Caste and the Indian Army

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In Independent India caste has been gaining influence in many fields of social activity. The part it has played in representative political institutions is now widely recognized.

An attempt is made here to show how caste is extending its influence to the Indian Army organization.

I shall describe the origin and development of the Sabha before considering its demand for a Yadav regiment.

[I thank Professor M N Srinivas for his comments and criticisms.]

The term 'Yadavas', literally meaning descendants of the Yadu dynasty, is used as a blanket one to include several localized but allied castes found all over India. The first attempt to trace the 'history' of the Yadavas was made in the last quarter of the 19th century by Vithal Krishnaji Khedkar of Ratnagiri District, in his work on 'Yadavas of Devagiri'. His son Dr Raghunath Vithal Khedkar, a distinguished surgeon of Bombay revised and enlarged his father's work in 1924, but it was not until 1959 that it was published under the title, 'The Divine Heritage of the Yadavas'. The authors of this book include among Yadavas four different categories of castes and ruling dynasties: In the first category are all ruling dynasties mentioned as Yadavas in the Hindu Scriptures. It may be noted that Krishna, the God incarnate, belonged to the Yadu dynasty. Secondly, all ruling families claiming themselves to be Yadavas such as the Rashtra-Kutas, Hoysalas and Wodeyars constitute another category. Ahirs and Go pas who are said to have been admitted to the Yadava fold at some period in 'history' form the third category. The last category includes those royal families who were once included among the Yadavas but later seceded from them for different reasons. Jats, Marathas, Bhatias, Prabhus, the ruling houses of Kolhapur, Baroda, Bharatpur, Alwar and Bikaner are given as examples of this category. Thus one may discern in the extensive coverage of castes coming under the fold of Yadavas, two related principles of integration: common descent from the mythical Yadu dynasty and similarity of occupation either as cowherds or as sellers of milk and its products or both.

Yadavas thus comprise different allied castes of several denominations, such as Ahirs in Punjab, Delhi, U P, Bihar and Gujarat, Thetwars and Raots in M P, Gowlis or Gopals in Maharashtra, Idaiyans in Tamilnad, Gollas in Andhra and Mysore, and Gopas in Bengal. Among other denominations Gwal, Dhanpal, Dhanger, Nanda and Dhinderd may be noted. Each of these castes is further divided into several endogamous sub-castes. Ahirs, for instance, are divided into Yaduvansis, Nandavamsis and Gwalvamsis. Gowlis of Maharashtra are divided into Dabholis and Cheolis. Thus different localized castes and sub-castes speaking different languages are included among Yadavas.

Dominant Position

Diversity among Yadavas obtains not only on the basis of linguistic and cultural differences but also stems from differences in economic and political status. While in some areas such as Punjab, Delhi, U P, Maharashtra and Bihar, Yadavas are owner-cultivators, in some others they are only cowherds and milk-sellers. Again, in some regions they are large estate holders but elsewhere they are small peasants. Except in a few States (e g Punjab), they are generally included under the Backward Classes. Similarly in some parts of India Yadavas had risen to political dominance. For instance, Ahirs built a Kingdom in Rewari which continued upto the middle of the 19th century A D. The Ahir rulers rendered military help to the Moghul Emperors of Delhi and widened their area of political influence through the grants of Districts they obtained in return to their military services. The Marathas overthrew the Moghuls in Delhi whereupon the Ahir rulers of Rewari served the former and obtained a big grant of twelve paraganas in 1758 A D. Whereas the rulers of Rewari thus served the different overlords at Delhi and expanded their area of political control, they were hostile to the British. Tejram, the then ruler of Rewari sided with the Marathas in their battle against the British. When the latter won the battle, the size of Tejram's kingdom was reduced to eighty-seven villages. Eater, Rao Tula Ram mutinied against the British and lost even this small principality.

Thus the Ahirs of Rewari (Punjab) provide an instance where Yadavas had risen to military and political power in pre-British India. It should be noted that such a strategic position of traditional dominance was of great importance to the Yadavas to make advances in different fields of social activity both under British rule as well as in Independent India.

