatory space, is grafted on to a different
plane. While defending the idea of the Brahmin association, activists are forced to
foreground an agenda that perceives the persona of the Brahmin as a value, one that had
to be achieved - even by the Brahmins themselves. More sharply posed, on our terms,
this means that the Brahmin identity as a mere associational solidarity can and ought to be
transformed into an inalienable sense of community. But this positioning, we also
argued, undercuts the very logic of caste associations, which definitionally demand a putative and immanent casteness, of being born Brahmin whose existence remains irrespective of the individual relationship with one's casteness and the attendant demands. The histories of Brahmin associations – particularly the corporate ones - have always had to endure this vacillation or, more accurately, oscillation.

Such deeply embedded and embodied dilemmas obtain most critically in the persona of the contemporary Brahmin individual, whom we encountered more fully in the sixth chapter. Continuing to be marked by the non-Brahmin othering, the Brahmins foreground a dominant sense of burden in evaluating their caste identity and location. The primacy that the 'Other' (the non-Brahmin) seeks to attach to it (that is, Brahmin) is sought to be vigorously denied by articulating the identity proffered by caste as being incidental or peripheral to its existence. It is, to recall a term used by a Brahmin in the journal *Mysore Star*, merely a "list" to which they all belong by default (Ch. 4, p. 152 above). However, and all too paradoxically perhaps, the logic of this retrieval is undercut by thick notions such as *samskara* (character and codes of conduct) that uniquely and exclusively endow the Brahmin with his ‘Brahminness’, and a consequent logic of immanence attached to it. Such recuperations of caste self as inhabiting the space of 'community' is most forcefully articulated when the respondents speak of a self under siege - a 'siege' that is not always the making of the non-Brahmin Other but a more fundamental mismatch between the logic of the times and an inexorable ethics of the self. The narratives of identity and identification that the contemporary Brahmins place on record are again, thus, defined by an oscillation between 'community' and 'association' sense of self.

Can all this be understood by situating ourselves within the framework of 'substantialisation'? The answer broadly is in the negative. Most importantly, the thesis of substantialisation renders caste action determined and deterministic, in that it carries a certain assumption of hardness and internal homogeneity attached to it. Consequently, it does not allow for an equivocation vis-a-vis one's casteness. It also carries an evolutionary idea of how castes transform, of a passage of caste from 'structure' to 'substance' (see pp. 35-7 and 53-4 above for an elucidation). Clearly, an account, which allows the caste actors to remain responsive to the *structure* of caste even as they make new meanings out of their caste identities, is in order. In the sections that follow, we work towards an architectonic of such an account, implicating secularisation and...
individuation and the contending logics of 'community' and 'association'. Our final section, of course, is a projection ahead and into the future.

II

Of secularisation and individuation: explanatory sketches

For more than two centuries, philosophers and social scientists have predicted the death of God and the decline of religiosity. It may not be possible to review all these arguments here, most of which can be subsumed under the heading ‘secularisation’ or ‘de-sacralisation’. A popular hypothesis postulates a negative relationship between economic wealth and (church) religiosity. According to the Bible, it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to get to heaven. In taking up this old idea, we might expect that religiosity increases under deteriorating economic conditions and declines under improving economic conditions. Others have attributed a different meaning to the same principle and derived from it a long-term trend. In particular, Inglehart (1990) argues that traditional religion satisfies the need for shelter and safety, but the unprecedented wealth of post-war Western societies has, for the first time in history, satisfied these basic needs, thereby destroying the basis of church religion. Thus, whereas in the early stages of industrialisation materialism and church religiosity co-existed, the traditional forms of church religiosity are expected to gradually wither away in advanced industrial societies. In contrast, Stark and Bainbridge (1985) have argued that religion will persist because it provides "general compensators" for not directly satisfiable desires.

According to a second approach, the decline of church religiosity is largely due to the development of 'occidental rationality'. Max Weber is often credited with outlining the basic features of this process (Collins 1986 has the details, although Weber's own writings [1978] are also useful). Obviously, underlying the whole process of western rationalisation is the belief that the world is calculable, predictable and controllable (cf. Wilson 1976). These beliefs, it is held, apply as much to the physical world as to the psychological and social worlds. Western rationality disenchant the world because God is no longer required in explanations of natural and social phenomena, each of which are seen as the outcome of this-worldly processes. Moreover, the basic tenets of a rational science may come into conflict with the requirements of religion (see also Schluchter 1981).
Other authors stress the effects of functional or structural differentiation (Dobbelaere 1985; Luhmann 1995) on secularisation and individuation. Functional differentiation, it is claimed, has produced societal subsystems, which have become increasingly specialised in their functions, and some have developed increasingly rational organisations. Doubts are expressed whether religion still has a societal function in a rational world, especially since control is assumed to be no longer based on religious or moral principles. What is more, it is held that religion may even be a menace to modern, rational institutions. Accordingly, functional rationality typical of a societalised environment may conflict with the value rationality of religion, which is community oriented (Fenn 1972). Thus secularisation is claimed to be more than a social-structural process. Indeed, as Peter Berger has maintained, "(i)t affects the totality of cultural life and ideation, and may be observed ... most important of all, in the rise of science as an autonomous, thoroughly secular perspective on the world (1967: 107)

