

# Caste's Latest Image

Evelyn Wood

*Within a series of factors, the voting system is now being socially applied to the restructuring of groups which are not always composed of one jati in a given village or panchayat.*

*From the processes of election, those few members of a group who have the interest to follow up what the elected representative does or does not do for his constituents can become important diffusion points in a village—Where a person can diffuse news, he can also diffuse suggestions for improved technical practices.*

*However, this new and powerful channel of communication for rural development may be choked up by the ideological attachment of the Government to a "Wasteless society", just as some other argument has prevented other channels from being cultivated and intensified with fresh understanding between the Government and "the people".*

*It could be, of course, that the Government does not really wish to reach fresh understanding of so complex a people; certainly not at the cost of being obliged to recognise caste as a revived social force.*

CHAOS is the word, privately, used by most visitors to New Delhi, when they wish to describe its central Government and bureaucracy. Mostly, this state of indecision, to give it a fair name, began from November 1962. To that extent, the charming Chinese scholars of despotism were justified in their ... him, ... assertion of armed power.

Besides this appearance in the Capital, a stream of reports flows into Bombay from the various development undertakings, particularly on the rural side, which indicates a similar — but more oceanic—state of the doldrums. This writer begins to feel thrice blessed that circumstances have kept him from rural fieldwork for nearly two years.

## How Are Ballot Politics Taking Hold?

This question will not seem irrelevant to those who have seen — or read deeply into — the working of Panchayati Raj. It is in this sector that the new image of caste begins to come clear. Srinivas' "Sanskritization" is by no means a spent force; but votes are beginning to provide a second focus of action for the formerly "bottom dog" *jatis*.

The last eight years has seen a spate of studies on the correlation of sub-caste with politics. Adrian Mayer, then funded by the Australian National University, began the interest in this side of the world, with his Fiji studies of Indian colonist labour.<sup>1</sup> A series of six brief studies on expansions of a similar approach in Malwi followed; and his latest summary<sup>2</sup> is pretty conclusive on the linkage which exists between caste and the new political forms.

In parallel with Mayer, F G Bailey's work in Orissa<sup>3</sup> has a special quality, due to the area it tackles. His latest book brings us up to the situation as it appears in the State Assembly.

A couple of recent studies, so far unpublished, one just over 1450 miles due north<sup>1</sup> of De was, in Malwa, and the other a dual effort between samples in Andhra and Rajasthan,<sup>6</sup> add confirmation to what goes on in the villages, according to Mayer and Bailey. Lastly, we have newspapers which keep tantalizing us with stories of clashes between villagers and (mainly) police, which never seem to have an ending.

Then of course there is the notorious down-casting movement in Mysore — so that candidates for educational facilities could shed their Lingayat or Gowd status for that purpose.

There seems to be no doubt that "the people", as a whole, are beginning to suspect that they are now entitled to have a hand in government. Many of the agitations and demonstrations one sees reported today are evidence of the fact that "the people" — in that particular group — are increased by not finding any dividend from the efforts they invested in electing a representative to the Government.

## Just What Values Have Votes in Villages?

It would be delightful if one could persuade oneself that parliamentary government is a going concern, with a sufficiency of the voters interested in between elections to make it work. That happy state *may* perhaps be reached a couple of generations from

now — provided that what "the people" really prove that they want is parliamentary, socialist etc. etc. as prescribed for them by their dear patrons, the Indian National Congress.

Let us not attempt to discuss cash-values. The currencies used in rural areas for this kind of commodity are still barter-goods. Favours, "protection", agreements to share the fruits of political power and the like are the more public prices paid. Jobs and various items of commission, rake-off or what-have-you are the private prices, which affect very few of the voters.

## A Definite Picture

In fact the question that has been partly answered by the anthropologists' studies referred to concerns the use of votes for group purposes. And in this form, the answer relates nearly always to a *jati* as the group either looking for advantage or defending a former position of advantage.

Out of the anthropologists' and sociologists' studies as more accurate reports, and the Press items as indicators, a definite picture is emerging. It is probably best expressed as a series of factors, which will thus be variable, to convert the picture into its local forms and colours:

(1) The power of hereditary ruling families is not destroyed by the electoral system. Those families which are reputed never to have sought for more power over people; and which have kept their economic heads well above water, may have a scion living who expresses the old-style "safe-reference" to most villagers in that place. He is still consulted before decisions are taken.

(2) Interest in the scope of government action, up to and including the installation of heavy industries and an adequate army to keep out the Chinese and Pakistanis, is very scant. It is the powers exerted by the local administration that villagers want to control. The higher functions of government are null to them.