During British rule economic and educational opportunities were available to the people where considerations of caste did not always loom large. Yadavas like other castes sought to exploit these opportunities. One of the pioneer organizers of the Yadavas, Vithal Krishnaji Khedkar, who hailed from a family with a tradition of military service started life as a teacher. He was a social reformer and one of the founders of Prarthana Samaj in Bombay. His wife, once again 'he daughter of a sardar, was the chief medical officer at Bhavnagar. Raghunath Vithal Khedkar, son of V K Khedkar qualified himself in medicine and surgery from Edinburgh and Glasgow, and was practising medicine in New Castle-on-Tyne for some years. At the outbreak of the World War I, he returned to India and served in his profession with distinction at Bombay, Kolhapur and Nepal.

Dr Khedkar was not only a noted physician but also a leader of Backward Classes. He headed a deputation of the Backward Classes to represent their case for political rights before the Joint Select Committee of Parliament in London in 1920. He also presided over the Non-Brahmin Conference held at Sholapur. He was the president of the Poona Board of the Hindu Missionary Society which admitted followers of other creeds into the Hindu fold.

The foregoing description of Dr Khedkar's activities is highly relevant to our discussion because he was one of the founder members of the All-India Yadav Maha Sabha which was inaugurated in 1924 at Allahabad.

While Dr Khedkar brought to bear
on the Yadava Caste Movement his modern organizational skills, Duleep Singh of Rewari later known as Swami Krishnandjji, further popularized the term Yadava and launched a vigorous campaign for sinking regional differences in denominations. Thus there was a calculated effort to bring together allied castes of different names found all over India under the single name of Yadavas. Among others who were associated with the Sabha, mention should be made of a reputed engineer of Bombay, who was connected with the Sabha for about sixteen years in various capacities until 1944 when he severed his connections with it due to certain differences of opinion. He then founded another association named Swami Yadav Singh which is now functioning effectively with its headquarters at Bombay.

Sabha’s Activities

The Sabha has gained in strength and popularity during its life of forty years. Before the formation of the Sabha there were in existence many caste associations at the regional level. For instance, in U P there was the Ahir Kshatriya Mahasabha, The Sabha affiliated such regional caste associations and further encouraged the formation of new local and regional bodies.

The Sabha, in its earlier stages of development introduced certain reforms of caste customs. It advocated inter-marriage between hitherto separate endogamous units. Although this has remained still a wish, the sub-caste members do not, however, now object to such marriages. The Sabha banned child marriages and the practice of dowry, and recommended shortening of the duration of the marriage ceremony from three days to one day. It launched a vigorous drive among its members for wearing of sacred thread, and this was an occasion of intense conflict especially between Bhoomihars and Yadavas in Bihar. The Sabha also asked its members to abstain from liquor and meat. Besides these reformative measures pertaining to Yadavas, the Sabha took keen interest in the removal of untouchability launched by Mahatma Gandhi. It played (and is playing) a significant part in the backward Classes Movement.

The Sabha propagates its aims and objectives by holding annual conferences in several parts of India, and by running a monthly journal called Yadav which is being published from Varanasi since forty years.

While the activities of the Sabha are thus more general and extensive, those of the regional or local Yadava associations are more specific and intensive. For instance, the Ahirs of Rewari started a high school in 1925, and another in 1935. The school later developed into a college. At present there are about twelve schools and colleges, and about six hostels for the students of the caste in the Rewari region alone. The Ahir leaders of Rewari are now making attempts to establish a Rao Tularam Memorial College in Delhi. Besides providing educational facilities in terms of schools and hostels, the regional Yadava associations have also established charity trusts and scholarship funds. Mention may be made of Alakiram Rawat Scholarship Fund which was founded in Bengal twenty-seven years ago, and Maharashtra Yadav Charity Trust established in Bombay eighteen years back. Thus an important activity of the regional and local Yadava associations seems to be that of providing educational facilities for the students of the caste. The Sabha has not, however, contested the General Elections in Independent India acting either as a political body or as an electoral machine. But this does nor mean that the Yadava caste is not a political force of the voting behaviour of its members. In U P and Bihar where Ahirs are in larger numbers, many Ahir candidates have returned as M L As. The Bihar State Assembly has about thirty-three Ahir M L As. But it may be noted that the activity of the Sabha in the realm of representative political institutions is not one of direct participation.