Following on from these arguments, others claim that the religious subsystem has not only lost its function at the macro level, but that religious and other beliefs are also transformed at the individual level. Since science and the technologies dependent on it make up the major part of modern education, it is held that the content of learning is desacralised (Wilson 1976: 68, 128). Indeed, as Durkheim suggested, the more general and vague God becomes, the more removed He is from this world and the more ineffective (1964: 168-9). The same could be held for traditions associated with belief in an entire sacred realm, so that in a society where role relations have become impersonal and segmented, observance of the sacred seems an anachronism.6

These formulations link the idea of secularisation at the macro level to changes at the micro level. The link between the 'impersonal society' and the sacred as an abstract notion is set within this framework because the impersonal and specialised character of rationally organised institutions seems to be a typical experience of modern citizens. In fact, one may extend the idea of individuation associated with modernity in this context. Broadly, the individuation thesis about the transformation of beliefs and practices under conditions of modernity has been elaborated within the framework of neo-functionalism.7

---

6 For a contrary view, see of course the later Durkheim, especially of *The elementary forms of the religious life* (1965).

7 For the content and thrust of neo-functionalist reasoning, see Alexander (1985). Luhmann (1998) has much to say on the individuating dimensions of modernity, as also Giddens (1991); while for the Indian context,
At its core, the thesis is rooted in the assumption that, in contrast to the non-modern (or pre-modern), religious and other matters can be decided by autonomous individuals. Since individuated subjects as self-respecting persons demanding dignity and equal concern from others can satisfy their needs and aspirations from a large basket of competing religious and non-religious offers, their belief system (as also the structure of their practice) becomes a kind of patchwork of heterogeneous elements. More sophisticated sociological arguments use complex notions of collective identity and identity construction to address this state of affairs. In traditional societies, it is argued, a homogeneous lifeworld gave people their identity; whereas, in 'modern' times, people live in a kind of disengagement, with the lifeworld of family, neighbourhood, community and formal and informal association becoming dissociated from the social system and its subsystems. Typical of this dissociation is the privatisation of the space of belief in the world of the subsystems (Luhmann 1998). In advanced modernity - sometimes referred to as postmodernity - individualisation is assumed to extend into the lifeworld, and a de-traditionalisation of the lifeworld is held to occur (Giddens (1990: Ch.5). This, it is claimed, has led to a 'liberation' in which people faced the new experiences of having to make their own decisions, their own choices, to build their own identity (Beck 1992). Collective identities are held to no longer obtain, and fixed identities may only survive in older generations.8

It should be clear, then, that although 'secularisation' has been used to designate a process of long-term change involving specifically religious beliefs, value-orientations, and institutional functioning, it could be made to yield a perspective on individuation as well. What is more, secularisation nuances (in the sense of adding dimension to) the process of individuation. To be sure, approaching secularisation from this perspective has two advantages. First, by analysing long-term change in beliefs and practices, it becomes apparent that changes in norms and values often cannot be reduced to the emergence of some new preferences or needs. Rather, 'religious' change (if one were to so restrict secularisation) may be better understood as a complex process of re-interpreting old, even

---

8 Contemporary events of course seem to suggest otherwise. Particularly after September 11, 2001, the world seems a transformed place with contesting imaginations and indeed the postulation of fixed collective identities.
abstract, value concepts. Secondly, conceptualising secularisation as a process of changing interpretations of value concepts and thereby connecting up with individuation emphasises the role of intellectuals and institutions in the process of change. Since the translation of values into coherent sets of preferences and norms requires special skills, the task is frequently assigned to 'experts' or specialized institutions. As long as they have a monopoly of interpreting norms and values, they may also influence the pace of religious and purely secular change. However, it is important to analyse not only the influence of institutions on changes in beliefs and practices, but also to investigate the consequences of institutional decay (indeed, and not often seen as so, an aspect of individuation). More particularly, is the loss of institutional power accompanying secularisation also accompanied by increasing value pluralism and value instability (read, individuation), as many conservative authorities suspect?

