

## CHAPTER - I

### Introduction : Genesis of the Policy of Reservation.

A social scientist eager to know the mechanism resulting in the emergence of political societies in India has to often start with an investigation into the roots of social organization of Hinduism. Caste may be described as the foundation of the Indian social fabric, at any rate as far as Hindu society is concerned. The term 'caste' has been used to describe ranked groups within rigid systems of social stratification and when defined in terms of its Hindu attributes and rationale is unique to India. A.L. Kroeber defined caste as "an endogamous and hereditary subdivision of an ethnic unit occupying a position of superior or inferior rank of social esteem in comparison with other such subdivisions".<sup>(1)</sup> The caste system, then can be said to have been based on the idea of a society composed of birth-ascribed hierarchically ordered, and culturally distinct social groups. The hierarchy entails differential evaluation, differential rewards and differential association. Since caste system ranks people by birth-ascribed group membership rather than by individual attributes, individual mobility is by definition impossible in the system. Since again the caste hierarchy implies a system of differential evaluation it means in effect a system of institutionalized inequality. Underlying hierarchical interaction between castes is the existence of what has been termed 'status summation'.<sup>(2)</sup> The multiple roles played by individual members of a caste are equivalent in the status they confer. Thus a person of high ritual status tends also to be of high

economic, political and social status. These statuses tend to coalesce and people are thus enabled as well as enjoined to interact with members of other castes in a consistent and hierarchical manner. Part of the dynamics of caste organization including the occasional tensions arising out of the inflexible caste model did often occur when there had been attempts for rectification of status incongruities. The caste system indicating a scale of social and organizational status of human beings and earmarking a man's position in the said scale at the moment of his birth had therefore, rendered the entire model of Hindu social organization as totally irrational if not unwholesome too. All Hindu *Dharma Shastras* take caste for granted. All *Puranas* assume the existence of caste and look upon it as a permanent order of society.

However it is common knowledge that the Hindu concept of *Jati* and *Varna* although possibly relevant in the context of ancient times does not fit at all with the changing condition of a dynamic society. Recent sociological work on caste has made it clear that the institution has never resulted in as closed and as immobile units as the *jatis* were usually thought to be, and there had been always inter-caste mobility (though small in number) arising out of such factors like land-surplus and western education including improved means of communications during the pre-colonial and colonial periods respectively.<sup>(3)</sup> But instances of such mobility being mostly rare, ranking of the Hindu society into four *varnas* usually furnished Brahminical orthodoxy with the bedrock on which it erected the elaborate caste structure. One essential feature of this institution

is the concept of "purity and pollution". In Hindustan proper, castes can be divided into five groups; first, the twice-born caste; second, those castes at whose hands the twice-born can take *pakka* food; third, those castes at whose hands the twice-born cannot accept any kind of food but may take water; fourth, castes that are not untouchable yet are such that water from them cannot be used by the twice-born; last come all those castes whose touch defiles not only the twice-born but any orthodox Hindu. (4)

The idea of defilement through touch of the human body, its proximity or even by touch of its shadow is associated with the concept of untouchability which has no parallel in the history of the civilised world. The so-called untouchables belong to the lowest rung of the Hindu caste hierarchy. Popularly known under various nomenclatures - *Achhuts*, *Panchammas*, *Atishudras*, *Avarnas* and *Antyajas* these outcaste people do not constitute a homogeneous or well-knit social group; they are truly speaking a congerie of heterogeneous castes, belonging to various regional, linguistic social, cultural and occupational affinities. Nevertheless, throughout history they remained subject to certain common social disabilities and degradations which for various reasons, assumed political significance of considerable magnitude most specifically in the Gandhian era of Indian politics.

Most of the Hindu *shastras* replete with high-sounding rhetorics provided a moral justification for such caste-based discriminations. The *Bhagavadgita* seeks to uphold such discriminations through one of

Lord Krishna's own exhortation - *chaturvarnam maya sristam guna karma bibhajasas* (The four-fold Order was created by Me on the basis of quality and action). The dictum may mean that the caste of an individual is linked to his *karma* (quality and action) instead of the accident of his birth. Here *Bhagabadgita* no doubt marks an important change in attitude at the philosophical level. But in actual practice the philosophy of caste takes the sting off the institution (of caste) and skilfully stereotypes it. As a matter of fact the *karma* judged in its peculiar Hindu esoteric context also means the deeds of an individual in his *purva* and *para janma* (life both before and after the present one) taken together. Such a hypothesis that seeks to justify and rationalise man-made social imbalance in the light of an individual's *karmaphal* marks the height of hypocrisy which abounds the holy texts of Hinduism.

One important outcome of this ritual ranking of castes has been to create deep-rooted vested interests in this system and to enable people belonging to the so-called higher castes to exploit men of the lower castes through the institutional framework of social organization. However, there is nothing unusual about this phenomenon. Ruling classes everywhere have tried to build a closed society of privilege through all sorts of devices and aristocracy has generally joined hands with the clergy in the process. What is, however, very peculiar about India is that as caste conditioned and controlled every aspect of an individual's life, it led to the creation of a society in which there was no 'rank disequilibrium' in the sense that for long it had hardly generated a sense of inequality particularly among those

who were its victims. "The real triumph of the caste system lies not in upholding the supremacy of the Brahmin, but in conditioning the consciousness of the lower castes in accepting their inferior status in the ritual hierarchy as a part of the natural order of things"<sup>(5)</sup>

This explains why Ekalavya, a tribal boy of *Mahabharata* had calmly surrendered to a demand for his forefinger made by his vainglorious Brahmin Guru - Dronacharya to whom he had little reasons to feel indebted. This also explains why in ancient times perhaps no one among the so-called low caste people came to challenge Kautilya when he prescribed differential rates of interests for debts according as they may be accepted by people belonging to different castes. In the same manner nobody came to challenge the great Hindu law giver's *bidhan* (commandment) which enjoined "...A king shall never sentence a Brahmin though convicted of all possible crimes but may banish him with all his property secure and his body unhurt. No greater crime is known on the earth than the slaying of a Brahmin and the king, therefore, must not even form in his mind an idea of killing a priest"<sup>(6)</sup>

Further there had been another *bidhan* to the effect that if a *shudra* mentions the name and class of the twice-born with contumely, an iron nail, ten figures long shall be thrust red-hot into his mouth and here again such a savage code remained unchallenged for a long time.

