Chapter One
Introduction: Contextualising Caste Studies

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

In many ways, this is not surprising because studies of caste abound in sociology, It has held a central axis for sociology in India. Caste studies have been a ground that sociology has claimed to be its own, and the other disciplines have not greatly contested the claim. This has led to the generation of various perspectives on caste, even as efforts to undermine the centrality of caste for a sociology of India have proceeded apace. Broadly this has meant a contradictory state of existence for Indian sociology, marked both by an essentialisation of caste (and caste-mediated realities) and its marginalisation, the attempt to efface caste from an assumed centrality and/or primacy. This contradictory state of existence can be - and has been - productive of a reorientation and recasting of caste studies. In this our introductory chapter, we reexamine the literature on caste, not with the intent of providing an exhaustive summary of the trends in the scholarship, but as a prelude to reorienting studies within the field. Our aim here is two-fold: on the one hand, to articulate a statement on perspectives in the sociology of caste that would be comprehensible by one and all without, for all that, lapsing into oversimplification, and, on the other hand, to lend some context to the historicising impulse undergirding this
study. The constitutive task here is to facilitate a kind of **agenda-setting** - at once, methodological and epistemological - for studying contemporary realities of caste, and not simply to achieve a substantive summation of the field of caste studies. In rendering the perspectives, therefore, we have sought to work off an extant secondary literature in the field.¹ It has to be kept in mind that the summation is only partial, often rendered at the cost of considerable violence to the rich and diverse nature of the works accomplished.

Even as we address the academic literature on caste in terms of the perspectives underwriting them, the claim is certainly not one of an argument for the conceptual determinacy of the categories posed in them - to oppose, say, the **anthropological** perspective on caste with the **sociological engagement** with the phenomenon. It has been repeatedly emphasised, in the Indian context at least, that the disciplinary orientations of anthropology and sociology converge; indeed that the distinction between these two disciplines is largely blurred, even vacuous. As Veena Das admits: "In my own usages ... there is a slippage between the terms ‘ethnographic’, ‘anthropological’, and ‘sociological’, and I think the reason is that none of the neat divisions often proposed to distinguish between these three kinds of texts could be applied to the disciplines of social anthropology and sociology in **India**" (Das 1995: 26, fn. 2). Likewise, Beteille (1993, also 1985) has remarked that one's professional identity - of being a sociologist or a social anthropologist - is determined by one's location, institutional and otherwise. Accordingly, many of the Indian sociologists (particularly those from the first two generations) have straddled the space of both these disciplinary orientations in their own personal intellectual trajectories. Beteille himself has been the figurehead of such a pathway. This blurring of boundaries has opened up important questions in the field, but they will only be cursorily dealt with here. Thus in setting **proto-typical** models, the imperative is only one of making methodological sense of the large literature on caste that confronts and consequently humbles any new student of the phenomenon.

The first section maps, synoptically, what is termed the anthropological perspectives on the question of caste - which, more often than not, are primarily a focus

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¹ The works by Dumont (1980), Susan Bayly (1983 and 2000), Chris Bayly (1988), Quigley (1993), Gellner and Quigley (1999), Dirks (1989 and 2002), Gupta (2000) and Sharma (2002) have been most useful in formulating the terms of our summary. Other works that bear on specific questions taken up in this chapter will be duly acknowledged in course.
on the caste system or caste as a system. The second section then focuses on those perspectives that primarily seek to perceive caste as a phenomenon of social stratification. Broadly these can be termed as tending towards occupying the space of the sociological in their orientation. In the third and fourth sections, we engage with the works encapsulating the political sociology of caste and encounter the perspective of social movements. Our fifth section foregrounds the problem of historicising the phenomenon of caste - a demand that we believe must underwrite the very project of formulating a distinctly sociological understanding of the question of caste. Equally constitutively, such a demand also forms a necessary condition for making any headway on the problematic of the contemporaneity of caste, and this will be taken up in our sixth section revisiting debates on what has been called the ‘substantialisation’ of caste. The penultimate section yields more determinable protocols instituting our study of the dynamics of Brahmin identity in contemporary Karnataka, while the chapter ends with a note about the sequence of the dissertation.

Evidently, the categorisation of perspectives in these relatively fluid terms - and not as something paradigmatically incommensurable - betrays a definitive position vis-à-vis the ‘object’ in question, namely, caste. Even as individual scholars and traditions of scholarship have straddled various theoretical and ideological orientations, often rendering the spaces between and across disciplines indeterminate, the frames and peculiar predilections undergirding disciplinary orientations level will demand closer attention. It will also necessitate a more discriminating discourse, roughly corresponding with our section-wise treatment of the perspectives dominating the sociology of caste.

A final caveat, before embarking upon our review of caste studies. Each section clubs together a spectrum of scholars. In doing so, the presumption is not that there exists a perfect agreement on various issues among themselves. For instance, Louis Dumont and Declan Quigley will be discussed within the frame of the anthropological perspectives on caste, but they display rather foundational disagreements on many an important issue. Nonetheless, there is a common ground that a set of scholars bracketed under a frame share. It is this ground that we will be interested in, even as we recognise that fundamental differences on substantive matters often does obtain among a given group of scholars.
I

Anthropological perspectives on caste

Classical anthropological perspectives on caste have all shared the propensities - methodological and epistemological - of the discipline as a whole. They have tended towards conceptualising caste as a totality, as an immutable and essential system uninfluenced by its contexts or socio-political locations. The other anchoring feature is that of perceiving caste as a consensual system of social relations. Ethnography formed the defining research technique for the discipline in anchoring caste studies, informed many a time unconsciously by an idea of a Hindu India that issued off Sanskrit, Brahmical scriptures (Das 1995: 36) Such ideational recuperations of the social reality of India were heavily influenced by what has been termed ‘orientalist’ constructions of India (Inden 1986) which drew chiefly from indological sources of Sanskrit texts.

Encountering the anthropological perspective on caste will have to, almost inevitably, build around the figure of Dumont and his magnum opus Homo Hierarchicus (1980). His work remains the most articulate delineation of the workings of the caste system - a position that was also simultaneously projecting a vision for the discipline of a sociology of India. Most of the ethnographic work that constitutes the bulk of caste studies shares a great deal of common ground with Dumont’s work. More importantly, even theoretical positions that diverge from Dumont too acknowledge the importance of his work. As Sharma (2002: 23) remarks: “Homo Hierarchicus may ... have been the ‘last major work to make caste the central problematic of Indian society’ ... yet thirty years after its first publication, general discussions of caste among anthropologists still tend to take Dumont’s work as a major point of departure.”

However, it is also important to recognise that Dumont himself was responding to the academic trends of his times, and their histories. Caste studies, when Dumont was systematising his sociology and anthropology of caste, were increasingly empiricist in nature. Primarily coupled with the genre of ‘village studies’, castes were viewed as substantive entities and as constituting localised structures of inequality. The 1950s and the 1960s that precede the publication of Homo Hierarchicus were animated by an impassioned plea made by Srinivas (1962a and 1962b) to foreground a "field view" of Indian society as against the "book view" which he thought had dominated works on Indian society. Srinivas called the indological constructions as constituting the "book view" of Indian social reality. For him, such book views are not adequate representations
of social reality, for people actually live very differently from the ways in which they might be normatively prescribed. He called for the generation of “field views” that need to supplement, if not displace altogether, the book view that had till then dominated the works of social scientists. Demonstrating the value of field views in the specific instance of the suitability or otherwise of the categories of ‘varna’ and ‘caste’, he reminded his fellow-practitioners that sociology should be devoted to understanding “the way people actually live” rather than "how they are supposed to live" (Beteille 1996b: 17).

The proliferation of studies from the field, primarily in the form of ethnographic monographs, indeed enriched and complicated the picture of an essentialised and thus coherent view of Indian society produced by the indologists. The field view, moreover, did not begin only with scholarly monographs of the 1950s and ’60s. Even earlier, colonial administrator-scholars, census officials as indeed the pioneering travel writers had already produced a great deal of empirical work that laid bare the partial nature of the book view and which flew in the face of the uniformity and conformity that the classical texts presented before the indologists. For Dumont, nevertheless, this proliferation of field-based caste and village studies had some delimiting implications. According to him, they took "the [caste] system ... as a mere collection of blocks and their arrangement [was] neglected" (Dumont 1980: 32). Any plausible explanation of caste had to be, for Dumont, in terms of the relations between castes. This relationality, he further maintained, could be grasped only in terms of and in relation to an encompassing set of religious values, which are articulated in the classical Hindu sources. For Dumont, therefore, it is only this method - a confluence of anthropology and indology, as he christened it - that can yield a perspective on the ‘structure’ of what appear to be discrete castes and as such making up a meaningful and coherent system.

By hindsight however, both these scholars were perhaps overstating their cases. For, the bulk of apparently disparate and localised anthropological studies of caste were informed tacitly by indological constructions of caste. In fact, the criss-crossing of indology and anthropology has characterised anthropological perspectives on caste much before being formulated in these terms by Dumont; and even Srinivas may be situated at such a confluence. Broadly, this was the result of a unique history - spanning almost two hundred years before social sciences arrived in India - that the anthropologists inherited. It is a history that is both complex and multivalent in which both the colonial scholarship and the indigenous elites participated and mediated. It is important to note that any bland
characterisation of this history as ‘orientalist’ or ‘colonialist’ (as much of recent scholarship does) would seriously compromise our ability to grasp its varied texture. Besides, the pleas for concentrating on the ‘field view’ did not necessarily transform the anthropologist’s perception of the ‘book view’ in itself - that is, as being an adequate source for understanding what Beteille (1996b: 15) calls "representations" of social facts. This is true in terms of constructing both an essentia/ised past of caste as well as an adequate representation of the ideology of caste in the present. We will return to this point later on this chapter.

One important distinction remained between the two positions of Dumont and Srinivas nevertheless - that of the temporal. While for Dumont, the indological construction of caste as a system that is animated by the principle of ritual hierarchy continued to be valid in the present, for Srinivas and a host of other 'native' scholars it held its validity only with reference to the past. While both the sides were unanimous in perceiving a continuous past for caste - of "nearly two thousand years" (Beteille, cited in Quigley 1994: 44, fn.7) - they diverged on evaluating the present of caste. Dumont believed that even in the present ~ one animated by modern, western values of individualism and egalitarianism - the principle of ritual hierarchy holds its ground, while admitting changes in the secondary realms of economy and politics. For Srinivas though, the change is far more transformative and foundational.