In sum: interest in the secularisation process can translate into a concern with not only aspects of religiosity, but also changes in behaviour, changes in beliefs and a concern with whether moral norms are more heterogeneous among people emancipated from institutionalised practices (whether these be connected with particular religions or not). Accordingly, ‘secularisation’, although a term used to designate changes in religious behaviour - the decline in church religiosity, for instance - can be extended to capture a wider gamut of changes in non-religious or purely secular realms as well. The latter scale of changes is connected particularly with the processes of modernity and modernisation, so that 'secularisation' may be approached as marking out further dimensions within a modern logic of the individuation of identities and selves.

We have made much of secularisation of caste in invoking the persona of the secularising Brahmin in our previous chapters. Of course, as our delineation above makes it amply clear, the concept of secularisation has primarily, if not exclusively, been deployed to animate debates on the relationship that obtains between religion and society in a modernising context, and what is more in the western context.9 The overpowering debate on secularisation has largely missed the attention of the Indian sociologists. In the Indian context, it is 'secularism' and not secularisation that has occupied the minds of the academia, particularly recently in the wake of what has been called the

9 The *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, among others, is a good source for current debates on the question.
'communalisation' of society. This seems singularly unfortunate because, as we have been maintaining off the explanatory sketches recounted above, the debate on secularisation (even as it remains mired in the question of religion) is open to the conceptual possibility of acting as a grid on which any discussion of a social formation negotiating with 'traditional' identity-markers in a modernising context can be mounted. Moreover, it can also facilitate a charting of the processes of individuation within identities and identifications as well. The same however cannot be said of the Indian debate on secularism.

This is unfortunate, for secularisation as a concept and as standing for a social process could be profitably used outside the sphere of religion - for instance, as we have attempted to talk off (and about) the 'secularising' Brahmin. Through this figure, we have sought to frame the varied, often contending, pulls and pressures that a caste self experiences in a context which increasingly seeks to legitimate itself by de-legitimising aspects of a 'traditional' (albeit changing) scheme of things. This is as much a secularising demand, as the demand to secularise vis-a-vis one's religious affiliations and affectations. Indeed, as it is being increasingly accepted in the debate on secularisation, the demand to 'secularise' need not and has not effected a complete erasure of 'traditional' identifications or even their significance in people's lives. Thus even as the Brahmin self copes up with the demand to secularise, it in many crucial ways remains 'Brahmin', a sacred signifier. Even as one admits to this possibility, however, it should not lead us either to dismiss the influence that the demand to secularise exerts on the caste self or, in relation to our problematic, constrict the ability of the Brahmin self to mediate its effects completely on its terms and with success. It is a window into these processes of negotiation that we have sought by implicating the idea, indeed the figure, of the 'secularising' Brahmin self. To be sure, secularisation is a process that all castes have been negotiating, but Brahmins, given the historical processes both embedding and disembedding the specific instances of this fold, seem to present an acute instance of the process. The demand to secularise has also been especially stringent for the Brahmins

In prefiguring the process of secularisation in this way, it is important to note, we have sought to make a crucial distinction that many scholars (of course epitomised by the modernisation theorists but also evident in the works of the recent celebrities such as Giddens) ignore. Secularisation need not necessarily be unique to or even equivalent to modernisation. That is, a demand to secularise need not necessarily be a demand to modernise, and the latter could take shape even in non-modern or post-traditional contexts.
because, invariably, the non-Brahmin 'Other' seeks to over-sacralise the persona of the Brahmin in its recuperation. ‘The Brahmin’ came to symbolise all that the 'traditional' caste order stood for and legitimised. This often leads the Brahmin self to engage in a complex process of reconfiguring its identity - a process that involves simultaneous acts of denial and recuperation.

More importantly, the theme of the secularisation of caste accents the processes of the 'substantialisation' of caste (if any). In negotiating with the demand to secularise - that is, to subject itself to an overt delegitimisation or even a privatisation of the space of caste-mediated belief and practice - and consequently in seeking out newer grounds of justification, caste entities move towards becoming aggregative formations founded on a will-to-power. The moot point however - and this is where, to reiterate, we think the thesis of 'substantialisation' confronts its limit - is whether this process is ever complete in that it comprehensively obliterates the terms of an older moral order. And, what is more, if it does not, then whether it obtains merely as a cloak (a metaphor?) seeking to mask or even to actively misrecognise what is really something else? Clearly, there is more to the processes of secularisation and individuation than what the substantialisation theme can command.