Coming to the more recent times when India was ruled by the colonial masters there was no indication of any improvement of the situation and status of this luckless lot belonging to the so-called low caste of the Hindu society. Socially they remained segregated from the

caste Hindus. They lived in the outskirts of the villages; and in certain parts of South India, such as in Madras and Malabar they were not allowed to come near a Hindu temple. In most cases the Brahmins would not function as priests in their ceremonies, in some cases their ceremonies were performed by their own caste-men and in others by the so-called inferior Brahmins. They were not allowed to reside or even travel along the streets of certain parts of the towns and villages of Southern India. In Cochin, the roads in close proximity to the temples and palace were a no-entry zone for them and they had no right to seek redress of such discrimination.<sup>(7)</sup> Under the rule of the Peshwas, in the Maratha territories, the Mahars, the most numerous untouchable caste of Maharashtra to which belonged Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, had to carry an earthen pot, hung from their neck, in which they were to spit lest the excretion on the streets may pollute a high caste Hindu.<sup>(8)</sup> In Mysore State, the women of certain lower castes were not permitted to cover their bosoms and even after being granted the permission for the same under a Royal Proclamation they could not be allowed to imitate the dress and hair styles of higher castes.<sup>(9)</sup> The untouchables were also subjected to numerous restrictions in such matters as food, dress, ornaments and dwelling condition. Good food, good dresses including gold ornaments and dwelling in good houses were all forbidden to them.<sup>(10)</sup> The Shanars of South India, although a very wealthy class among the untouchables, have had no right to build two-storeyed houses, wear gold ornaments and use umbrellas even during the months of hot or rainy season of the year.<sup>(11)</sup>

In the field of education, the benefits of receiving liberal

education although made available to all, were denied to people belonging to the so-called lower castes. This state of affairs continued even during the period following Wood's historic Despatch of 1854. The low caste students could not be admitted in the common schools because the caste Hindus felt that the presence of such boys in the schools would pollute the children of their own caste.<sup>(12)</sup>

I.A. Baines noted that the boycotting of the Depressed Class boys in the schools was almost universal.<sup>(13)</sup> In 1915, in Bombay Presidency,

the Mahar and other Depressed Class boys were not allowed to enter the school rooms and were accommodated outside the class room on the verandah.<sup>(14)</sup>

The doors of the common schools were in the same manner kept closed to the Chamars because the caste Hindu teachers and pupils would not allow the low caste boys to sit in the class rooms together with the high caste children.<sup>(15)</sup>

In Bengal which was relatively free from caste prejudices, the condition of these boys although a little better was by no means very enviable. Here they were not allowed to stay together with the caste Hindu boys in the same hostel and had to live elsewhere separately (as in Banibhaban mess at 10 Simla Street, Calcutta) under the superintendence of one high caste man who was seldom sympathetic to the residents of the boarding house.<sup>(16)</sup>

The caste bias of the Hindu gentoo was most shamefully demonstrated also at the time when the Hindu College, the forerunner of Presidency College, the most advanced centre of learning in Bengal came to be founded in 1817. That college, as reported by F.J. Mouat, Secretary to the Council of Education, Government of Bengal, was "designed as a school for conveying English learning to Hindoos of the higher classes exclusively". Later when for reasons of financial constraints there was a proposal for some organic changes in the Hindu College the

native managers of the institution declined to accept the proposal lest in that case the principle of exclusive admission is dropped for ever. It was then argued that the caste Hindu guardians may not allow their children to sit " on the same benches with children of very low caste or social position".<sup>(17)</sup> For a long time therefore, the standard of educational attainments of such low caste people continued to remain at a very low level. According to the Census of 1931, there were only 19 literates in every one thousand of their population as against 84 literates in every one thousand of the Hindu population and 95 literates among the same number of total population of the country.<sup>(18)</sup>

Of course it is true that since the twenties of the present century the provincial governments everywhere went on a special drive for promotion of education among the children of the Depressed Classes. Efforts were made to make all publicly managed schools open for admission of students of every description irrespective of their caste. Special schools and hostels were also opened for the education of the children of the Depressed Classes and provision made for remission of fees and grant of scholarships to such pupils. As a result of such special measures, there was some noticeable growth of education among the Depressed Classes and particularly in areas like Bengal, Punjab and U.P. there was a spectacular increase in the admission of the Depressed Class pupils to the common schools.<sup>(19)</sup>

But all said the state of education among the Depressed Classes remained as much dismal as had been quoted in the census Report of 1931.