Dumont’s substantive disagreements with the existing literature on caste had something more to do than with his methodological insistence on the confluence of the 'book view' and the 'field view'. He positioned himself against (i) treating the Indian caste system as merely an instance - if extreme at that - of social stratification, (ii) understanding particular castes as substantive entities at the expense of a defining focus on the relations that obtain among them, which for him is the only way to make sense of this system; (iii) empiricism at the expense of a focus on an encompassing set of values; (iv) adopting a perspective of individualism as against the holism that informs the logic of the caste system. It is important to recognise that Dumont was also attempting to set up a comparative axis from which one could understand his own - that is, modern Western - society that was foundationally animated by the logic of individualism. Thus Dumont is interested in locating a "unique structural principle" (Beteille 1992: 124) that both holds together and makes intelligible the Indian social system.
In spite of radical disagreements among scholars, it is the agenda that Dumont sets up (as articulated in the four objections listed above) which structures the anthropological perspective on caste. His frame not only unites the apparently disparate ethnographic studies of caste but also the divergent theoretical models proposed to explain caste. Quigley (1993), who has proposed one of the most rigorous theoretical critiques of Dumont's model, suggests as much in his recounting of the anthropological discourse of caste. There are two structuring principles that Dumont advises analysts of caste to be sensitive to - principles that structure the ‘Hindu’ or Indian society and its caste system. One is that it is tuned towards the ‘whole’, and the other is that the ideology or value of the caste system is defined by a principle of ‘hierarchy’ that encompasses a domain of empirical facts. Consequently, for Dumont, if a satisfactory, all-encompassing understanding of caste is to be arrived at, then the analyst will have to tune him/herself to look at the ‘ideology’ (the system of ideas and values) undergirding the caste system, and do so not only in order to synthesise the bewildering diversity of caste and its workings but also to get a holistic hold on it.

Dumont arrives at that principle of ritual hierarchy, which for him explains the grounds on which the caste system obtains, namely, the encompassing oppositional unity between purity and impurity. This works itself out on two levels - the binary opposition between the Brahmin (as the very epitome and essence of purity) and the Untouchable (as the carrier of impurity); and between the Brahmin (as the figure of sacred/ritual status) and the King (as the figure of the temporal/secular power). Since the pure always necessarily encompasses the impure, at least at the level of the ideology (if not at the level of the fact), the Brahmin is placed at the top of the hierarchy. And this is so not only in relation to the progressively receding states of less purity (or more impurity) as embodied in the person of other castes, but also in relation to the King or the holder of the temporal authority.

The French scholar, Celestin Bougie had earlier insisted that the caste system "was a product of the unique configuration of three relational properties of the castes - separation, hierarchy and interdependence" (Appadurai 1988: 42). But Dumont implores that it is only the opposition of purity and pollution acting as the fulcrum of the Indian society.

2 Dumont equates the two mostly, only tending to set them apart when drawing attention to caste among the non-Hindus.
caste system that can make sense of what are usually encountered by ethnographers as being distinct features of caste system - separation, interdependence and hierarchical ordering (Dumont 1980: 56; also Quigley 1999: 307). The several insistences that Dumont foregrounds - of finding the essence of caste primarily within the space of the sacred/religious, of looking at caste only in terms of comprising a systemic whole, a totality, and not as discrete independent entities, of preferring a reading of a consensual unity over dissent and frames of inequality - have all had important effects over the future trajectories of caste studies.

Dumont's formulations have been subjected to a thoroughgoing criticism and that too from within the space of the anthropological itself. Hocart had early on proposed a 'royalist' model (Quigley 1999) in which the central institution of caste is kingship, the occupiers of which should be kept in a state of purity, and in order to achieve that all the other castes serve priestly functions. This model has influenced the thinking of many analysts, but most notably of Quigley (1993) and Raheja (1988) who seek to be sensitive to both the structure of caste as well as its contexts. Besides, Das (1982) complicates the Dumontian binarisms - of Brahmin-King, Brahmin-Untouchable, and Brahmin-Renouncer - by suggesting a series of triads like the Brahmin-King-Renouncer.

There have also been many other critical engagements with Dumont, of course. Most importantly, they have been in the areas of his inability to explain contrary 'facts on the ground', his methodological decisions structuring the understanding of caste, ideological predilections as indeed his putative insensitivity to questions of context and history. While not going into the specific terms of this critical engagement - Sharma (2002: 21-28) has the details, but see also Tambaiah (1972) - and while keeping in mind that Dumont was only a sharp articulator of certain propensities in the study of caste, the signposts of what could be identified as further negotiations within the space of the anthropological can be detailed as under.

**Caste as an encompassing totality**

A primary characteristic of such an anthropological orientation has been its proclivity towards, to use Dumont's important term, encompassment - the urge to arrive at a singular structural principle to explain caste. It has been noted, with reference to Dumont, that there is a "commitment to the notion of totality, to a stable reality, and with it to a stable system of representation" (Das 1995: 34). This inclination prods such
theorists towards conceiving caste as a system, but equally crucially as a totality. The emphasis in these scholars is on understanding caste as a totalising ideological system; and consequently the attempt is to look for the 'unique structural principle' that undergirds this system. Gupta comments on this tendency, particularly as evidenced in Dumont, fairly accurately: "(F)or Dumont the ideology of caste system is all pervasive without exception in Hindu India. For the Hindus, Dumont avers, belief in God is secondary to belief in caste ... [Dumont] argues that there is only one elaborated ideology based on these principles, and for the elaboration of this ideology he depends primarily on the ancient Brahman lawgiver, Manu. From the highest caste to the lowest caste everybody subscribes to this elaborated ideology, duly accepting as their just position in the ranking" (2000: 69).

This insistence on a systemic understanding of caste directs them towards a theory of caste as a 'system' rather than that of distinct caste groupings. For Dumont, for instance, caste cannot but be understood as a system of relationships between these entities called castes; just as the Brahmin can be made sense of only in relation to the untouchable, and purity in relation to impurity. Dumont pointedly avers: "(T)he impurity of the Untouchable is conceptually inseparable from the purity of the Brahman. ... [W]e must get used to thinking of them together. In particular, untouchability will not truly disappear until the purity of the Brahman is itself radically devalued" (Dumont 1980: 54).

There could be differences in terms of who occupies the 'top' or the 'centre' of the hierarchy or status rank. For Dumont, it is the Brahmin presented in a vertical linear scheme of hierarchy, whereas for Hocart and Quigley and Raheja the 'centre' obtains laterally and in the context of the king or dominant caste. Nevertheless, all the actors are taken to partake of a worldview, and a lifeworld is taken as given. Caste is a system and ought to be understood only as and in terms of making up a system of values, an encompassing totality.

Caste is accordingly understood, in the Dumontian framework, as a structure of meanings and practices that has no necessary linkages to its externalities of polity and economy, in that it is self-regulating and sufficient. Therefore, it is inalienably structured within and becomes meaningful only in relation to the Hindu religion and its values (or ideology). It also presumes that there is an *essential character* of caste that is unaffected by the larger structures of polity and economy, and which can be retrieved in its pristine
form either in terms of a ‘past’ or in the contemporary moment in some spatial location - say, in the ubiquitous Indian village, or in a locale like the Kathmandu valley.3

Insistence on a presumed holistic nature of Indian society and therefore the need to dep/ol•non-
•eastern, unique/•Indian native categories

Following from the above point, anthropological perspectives on caste, especially that springing from Dumont, understand the Indian society to be structurally holistic and thus inherently different from the Western society that recognises the individual as the basic unit. Since this distinction is posited as being so foundational as to enable a western scholar escape a “smug sociocentricity” (Dumont 1980: 214)4, the frames for understanding the ideology of caste will have to go beyond the simple application of western categories (religion, economics etc.) to Indian reality. Indeed, as Sharma avers in a description encoding aspects of this frame, “sociology is a product of an individualistic western society. Looking at India, the western sociologist seeks the individual agent and, failing to find it, fundamentally misunderstands the value system on which that society is based” (Sharma 2002: 23).

Thus the primary unit in Indian society for any sociological analysis is taken to be the community (primarily, the caste community) and not the individual [of whom the society "knows nothing of (Dumont 1980: 8) or who is encountered only "outside-the-world" (ibid.: 233)]. What is more, it is only by focussing on the encompassing set of values - primarily of ritual hierarchy and of socio-moral dharma - to which the Indians/Hindus adhere that the analyst of caste can say something meaningful. The idea of caste (as opposed to the practice of caste) accordingly encapsulates the sociological reality of caste, and the anthropological models have tended to approach the latter through the lens of the former. It is perhaps such an ideational orientation that facilitates building models or singular all-encompassing representations of caste. Access to these indigenous or native categories of thought is seen to be gained through the textual

3 See the introduction by Gellner in Gellner and Quigley (1999: 1-37, especially p. 2). Also see Quigley’s conclusion (ibid.: 298-327) in the same volume (particularly p. 298) for an important, albeit mutely stated, correction.
4 See Berreman (1971: 17) for some biting remarks on this claim made by Dumont.
sources, which are taken to be representing - following from the above assumptions - the entire population, irrespective of its varied locations.\textsuperscript{5}

Most often than not, this stated preoccupation with the indigenous ideology and values of the caste system has blocked the very opportunity to foreground the question of historicity or a historicisation of caste. As we shall see in a subsequent section on historicising caste, this preoccupation has resulted in a construction of a \textit{traditional India} that is timeless and continually framed and governed by the caste system. It has always been this construction of a 'traditional' India that has been counterposed against the disjunctive and ruptured present of caste. Even if the scholars concerned would differ among themselves in deciding where to peg the 'past' of caste - "for over one thousand years" (Kolenda 1978: 3), "for nearly two thousand years" (Beteille, cited in Quigley 1994: 44), “for thousands of years” (Deliege, cited in Quigley 1994: 44) - they all seem to agree on not critically examining this past itself. Thus all evaluations vis-a-vis the 'present' of caste carry a sense of unprecedented novelty and surprise.

\textit{Caste as an integrative/consensual and coherent principle of thought and practice}

For these perspectives, moreover, the systemic reality of caste is integrative, and not a system that is foisted from above or afar. In other words, they decline to perceive the caste system as a consciously deliberated system of coercion in which some people are kept ‘low’ and discriminated against by coercion and domination. Some theorists recognise the existence of competition between castes - Quigley (1993) for instance - but they are certain that there is an acceptance of the systemic principle that governs thought and practice within the caste system. However, that still leaves the question of consent open and anthropologists have taken sides on this question - in particular with reference to the loaded problem of the 'Untouchable'. Does the untouchable take values of purity and pollution as his own, even as the logic is evidently working to his detriment? While Moffat (1979), through an ethnographic study of an untouchable community (of the Paraiyars) in a village of Tamil Nadu, demonstrates that they share the same moral universe with the other upper/touchable castes, Deliege (1997) conducting fieldwork with

\textsuperscript{5} While this insistence has rightly invited criticisms in regard to its "elitism" (about which we will have more to say while discussing demands to historicise caste), Das has cautioned us against taking that point too far: “[I]t does seem to me that by characterizing ... [particular conceptions] ... as a purely Brahmanic conception, one loses the opportunity of treating it as an important conceptual resource” (1995: 37-8, fn. 9).
the same community, albeit in a different village setting, finds an articulated stress on egalitarian - that is, disjunctive - values even as they inhabit a larger hierarchical structure and moral universe.\footnote{6}

\textit{Vesting an a priori sociological reality on the Indian village as a bounded and coherent cultural unit and thus equating caste with village}

\textit{[M]ost anthropological work on caste"}, reminds Gellner, display a "rural bias" (1999: 2).\footnote{7} Thus that ubiquitous 'Indian village' - making up both a sociological as well as methodological unit of reality - has remained the most favoured locale to study caste for anthropologists. 'Caste System', along with the 'Indian Village', was understood to be the two 'fundamental' aspects of the social reality of India. That is, if one were to study India, it was asserted, s/he had to take on the enterprise as an effort to analyse these two interpenetrating totalities, and that if one were successful in doing so they would have something 'authentic' to say about India.