IV

The logic of ‘community’ and ‘association’

To be sure, one can accept much of the preceding analysis without adopting the whole conceptual framework. Even though one may be uneasy about the notions of identity-construction and individuation - an unease that is even more accentuated for contexts such as the Indian one, where plasticity of identity and identification need not imply elasticity - hardly anyone disputes that individuals are now confronted with a larger number of alternatives in the lifeworld than in the past. But, and this is important, as our study of a particular range of caste subjects (namely, Brahmins) has revealed, the availability of options both determines and is determined by the relative homogeneity and stability of structurally-ordained beliefs and practices. It is this duality of determination that has to be captured, and we strive to do so in terms of a schema of 'community' and 'association'. While the schema is a derivative of the results encoded by our study of the dynamics of Brahmin identity in Karnataka, in documenting the latter we now seek to present it as an encompassing framework undergirding the whole investigation. It is towards an explication of this schema that we shall now turn, of course in the light of our
study of Brahmin identity and identification(s). In the process, a key motif of our investigation, namely, the idea of the secularising Brahmin, will find further elaboration.

In grafting the entire spectrum of caste-based invocations, recuperations, enunciations and significations onto a logic of community and association, one is of course drawing on the inspiration provided by Ferdinand Toennies’ (1955) classic statement on the subject of *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft*. For Toennies, all social formations evolve from a state of ‘community’ (that is, *gemeinschaft*) to one of 'association' (*gesellschaft*). He seemed to deploy these concepts less as formal or formalised types than as terms designating forms of social relations. This perception itself had its echoes in most of the classical sociological thinkers like Durkheim, Marx and Weber. But often such perceptions work on a presumption of determinacy - the terms ‘community’ and 'association' taken to represent contrasting types of social organisation - and are often served up against an evolutionary backdrop. Surely such a mode of characterisation is problematic, and it should be evident that we, in invoking Toennies, neither partake of his model nor scale transitions by means of an evolutionary schema. Social theorisation has evidently come a long way off.

The intent behind the invocation of the 'community-and-association' schema, nevertheless, lies simply in its ability to gesture in the direction of the contradictory bases of caste action today - their oscillation between contrasting senses of 'community' and 'association'. The sense of community, of a being-in-common, invokes, as Toennies and many others following in his wake have suggested - Upadhya (2001) details the career of the concept in social theory - a certain transcendent character, a recognition that obtains on a moral collective plane beyond the calculations of contract and interest. Although enmeshed in social relations, 'community' is taken to be the primary resource of legitimacy and normativity in those relations, and thus obtains as an involuntary, inalienable and accordingly 'natural' commitment or solidarity offering the participants a collective sense of belonging. As the popular dictionary definition spells it out, community is a state of "joint ownership of liability, being shared and being held in common" (*Concise Oxford Dictionary* 1976: 204). It is, in short, a thick notion. The idea of 'association', on the other hand, seems a much thinner one, and can be usefully deployed as a form of identification and/or recognition that is more malleable and open to
change, contestation and disavowal.\textsuperscript{11} It is an axis that is much softer and subject to the vagaries of individuation and individuals. In being the very anti-thesis of ‘community’, it stands for a voluntary, deliberated choice to associate.

In suggesting that the contemporary state of caste identity and identification can be approximated as a definitional oscillation between the two states - embodied by the terms community and association - which, it is important to note, are not mutually exclusive to each other, we demonstrate the possibilities of transcending the current closures that contemporary caste studies face. But before getting on to this tack, we need to firm up what our substantive chapters has been registering, namely, the idea of the secularisation of caste, and the attendant notion of individuation, as obtaining within the Brahmin fold.

The contemporary Brahmin 'community' - note, used here as a shorthand symbol for a particular, numerically defined, grouping - in very important senses foregrounds the prevarication of being a 'caste' today. The 'traditional' moral order is plainly not going away. Even as it has lost legitimacy in many ways in the views of the Brahmins, their retrieval of it is in no way marked by summary rejection. The negotiation with the fact of being Brahmin - especially, of being a caste self that was/is driven to respond to a very active and fundamental 'othering' (silently from within, but overtly from without) - can be mapped as oscillating between the senses of 'community' and 'association' as disclosed above. By 'oscillation' we do not mean that Brahmins at any given point of time would deliberately decide to invoke one sense over the other, nor is it meant to bring into focus a sort of schizophrenic self. The idea we are keen on foregrounding is, as we mentioned, a duality of determination - that caste (as a structurally 'given' resource of identity and identification) both determines and is determined by the creative ways in which a people who possess it as a socio-cognitive resource put it to use in organising their lifeworlds and derive an ontological sense of security. This is also a point we made above while explicating the idea of the secularisation of caste - that even as the Brahmin is subject to the transformative processes of the latter kind, these do not leave him dispossessed of the sentiments and structures of caste (in a word, of being 'Brahmin').