The economic condition of the low caste people was also very



deplorable. According to the norms of the traditional society they were supposed to do all kinds of work which involve great physical labour including most other jobs which the high caste people would hate to perform. Besides cultivation, they performed some so-called unclean jobs like scavenging, sweeping, carrying night-soils and burning the dead-bodies (as in the case of *dhangar*, *methar* and *dom*). Some of them also engaged themselves in skinning the dead cattle and some minor handicrafts (in case of the *chamar*), weaving (in case of the *Kori* caste of U.P. and Bihar) and toddy-tapping (in case of the *Pasi* caste of Northern and parts of Southern India). Social custom deprived them of the right to seek a higher social status by taking to occupations other than the hereditary ones. Naturally therefore, the Depressed Classes, as a result of all such restrictions imposed on them existed only like a vast labour force without any right to enforce their bargaining power as labourers. They cultivated the soil but could not own the land. They performed the menials' job including those of house servants in the families of the high caste people, but could not earn proper wage for their services. It is no wonder then that they always remained "badly nourished, clad in the vilest rags, eaten up with leprosy or other horrible diseases, huddled like pigs, untaught, uncared for and unpitied".<sup>(20)</sup>

During the post-Reform Act of 1919 few among the Depressed Classes found opportunities to be placed in government services. But their number was very negligible. However the Depressed Class people had to fight hard for obtaining even such minor concessions from the government.<sup>(21)</sup> It was often argued that the educational backwardness

of such people would mainly account for the very small number of their appointments in the government services. This may be a good enough point for debate. But educated spokesmen of the Depressed Classes attributed this to the caste prejudices of the recruiting authorities who came mostly from the caste Hindus. In 1921 an unstarred Council question was put to Sir Henry Wheeler, the Hon'ble Member in charge of Appointment Department of the government of Bengal in which Babu Bhisnadev Das, Hon'ble Member gave vent to the sense of frustration of the young graduate and under-graduate namasudra candidates of Bengal who have failed to secure suitable employment under the government. The reply of the Minister appeared to be very significant. He confessed that some thirty-five qualified namasudra candidates had sought employment in the various cadres of government service including Civil Service, Police Sub-inspectorship and Sub-registrarship. But only one of them secured an appointment of a Sub-registrarship in 1918.<sup>(22)</sup> The Hon'ble Minister's answer is a revelation in the sense that it shows that at least for the Depressed Class people merit was not always a criterion for recruitment. As a matter of fact the caste prejudices of people close to the official circle had forestalled the appointment of the so-called low caste people also in other departments of the government - Central and Provincial.<sup>(23)</sup> This is the reason why no definite policy for recruitment of the members of important Hindu castes other than those usually employed in government offices could be formulated even when a Resolution to that effect was taken in February 1907 by the government of the newly created province of Eastern Bengal and Assam.<sup>(24)</sup> Six years later, the government made a frank declaration of its intention

when in the Imperial Legislative Council it was openly avowed that "any reservation of such work for them to the exclusion of others is scarcely practicable"<sup>(25)</sup>. It may be noted here that although the reservation policy could not yet be formulated the members of the Depressed Classes were allowed to enjoy some special facilities so that they may be easily accommodated in the government services at least in the province of Bengal.<sup>(26)</sup> But this being an ex-gratia measure could very little improve the employment situation so far as the Depressed Classes of Bengal were concerned. Curiously enough, ever since 1920, the government of Bengal had accepted the principle of communal representation in the services and had, therefore, set apart one-third of total vacancies in the provincial services for the Muslims. But application of the same principle for the benefit of the Depressed Classes "was not considered to be 'safe' owing to the dearth of qualified candidates"<sup>(27)</sup>. Again in 1922, the government issued a general order which would reserve a certain quota in the total number of government services that had to be filled up either by the Anglo-Indians or the members of the Depressed Classes. But here too the concession as regards reservation appeared to be rather elusive than real. Grouped "as they were with the Anglo-Indians, the 'depressed classes' could not compete with them on equal terms"<sup>(28)</sup>.

Judged in all respects, therefore, the condition of the so-called low caste people including most notably the untouchables appear to have remained very deplorable during the past three thousand years when the caste system provided the basic scheme of social organization of India. Of course it is true that during the colonial period when India came to be gradually acquainted with the ideals of a

western model of liberal and democratic forms of government, the caste-based model of social institution containing so large an element of inequality and discrimination was challenged by the more advanced and enlightened section of the Indian society. But they have failed to bring about a substantial change in the social psychology of the people who being still caught in the hallowed tradition of caste found it difficult to overcome the prejudices centuries old. As a matter of fact since Indian social life is mainly articulated through caste; any organization or association which is formed to further social interests tends to be coloured by caste. Even now it serves as a cementing factor for group formation, for within a caste-oriented frame of society, individual behaviour is largely regulated in terms of the conventional norms of the caste in which an individual is born. " His primary loyalties are to his kin and caste members at the local level. Even if he migrates to urban centres, it is essentially along caste lines; if he turns factory worker, he returns to his village for traditional, ceremonial occasions and finally after retirement".<sup>(29)</sup>

This is the reason why the so-called higher castes are practically allowed to dominate over low castes especially in the rural community till today. In a recent study of Jannsar Bawar by R.N. Saksena; it was found that in spite of the very earnest desire of the government to remove the social and economic handicaps of the koltas, who form the Depressed Class and provide free labour to their landlords by tradition, it has not been possible to remove their disabilities since the koltas themselves chose to remain tied to their landlords out of their own blind regard for the tradition.<sup>(30)</sup> Old prejudices seldom die away very easily and in a traditional society they have a

lingering life. This role of caste is inevitable since, in the absence of well-developed interest-groups and voluntary associations, caste has filled an important gap in the life of the people.