More often than not, an anthropologist would choose a village - albeit after some careful considerations - and study it as though it constitutes a self-contained and self-reliant moral universe of meaning-making and practice. This choice to study rural settings rather than urban locales evidently has had important effects on the anthropological constructions of caste; but also in setting up agendas for the scholarly enterprise of studying caste, a point to which we will return in due course. Thus if at all some anthropologist were to take interest in caste in non-rural contexts, there was an unstated compulsion to explain such choices, even as the village as a natural locale for caste studies went without the pressure to explain themselves (as though it was self evident that caste had some structural link with the rural setting). Most of the ethnographies done on caste thus invariably have a rural bias.

\footnote{6 Also see Racine and Racine 1998. But see Sharma (2002: 47-58) for an argument about the very vacuity of the question formulated in these terms.}

\footnote{7 Quigley’s chapter that concludes this volume (Quigley 1999: 298-327) begins with the same observation, and is a thoroughgoing interrogation of the "rural bias" of anthropological studies on caste. The chapter comprehensively exhibits the value of actively moving away from such a bias.}
A perspective from ‘social stratification’

As mentioned before, since the boundaries between sociology and anthropology have always been left fuzzy, its effects on formulating a distinct sociological perspective on caste have been profound, even if usually not recognised in those terms. Sociologists generally have tended to unquestioningly take on anthropological assumptions as their own, and in the process rendered indeterminate the space of a distinctively sociological articulation. This indeterminacy notwithstanding, questions about the validity and adequacy of the anthropological perspectives on caste have been periodically raised. This has often entailed a standpoint from what could be crudely described as a perspective from 'social stratification'. Broadly, this has meant a normative interest in the distribution of benefits and burdens within a population, as well as an explanatory interest in social inequality (Beteille 1969b is a representative collection). The perspective deviates - at times decisively - from the traditional indological and anthropological approaches to the question of caste, both in terms of its methodology as well as substantive orientation. This has proved at once fruitful (in generating important debates about a sociology of India beyond Dumont, for instance) and restrictive (in overdetermining the future trajectories of the discipline's engagement with the question of the present of caste).

The understanding of caste as but another form of social stratification owes much to the founding ideas of the German historical and comparative sociologist, Max Weber. His influence is not restricted to merely the ‘stratificationists’, as it were; his sway over what could be reductively characterised as the non-anthropological approaches to caste (in that it includes perspectives from social stratification, political sociology, historical and comparative sociology) has been singular. Weber - unlike Celestin Bougie, the two figureheads that Sharma (2002: 10-15) recognises as offering the primary opposing frameworks of caste studies - was keen on the question of comparison. Interestingly, both Dumont (who draws largely from Bougie) and Weber insist that their enterprises are primarily meant to enable a comparative sociology. However the modalities instituted and the protocols set and practiced by them are significantly different. Even as it is easy to recognise that Dumont’s comparative take on caste gets reduced to a mere contrastive

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8 For a recent articulation, see Deshpande (2003).
frame, it is imperative to recognise that he is himself critically reflexive enough to remind us that comparison can be pursued only after according the phenomena being compared some internal coherence, substance and validity (Dumont 1980: 247-266, particularly 249). This is an advice, he notes however, that is held more in breach than in practice. Contrastingly, it is the same comparative keenness that allows Weber to understand castes as 'status groups', which is to say as "communities sharing some form of social estimation of honour" (cited in Sharma 2002: 12). They are accordingly like substantialised entities or ethnic groups that have reached a climax of closure upon themselves.

To be sure, such an outlook recognises a history and an agency for these groups as well as the individuals acting within and in the context of these identifications. This recognition can, by itself, be conceptually liberating, in the sense that it enables the analyst to allow for dynamism in the workings of caste. Nevertheless, the problematic of caste as a systemic phenomenon remains here uncovered. Weber attempts to accommodate this question by deploying a conception of 'societalisation'. He implores that "the societalisation of ethnically distinct communities embraces them to the point of uniting them [into a systemic whole]" (cited in Dumont 1980: 250). Dumont, though, recognises the tensions and the ultimate inadequacy of this unsatisfactory marriage between ethnic-like groups (or substantialised entities) and a conception of hierarchy (ibid. 249-51). Indeed, with some scholars operating from a 'social stratification' perspective - particularly Bailey (1957), Berreman (1971) and Mencher [1992 (1974)] but also, in more sophisticated and guarded ways, Beteille (1966) and Gupta (2000) - this problem exacerbates into constructing the systemic element of caste as an ideological obfuscation of its exploitative content by the beneficiaries of the system. In other words: caste here is nothing but a system of inequality and exploitation. The historian Susan Bayly has commented perspicuously on such tendencies (though not about these particular scholars). According to her: "[Caste is] much more than a 'structure of domination' ... [or] a kind of social conspiracy ... The caste system may offend present-day egalitarianism but even so there is more to caste than oppression or the use of ideology to maintain the authority of dominant castes" (Bayly 1983: 522).

Beteille has remained a consistent proponent of a perspective on caste from within a stratification frame - beginning in many ways right from his doctoral work (Beteille 1966) and sustained over four decades of consistent writing. His assiduous and still
continuing engagement with Dumont has brought forth some of the clearest expositions of this approach.\(^9\) Therefore, one could begin this summation with his words, which institutes with characteristic flourish and clarity some constitutive protocols in regard to a perspective on caste from within social stratification.

Critiquing Dumont’s insistence on arriving at a 'structural' principle that animates and explains Indian society, Beteille foregrounds an important distinction - "It is easier for the anthropologist and the historian of ideas who views a system at a distance to discover unity in it rather than for the sociologist who views it at close quarters" (Beteille 1992: 242) - while going on to maintain "[however] I belong to the modern world, and I would be untrue to my vocation as a sociologist to disown the world to which I belong" \(\textit{ibid.}\): 249). Being true to the modern world to which one belongs, for Beteille, is to be sensitive to the "material interests" of the society being studied, a standpoint that inevitably calls into question the 'unity' that the anthropologist or the historian of ideas have discovered. According to him, it is by no means true that students of Indian society have ignored altogether either economic and political life or material interests in general; what is lacking is a comprehensive framework for the study of interests of the kind which Dumont has developed in relation to the study of civilizational values. The construction of such a framework will be, according to Beteille, "a major step in the direction of a more balanced appraisal of social reality in India" \(\textit{ibid.}\): 137).

These observations, as it were, structure the primary departures for what could be an inherently sociological perspective on caste. What is important to note is that Beteille is not dismissing the centrality of what can be called a systemic and thus 'ideological' (in the sense that Dumont uses, a civilizational framework of value or a system of ideas) approach to the question of caste. He is merely calling for a correction, a balancing act. Beteille thus has been a very nuanced and careful analyst of caste as a system of social stratification, when compared to many others who shared that space. He does not dismiss the 'systemic' understanding of caste that Dumont represented. However he prefers to concentrate on the 'material contexts' of caste and shares with much of the defining

\(^9\) The debate between Dumont and the ‘stratification’ theorists, but most importantly with Beteille, is not merely about contending ways of characterising caste. It is primarily about the larger question of representing societies and civilisations - here, the modern Western and the Indian/traditional/Hindu civilizations as standing for \textit{homo equalis} and \textit{homo hierarchicus} respectively. Beteille (1987: esp. pp. 33-53) bears testimony to the richness of this debate. Our mapping, however, restricts itself to the question of caste.
grounds of the stratification perspective. Beteille is not loathe to compare, for instance, caste and race within "the same framework of understanding" (Beteille 1992: 37). Indeed he even questions Dumont's insistence of understanding hierarchy as distinct from inequality, discrimination and thus stratification: "At any rate, the idea of hierarchy entails that of inequality, whether we speak of a hierarchy of castes or of a hierarchy of angels. And in the context of the study of Indian society, past as well as present, it has come to signify not just inequality, but inequality of the most rigid and uncompromising kind" (Beteille 1987: 34).

Understanding caste as a form of social stratification - even if unique and an extreme instance - is definitionally informed by a contextualising impulse. It also glosses over the prisms of ideology and values, with an intent to focus on the practices and "material interests" that caste simultaneously inhabits and also makes possible (Beteille 1992: 123). These two features of this perspective enable it to resist the problems that have been identified as the distinctive markers of anthropological theorising in general and of the Dumontian theorisation of caste in particular - of essentialisation, exoticisation and totalisation (Appadurai 1988: 41). The approach is also to a significant extent free from the problem of location. As we had observed earlier off Gellner, most of the anthropological works on caste suffer from a rural bias. Approaching caste from the perspective of social stratification does not necessarily have to suffer from this fixation. The promise is one of a necessarily sociological approach to caste, in that the perspective is more alert to (again invoking Beteille’s evocative expressions) the "shreds and patches" of caste rather than constructing it as being "made of whole cloth" (Beteille 1992: 246).

The distinction that gets posited between the anthropological and the stratification perspectives on caste is also one of agency. While the former, through its insistence on holism, systemic nature of the phenomenon and the primacy of ideas over practice, glosses over the question of agency of the actors ‘living-out’ caste, the latter (that is, the stratification perspective) marks out a focus on that very agency - if not at the level of the individual, at least at the level of the communities of caste they belong to. Moreover, the understanding of castes as dynamic, historical and agential allows for contestations within and across these entities. This enables the stratification perspective to avoid the closure demanded by a consensual frame of understanding the caste system. This avoidance of closure is also made possible by asking the very important question of the
vantage point from which to look at caste. It serves up a way of looking at caste from a
‘bottom up’ perspective. Accordingly, as Gupta has suggested of the work of Berreman
and Mencher, "both encourage a non-Brahminical view of caste, or to be more accurate, a
view of caste that is not limited to the Brahmin's version. My [work] ... follows this line
of thought and attempts to provide an alternative conspectus for understanding the caste
system" (Gupta 1992c: 26-7).