\textsuperscript{11} Of course, the personification of 'community' can obtain at various levels, including that of association as deployed here. But the key to 'community' is its transcendent character - that distinguishes the community from what might otherwise be called an association, be it a group, locality, family or even political society. For a thought on this, see Frazer (2000 \textit{passim})
What is obtaining is an active process of negotiation in which each transforms the other and gets transformed in turn.

Evidently, this framework cannot be superimposed uncomplicatedly onto the thesis of substantialisation. Unlike the latter, by introducing the dynamic of community and association, we have sought to point to the simultaneity of caste being (in terms of the Dumontian register) both relative and substantive to individuals and groups alike. It is also a suggestion to remain sensitive to the different levels at which 'caste' is - or particular castes are - undergoing transformation. What happens at the level of castes as relational social groups need not necessarily reflect what is happening within a caste or even to individuals who are, as it were, caste-d. 'Caste as community' is often deployed to signify the state in which one's casteness - of being a caste self- remains the primary, if not the sole, universe of meanings and legitimacy. Conversely, ‘caste as association’ is made to stand for a state in which casteness signifies a mere aggregation - a loose conglomerate, an association which might not be binding, either morally or emotionally; perhaps standing in for a mere reassurance of the familiar.

The terms of this dichotomisation could nonetheless be made to work on behalf of the substantialisation thesis. Dirks interestingly, but only fleetingly, uses these terms when he attempts to make sense of the process of substantialisation:

Caste may no longer convey a sense of community that confers civilizational identity to the Indian subcontinent, but it is still the primary form of local identity and, in certain contexts, from Dalits to Brahmins, translates the local into recognizably subcontinental idioms of association far more powerful than any other single category of community (Dirks 2002: 7).

This is another productive way of retrieving the ideas of 'community' and 'association' underscoring our investigation. However, the formulation remains too closely wedded to Dumont's thesis - ironically enough Dirks remains an important luminary in the post-Dumontian approaches to caste - in that it invests the "idioms of association" with a hardness, a substantiveness betokening our sense of community. The formulation that we foregrounded following Toennies was one in which the idioms of association are definitionally amorphous and peripheral as opposed to those of the community.¹²

Again, the self-contradictory nature of the process of substantialisation that Fuller refers to can be redeployed so as to make sense of the very structure of oscillation that the perceptual space of Brahmins exhibits. However, this ‘self-contradictoriness’ is much

¹² Cf. also our fn. 11 above.
more fundamental to the contemporary Brahmin identity than a mere ‘privatisation’ of the space of caste or even the increasing differentiation that obtains within each caste in terms of class, status and power (as identified by Fuller). What is more, retrieving this state of being that the Brahmin finds himself in the grip of as a contradiction might also be misleading.

Pointedly, such contradictory bases of caste action are rendered much more central and acute in the state of being Brahmin, for it has had to negotiate with a very articulate othering of the self in the context of the non-Brahmin articulation. Its very casteness - of being Brahmin - was rendered illegitimate and anachronistic vis-a-vis the demands and normativities of the present. The interrogation, or, at the least, an active negotiation, of one's caste self was thus not only immediate but also inevitable for the Brahmin. Thus, paradoxically enough, the 'burden' of being a caste self is probably the most acute in the Brahmin - a feature that was unmistakably visible in the respondents' narratives about themselves and their families. At any rate, resolving the demands of this historical moment has not been unequivocal; nor has it been complete. The Brahmin persona in responding to the non-Brahmin othering has not unambiguously disowned the identity and identification of being Brahmin. On the contrary, it has sought to actively bring into its formulations of self the 'given' (traditional?) significations of associational worth and community belonging.

Of course, the possibilities of disowning the caste identity and the attendant significations exist before individual Brahmins, perhaps to an extent that was hitherto unavailable. This is particularly since the moral force behind the codes of conduct originating from the fact of being Brahmin have been diluted (without losing their imperativeness), but also since such choices have begun to obtain from within other identities and identifications that a person takes as his or her own - be it class, occupation, or quite simply the fact of change. The non-Brahmin othering, if anything, only heightens and even demands such a repudiation. But that precisely is the point - that in spite of the apparent 'burden' and in spite of the availability of alternative ways of imagining the self, the Brahmin does not engage in summarily evicting his/her casteness.