One of the fundamental reasons why progress in Indian society had remained stunted for long is the nation's inability to improve the general standard of the so-called low caste people of the land and to allow them adequate opportunities for getting absorbed in the mainstream of Indian society. The point was even clearly understood by the colonial masters who believed that the problem of Indian situation should be judged in the context of "the outstanding fact that the average Indian of the lower class is remarkably poor and helpless - poor and helpless to a degree to which Europe can afford little parallel. There is thus an infinitely large field for work, both voluntary and official, in raising the condition of the lower class population; in educating them up to improved ideas of sanitation; and in freeing them from degrading social customs"<sup>(31)</sup>. It may be noted here that the Depressed Classes constitute a sizeable portion of the Indian population. According to the Census of 1931, their population was 50,195,770, constituting 21% of the Hindu population and 14% of the total population of India. Yet so vast a segment of population had been kept segregated. In the circumstances it is quite natural that the "rhetoric of nationalism and the idiom of democracy were meaningless in a society which rested on the institution of caste, and they were invoked merely to provide a facade for the domination of the 'superior' over the 'inferior'

castes".<sup>(32)</sup> The imperialist historians had for a long time harped on the essentially divisive element of the political society in India. Sir Herbert Risley who had already gathered vast experience as the principal man of the Census Survey of 1901 in India, launched a powerful attack upon the notion of territorial representation advocated by John Morley, the Secretary of State for India. Because of the structure of society in India, he argued, representative councils would result in the domination of the superior over the inferior castes. However, such a distortion would not come about if each of the social units, be it a community or a religious group, was given separate representation in the legislative councils set up under the new constitution. "Risley in effect argued that since India was a political society different in structure from the political societies of the West, only a constitution which recognised this difference could bring into existence a creative political community in the country".<sup>(33)</sup>

The nationalist historians viewed the interpretation of the civilian scholars like Risley with suspicion. They thought that the model was conveniently designed to undercut the demands voiced by the nationalists.<sup>(34)</sup> But then it cannot be denied that the low caste people themselves also felt an urge for being treated as equals to others in the society. This change in attitude was the result of a variety of reasons, viz contact with the West, social regenerative movement within the subcontinent itself and quest for power. These factors operating sometimes singly and sometimes jointly have brought about a great change in the society.

The establishment of British rule in India had opened prospects for a distinct improvement in the status of the low caste people of the country. Various forces and agencies, all emanating from the Western culture, worked for their elevation during the British rule. The British government introduced equality before law which at least theoretically ensured social justice to the low caste people. The Christian missionaries coming from the West, worked for their welfare. The British rule had thus initiated the process of westernization which cut down the social prejudices and taboos. Finally, the socio-religious reform movements of the nineteenth century, an outcome of the Western impact, awakened the enlightened Indians to the moral responsibility of improving the lot of the low caste people.

The impact of the West on the cultural and social areas of the colonies was first felt when the Christian missionaries took up the programme of social reform among the natives of India. The missionaries took the earliest initiative for the spread of education among the low caste people and in the process they had brought opportunities to these people to become aware of the fundamental equality of human beings, a lesson hitherto almost unknown in India. It is true that notwithstanding their immense services for the uplift of the low caste people the missionaries could not bring about any substantial change in the traditional society. This is because the Company's government was unwilling to jeopardise its revenue-earning business prospects by trying to hurt the deep-rooted religious sentiments of the people however much they might appear to be inhuman or undemocratic to them. But then the propaganda of the Christian

missionaries and the rationalistic and liberal ideas coming through contact with them had undoubtedly stimulated humanitarian concern for the welfare of the Depressed Classes. Moreover such people themselves began to realise that the sanction of untouchability "which for so long had justified their miserable condition was false, and that it was not held by the missionaries or the British Government"<sup>(35)</sup>.

Consequently there was an awakening among them which led them to agitate for their reclamation such as were seen among the Mahars of Bombay, Thiyyas of Malabar, and Bhokkaligas of Mysore.<sup>(36)</sup> It was mainly because of the work of the missionaries that the Depressed Classes of Madras Presidency became aware of their social and political rights and realised the inequality of their economic as well as ritual status.<sup>(37)</sup>

Next to the Christian missionaries mention may be made of the contributions of the great social-religious reformers of the country who felt the urgent need of reorienting the traditional society according to the needs and aspirations of an enlightened generation. During the colonial period the socio-religious movement began with Raja Rammohun Roy who aimed at reforming the Hindu society by clearing many of its institutional abuses including also the abuse of caste and untouchability. The Brahma Samaj, the Prarthana Samaj, the Theosophical Society, the Arya Samaj and other reform associations condemned untouchability and worked for the uplift of Depressed Classes. Some of these social reformers like Jotirao Phule (1827-1890), Vithal Ramji Shinde (1873 - 1944), Chhatrapati Shahu (1874 - 1922), Karmaveer Bhaurao Patil (1887-1959), and most notable



of all Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948) and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar (1891-1956) including men like Sasipada Bandyopadhyay of Bengal had made significant contributions towards mobilizing the non-Brahmin mass for their educational and political developments. They had tried to bring a total transformation of their status through varied means viz, education, legal enforcement, acquiring political power and of course also enlightening the downtrodden masses for making them aware of their rights by using the means of agitation.

Simultaneously with the evangelic zeal of the missionaries and the social-reform movement within the Hindu society itself the British government also helped to quicken the pace of transformation by introducing in India the democratic culture of the West. The British administration and the personnel in charge of it could not remain cut off from the democratic and humanitarian movements of contemporary Europe. As early as 1833, the Charter Act passed by the British Parliament proclaimed the principle of equality of treatment to the natives of India in the matter of appointments to the public services. The same principle was reiterated in a wider sense in the Royal Proclamation of 1858 which promised the "equal and impartial protection of law" and equality of opportunities for all in the matter of recruitment to public services. These principles readily counteracted the injustice and discrimination inherent in the hierarchical nature of Hindu society.