In the words of Mencher: “It is quite clear that it was the superior economic and
political power of the upper castes that kept the lower castes suppressed” (Mencher 1992:
94). Again, it is averred that "those at the bottom appear to have a more explicitly
materialistic view of the system and of their role in it than those at the top" (ibid.: 104).
Looking at caste from below leads her to underscore two primary impulses of caste - one,
that it is a very effective system of economic exploitation; and two, that by its very
existence it prevents the formation of social classes (ibid.: 93-109). This tells her why
the East is "Not-so-Mysterious" (the original title of her essay cited here) for all that.
Similarly, for Berreman, who is deployed with relish in most critiques of the Dumontian
position on caste, the indological-anthropological obsession and romance with the
distinctness of caste and thus the non-deployability of the same as a comparative category
is simply untenable. For him, stratification is simply "the systematic ranking of
categories of people" (Berreman 1981: 4) and consequently there are held to be "striking
similarities in the structures, values, interactions and consequences of the rigid systems of
birth-ascribed inequality in [the] two societies [the USA and the Indian], in both material
and experiential terms" (ibid. 5). In fact, he is willing to take a step further and
designate any birth-ascribed stratification as "caste stratification" (ibid. 5). Thus the
relevant comparison for him is between caste-stratification systems (which are closed in
that they are birth-ascribed) and more "open and permeable systems ... [that is systems
of] 'class' stratification" (ibid. 5).

This is held to be all the more so because - and here he takes issues with Dumont
- "power and status are two sides of the same coin" (Berreman 1971: 18). Accordingly,
arriving at the central feature of his understanding of caste, he opines: "I believe that
there are fewer exceptions to be dealt with - that explanation of caste is simpler and more

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10 The work just mentioned was first published in 1974, and is reproduced in Gupta’s anthology (1992c).
The citations are from the latter, and the page numbers correspond to that publication.
in accord with the facts of social life in India—if the basis of caste is regarded as lying in differential power which is expressed in ritual status terms, than if the reverse is assumed [as Dumont does]" (ibid.: 19). This indeed is the central perception that perspectives from social stratification have yielded on caste. Not surprisingly, it has come under some trenchant criticisms from the exponents of the anthropological perspective. Dumont himself had only tangentially dealt with the question of caste as social stratification in his work. In the course of this treatment - which lasts a mere page or two (Dumont 1980: 214-5; also 36-7) - he maintains: "the word 'caste' is used to designate any permanent and closed status group. Then 'castes' can be found more or less everywhere, even in modern society. ... [This] tendency in question has simply failed to recognise the nature, function and universality of hierarchy, as is shown by the term 'stratification' taken from the natural sciences" (ibid. 214). For Dumont, hierarchy is neither by definition nor by necessity stratification and/or discrimination and inequality - an articulation which, as Appadurai suggests, enables him to make a "decisive break ... with the earlier western obsession with Indian stratification" (1988: 43).

Dumont comes back to the question, again tangentially, in an essay that polemically takes issue with a group of American scholars (but also Ghurye) on the comparative value of caste vis-a-vis race (1980: 247-66). He characterises any scholarly understanding of caste in terms of social stratification as being marked by a "sociocentric attitude" (ibid. 254), for they attempt to understand a fundamentally different cultural entity in terms of their own norms. Thus "[i]n general, caste here [in the stratification school] is conceived as a variety of class, differing from it in that it forbids mobility either up or down" (ibid. 253), even as "an extreme form of stratification" (ibid.: 256). This, Dumont suggests in his inimitable style, "reduces a society's consciousness of itself into an epiphenomenon" (ibid.. 249) - a position, incidentally, with which his most significant critic from within the space of the anthropological, namely, Quigley completely concurs (see the latter's 1994: esp. 25-8).

Indeed, Quigley foregrounds another point, not entirely unconnected with Dumont. As he pointedly remarks: "To characterize caste systems baldly as forms of stratification is also to leave out most of what is really intriguing about them ... the seemingly endless flow of ritual and ritual prohibitions .... [and also the] existence of untouchability" (ibid. 26-7). According to him, if they are merely systems of stratification "it is doubtful if we would notice anything distinctive about caste systems or
have any reason for using the word 'caste' in the first place" \(\text{\citefootnote}. 32\). It is important to note that the observation Quigley is making here is not strictly a Dumontian one. Where for the latter the understanding of caste as stratification is “sociocentric” by refusing to recognise the fundamental non-reproducibility of caste elsewhere outside India/Hinduism, Quigley is much more open to seeing caste outside India and/or Hinduism. His contention, nevertheless, is directed against an implication of the stratification perspective, namely, "that all castes are arranged, one above the other, in a relatively unambiguous way like a football league table" \(\text{\citefootnote}. 27\) with "Brahmans at the top and untouchables at the bottom" \(\text{\citefootnote}. 40\). More importantly, for Quigley, "many of the difficulties in constructing an adequate theory of caste seem to ... be the result of being imprisoned by this ladder-like representation which one is led to almost inescapably if one starts with the notion that every caste can be said to be 'higher' or 'lower' than every other caste" \(\text{\citefootnote}\) - a standpoint with which Dumont would completely agree, albeit to endorse a different representation. Quigley is clear that this tendency makes room for a number of misrepresentations \(\text{\citefootnote}. 27-8\).

By far the most sympathetic and sensitive (but also nuanced) treatment of the question has been of Dipankar Gupta, who in a couple of works (1992a and b, and more elaborately in 2000) records a move towards a more systematic engagement with caste. His uniqueness lies, in no small measure, in being sensitive to the criticisms raised by the anthropologists against approaching caste through the exclusive prism of 'social stratification'. For Gupta, the concepts of 'hierarchy' and 'difference' are central to understanding any form of social stratification, including caste. Not all systems of stratification are necessarily based on hierarchy, for there could be such systems based also on a valorising of differences. The former (namely, 'hierarchy') becomes applicable only when the system is based on a criterion of differentiation that can be quantified or is quantitative. The latter (that is, 'difference') "is salient when social stratification is understood in a 'qualitative' [and thus unquantifiable] sense" (Gupta 1992a: 8), and he goes on to actively foreground a notion of differentiation or discrete categorisation. Thus if such a system - and caste is primarily a system of the latter kind - has to be hierarchised, then "the criterion of hierarchy has to be imported from outside and can have no justifications from within" (Gupta 2000: 24).

According to Gupta,"[c]aste has resisted definition quite successfully precisely because its two dimensions, namely, hierarchy and difference, deflect any single unifying
It is held that Dumont, by over-emphasising hierarchy (and thus an all-encompassing unity) to the detriment of a focus on differences, arrived at the conception of a 'homo hierarchicus'. In an effort to restore the balance, therefore, Gupta forges an innovation that opens up tremendous possibilities for grasping caste in all its diverse expressions and practices. According to him, castes are discrete entities, for they can be differentiated only on grounds of difference. This 'discreteness' comes not merely from competing and discrete tales of origin that each caste possesses (consequently the improbability of a single, consensual ideology of hierarchy) but also from a 'hypersymbolism' that works to keep each such entity separate and different. Thus the idea of "continuous hierarchies and discrete castes" that Gupta articulates, which accommodates both the notion of hierarchy and difference and accordingly is something that is necessarily contested and thus "muddled" (1992b: 124) unlike Dumont's unitary hierarchy. Gupta nevertheless concurs with Dumont - and thereby differentiates himself from those who work from a one-dimensional stratification perspective - holding that "caste cannot be seen as an extreme form of class, race or estate" (ibid.: 137). As he explicitly maintains: "The caste system is a form of differentiation. It cannot be subsumed under a system of fundamentumdivisionis'(ibid.: 137).

Where he seems to be in agreement with his fellow-stratificationists, as it were, is when he makes a distinction between rules and ideologies: "Rules are most nakedly an instrument of power hierarchy. Ideology, on the other hand, tries to mask this nakedness. ... The caste rule in this sense, which holds that the subaltern castes must serve the privileged, is an expression of power and Brahman ideology attempts to cloak it" (ibid. 118). However since separation is an active feature of caste entities, ideologies can be as multiple as castes. In effect, therefore, "the rule of caste is only obeyed when it is accompanied by the rule of power. Therefore, contrary to what Dumont claims, it is the hierarchy of power and economics where we believe that hierarchy is naked. Ideology, on the other hand, introduces it 'shamefacedly' but only after effecting the separation between discrete categories of castes" (Gupta 2000: 67). The element of 'deliberateness' and contrivance that he brings into the analysis seems to expose him to the Dumontian charge of reducing a society's consciousness of itself into an epiphenomenon. But Gupta would confront the very singularity of that charge, indeed the very presumption of describing 'a society's consciousness of itself'. All the same, one can doubt whether this
interjection would sufficiently and adequately cover the implications of the Dumontian query.

III

Perspectives from political sociology

By and large, perspectives on the political sociology of caste have derived more from political scientists than sociologists. It is possible to identify two kinds of studies that nearly exhaust the space of political sociology. One is what has been termed studies in 'caste and politics', investigations that predominantly tend to take caste to be a primordial or natural "hereditary status group" (Gould 1990: 9) harnessed by and into the political process of parties and elections. It is here that the influence and work of political scientists has been significant. The second relates to studies that see caste primarily as a mobilisational resource and encodes a 'social movement' perspective. Sociologists seem to be in greater numbers within this latter trend. Both the areas have been witness to a fairly productive range of studies in the last three decades. In a very real sense, they seem to be filling the void created by the receding number of ethnographic works that focussed on individual castes, particularly within the bounds of a village. This 'replacement' itself is significant. The predominance of works on caste and politics and on caste as social movements has been so complete that one is witness to a virtual shutting out of conceptual and empirical engagements with all the other realities of caste. This has had important consequences for some of the more recent attempts to reorient caste studies, particularly in negotiating the charge that 'caste' has performed a "gate keeping" function (Appadurai 1986a: 357) in relation to Indian society.

Approaching caste through a political sociology perspective entails many protocols and presumptions. Even as it is about the present of caste, it does not necessarily presume caste either as a historical entity or as something in need of historicisation. Therefore, even as it inevitably foregrounds a dynamic and processual understanding of caste, most of the studies that seem to bear the weight of a political sociology are blind to the question of the 'pasts' of caste. A great many of them, albeit unwittingly, take the excesses of the anthropological perspective as their own and look at, for instance, the past as an undifferentiated and timeless continuity. The dichotomies of tradition/modernity, East/West, and continuity/change get replicated in many a work.