With certain events that happened during the Chinese aggression in 1962, there has been a dramatic change in the character of the Sabha’s activities. The Chinese attacked the Indian post at Rejangla in Ladakh on November 18, 1962. The 13th Kumaon Company which fought the Chinese at this post wholly consisted of Ahirs. One hundred and fourteen soldiers laid down their lives in an attempt to defend the country gallantly against the overwhelmingly large force of the Chinese. This event evoked all-round sympathy and admiration in the press, but for Ahirs it was more personal, and it triggered off an agitation for the formation of a separate Yadav or Ahir regiment in the Indian Army.

Yadavas, in some parts of India and especially in Punjab had a tradition of military service. They had all along cherished a desire to enlist themselves as a ‘martial race’ in the British Indian Army. As the British had an unhappy experience with Rao Tularam, who revoluted against them in the Indian Sepoy Mutiny, they were against recruiting Ahirs in their Army. But by 1904, the British changed their attitude towards Ahirs and started recruiting them. However, Ahirs were recruited to the artillery and not to infantry or cavalry, and it was not until World War I that they were recruited as soldiers in the infantry. Rao Balbir Singh, the second descendant of Rao Tularam acted as a recruiting agent of the British Government, and since then many Ahirs have joined the Army in increasing numbers. There are a few military villages in the Punjab where at least one member of each of the Ahir households was or is in the Army. Mention should be made of an Ahir village, Kosli, in Rohtak district where there are as many as about seventy senior commissioned officers and about one hundred and fifty junior commissioned officers. Military pensioners number one hundred, a few of them being recipients of different military honours during British rule.

Case for a Yadava Regiment

Thus Ahirs have built up a tradition of military service in the British Indian Army over the past sixty years, and the bravery that the Ahir soldiers exhibited in Rejangla has further confirmed their military virtues. They fought not only for the honour of the country but also for the prestige of their caste. Hence it is claimed that it is only fair that the Ahirs or Yadavas should have a separate regiment in the Army. Let me formulate their argument behind the demand more fully.

Firstly, Yadavas have had a military tradition in some parts of pre-British India where they had risen to military and political power. Therefore, they claim themselves to be one of the ‘martial races’. Secondly, the Ahirs of Rewari fought against the British in the Sepoy Mutiny as a result of which the former were not recruited in the Army till 1904. Meanwhile, other mar-

Another parallel all-India association of the Yadavas, the Indian Yadav Association (Bharatiya Yadav Sangh) also holds its annual conferences separately and publishes its own monthly journal called Yadavesh from Bombay. I am more concerned in the present article with the Sabha because of the active part it is playing in the agitation for the formation of a separate Yadav regiment.
tial castes such as Jats and Raiputs were not only recruited in greater numbers to the Army but separate caste regiments were established for them. These caste regiments were well-established by the time the British revised their policy in favour of recruiting Ahirs to the Infantry. Thirdly, after India attained its independence, Ahirs entertained a hope that at least the Indian Government would undo the injustice done by the British to them. The attitude that was expected of the Congress Government was similar to the one hoped for by the political sufferers during the Independence struggle. Fourthly, caste regiments already exist in the Army, and the demand for the formation of an Ahir or Yadav regiment is only based on established precedents and policies. Ahir soldiers are not only found in larger numbers in the Indian Army but they are also to be found in the higher ranks. Lastly, the present Kumaon regiment already consists of a certain proportion of Ahir soldiers. Even though Ahirs fight bravely the name goes to Kumaon and not to their caste of which they are proud. If, on the other hand, they have a separate regiment, it gives them the best opportunity to exhibit their martial talents and to fight in the honour of both the country as well as the caste and the Yadu dynasty to which they belong. It is remarked; “Caste loyalty evokes greater emotional appeal than national loyalty”.