---

13 We need to consistently remind ourselves of caste's historicity that we made much of in the course of our introductory chapter. Thus such statements of comparison - 'now' compared to the 'past' etc. - must remain alert to the historical rootedness of such time frames, and not indulge in constructing timeless pasts as against a momentously transformative present.
Or, stating it differently, that the caste identity continues to be resilient enough to remain a significant resource for both meaning-making and making possible coherent action.

In the third chapter, we presented a schematic historical trajectory of the Brahmin community of Karnataka. Through a deployment of disparate sources of data - that included the Mysore Representative Assembly Reports, Backward Classes Committee/Commissions' Reports, auto/biographies, and of course the secondary scholarly literature - we argued that the specific ways in which the community underwent the processes of urbanisation and modernisation structured the very possibilities in which the modern Brahmin identity retrieved itself. This, we have been maintaining, can be seen as a process of secularisation and of individuation. To be sure, a great deal of scholarly work - in particular that seeking to understand the non-Brahmin movements - rest content with recuperating the Brahmin mostly as an embodiment of a will-to-power and of a will-to-masquerade as a secular self. Such retrievals of the modern Brahmin self are of course true but only partially so. We did, in a fairly detailed manner, narrate the Brahmin's predominance in what were increasingly becoming key spaces (the modern bureaucracy and education, for instance) in generating social and cultural capitals, the different subtle and not-so-subtle ways that were deployed in consolidating this dominance while denying the same to the others, the remarkably successful reproduction over generations of this position of dominance, and so on. These unique trajectories place the Brahmin in a position to emerge as a secular self that ostensibly partakes very little of the casteness that is vested within.

Nonetheless, it is not often that scholarship has commented upon the dimensions of this positionality for the very selfhood of the Brahmin, one that is seeking to formulate a legitimate identity for itself in the modern situation. This has meant allowing a space for the Brahmin to reflect upon his own state of self. In doing so, we have looked beyond the scholarly literature on the 'non-Brahmin movement' and the data produced by the state, and turned to the narratives of the Brahmins themselves - present in different forms such as the autobiographies and reminiscences, the debates in the newspapers of the late colonial period but most importantly in the narratives of self that our respondents (both caste association activists and individual Brahmins) elucidated. It is by allowing for such voices to speak out that we have come to realise that the story of the modern Brahmin identity is not a simple one of hegemony, whether abetted by a will to secularise or not. Conceptualising 'caste as secular self (see Dhareshwar 1993 for a piecemeal
formulation) does not allow for a concomitant dynamics of a 'self under siege' that the Brahmins experience; nor, importantly, does it account for the demands of secularisation itself.

The dynamics, clearly, has to do with the availability of a description - from within the narratives foregrounded by our study, it has to do not only with a sense of siege, but also the confounding logics of 'community' and 'association' that we have been alluding to - and requires also an imagination of agency. The substantive chapters have each presented a complex process of negotiation with the demands of the new normative order and the Brahmins own unique positioning in that order - a positioning that is at once dominant and embattled. Lest it be misunderstood, we need to reiterate the point again. The recuperation of the self as a secularised one has been constitutive of the Brahmin's ability to be resilient even in the face of an articulate othering. But as we witnessed through the course of our expositions, the modern Brahmin self has also been at a loss in coming to terms with its casteness. The agency of the Brahmin - presented herein at the individual, associational and historical levels - has fundamentally been an ambivalent one - at times deeply dependent on its 'Brahminness' (that of being and becoming Brahmin) representing the logic of 'community' and at other times willing to or drawn to repudiate the very state of being Brahmin, representing the movement towards the logic of 'association'. In bringing to life this complex identity and identification, Brahmins do not summarily retrench the old values and meanings. Instead, they engage in a process of re-interpreting such resources in the context of the world find themselves in.