Caste - particularly in the extant literature on 'caste and politics' - is approached as an already "substantialised" entity, indeed as "competitive, self-sufficient blocks"
(Dumont 1980: 222) without any necessary relationship with its systemic or structural underside. If for Dumont politics represents an interstitial, secondary level as far as the caste system is concerned, for the political sociologists the anthropological reality of caste is, at best, secondary or given. Their debt to Weber however is unmistakable. Interest in the problematic of caste and politics arose primarily with the perception that caste was becoming a salient and even primary player in determining the modern political system of representative democracy that India adopted. Despite the later preponderance of political scientists in articulating this problematic, Srinivas (among the sociologists) was the first to urge scholars to attend to this theme.\footnote{Srinivas was preceded by Ghurye [1969 (1932)] in proposing a similar evaluation of this particular modern dimension of caste. Indeed, it is primarily on the basis of Ghurye’s observations in this regard, as also those of Srinivas, that Dumont was prompted to propose an important theoretical handle to comprehend the contemporaneity of caste. We will return to the axis of this engagement later. Nonetheless, see Dumont (1980: 217-38, but more significantly the footnotes therein) for crucial evaluative statements on the subject of caste and politics.} His essay ‘Caste in modern India’ (1962c) is the frame which structured the debate, and is still customarily visited by its adherents. What is most important about his formulation is a sense of break about the past of caste (understood primarily in anthropological terms) and its present (subsumed within a notion of “votebanks”). His posthumously published paper (Srinivas 2003) is a more striking enunciation of the break that he proposes. He expounds what could be termed as a ‘near-alarmist’ view of the intertwining of caste and politics, one that seems to have captured the imagination of the non-academic (particularly the English media) world.\footnote{Indeed, one is struck by the remarkable consistency that Srinivas has demonstrated vis-a-vis the contemporaneity of caste. See his introduction to 1996, as well as the posthumously published article being cited in the text. The near-alarmist evaluation of caste constitutes the contours of his engagement with the phenomenon throughout his long career. See also his newspaper articles during the Mandal Commission upheavals of 1990. Fuller (1996: 2, fn. 2) has the relevant bibliographical details.} This view concretises the consolidation of caste in the domain of politics as the revival of what is thought to be an outmoded primitive institution. Of course, such a perception is encountered in different hues and forms in various scholars. But, foundationally, caste is seen to represent an extremely damaging threat to the development of more ‘modern’ political identities - either of a liberal citizenship or of class consciousness and identity, depending upon the ideological persuasion of the scholars concerned (Sharma 2002: 65).

It is not surprising that such a perception often gathers itself under the rubric of ‘the resurgence of caste’. The presumption here is that caste, which would have died a
natural death because of the society progressing from a traditional to a modern one (at
once, a Weberian as well as a Marxist position), is being given a new lease of life by the
machinations of the polity and is being kept alive for petty and sectarian votebank
interests. Thus, it is maintained, the chances of India becoming a modern nation have
been severely compromised by caste.

This presumptively closed perception notwithstanding, a host of political
scientists between the 1950s and 1970s - beginning with the Rudolphs (1967), continuing
with the greatly influential works of Kothari (especially 1970), and a plethora of
empirical investigations - worked with a more open-ended and processual framework in
understanding the problem of the intertwining of caste and politics. In their pioneering
work, the Rudolphs (1967) presented an important statement. Arguing that caste has
"contributed more to [the] realization [of political democracy] than to its inhibition"
(Rudolph and Rudolph 1967: 24) they suggest:

The leading and most pervasive natural association of the old regime, caste, has responded to
changes in its political and economic environment by transforming itself from below and within.
Hierarchy, privilege, and moral parochialism no longer exhaust its secular significance. Caste has
become a means to level the old order's inequalities by helping to destroy its moral basis and
social structure. In doing so, caste has helped peasants to represent and rule themselves by
attaching them to the ideas, processes and institutions of political democracy (ibid: 19).

Thus what is, for them, a "natural association of the old regime" (in the sense of being
primordial and given) is "adapting" to modern situations. This process of adaptation, it is
further suggested, "can be understood in terms of three types of political mobilization,
each suggestive of different phases of political development: vertical, horizontal and
differential" (ibid: 24).

The framework of this understanding however, as Kothari (1970: 7) observes, was
only a more sophisticated version of the central problem that afflicted the earlier studies;
the problem, that is, of being bound by dichotomous visions of tradition/modernity (even
as they are seen to be interacting and negotiating with one another and not supplanting
each other) and of an "ideal type 'contradiction'" (ibid.) between such dichotomous
visions. More substantively, it is maintained that "(w)hat they fail to see is that there
never was a complete polarisation between the caste system and the political system, and
that what is involved in the contemporary processes of change is ... really a change in the
context and level of political operation" (ibid). For him, though, the problematic of caste
and politics is primarily one of "the secularisation of the social system" (ibid. 22), even
that caste, which is the non-secular *society*, is getting secularised. In other words, the contention is that caste as a social system governing relationships between groups and individuals is negotiating with the "new procedures and values" (itad. 23) of what is apparently vested with an inherent quality of the *secular*, namely, the political system.

Salutary as these prognostications might seem, it is not at all clear as to how Kothari himself escapes the binary frames that he criticises. His deployment of the category of "political modernisation" only reintroduces the binarisms that he argues against in another garb. This becomes most apparent when he talks about the three stages in the relationship that obtains between caste and politics - of 'polarisation', 'factionalism and fragmentation' and 'mobilisation' - stages testifying to a receding significance of caste. The third stage is held to represent the arrival of true modernisation, and thus of a stage when caste loyalties no longer determine political choices and action. Accordingly his thesis: "The alleged 'casteism in politics' is thus no more and no less than *politicisation of caste* (1970: 4-5).

Kothari, besides, appears to work with some perception of a radical rupture between the past and the present - the simultaneous occurrence of the demise of caste as a system and the emergence and the increasing salience of caste in politics. Subsequent works have all shared this perception, and consequently remain insensitive to the issue of the negotiations between and across the two processes and their effects thereof. The premises of one or other versions of modernisation theory are accordingly presented in various hues. Thus Gould (1990), who otherwise successfully historicises the dynamic that is seen as being merely novel and unprecedented, too works with a similar framework. Again, as Hawthorn (1982: 210) has noted with reference to the first of Kothari's three stages: "Observers agree that where it once exercised social control at the level of functionally integrated villages, caste now reinforced economic and political conflict ... that it had become the unit in which men associate for competition against others." It is important to see that castes are here given, corporatised and yet primordial entities - with natural senses of identity and consciousness, and consequently of loyalty - readily available for political harnessing. There is also the presumption that caste groups are like any other ethnic groups and identities, and that, once fully incorporated into the

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13 Beteille, it seems, also concurs. For this, see Kolenda (1978: 124).
political logic, they remain as no more than mere "names of groups and interests of other kinds" (Hawthorn 1982: 213)

For Hawthorn - as indeed for us - this is clearly a problematic presumption, but it is interesting to see how it is replicated in studies of caste associations especially. In fact, the study of caste associations, which too witnessed a plethora of studies during this period, inflects the ground of caste and politics further. The caste associations that emerged in the late colonial period across the country were initially seen as strivings for higher 'varna' rankings - as "idle strivings for social symbols" (Carroll 1978: 233) - in the proposed colonial census operations. However, Carroll (1975 and 1978) in important summations of works in this field has suggested that caste associations were primarily "responses to foreign definitions of Indian society" (1978: 233) which had "important economic and political repercussions" (ibid) for the life-chances of these communities. Her essays prefigure in many ways the subsequent concern with caste and colonialism as in Inden (1986) and Dirks (1997) which will be discussed later.

A large body of empirical works conducted during the 1960s and 1970s covered contemporary caste associations. They seem to share many presuppositions and characteristics. Caste associations were seen as "an agent of recruiting caste members in politics", by "inducing political ambitions on its members, and mobilising them for greater political participation" (Shah 1975: 161). Moreover, true to the evolutionary schemas within which they worked, the studies also sought out stages in this dynamic. It is thus asserted that "politics is not merely an end-product of social forces, but it is also an independent variable", adding that "in course of time, it weakens caste loyalty and develops its own ‘autonomy’ in determining political behaviour of the participants" (ibid). Shah sees an enactment of these stages in the Gujarat Kshatriya Sabha that he empirically addresses. The Sabha was very effective in mobilising people for electoral gains during the 1950s and up until the mid-1960s. But thereafter it lost its influence, as reflected in the losses that it suffered in the 1967 elections. This model of the waxing and waning of a caste association does not get replicated across the country; and, what is

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14 As already mentioned, Carroll (1975 and 1978) has a critical examination of the works on caste associations that were carried out during this period. For other instances of studies of particular caste associations, see Shah (1975), Mukherjee (1994), and Templeman (1996). Works that deal with the emergence of caste associations in Karnataka are cited in the course of our substantive chapters, esp. Chs. 3 and 4.
more, has been commented upon [see Rudolph and Rudolph (1967) and Kolenda (1978) for a summation].

Complicating this literature further are attempts to draw a longer historical trajectory for the peculiar relationship that caste and its mobilised forms seems to share with politics. Gould's final volume of his trilogy (1990) is an effort in this direction. Drawing on the works of C. A. Bayly and Fredrick Barth, he demonstrates the significance of the inherited structures and principles of governance dating back to the Mughal era and persisted with by the British (as indeed by the 'Congress System' of the post-independence period) in determining the course that the dynamic of caste and politics has taken to the present moment (Gould 1990: particularly pp. 5-20). More recently, however, the very *ration de etre* of these studies has been called into question. Most of these studies assumed - and many continue to assume - that there is a direct correlation between caste and the political choices of individuals and groups. More often than not, what is to be established comes to be assumed to exist. Brass and Mayer - both cited in Hawthorn (1982: 212) - were perhaps the first to raise questions about this premise (see also Hauser 1997). There have also been suggestions that the mutual intrusions of caste and politics can take different forms depending on the context and other contending mobilisational identities and forces. Sharma (2002: 66-7) discusses some of these studies.

A feature worth noting about these critical studies is that they are premised on the apparently contradictory nature of caste and politics. Even as caste within the system of ritual and sociality symbolised hierarchy and inequality, its introduction into a representative democratic political system had meant an equalisation and empowerment, most significantly for those castes that were discriminated against and denied opportunities. Indeed, in the last two decades - and in particular during the decade of the 1990s - the debate on caste and politics has overseen a decisive turn, which reflects not merely the pronounced shifts in the Indian polity and its relationship with caste but also the grids of theoretical perception and evaluation that the later scholars have brought forward. Generating extensive data on elections, voting patterns and the composition of the legislative bodies, this scholarship convincingly charts a picture of the Indian polity as a democracy from below, arguing that in the post-independence period lower castes have used their franchise as a tool of empowerment to rally against discrimination and denial and successfully wrested the state legislatures from the hands of the upper castes.
Yadav (1996), Alam (1999a), Varshney (2000), Shah (2002) and Jaffrelot (2003) have been the most significant articulators of this view. Varshney (2000) and Jaffrelot (2003) even foreground a thesis of replication - that North India (which had hitherto been a communal, Hindu-Muslim - centric polity) over the last two decades or so has begun to replicate South India (which for almost a century now has been caste-centric polity). Given the definitional significance that numbers have in representative democratic politics, this is taken to mean "democratic power is increasingly moving downward. Democracy is no longer a gift from above" (Varshney 2000: 22).