A process of change had therefore, already set in with the coming of the British. Inevitably, the colonial rule had released certain

forces that came to question the rationale of the hierarchical organization of a traditional society. The penetration of the British administration into the interior, the introduction of British law and the establishment of law courts based on the British sense of justice and equality - all taken together had corroded the power base that provided sustenance to the caste-oriented stratification of the traditional native society. "The system of production and exchange that arose in the Hindu society on the basis of family occupations" and which "lasted because of the bonds of cooperation it provided"<sup>(38)</sup> was seemingly swept away before the onslaught of the market economy that gradually came into existence under the colonial rule.<sup>(39)</sup>

Customary production relationship was replaced by contract and as a result caste was detached from the economic system. "Land became a marketable commodity and career was thrown open to talent. Frequent transfer of landed rights as well as new opportunities in trade led to greater diffusion of wealth across caste lines. The element of competition was thus introduced in a society that was previously non-competitive". The net result of all these was a mighty transformation of the indigenous society so much so that at least in the nineteenth century Bengal many individuals and associations had started believing that caste system would wither away automatically.<sup>(40)</sup>

The logic that the British rule had played a progressive role in India was also clearly understood by Karl Marx. England has broken down the entire framework of Indian society. But then by laying the material foundations of Western society in India (through use of electric telegraph, railroads, creation of private property in land

and of course also by educating the people) it had also stimulated the desire and efforts indispensable to social advance. Marx was very categorical about the role played by modern industry in India which he thought "will dissolve the hereditary divisions of labour, upon which rest the Indian castes, those decisive impediments to Indian progress".<sup>(41)</sup> Therefore, the raj did indeed undermine the "self-sufficient inertia" of village and caste and release "the desires and efforts indispensable to social advance".

However, the desire to achieve social advance also means the desire to accumulate power, power to manipulate the levers of administration through capture of position in the Council House. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the constitutional reforms of the government had opened the prospects of wider Indian participation in the seats of government. The system of franchise and quota in the Council Houses had brought opportunities for obtaining seats in the Legislature and this can be achieved through organisational manoeuvres and skilful handling of the electoral machinery. The situation coupled with such factors like greater occupational mobility and spread of education during the colonial period had increased the status aspiration of the so-called low caste people who now felt the need of building some horizontal solidarity among them so that they may more effectively wage their battle for more power and patronage in this new competitive world. However, a section of the Cambridge historians have failed to see a desire for social advance operating as a basic impulse for building up political or semi-political organizations founded on horizontal solidarity. In

the pursuit of power, as some of them would like to believe, power was wanted for its own sake and at any rate there was seldom any motivation for use of power to change society. "Consequently political power existed as a composite variety of elements, many of which might possess no inherent social or economic relationship to one another".<sup>(42)</sup>

Looked at from these basic realities of Indian situations most of such organizational solidarities have been described to be more like a 'ramshackle coalition' formed in a bid to capture power, office and place rather than use of power for a thorough social change.<sup>(43)</sup>

Not all contemporary thinking on the caste/national movement was, however, marked by the crudeness and simplistic analysis which characterized the interpretation put forward by a school of historians in Cambridge. It is true that the lower caste movements being mostly led by the caste elites often got lost in the whirlpool of institutional politics operating within the competition-collaboration syndrome and the masses boiling with a desire for 'ethnic freedom' might feel little affinity with a movement which largely relied on the tactics of electoral bargains for obtaining larger concessions and patronage through a loyalist political strategy.<sup>(44)</sup> It is also true that a caste movement could not become powerful so long as there was not a convergence of the two levels of consciousness : the aspirations of the elites and the grievances of the masses. It is often argued that the so-called horizontal expansion did not take place simply because in most cases the supposed convergence did not occur and the membership of these associations remained limited only to the educated members of the caste. Thus a caste association may not also always

represent the ideas and aspirations of an entire community. But all said it is also true that within an occupational jati "its members could and did work out, at least in certain cases, a broader group-solidarity or forged a greater community-consciousness while confronting the outer world"<sup>(45)</sup>. Thus caste associations often linking the more advanced sections of similar jatis undertook to upgrade the position of the caste in the social hierarchy. They pressed for the extension of the privileges and rights by adopting the attributes and emulating the behaviour of higher castes and by turning to the state for recognition of their claims.

In the realm of politics, caste in order to acquire newer potentials for bargain had responded through three different types of political mobilization, each suggestive of different phases of political development : vertical, horizontal and differential.<sup>(46)</sup>

The Rudolphs have perhaps chosen to put maximum emphasis on horizontal mobilization which according to them illustrates most clearly as to how the cultural and structural transformation of a traditional institution contributes to political modernization and democracy. Such mobilization which manifests usually in numerous caste associations are in the nature of "paracommunities that enable members of castes to pursue social mobility, political power and economic advantage".<sup>(47)</sup>

The caste associations enabled middle and lower castes to establish and win social esteem, first from the state, then from the macrosociety and last and most slowly from the microsociety of village and locality.<sup>(48)</sup> When the caste associations turned to the state their initial claims were aimed at raising caste status in terms of

the values and structure of the caste order. But as liberal and democratic ideas penetrated to a wider section of the population the aims of the caste associations began to shift from sacred to secular goals. Instead of demanding entry into temples, prestigious caste names, and the so-called honourable occupations and histories in the Census, the associations began to demand access into the corridors of power through political representation. For, institutional changes in the structure of politics have already demarcated newer areas of influence which did not always correspond to rank or position in a caste hierarchy. Political power obtained through exercise of franchisal right may permit entry into these new areas of influence. The huge number of low caste men now armed with the right to vote in the election process had a natural advantage in competitive democratic politics and once such an exercise is successful they may gain influence, access and power in state and society. With such new acquisition at their command, they can also change in their favour the allocation of resources, privileges and honour. Caste associations, therefore, attempted to have their members nominated for elective office, working through existing parties or forming their own; to maximize caste representation and influence in governing bodies and to use ministerial, legislative and administrative channels to press for action on caste welfare programme. (49)