Of course, the question of the availability of a description and the attendant requirement of an imagination of agency is more complex than what our formulations above have sought to record. Because, again in keeping with the contending logics of 'community' and 'association' instantiated by our narrations, the dynamics of the Brahmin field is also a matter of an 'association' aspiring to be community and a 'community' unable to shed the dimensions of its associational life.\textsuperscript{14} Quite clearly, the demands of secularisation as bearing upon and borne by Brahmin castes - mark the plural - entail classifications and identifications that defy the Toennies dichotomy between \textit{gemeinschaft} (community) and \textit{gesellschaft} (association). The anxieties and dilemmas

\textsuperscript{14} Cf. again fii.4 above, and the portion of the text from which this springs.
writ large over the space of Brahmin associations, their variety notwithstanding (Ch. 5 has the details), implicate a question about losing out the concept of community and the boundaries and membership that go with it. The challenges before the space of Brahmin castes and their associations (both corporate and caste-specific ones) are, we suppose, clear. Without hard boundaries circumscribing a community and a clear notion of its membership, how does one articulate a sense of agency? And yet, if the secularising experience that particular Brahmin castes have been privy to is further crystallised, would it not be the unmaking of both a community and the peculiar facets of its associational life?

Surely there cannot be determinate answers to these precise questions. All the same, it has been primarily in order to steer clear of the partial retrievals of the modern Brahmin self, while remaining active to the singular significance of the demands of secularisation on the spaces of caste action, that we foreground the dynamics of community and association. It is nowhere an unambiguous, conscientious steering away from casteness or a sense of 'community'; nor, on the other hand, is it a simple story of associational peculiarities and communal belonging. It is in some sense both: of nested boxes and complex networks, the fact really of community and association respectively. Consequently, it needs reiterating that the 'community-association' dyad by itself cannot do all the work of explanation, as indeed summarise the precise ways in which caste structure and sentiment successfully forges complexes of action and gets people to act on behalf of and in terms of a 'casteness' that they carry around as their own. For instance, the spaces of the caste associations (the problems notwithstanding) demand a harder sense of identification with the category of being and becoming Brahmin. Paradoxically enough, these very spaces even while apparently speaking in terms of and drawing their legitimacy from a 'systemic' identity serve to undercut that very identity. What is more, the logic of this cross-cutting identification also serves up the ground for a resistance to the very space of the association. Even as a 'collective' on the moral plane is affirmed, its instrumentalisation through the modality of an association is resisted.

Thus one will have to strive to complicate the formulation of the 'community-association' dynamic. Identities in order to be socially meaningful cannot be eternally in a state of oscillation; they have to be working towards freezing this movement - to invest a certain sense of stability and seeming permanence to the oscillation. If identities do not appear unequivocal and unruffled and unambiguous, they cease to be of any worth. Often
the axis of identity and identification embodied in and by individuals and communities mediates the oxymoronic pulls of a sense of community, on the one hand, and of association on the other. Accordingly, the caste location serves at every point as both medium and outcome of the mediation between community and association. What is more, in obtaining thus, it persuades individuals and groups to act and think in terms of those identifications that they share and others provide. This can obtain even as ambivalence reigns large over the matrix of caste identification.

It is nevertheless important to emphasise that the logic of 'community' and 'association' - both as schema and as process constituting the field of action today - seeks to foreground the experiential and agential dimension of caste-mediated totalities. Particularly, in addressing this logic across the various registers of Brahmin identity, we have consistently recuperated a Brahmin self that is engaging itself in an act of reflexively enunciating its space. It is perhaps one of the routes to undertake the journey of making sense of caste action in our times, which successfully steers clear of the normative pitfalls (as recapitulated in Sect.1 above) characterising contemporary discussions of caste - scholarly and otherwise.

\[\text{Integuments for a sociological ethnography}\]

As already mentioned in our chapter on method, the work that has been represented here is not an ethnographic study in any classical manner. It shies away from claiming any 'totality' in its comprehension of the subject of inquiry and from recuperating itself in a monographic form. This, for sure, is an important step in disabusing the method of its anthropological biases, and to make it deployable in more complex settings that sociology, for one, has claimed as its own. The British sociologist, John Goldthorpe (2000), has cogently reminded us that ethnography, unlike survey research, has remained reticent in meeting the demands of methodological rules. According to him, in seeking a special status for itself by way of a 'reflexive' or 'critical' social science, ethnography has more often than not sidestepped the key issues of method - namely, of obeying a logic of inference (a matter of relating evidence and argument, that is) and of resolving the problem of variations in and across contexts. Again, in our chapter on method (especially PP. 70-2 above), we made clear the rationale by which we chose the locales in which we carried out our fieldwork and the ways in which we arrived at the sample, allowing thus the reader to evaluate the problems of variation and thus of
representativeness with regard to our study. These problems may yet remain, but quite clearly, in terms of our research focus and the consequent narration, the onus has been on capturing aspects of the world experienced by secularising Brahmins. This kind of determination, we believe [in deference to the logic of Goldthorpe (ibid.)], is itself an important step in rendering the ethnographic space of narration accept the 'same rules of the game' as other methods of sociological research.