This largely celebratory scholarship, even as it offers a significant corrective to the largely uncritical versions of the alarmist school, appears to work within too many conceptual straitjackets and binarisms (South-North, Sanskritisation-ethnicisation, cooption-assertion of self, democratisation-subversion etc.). This has tended to block it from fuzzier areas of caste mobilisation and more nuanced questions about caste negotiation. Moreover this literature, although appearing to take on the contemporaneity of caste, is marked out by a tendency to overstate the shifts; and indeed is overeager to posit definitive breaks in the recent history.

These tendencies notwithstanding, the burgeoning academic works on caste and politics over the last four decades or so have changed not merely the ways in which we approach the question of caste, but more importantly have overdetermined our ways of looking at caste. Caste as a 'political' principle has almost decisively replaced earlier understandings of and negotiations with caste as a 'social' principle. This is bound to have some far-reaching regulatory effects on both our thinking about caste as well as the agenda of contemporary caste studies. More directly, it has overseen the near complete displacement of anthropological approaches to caste. Indeed, in the context of this latter development, 'caste' loses all analytical bite and comes to be replaced by a descriptive discourse of identities and identifications.

IV

A window into social movements

A coterminous but distinct pathway into caste has been the perspective of social movements. Looking at caste through the perspective of 'social movements' has witnessed a sharp momentum in the last two decades, primarily in the context of the study of the Dalit and OBC movements. Note the distinct shift that is already instituted here. The focus is no longer on individual caste groups, but on larger, internally
heterogeneous categories like Dalits and OBCs. These studies have pursued either of the following two directions. The first - and till recently the most prolific - version seeks to understand these movements as primarily being animated by the impulse of relative deprivation. These studies are greatly influenced by reference group theories. M. S. A. Rao’s works (1982 and 1987) are important instances of this approach [see also Guru (1993) for a useful bibliography] There are also some ethnographic studies, especially of Dalit "middle class" and “elites” - Ram (1988) for instance and the works cited therein - although, as Omvedt has noted, “(m)ost studies of dalit communities focus on their structures of exploitation; a few look at the histories of their movements for change” (1986: 1011). At any rate, most studies of Dalit exploitation too begin with or eventually take on the 'movements' framework and work off from the grounds thereon. Only Khare (1984) and Mendelsohn and Vicziany (1998) appear to consciously move away from this framework.

The second are studies - theoretically more rigorous and sensitive to questions of history and context - which are inclined to represent the issue of consciousness (and thus of an assertive or hard identity) as being central in such movements. These works attempt to concretise the disjunctive or contradictory consciousness that such movements from below supposedly are animated with. This consciousness emanates not merely from the lived injustice and inequalities of the constituencies they claim to speak on behalf of, but also involve a rereading of the history itself. Without doubt, it is a history both marked by the injustice and oppression unleashed by the upper castes, as well as testifying to a history of endemic resistance and a refusal to surrender self-respect and pride on the part of the exploited. Thus another set of binaries become prominent in such studies - Hinduism/Brahminism vs. Buddhism, literary vs. folk, elite vs. subaltern etc. Studies of non-Brahmin movements of the late colonial period (see Geeta and Rajadurai 1998 for an exhaustive bibliography) are a rich instance of this kind of works, but also Ilaiah (1996) and the agenda-statement of the Subaltern Studies school of Indian historiography (Guha 1982).

The differences as well as similarities with the anthropological traditions of caste studies are important to be noted. Even as most of these studies invoke a variation on the Dumontian way of perceiving caste - strictly, the ideational nucleus surrounding caste, while actively warding off its implications of consent - such an invocation acts merely as a point of departure. The very framework of social movements that they inhabit offers
them little space to dwell meaningfully on either the systemic or the processual dynamics of caste. Of course, these approaches attempt to straddle all the dimensions of the 'caste' reality - inflecting both aspects of its 'structure' and 'substance' - but given that the former axis functions only as a point of take-off and the latter is already overdetermined by the imageries of identity, they do not remain sufficiently sensitive to the internal structuring of caste consciousness and change. The result is that even as they reinforce and over-visualise the presence and the success of caste-based movements, they seem to add very little to our knowledge about the life-worlds and the worldviews of the communities themselves. It is as though the 'movements' narrative pervades and exhausts the lives of these communities.

This is not really surprising in that its categories are not castes in any available sense, but are blocks that oversee and/or seek a 'substantialisation'. Besides, these categorisations themselves are in a Dumontian sense alien to the logic of caste, deriving as they do from a very modern mode of self-assertion and which the 'movements' framework seeks to foreground and circumscribe. The category of 'OBC is a case in point, in that even as it is proposed by the state, the subject-position announced by this labeling is taken on by discrete caste groups as their own. This is true as well of the category 'Dalit', albeit not always resonating state-defined imperatives. That is why categories like "upper castes" and "lower castes" assume here an apriori conceptual coherence and validity. In many ways, they need to be historicised, and our next two sections mark out the demands and effects of this maneuver. In the process, the specific contours of our study will stand disclosed.

V

Historicising caste

The drift of our foregoing summary, hopefully, will have become clear. Our purpose in collating and working through the various perspectives on caste has been to facilitate the space of its historicisation. It has also served to situate our study in a larger, multidisciplinarily constituted academic field. To be sure, the tendency to reduce the logic of societies to a single theoretical and substantive lever as 'caste', even if interdisciplinarily constituted, is problematic. For one, as has been noted, "the discussion

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15 This could also be the reason why the Dalit movement and its intellectuals differed so sharply from the other sociologists on the caste-race question that was debated during the UN's Durban Conference on Racism. See Visvanathan (2001) for details. We return to substantialisation in a subsequent section.
of the theoretical issues tends (surreptitiously) to take on a local cast, while on the other hand the study of other issues in the place in question is retarded, and thus the overall nature of the ... interpretation of the particular society runs the risk of serious distortion” (Appadurai 1986a: 358). In perspective is the ”gate-keeping function” that the concept of caste has served vis-a-vis Indian society. Consistent with this function, it has been postulated that "the ghost of colonial sociology" still haunts Indian studies, even that "(a)nthropologists of India have themselves remained so firmly wedded to a Dumontian position (even in dissent) that India has become marginalized as the land of castes” (Dirks 1997: 123).

The demand clearly is to historicise the phenomenon of caste, and more crucially to make our understandings of caste contextually sensitive. Before looking at contemporary works that attempt to restore caste its historicity, we need to note that some of the pioneering anthropologists/sociologists themselves had attempted to look for possibilities that the caste system presented for social mobility. Srinivas (1968) is just an instance of that engagement, but there were many others too who recognised the possibility of mobility within the caste system. However, recognising mobility is not the same as historicising the phenomenon. For Srinivas [1987 (1975)], though, it was the colonial intervention that worked at the very roots of the 'hardened' caste system and contributed much to dissolving the latter’s legitimacy and acceptance.

As indicated above, any forceful demonstration of the need to historicise caste would have to interrogate and argue against Dumont’s understanding of caste which rendered it static and outside the purview of change and dynamism. There is a large volume of literature that has successfully demonstrated the value of such an endeavor. Approaching the question from within the space of specific caste-based ethnographies are the works of Conlon (1977) and Leonard (1994). The former charts the formation of a caste (the Chitrapur Saraswat Brahmins) over a period of more than two centuries and ably demonstrates that castes are not given and natural/primordial entities that remain static. He argues convincingly that "the classical definitions of caste do not necessarily accommodate the full range of possible fission and fusion processes which lie in the background of what at a given moment may be seen as a unified and clearly bounded group" (Conlon 1977: 8). Likewise, Leonard studying the Kayasthas of Hyderabad

16 Ram (1988) has the details.
shows the dynamism and agency that is so vital in the formation of a caste community, while going on to implicate its contexts and specific trajectories. These two works remain the most sensitive social histories of caste that draw attention towards the historicity of caste.

In a more forceful and deterministic tone, however, Inden (1986) and Dirks (1997) go further to suggest that the British invented what was perceived to be the 'traditional' caste system represented and explicated as such by Dumont in his *Homo Hierarchicus*. Dirks' important work (1989) sought to question the very basis of Dumont's thesis by looking at the pre-colonial political formations, and implores that the crown was not 'hollow' for all that in the pre-colonial times and that it was the colonial rule which rendered it hollow. Inden (1986), definitionally influenced by Said's thesis of Orientalism, argued that anthropological knowledge about Indian society saw caste as pathological and presented the 'natives' as being passive victims of caste. These scholars (see Fuller 1977 too) thematise a radical break in the moment of colonialism vis-a-vis both Indian society as a whole and caste in particular.

The contemporary scholarship has tended to recognise the value of such efforts. Fuller pithily formulates the most dramatic implication of such studies:

> [T]he inescapable conclusion emerging from the historical literature is that the 'traditional' caste system encountered by village studies ethnographers - and generalised to all of India by Dumont - actually acquired its foundational position in the social structure, and much of its apparent stability as regulated by a distinctly Brahminical preoccupation with hierarchy, during the British rule. Latter-day caste society was not in fact 'traditional' - meaning very old - at all (1996: 6).

Many academics, nevertheless, see the suggestion of a radical break as being an overstatement, and take the attendant implication that anthropological studies need to be abandoned with a pinch of salt. Indeed, Gellner and Quigley (1999) begin their very important work with such an assertion (see Gellner’s introduction therein). The historians Chris Bayly (1988) and Susan Bayly (2000) too reject the "rupture" thesis. They demonstrate that the hierarchical caste system precedes the colonial period. While Chris Bayly limits the role of the colonial state to one of consolidation of the 'traditional' Brahmin-centric caste order, Susan Bayly demonstrates that it was the interim period

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17 Bernard Cohn prefigured this position as early as 1970 itself when he suggested that the British rigidified the previously flexible caste communities. See his 1987 *passim*. Appadurai (1986b) and Breckenridge and van der Veer (1994) share similar views.
between the fall of the Mughal Empire and the consolidation of the British rule that brought about a firm ensconcing of the traditional caste system. Furthermore, Quigley's *The Interpretation of Caste* (1993) is an important instance of a necessarily anthropological theoretical work that accommodates and remains alert to the question of history.