Memorandum to Prime Minister

Soon after the occurrence of the Rejangla incident in November 1962, the Sabha got active and organised a conference in January 1963 in Delhi and pressed the demand for a Yadav regiment in the Army. A delegation of a hundred strong met the Defence Minister and presented the case for favourable consideration by the Government. However, the reply of the Defence Minister was not in favour of the demand of the Sabha. But undeterred by this reply, the Sabha continued its agitation. In November 1963, it organised a conference in Hyderpur an Ahir village near Delhi. Again in December another conference, on a larger scale, was held in Surendra. The Surendra conference was not only well attended but many Yadav MPs took part in it. One of the highlights of this conference was the spirited speech made by Golla M P from Mysore. People showed great enthusiasm and urged the Sabha to make fresh efforts to press their demands. One of the prominent organisers and spokesmen of the Sabha and two Yadav MPs met the Prime Minister and submitted a memorandum to him.

Besides such attempts to persuade the Government through democratic means, the Sabha is further seeking the support of Yadavs all over the country. It is organising regional conferences as a step towards holding a larger all-India conference. Thus the Sabha has launched a vigorous campaign on two fronts; it is persuading the Government through negotiations on the one hand, and is seeking the support of its caste members and of the general public on the other.

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The foregoing account of the origin and development of the Sabha and its attempts to press the demand for a Yadav regiment in the Army brings to the fore certain broad features of the dynamics of caste associations.

The traditional political organisation in pre-Brindsh India was characterised, among others, by the rise and fall of several political powers all over the country. It was common for any caste group which wielded political power to raise its social status in the varna hierarchy. Since kingship or chieftainship and military occupations were associated traditionally with the Kshatriya varna, it was only imperative that they adopted the Kshatriya model of Sanskritisation. Further, `royal' families of the newly rising political and military powers claimed descent from the established mythical dynasties such as the Sun and the Moon dynasties. Thus, varna and Kshatriya became the symbols of their caste. Ahirs took government contracts in the British bureaucracy. Men of such influence, other enterprising Ahirs, were also integrated in the fold of the Sabha and of the local Yadava caste associations.

Financial Support

The proliferation of activities of the Sabha and of the local Yadava caste associations required financial resources. Here the part played by the business elite of the caste is significant. With the growth of employment opportunities in towns and cities under British rule, many Yadavs emigrated from villages. Those families whose traditional status was high (such as the royal families or Zamindars) were better able to develop contacts with the British bureaucracy. Men of such families took government contracts in the Railways and elsewhere. Besides these men of influence, other enterprising Yadavs also entered trade and commerce. The business elite which thus grew in cities and towns, patronised the programmes of their caste associations. They gave liberal donations to build schools, colleges, hospitals and temples, to scholarship and towards the expenses of running caste journals and of holding conferences and meetings. For instance, an Ahir business magnate in Delhi...
save as much as Rs 50,000 to the building fund of a High School in Rewari. Another Rai Sahib of Rewari financed the publication of caste journals for many years. He had also given a free land grant to the school. Similarly a leading businessman of Bombay has given Rs 21,000 for the Maharashtriyada Yadav Charity Trust. Thus the business elite rendered, to a certain extent, financial help for the implementation of the programmes of the Yadava caste associations. But it must be noted that the business elite among the Yadavas is not relatively developed.

During British rule there were only a few men of importance among Yadavas in politics and administration. In Independent India, however, there has come into existence a political elite among them.