It may appear strange that the horizontal solidarity was built along lines not of class but caste. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay has given answer to the riddle. "But that they thought of being organized in terms of caste rather than class was purely because, in their

mental world, caste was still the most valid and perhaps the only real broad social category which they could easily refer to for social mobilization.... The colonial policies", Bandyopadhyay further argues "also reinforced this structural pluralism in Indian society by distributing patronage on the basis of the caste status of individuals, who were thus compelled, by the logic of the politics of numbers, to stay within that group for social and political identity in institutional life".<sup>(50)</sup> Here comes, therefore, yet another field of scholarly investigation - the nature of colonial inducement, which may be helpful for a clear understanding of the policy of reservation.

### III

The rationale of the principle of reservation has to be understood in the context of colonial inducement at two levels. First, by a skilful application of the method of statistical investigation the colonial government had generated a sense of separate identity among wide groups of Indian population who were gradually persuaded to believe that they must not be hamstrung and tied with the vast sector of Indian people whose interest were altogether different from theirs. Such a hypothesis, then led to the germination of the ideology of separate electorate of which the practical application was made even unasked, by the British government when large-scale constitutional reforms were granted at the opening of the present century. The demand for reservation was, therefore, a natural sequel to official concessions being already made for separate electorate and special constituencies.

That the raj itself was responsible for generating a sense of separate identity among the various segments of Indian population can be well understood if one tries to trace the history of census-based colonial sociology of India. The British policy of treating the Indian society as a pluralistic one was clearly revealed when the first census operation of the present century was taken by the then Census Commissioner Herbert Risley in 1901. In this project Risley's endeavours were not merely confined to the collection of descriptive and quantitative information alone. On this occasion he actually tried to classify each caste according to its place in Hindu society, both in terms of local hierarchy and more significantly, their varna affiliation. This he did for "presenting an intelligible picture of the social grouping of that large proportion of the people of India which is organised admittedly or tacitly, on the basis of caste." (51) In the Census of 1911, the population that had been so far classified as Hindu was divided into three distinct categories namely, Hindus, Animists, Tribals and the Depressed Classes or "Untouchables." It may be noted here that on the eve of this census the colonial government had made the first attempt to develop a separate political identity among the lower castes, later known as the Depressed Classes in official parlance. The census model of classification of Indian population was continued subsequently, even though it was resented by some Hindus who feared that it would react unfavourably on their political importance. (52)

Thus the separate enumeration of the Depressed Classes which could not be undertaken in 1911 owing to public protest, was secretly accomplished in 1917, when the Bengal government prepared such a list that included twenty-one "untouchable Hindu and Animist castes or



Tribes", six "Aboriginal and Hill Tribes" and four "Criminal Tribes" -  
 (53)  
 thirty-one social groups in all. The practice was continued also  
 in 1921 and 1931. It should be noted here that though the term  
 Depressed Classes was originally intended to include the Hindu  
 untouchable castes, sometimes the census authorities included in it the  
 names of some castes who were never considered as such. It is not  
 unlikely that such inclusions were made deliberately as a political  
 move to swell the population of the Depressed Classes and reduce the  
 Hindu population. At any rate in the province of Bengal at least 'some  
 respectable castes' like the Sonarbenia and Saha were officially  
 declared as constituents of Depressed Classes by the census officers  
 and also by the Southborough Franchise Committee. (54) Thus as noted by  
 H.N. Brailsford, a British observer, "by classifying Indians according  
 to creed in every conceivable relationship of public life ", the  
 British government had very effectively "helped to make them abnormally  
 conscious of their differences". (55)

If the census reports appear to be a thin end of the wedge,  
 the Indian Councils Act, 1909 had caused further estrangement in the  
 society. The Morley-Minto Reform proposals had submitted a novel scheme  
 of election under which the constituencies were divided into a large  
 number of units comprising Muslims, Landlords, Muslim landlords,  
 Chambers of Commerce, Universities etc. The framers of the Reforms were  
 definite that the system of 'general electorates' and 'territorial  
 representation' was not suitable for India and that 'Communal  
 representation' and a system of election based on classes and interests  
 was the only practical and just method for filling seats in the Central

as well as the Provincial Councils. However, it may be also noted here that the representatives came from so many divergent interest groups including classes and communities, that it was difficult for them to work as a team and to forge a common front against the government in the Councils. But this was precisely what the colonial government wanted to achieve. Representation was given to classes and interests with a motive which impelled the colonial ethnographer-administrators to initiate census investigation almost on similar lines and which may result in splitting the country into many divisions and segments.

The British policy of communal representation which was based on the assumption that Indian society was essentially a congeries of widely separated classes, races and communities with divergences of interest and hereditary sentiment was further reflected in the reform proposal of Montagu and Chelmsford. In their report on constitutional reforms, they emphasised the British responsibility for providing representation and if necessary, protection to the Depressed Classes :

"We intend to make the best arrangements that we can for their representation, in order that they too may ultimately learn the lesson of self-protection. But if it is found that their interests suffer and that they do not share in the general progress, we must retain the means in our own hands of helping them".<sup>(56)</sup>

But all said, the joint authors of the reform proposal did not provide for any particular method of representation for the Depressed Classes, even though they recommended communal representation in case of Muhammadans, Sikhs and the Non-Brahmins of the Madras Presidency.