### Clean Castes on Defensive

(3) Voting, whether for a *panchayat* or the Lok Sabha in New Delhi is controlled by two polar effects and two or three equatorial currents. The polar effects were obvious from the provisions for Scheduled Castes in the Indian Constitution:

- (a) *Harijans* tend towards grouping so that they may jointly refuse menial service, obtain lands and employment as increasingly skilled labour, take their idol out in procession, as the "clean castes" do ... and, if these rights are not given, then, the whole *jati* has been known to move out or make a riot. *These* formerly despised groups look like becoming the true progressives of development in rural India. They have already proved far more adaptable to new occupations.
- (b) Clean Castes, more especially the outnumbered, such as Brahmins almost everywhere in the villages; or self-claim brahmins like Lingayats in parts of Mysore, or non-tribal colonists in the exploited hill-areas of Orissa, all begin to fear and hate the *harijan*, especially where he can mass in negative or positive groups. It is no fun to be left without *chamars* to flay the dead cattle; scavengers to clean the latrines you have installed; and, if there is no *dai* in the village, what happens when your wife delivers?

So the clean castes are on the defensive. They can express this directly by voting and manipulating the votes of others. As far as possible they try to use their old forms of privilege to bargain for blocks of votes.

It is well worth remarking that the Development Block pattern has not helped either the aggressions of the *harijans* on the defences of the upper castes. As often as not, the NES has created a fresh focus of rural communications; this is not a universal ef-

fect. The more general result of having a Block H.Q. in an area of about 60,000 population has, however, been to increase the importance of the *mandis* in that area; not necessarily as trading-points; but as a meeting ground for electoral bargaining, demonstrations and agitations of a political kind, and the formation of *jati mandate*, utterly distinct from the traditional caste panchayat.

(4) Votes are often used to feed the power of local factionaries. At the national elections, the defensive caste vote for Congress, unless there be a strong body of local Mahasabha type, in *the promises of which they have some trust*. Broadly speaking, there is no trust placed easily, as was the case a decade ago, in *any* politician's promises; and the promises of a political party are today regarded with disgusted scorn — where anyone takes notice of them, which is rare.

(5) The manoeuvre in nearly all village politics is to break up some other group's claim to privilege and benefit, especially where the elected candidate will have some contact with sources of funds. As to whether his contact can be effective from his electors' point of view, no one relies on the representative for whom they vote. They try to make sure that they will have, as a group — if there be enough of them in the unit (village or *gaon sahha*) — a sufficiency of unbaloted representatives who will prod the elected one. Prodding is only one function; the traditional practice of spying on the giver of an undertaking is being revived with effective results.

On the side of the Brahmins and other outnumbered castes, their contacts with influential persons in government service or political party secretariats are used to intrigue against, obstruct and harass their low-caste neighbours. The new Extension contacts in the villages make this all too easy today.

### Conclusion

Within this series of factors, the voting system is now being socially applied to the restructuring of groups which are not always composed of one *jati* in a given village or panchayat — still less in the whole string of villages served by a given *mandi*. There can be fresh combinations of *jatis*; even castes such as brahmins

and kshatriyas can make common cause for the ballot, and the benefits to be derived from chasing the representatives secured by a successful blocking of their votes.

From the processes of election, those few members of a group who have the interest to follow-up what the elected representative does or does not do for his constituents can become important diffusion points in a village — and, in this case, in a *mandi*. Where a person can diffuse news, he can also diffuse suggestions for improved technical practices.

Doubtless the ideological attachment of the Governments in India to a "casteless society" will prevent this new and powerful channel of communication for rural development being used...just as some other (surely) logical argument has prevented other channels from being cultivated and intensified with fresh understandings between the Government and "the people".

It could be, of course, that Government does not really wish to reach further understanding of and, therefore, *with* so complex a people; and certainly not at the cost of being obliged to recognise caste as a revived social force.

### References

- <sup>1</sup> Mayer, Adrian C: "Associations in Fiji Indian Rural Society" p 97, *American Anthropologist*, Vol 58, No 1, Feb 1956
- <sup>2</sup> 'System and Network: An Approach to the Study of Political Process in Dewas' in "Indian Anthropology," Essays in memory of N D Majumdar, (Eds) Madan and Sarana, Asia Publishing House, Bombay, 1962.
- <sup>3</sup> Bailey, F G: "Politics and Social Change: Orissa in 1959", University of California Press, 1963; Oxford University Press, Bombay, 241 p.
- <sup>4</sup> Nath, V: "Social Change in Village India" MS 382 p. Studies near Sawai Madhopur around 1957.
- <sup>5</sup> Hofsommer, Harold and Dube S C, Central Institute of Study and Research in C D, Mussoorie, and Ford Foundation: "A Sociological Study of Panchayati Raj in Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh" 170 p, cyclo, undated.