The 'historicising' literature, evidently, has been extremely useful in interrogating the holistic positions on caste, liberating in the process caste studies from the trap of such trajectories as 'essentialisation', 'exoticisation' and 'totalisation' (Appadurai 1988). By foregrounding a processual understanding of caste and historicising the dynamics of the latter, a very important advance has been made. However, an obsessive and fashionable preoccupation with the rupture thesis has had delimiting effects on these attempts.18

Indeed, as Quigley has remarked:

Dirks ... writes that 'colonialism in India produced new forms of civil society which have been represented as traditional forms; chief among these is caste itself ... Both Dirks and Inden are heavily influenced by Said ... Dirks's description of caste as a 'trope' inspired by the classificatory needs of colonialists ... greatly trivialises its sociological significance (1994: 45, fn. 25).

Needless to add, this peculiar trivialisation does not exhaust the value and need of the historicisation of caste. Susan Bayly's magisterial work is an adequate reminder of the compulsions of historicisation. Even as she is urging that -

[C]aste was and is, to a considerable extent, what people think of it, and how they act on these perceptions. Far from being a static reflection of received codes and values, caste has been a dynamic force in Indian life and thought: it has been embodied in what people do and say at any given moment about the conventions and values which they define as those of 'caste society' (Bayly 2000: 7)

- she is emphatic: "[C]aste has been for many centuries a real and active part of Indian life, and not just a self-serving orientalist fiction. (ibid.: 3). Further on, she states:

[The] attempts to downplay or even dismiss the significance of Brahmans and Brahmanical caste values go against the grain of much that is familiar both from the historical record and in contemporary Indian life. The social scientists who will probably have the most enduring impact on the field are therefore those who have taken Dumont's formulations seriously rather than dismissing them altogether (ibid. 23).

Mark the point, invoking at once the systemic properties of caste and highlighting its processual dimensions. Against this backdrop perhaps - and in the light of the

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18 The famed Subaltern Studies scholarship abets this preoccupation in more ways than one.
summation offered in the foregoing pages - we can lay out the matrix of understanding undergirding this study. While its specific methodological and operative aspects will be encountered in the next chapter, we are here concerned to prise open the problematic of the contemporaneity of caste, and which, in the context of this study, is contextualised to the Brahmin community in Karnataka.

VI

The ‘presents’ of caste and the thesis of substantialisation

The foregoing leaves us with the problematic of how to make sense of the contemporaneity of caste: about what is happening to its hierarchical principle, the meanings and the kinds of legitimacy that actors inside the world of caste are according to their 'casteness' (as it were), the objective and subjective forms that caste takes in contemporary society, the 'modernity' of caste expressions, and so on. To be sure, the question of the 'presents' of caste has engaged various scholars. Evidently, the works we reviewed under the rubric of social movements and political sociology as indeed the integuments of a stratification perspective on caste are also engaging with this very problematic. However, our intent here in this section is to lend a more constructive profile to the dimensions that will inevitably come to be attached to our study. Fuller has remarked that "on the subject of caste ... anthropologists and sociologists have generally been more confident about structural continuity than contemporary change" (1996: 1). But if it is both 'continuity' and 'change' that is the focus vis-a-vis the world of caste, where does one go?

Again it is not surprising that the scholarship, in attempting to answer this question, should take off from Dumont's suggestion. His thesis on 'substantialisation' is by far the only conceptual lever that has sought to grasp the diverse and contradictory changes that caste has undergone over the last century. In fact, even those who are inclined to dismiss Dumont's larger theory of the caste system are willing to concede the usefulness of this thesis (see Hawthorn 1982; Fuller 1996; and Dirks 2002 passim). The thesis of substantialisation, in brief, is an attempt to encapsulate and theorise the contents of the various village and caste ethnographies as well as the macro trends that Ghurye and Srinivas in particular were noting about the caste system. While conceding that changes have occurred in the world of castes, and in the process of condensing the data and claims made by academics thereof, Dumont ventures to suggest that we look at it as a transition from 'structure' to 'substance':

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

Along the contours of this transition caste entities are no longer relational and therefore interdependent, but (as Dumont puts it) "each caste [has become] an individual confronting other individuals" seeming accepting equality (ibid.: 227). The recognition of this possibility notwithstanding, Dumont however is not interested to modify his structuralist account of caste. As he avers:

But one must not lose sight of the fact that this alleged modification, however genuine it may be, remains incomplete. It bears on the politico-economic domain of social life ... [However] the politico-economic domain is encompassed in an overall religious setting ... Everything happens as if the system tolerated change only within one of its secondary spheres” (ibid. 228).

A large body of scholarship that either feeds off or into the 'presents' of caste seems to validate this thesis of the substantialisation of caste in the modern condition. This is so even if individual scholars have sought to distance themselves from Dumont’s obsessions, whether it be his classification of "primary" (religious) and "secondary" (economics and politics) spheres or his rendering of the temporal dimension of caste (the latter as a matter of "structure" in the past and of "substance" in the present). Some - most notably Shah and Desai (1988) - have sought to avoid the terms of the Dumontian reference altogether. But summatng this scholarship within the language of substantialisation demands that the loads of the larger Dumontian framework that we outlined above (cf. Section I) be addressed. Evidently the scholarship would struggle to bear such a load. Thus encoding the existing body of work on the contemporary avatars of caste as post facto authorising the thesis of substantialisation remains problematic.

All the same, it can be suggested that in order to work with the idea of substantialisation, it is not a logical necessity that one shares the larger framework of Dumont. Interestingly, Dumont himself is rather reticent to announce a break in the world of caste; and while this might have to do with the urge to "protect the validity of [his] synchronic structural model from any ostensibly contradictory evidence emerging from modern change" (Fuller 1996: 12), the thesis of 'substantialisation' seems yet valuable in furthering engagement with the contemporaneity of caste.
Clearly, community and village studies (even by the 1950s itself) were testifying to a weakening of the hierarchical values of commensal restrictions and those of touchability (see Sharma 2002: 60-2 for a summation; and Mayer 1996 for a specific instance). In urban areas, the studies ventured to suggest, the maintenance of caste rules had been rendered pretty much impossible. Likewise, the dynamic that obtains between caste and politics, as well as the recrudescence of caste-based movements, have called attention to the decreasing visibility and legitimacy of caste as a hierarchical structure in such spaces. Beteille in more recent years (1991 and 1996a in particular) has sought to thematise a growing irrelevance of caste - both as a substantive and relational entity - among what is variously described as the "urban middle classes", the "intelligentsia", the “professionals”, or the "service class".

Nevertheless one cannot carry this point any further. Indeed, Dumont’s gesture of accommodating change through the notion of substantialisation is rather alien to and subversive of his agenda. It seems to arrive as an afterthought, as a forced confession. The gradualist, almost evolutionary schema he presents of a "transition from structure to substance" (Dumont 1980: 226) is rather one-sided and piecemeal. It could be attributed to the near-exclusive focus on what are perhaps the most substantialised elements of caste in contemporary India - the non-Brahmin movement and of caste in politics - and not, say, the anthropological constructions of caste. A more comprehensive and processual reading would perhaps have led him to address the relationship that obtains between the caste's structure and its substance.

Many scholars (see for instance Gould 1990, van der Burg 1991, Jain 1996, Beteille 1996a) understand ethnicisation as the contemporary form that caste is assuming. Many scholars (see for instances of such usage, Barnett 1977, van der Burg 1991, Fuller 1996, and Dirks 2002) even suggest that substantialisation is in fact ethnicisation of caste. Thus Barnett (1977) asserting that substantialisation can "also be understood as the transition from caste to ethniclike regional caste blocs" suggests:

“Ethniclike" because each such unit is potentially independent of other such units, defined and characterized by a heritable substance internal to the unit itself and not affected, in terms of membership in the unit, by transactions with others outside the unit. ... In an ethniclike situation, transactional ranking no longer orders the parts of the whole, and caste interdependence is replaced by regional caste bloc independence (ibid: 402).
It appears that conceptualising substantialisation as ethnicisation does not help much, primarily because it strips the former of any distinctness particularly in explaining the particular transformations caste as an ideological system is undergoing but also because the term ethnic/ethnicity has been rendered too vague and imprecise. However it appears that it is no coincidence or a mistake that many scholars have equated the two, for the very ways in which Dumont articulated the thesis enables this equation. Neither does the very move to frame caste in ethnic terms appear conceptually any more useful. Nonetheless, Barnett's effort to describe this process with specific reference to a caste in Tamil Nadu is useful not the least because he remains alert to the differential ways it unfolds at the individual, personal level as compared to the level of caste as a unit.

A more comprehensive introduction to the theme of the substantialisation of caste is the remarks by Fuller anchoring his edited volume *Caste Today* (1996). Towards the end of his introduction, Fuller cites the novel *A Suitable Boy* (by Vikram Seth) in order to explicate the varied workings of caste today. In the context of a proposed wedding of the daughter, her mother and her brother express different positions about a proposal from a prospective groom. In evaluating these positions, Fuller of course dissolves into a gradualist stance by deliberately overstating some elements within the given positions over the others. Interestingly, he sees the mother's enunciation as being "a half-hierarchical and half-substantialist notion of caste" (Fuller 1996: 28) while the brother seems to show a preoccupation with class rather than caste. In the latter's instance, Fuller seems to believe, the trope of caste is no more meaningful than as an obfuscation of more secular concerns - of class, for instance. Fuller also accepts Beteille's thesis that among the so-called urban middle classes even the fructified form of the substantialisation of caste - as signifying cultural difference - has lost its significance. It is as though they inhabit a space 'outside' caste. This is an important claim as far our present study is concerned, but more needs to be said about the dynamics of this spacing. Indeed, Fuller himself renders the dynamic even more complex, viewing substantialisation as a "self-contradictory process, because as it develops castes actually become more internally heterogeneous" (1996: 13, emphasis added) and imploring that while relational hierarchical values might be expressed in the language of "cultural difference", their operative significance is restricted to the private realm (for, caste and its morality cannot be defended publicly). Thus the emphasis that "substantialisation is an ideological shift that simultaneously sharpens the divide between public and private behaviour and
expression" *(ibid. 14)*. Further, caste actors' "understandings of caste - what it is and what it means - are above all a **denial**, most explicitly in the public domain, of the existence or continuing significance of caste in its 'traditional' form" *(ibid.: 21; emphasis added)*; it is "**remembered as imagined** their own past, a social and ideological reality that is now on the wane" *(ibid, emphasis added)*. Fuller sees caste identity as cohabiting a space in which there are other identities that are in competition with each other for the allegiance of individuals and groups.

To be sure, these are crucial points of evaluation for our own study of the dynamics of Brahmin identity in contemporary Karnataka. An associated formulation of discrete castes and continuous hierarchies, traceable to Gupta *(1992b and 2000)*, likewise is open-ended and facilitative of an understanding of caste's contemporaneity as a dynamic given. *(Incidentally, Gupta's prognosis is hardly alluded to in the Fuller volume.)* Perhaps the greatest advantage that Gupta offers is that he steers clear of an aspect of the anthropological construction of caste - caste as a bounded ideational system articulating a clear structure of values - even as he is logically open to the question of the systemic properties of caste itself.