The Brahmin identity and agency in contemporary times are obviously unfolding in much more complex locales than those addressed by classical anthropological studies. There are, consequently, a plethora of questions that a sociological ethnography of the Brahmin community would have to contend with, some of which our study has sough to foreground and help elucidate. The challenge, of course, is more context-specific studies in contemporary settings, sufficiently disaggregated to make sense of the patterning of caste action and identity choices obtaining today and yet not giving-up on a logic of relating evidence and argument. Quite clearly, we need to get at the evidence - innovations at the level of method, in the sense of experimenting with techniques of data collection are welcome. But we also need to be honing up our tools of argumentation, something which can follow independent of a fine-tuning of the methods of data-collection. Ideally, we need to be stringing these two imperatives, although commanding our methods need not be the same as giving sense to arguments.

Broadly, in keeping with this imperative then, we would urge the following from within the spaces foregrounded by our study of the dynamics of Brahmin identity in contemporary Karnataka. More than simple ethnographies of particular Brahmin communities, we also need to be crafting the possibility of a sociological ethnography between and across Brahmin castes in different regional contexts. Although we have hesitated in presenting our investigation in these very terms, there is a model of sociological ethnography to be contended with in our foregoing pages. All the same, we must concede that it needs more effective positioning and methodological innovation. But more substantively, a sociological ethnography of the Brahmin community in Karnataka would require that the theme of 'substantialisation of caste' - or, more accurately, on our terms, the secularisation of caste - be broached as an unfinished project of caste in modernity. This formulation cuts deep into the very logic of the Dumontian thesis, for, even as Barnett (1977) has shown that the 'narrative' of caste hierarchy gradually but surely loses out to the 'logic' of caste identities, the elements of an
evolutionary determinacy and gradualism undergirding this schema would have to be transcended. The problem with this assessment has as much to do with its inability to recognise the contradictory dimensions of the processes of change as a certain naivety about caste dynamics and structure. At any rate, any presumptive evaluatory schema building on notions of change and rupture is problematic and, as our data has shown, unsustainable. Thus if substantialisation - or again, on our terms, secularisation - is the modern condition of caste, then the process needs to be adduced to in our sociological and ethnographic descriptions in all its textures. It also logically follows that in the transformations being wrought upon this condition - can we term it late-modern, or even post-modern? - 'caste' even as a substantivised or secularised identity and entity might lose its critical purchase. The framework of a sociological ethnography would need to be attentive to these possibilities. On a different register, yet, the more recent and fashionable interest in identity-theorising and politics is far too obsessed with its retrieval of the idea of caste as social identity as an always-already resource of empowerment and assertion. Evidently, this axis of appraisal is not sufficiently sensitive to the problems of identification and of the specific ways in which a caste identity fluctuates in its self-recuperations. The formation and survivability of a social identity can and ought to be conceptualised as a product of a simultaneous project of self-realisation in which autonomy plays a crucial role along with a process of negotiation with 'others'. Of course, all this takes place in the context of a horizon of value and shared allegiances, even a community of belonging historically registered and cognitively mapped.

This must entail that caste as a system-induced identity-marker, a horizon of value and shared allegiances, serves to stabilise what our study has presented as the dynamic of 'community' and 'association' as obtaining within the Brahmin fold. Caste identities (like any social identity), for reasons of their own self-maintenance and perpetuation, seek to accord themselves a state of permanency and eternity. In doing so, they strive to demonstrate their immutability and character to be unruffled by contextual and historical pressures. Indeed, they have to succeed, in order to survive, in making those individuals and communities which embody such identities to act on their behalf and in their name. Now, while any strictly synchronic study of caste communities will drive home this point, a sociological ethnography of this dynamic can serve to complicate this presumption. 'Casteness' (of being a caste self, that is), even as it serves to contain the 'community-association' dyad, is equally subject to the pressures and pulls of this dynamic.
Accordingly, the primary impulse animating such a sociological ethnography would have to be making sense of the *contemporaneity* of caste. The present study has sought to stand as lowest common denominator of caste's contemporaneity, inflected of course to an 'upper caste' context. **Hopefully,** it has demonstrated the legitimacy of the conviction - at any rate, of this researcher - that caste continues to be *significant* as a crucial frame of self-understanding and categorisation and accordingly as a parameter of socially meaningful action in India. If this claim is accepted, then sociology - of all the social science disciplines - cannot run away from this fact.

Perhaps we need to be getting back to the instituting protocols of our study; only, this time round we can and ought to be naming explicitly the idea of a sociological ethnography.