The Franchise Committee which was appointed in 1918 under the chairmanship of Lord Southborough to devise franchise and frame constituencies recommended the expedient of nomination for the representation of the Depressed Classes, as they did not find it possible to provide an electorate on any satisfactory system of franchise. This committee recommended only seven seats for the Depressed Classes to be filled up by nomination out of a total number of 791 seats in all the provincial Legislative Councils. Such a recommendation, could however, little satisfy the members of the Depressed Classes. Before the Southborough Committee, B.R. Ambedkar, therefore, made an elaborate and forceful plea for the adequate communal representation of the Depressed Classes. He argued that the concepts of freedom and self-determination should be applied not only in the case of international relations but also in the case of class relations within a nation, 'because discord does not exist between nations alone, but also... between classes from within a nation', and that the moral evils, such as dwarfing or stunting of the Indian race, which was attributed to the British rule by the nationalists could be more fittingly voiced by the untouchables to the disgrace of the Brahmin oligarchy. He subscribed to the colonial outlook that territorial constituencies of the Western democratic type were not applicable to the pluralistic society of India, specially because the social divisions of India constituted an 'obstacle in the path of realising an harmonious political life'. He, therefore, recommended plural constituencies with provision for reservation of seats and communal representation. For the purpose of communal representation he divided the Hindu society into three classes - Brahmins, Non-Brahmins and Untouchables. (57) However Ambedkar's plea for electoral

reservation was never considered to be just enough for obtaining social equality and there had been, therefore, always a persistent demand for reservation of seats in the educational institutions including the services of the state.

Although the Government of India Act passed in December 1919 made no provision for the representation of the Depressed Classes in joint or separate electorates there were indications that the government remained always very sympathetic to them so far as their other demands were concerned. This is because the colonial government had already established the ideology of differentiation which motivated it to underpin a central dichotomy between the privileged higher castes at the one end and the depressed lower castes at the other. Then in order to neutralise the social tension likely to arise out of this central dichotomy of the traditional society the colonial government had evolved a policy of 'protective discrimination' by which the government sought to grant special favour in matters of education, employment and constitutional rights, first to the Muslims and then to the Depressed Classes later called the 'Scheduled castes'. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay has explained the situations that led to the application of the device of protective discrimination "particularly when the high caste Hindu ~~bhadralok~~ began to question the legitimacy of the raj at the turn of the century. In order to contain the intensifying anti-imperialist agitation, the British first tried to rally the Muslims and then with equal consistency sought to mobilize the Hindu 'depressed classes' in support of their rule".<sup>(58)</sup> Once again Sekhar Bandyopadhyay feels that the demand for reservation is at one end a manifestation of "the weak

response of certain lower castes to 'the nationalist movement' and at another end is also the political idiom of a "new social category called the 'depressed classes' constructed by the sociological discourse and subsequently politicised by the policy of protective discrimination".<sup>(59)</sup>

If his views sound a little harsh Gail Omvedt's assessment appears to be not too mellowed either. She believes that "the general reservation policy during the 1920s and 1930s led to a situation in which the 'non-Brahmins' became a loose and contentious (sic) alliance of different caste groups and communities, engaged in political opposition to the dominant Brahmins but quarreling about each other's share of the general allotment". She further quotes V.K. Nataraj who saw in the scramble nothing more than sheer "maneuvering for a share of the pie".<sup>(60)</sup>

Dr. Barun De finds in the movement of the lower castes a 'little nationalist' (*kleinjati* if one may borrow a usage from the German term *kleindeutsch*) sentiment which was also a part of a particular view of history. "In this", Barun De argues, 'caste' appeared to be the most legitimate reference category. In the 1920s and 1930s it was raised to the level of an ideology. Its structure was similar to the ideology of Muslim *qaumi* or *millat* or Hindu fanatical communalism, which at the same time broke up British Indian political integration, again under original colonialist sponsorship".<sup>(61)</sup>

During the post Non-co-operation years, the self-consciousness and separatist feeling among the Depressed Classes gained greater momentum. The brightening prospect of representation through special electorates and the dissatisfaction with the slow

progress of anti-untouchability movement and in some cases, disillusionment with the actual performance of the caste Hindu politicians and reformers led to the growth of such tendencies. An insight into the political history of this period should, however, take into account the situations leading to the emergence of the problems of the backward castes during the preceding decade of 1909 - 1917.

## NOTES


1. *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*, New York, Vol. III, pp. 254-257. Caste.
2. *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, London, Vol. I, p.335. 'The Concept of Caste'.
3. Sarkar S., *Modern India 1885-1947*, Calcutta, 1983, p.55.
4. Ghurye G.S., *Caste and Class in India*, Bombay, 1957, p. 139
5. Mandal B.P., *Report of the Backward Classes Commission*, First Part, Vol. I, Government of India, 1980, p.14, para 4.5.
6. Code of Manu quoted in Kamble J.R., *Rise and Awakening of Depressed Classes in India*, New Delhi, 1979, p. 72
7. *CWM.*, Vol. XXX, pp. 379-380.
8. Mandal B.P., *op.cit.*, p. 15, para 4.11.
9. *Ibid*, para 4.19.
10. Hutton J.H., *Caste in India*, Bombay, 1951, pp. 204-205
11. *Ibid*, p. 122.
12. 'Statement Concerning the State of Education of the Depressed Classes in Bombay Presidency', submitted by B.R. Ambedkar, Member, Bombay Legislative Council to the Indian Statutory Commission on 29 May 1928 at Damodar Hall, Bombay, on behalf of the Bahiskrit Hitakarini Sabha. SCR, Vol. p.
13. Views of I.A. Baines quoted in Report on Material and Moral Progress of India (1891-92) in *Imperial Gazetteer of India*, The Indian Empire, Administrative, Vol. IV, p.432.
14. Ghurye G.S., *op.cit.*, p. 189.
15. Briggs G.W., *The Chamars*, London, 1920, p. 231.