**Sources of Power**

Yadavas enjoy numerical preponderance in many parts of U P and Bihar and the State Assemblies there consist of a sizeable group of Yadava M L As. There is an Ahir Minister in the Union, and about twelve Yadava M Ps from U P, Bihar, Andhra, Mysore, Maharashtra, Delhi and Punjab. Thus the emergence of a political elite among the Yadavas is an event of crucial importance in the life of the Caste Movement. The Yadava politicians not only wield influence and power to sponsor the activities of the caste association, but also bring the Yadavas in the villages closer to the Movement. They form the legitimate contact men with their respective constituencies which presumably consist of a significant proportion of Yadavas.

Besides this advantage, the caste politicians develop a net-work of relations both within the Ministry and Government bureaucracy as well as outside them. They are in a position to make others, who need not be their castemen, obliged to them in several ways. These ties form the bases to exert pressures and pulls. For instance, the Yadava politicians may approach a non-Yadava Deputy Minister in the centre asking for co-operation or support on the issue of Yadav regiment. The basis of seeking such a support is that the Deputy Minister won the election because of the active support of Yadavas—and these are not mutually exclusive—have interacted with one another at different levels of participation in the life of the Yadava Caste Movement. Another type of elite which is of particular importance in the context of the agitation of the Sabha for the formation of an Yadav regiment in the Army is the military one. Over a period of sixty years Yadavas have enrolled themselves in the Army, as noted earlier, in increasing numbers, and many of them have also risen to senior officers' ranks. There are also retired military officers and soldiers as well. While the latter have settled down in their villages and towns, the former maintain regular contacts with their native villages. Although the Ahir military officers are prohibited from taking an active part in the Yadava regiment agitation, their informal contacts with the other types of elite prove to be of great value. However, the situation in respect of the retired Yadava soldiers and military officers is different for, they can take a more active part. They are men of knowledge about the details of military organisation and the past occasions on which Yadava soldiers have exhibited courage and discipline. Some of them also provide living examples of these instances, the narration of which evokes emotional appeal and carries convictions to their audience. If the caste politicians take an active part in leading delegations and organising other aspects of the agitation, the military elites provide the necessary direction with their knowledge of the army organisation. Thus there exists a division of labour among the different types of elites—the intellectual and professional, business, political and military. They are bound by common interests and serve in different capacities to achieve their desired goal.

**Caste Claiming New Ground**

The agitation of the Sabha for the formation of an Ahir regiment in the Army shows how caste in Independent India is claiming new grounds. However, this does not mean that considerations of caste have come up for the first time now in the Indian Army. Caste was very much part of the Army, as noted earlier, in increasing numbers, and many of them have also risen to senior officers' ranks. There are also retired military officers and soldiers as well. While the latter have settled down in their villages and towns, the former maintain regular contacts with their native villages. Although the Ahir military officers are prohibited from taking an active part in the Yadava regiment agitation, their informal contacts with the other types of elite prove to be of great value. However, the situation in respect of the retired Yadava soldiers and military officers is different for, they can take a more active part. They are men of knowledge about the details of military organisation and the past occasions on which Yadava soldiers have exhibited courage and discipline. Some of them also provide living examples of these instances, the narration of which evokes emotional appeal and carries convictions to their audience. If the caste politicians take an active part in leading delegations and organising other aspects of the agitation, the military elites provide the necessary direction with their knowledge of the army organisation. Thus there exists a division of labour among the different types of elites—the intellectual and professional, business, political and military. They are bound by common interests and serve in different capacities to achieve their desired goal.

**Housing and Slum Clearance**

Housing has asked the State Governments to conduct sample surveys to assess the impact of the low and middle income group housing scheme and the slum clearance programme. It has been found necessary to collect the data before proposals for Fourth Plan housing programme are finalised. The surveys are expected to give a clear picture of the implementation of housing programmes in different States.

The surveys, among other things, will cover the number of houses actually occupied by owners and the number of houses sublet to other tenants.

The survey of the slum clearance programme will indicate the number of pucca, kachcha and uninhabitable or dilapidated houses; and the total number of house-holds in different income groups occupying one room, two rooms, three rooms and more than three rooms.
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