Some **reflexively** ordered questions however need to be foregrounded here, in the context of 'substantialisation'. Does the adoption of this frame commit one to the instituting protocols of **Dumont's** theory of caste - i.e., would mapping the presents of caste within the rubric of substantialisation require us to validate the Dumontian framework in its entirety? Particularly, what becomes of the language and the identity of caste as Dumont comes to inscribe, as indeed the meanings he associates it with? Fuller *(1996)* suggests that even if we accept Dumontian theorisation to be an accurate account of caste but at a mere instance of history, substantialisation still stands steady as a theoretical lever to make sense of its contemporaneity. Dirks too appears to share a similar ground in making the following statement:

*[T]he process of what has been called the ethnicization, or substantialization, of caste, heralded by many social scientists as the necessary death of the old caste system (based as they thought it was on interdependency rather than conflict) has provided new mechanisms for the strengthening of caste identity (2002: 7).*

Further, need substantialisation lose its validity if we, in a manner of **speaking**, historicise Dumont's caste reality itself as representing the phenomenon as it existed in the colonial and late colonial periods? As an approximation, it appears that one could
answer the first set of questions in the affirmative. However, the second complicates the terms of that positive answer by imposing new constraints on it. A fuller treatment would have to await the flow of our study, and ideally they need to be taken up in our concluding chapter. Be that as it may, let us here get down to systematising the contours of this study’s focus.

VII

Representing the contemporary Brahmin

As the drift of the foregoing recapitulation should reveal, the transcription of caste as a crucial category of sociological analysis in the sociology of India is imperative. As Deshpande (2003) suggests, the first step is to acknowledge the very modernity of caste - of the fact that caste can and has reinvented itself throughout its history and especially in modernity. This is not to obscure its connections with structures of inequality in India and their reproduction - in that sense, perhaps, an emphasis on 'social stratification' is inevitable - only to suggest that trends in contemporary sociology that amount to marginalising caste by restricting it to certain spaces need to be interrogated. It is only by disclosing the more various and nebulous workings of caste that caste studies can be made more legitimate and responsive to the times.

More poignantly perhaps, we seek to disclose aspects of the world of caste by recourse to what may be putatively described as the study of caste in an 'upper caste' context, namely, the Brahmin community in contemporary Karnataka. To be sure, the categories 'upper caste' and 'lower castes', even as they are handy and ready-to-use, are ambiguous and slippery. They enter sociology (or rather the formal academic disciplines) from the 'field' - where, being objects of contextual usage, they present some intractable problems to academics before they can serve as useful conceptual categories. For instance, the category of 'upper caste' may be used to signify any caste which is above one's own caste, in which case the usage fixes on a certain systemic and relational notion of the 'upper'. But most of the times they constitute substantive definitions - some castes are 'upper' castes and some others are 'lower', and they are held to remain that way over time and across contexts. Even as these categorisations invoke the ritual orderings of purity and pollution, they are increasingly vested with connotations of the secular inequalities of power and economy. Besides, as they are substantive, they vary across 'regions' (in this instance, Indian states as units of region).
Of course, within a polity or a region, one encounters a relatively stable and unambiguous understanding of who constitutes the 'upper castes' as well as the 'lower castes'. In the specific context of Karnataka, only the Brahmin community is seen to constitute the space of upper castes, particularly when ritual hierarchy is the issue.\textsuperscript{19} But if one brings the economic and political factors into reckoning, then the category of upper caste would have to be expanded to include also the Lingayaths and the Vokkaligas. One supposes that this is what Srinivas was getting at in formulating his idea of 'dominant caste' (Srinivas 1959), but this can pass (for a critical reference to the concept, see Mukherjee 1979 \textit{passim}). What is significant is that the Brahmin community is represented as 'upper' on either or both of these counts, although paradoxically enough its visibility commensurate with its status of being 'upper caste' has been diminishing in contemporary Karnataka. Indeed, in the wake of the latter, efforts at 'corporatising' the Brahmin identity has gathered pace, of course with varying degrees of success.

Our intention to focus on dynamics of Brahmin identity does not derive exclusively from such shifting contexts however. For one, the mode of contextualisation on offer seeks to rid the sociology of caste of an excessive (and even obsessive) concern with castes and communities from below. One need only traverse the methodological ground of the studies reviewed to consolidate this insight. It is almost as if lower castes come marked out as embodiments of an entrenched (and traditional) system, while the upper castes and the profiles attaching to them represent a changing present, one whose contours must await a delineation of the traditional system. Even more ironically perhaps, the choice of a focus on the Brahmin community need not - and indeed does not - entail the possibility of a perspective from above, for as we remarked above the Brahmin community is invisible in most spaces in contemporary Karnataka. What is more, given a now long history of non-Brahminical othering of Brahmins, the latter feels even more a community under siege. It would be interesting to capture aspects of this sense of siege - as indeed the Brahmin response to this condition - as a window into the

\textsuperscript{19} The case of the Lingayaths is a more contested one. They have been insistent that their community is treated on par if not better than the Brahmins. However, their own internal heterogeneity is held against them. Note also that to refer to caste groups as communities can be problematic. Nevertheless, we persist with its use for reasons that will become clear in course. Besides, as the title of our study discloses, it is the peculiar dynamic between conceptions of caste, community, and association (as derived from the discourse of Brahmins in Karnataka) that is the focus.
dynamics of Brahmin identity in contemporary Karnataka, something that our study sets out to do.

In a more constitutive sense, objectifying the subject of the Brahmin - as our study is wont to do - emanates also from the peculiar state of existence that the figure of the Brahmin has come to occupy in contemporary debates on caste. Although the figure of the Brahmin permeates all invocations and examinations of the structural and relational aspects of caste, the figure is conspicuous by its absence when the substantive aspects of caste are being either recalled or debated. The 'Brahmin' thus in most debates on caste is omnipresent, but the form of his presence is more as an idea or ideal than as an entity (an embodied person or even community). Indeed, Madan (1965) and Khare (1970) are arguably the only full-length studies that deal with the contemporariness of the Brahmin community, apart from the studies of Brahmin priests like Subramaniam (1974), Fuller (1984) and Parry (1994). Even Beteille, as we have seen, avoids recognising the caste locations of the "urban middle classes" and the "intelligentsia" that he speaks of, although a fair guess, at least with reference to the context of Karnataka, would be that a determining number of individuals making up that category would come from the Brahmin fold. If this deduction is defensible, then the contours of Beteille’s diagnosis would have us believe that it is merely a matter of time before Brahmins would have very little to do with caste or, more accurately, with caste as a system: it would have lost a great deal of legitimacy and influence and could obtain as a form of ethnic or ethnicised identity, one that these ‘de-casted’ individuals share and probably significant in choosing life partners. That prognosis would have to await further investigations however. In focusing on the figure of the Brahmin, as the Brahmin encounters it and plays itself out, our study therefore problematises caste action and even queries the specific modalities of the survival of caste as an institution in the present.

Accordingly, then, in representing the world of the Brahmin, the study confronts what Quigley has noted in another context:

Some anthropologists have tried to sideline the theoretical problems by sticking to what they can actually observe on the ground during prolonged periods of fieldwork, as if ethnographic description and theoretical abstraction belong to mutually exclusive zones (1994: 28).

20 A very recent treatment is Fuller (1999).
In bridging this divide, however, we remain committed to ‘sociological’ protocols - taking the term to designate a more contemporary register for fieldwork and theory. In fact, the historian Susan Bayly, way back in 1983, had noted that studies of single caste groups "are beginning to outlive their usefulness" and that "the future lies with studies which seek to portray the evolution of relations between a variety of castes in the context of the wider field of economic, religious and political organization" (Bayly 1983: 527). More recently, but pursuing a different demand, Deshpande has observed that even as the standard anthropological method of intensive fieldwork by a single scholar in a very small area has yielded valuable insights, "it has precluded any significant attempts at developing a macro-perspective based on a more broad-based coverage of the field" (2003: 104). Broadly, in keeping with these protocols for a renewed sociology of caste and working against their grain, we can maintain that our study attempts to combine a focus on both the synchronic and diachronic realities of the contemporary Brahmin community. By means of such a grafting of the historical onto the space of the present, we seek to resist the contemporary impulse both to ‘substantialise caste’ as well as to announce a radical break with its past. Clearly, the thesis of substantialisation is not the last word on the contemporaneity of caste, and indeed, as we indicated above with reference to Fuller, the process itself is a self-contradictory one. What this entails is a more empirical and perceptual engagement with the world of contemporary caste(s), something that we seek to do in the course of investigating the dynamics of Brahmin identity in contemporary Karnataka. The specific methodological resonances attaching to our study will be recounted more fully in the next chapter.

To sum up the object of our research: the study issues from a concern to attend to “caste” in upper caste contexts, and translates into a focus on caste as an axis of identity and identification. The study is contextualised to the Brahmin community in contemporary Karnataka and seeks to map the perceptual field (individual and organised, historical and contemporary) occupied by the community as a whole. Along this course, the study will query the differential investment in the category of the "Brahmin".

VIII

A note on the chapterisation

The dissertation is sequenced as follows. The present chapter has been concerned to contextualise the study to the trends and perspectives that have dominated the sociology of caste. In the course of this summation, we also gave a glimpse of the object
and concerns configuring the study. Our second chapter incorporates concerns that are primarily methodological. The axis of a ‘movement’ framework is actively repudiated, and a perspective on caste in/and/as identity is explored. The chapter also introduces the field of study by **summati**ng the historical and substantive contexts in which the work is taking shape. A note on the research materials used and the sampling strategies adopted is also included.

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

Accordingly, the fourth chapter encounters aspects of the **non-Brahminical** othering of the Brahmin identity and community. It examines the responses of and negotiations with that othering on the part of Brahmins in the late colonial period (beginning from the 1900s) in the region that later came to be identified as the state of Karnataka, particularly the Princely Mysore State. This chapter also describes the many other intersecting voices - such as that of the Lingayaths as indeed of the contending imaginations of the self obtaining within the Brahmin fold - in order to map the shifting identifications that the Brahmin self foregrounds. The descriptions that get encoded in these two chapters - the third and the fourth - demonstrates that merely recounting these trajectories will not exhaust the space of the making of the modern Brahmin identity. The latter is also shaped by the self-interpretations and representations of the self that are
made possible by the modern conditions in which the community found itself overwhelmed.

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

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

Finally, our concluding chapter revisits the critical premises and points of departure marking the study as a whole in an effort to arrive at a probable approach to understand caste especially in its contemporaneity and regional specificity.