16. Unstarred question no. 48 by Babu Bhisimadev Das in the Legislative Council. *Bengal Legislative Council Proceedings*, Vol. I, No. V, First Session 1921, 1st April 1921 p.42.
17. Sengupta S.C.(ed.), *Presidency College Alumni Association, Autumn Annual*, Vol. XXI, 1992-93, Calcutta, pp. 30, 40.
18. Census of India 1931, Vol.I, Part I, pp. 325-331. Report.
19. G.I. Home (Pol), File no. 23/23/1933. The file contains an account submitted by the Director of Public Information, Government of India, indicating the measures adopted by the various provincial governments for the welfare of people belonging to the Depressed Classes.
20. Saraswathi S., *Minorities in Madras State*, Delhi, 1974, p.147.
21. Resolution of the Government of Eastern Bengal and Assam, no. 1769-C dated the 15th February 1907. See unstarred question no. 53(a) & (b) dated 14th March 1921. *Bengal Legislative Council Proceedings*, Vol.I, No. V, First Session 1921, p.42
22. *Ibid*, p.697. Unstarred question no. 250(b) & (c) dated 18th July 1921.
- 23 G.I. Home (Public), Police, File no. 11/30/1927. Also see the Presidential speech of B.R. Ambedkar in All-India Depressed Classes Congress, first session held at Nagpur dated 8 & 9 August 1930.
24. *Bengal Legislative Council Proceedings*, Vol. I, No. V, 14 March 1921, p.43.
25. G.B. General (Miscellaneous), File no. 8D-1, B May 1913, Progs. nos. 126-128, Serial 1.



26. G.B. General (Education), File no. 11C-112, December 1919, Progs. nos. 244-254, K.W., p.2. Appendix.
27. Bandyopadhyay S., *Caste, Politics and the Raj, Bengal 1872-1937* Calcutta, 1990, p. 64.
28. *Ibid.*
29. Saksena R.N., 'Inter-caste Tensions' in Thapar R. (ed.), *Tribe, Caste and Religion in India*, Delhi, 1977, pp. 66-67.
30. *Ibid.* p. 60.
31. Rushbrook Williams L.F., *India in 1919*, 1920, p.126.
32. Kumar R., *Essays in the Social History of Modern India* , Calcutta, 1983, p. 48.
33. *Ibid.*p. 50.
34. For example one may also refer to the views of Valentine Chirol. Chirol claimed that India was a 'mere geographical expression' which could never develop into a nation in the western sense of the term; and that whatever political movements, with a pseudo-national character, existed in India, had their roots deep in traditional, instinctively anti-western sources. The so-called national movement headed by small elite groups had therefore the particular interests of their own castes rather than the general interests of the people. See Chirol V., *Indian Unrest* , London, 1910, pp. 322-323.
35. Farquhar J.N., *Modern Religious Movements in India*, Delhi, 1967, pp. 366-367.
36. *Ibid.* pp. 311-316.
37. Irschick E.F., *Politics and social Conflict in South India : The non-Brahmin Movement and Tamil Separatism, 1916-29*, Delhi, 1969, p. 115.

38. Bose N.K., *The Structure of Hindu Society*, translated by Andre Beteille, New Delhi, 1975, pp. 137, 143-144.
39. Bandyopadhyay S., *op.cit.*, p. 11.
40. *Ibid.* Also see Shastri Shibnath, *Jatibhed* (in Beng.), Calcutta, 1884
41. Marx Karl, 'The British Rule in India', *Selected Works II*, pp. 652, 661-662. Karl Marx however also agreed that England's mission of destruction, "the annihilation of old Asiatic society" was not yet complete in 1853. "We know", he writes, "that the municipal organization (village and caste panchayats, or councils) and the economical basis of the village communities have been broken up, but their worst feature, the dissolution of society into stereotype and disconnected atoms (that is, the Indian villages and castes), has survived..." the revolutionary impact of British imperialism. *Ibid.*p.660.
42. Washbrook D.A., *The Emergence of Provincial Politics : The Madras Presidency, 1870-1920*, Delhi, 1976, p.16. See also Ray R.K., 'Three Interpretations of Indian Nationalism' in Nanda B.R.(ed.), *Essays in Modern Indian history*, Delhi, 1980, p.27.
43. Seal A., 'Imperialism and Nationalism in India' in Gallagher J., Johnson G and Seal A., *Locality, Province and Nation : Essays in Indian Politics, 1870 to 1940*, Cambridge, 1973, p.2.
44. Bandyopadhyay S., *op.cit.*.,p. 13.
45. *Ibid.*p. 12.
46. Rudolph L.I. and Rudolph S.H., *The Modernity of Tradition: Political Development in India*, New Delhi, 1987, p. 24.
47. *Ibid.*p. 29.

48. Rudolphs in their case study based on the history of the Shanans (the Nadars) and the Vanniyars of the erstwhile state of Madras have illustrated the process of social change and modernization from within and below the caste(s) itself. Over the past century these castes have transformed themselves through sustained effort to build a more enduring organization against the subjection of caste hierarchy. *Ibid.* pp. 36-61.
49. *Ibid.* p. 33.
50. Bandyopadhyay S., *op.cit.*, p. 12.
51. India Census 1901, pp. 537-538, quoted in Bandyopadhyay S., *op.cit.*, p. 39.
52. Census of India 1911, Vol. I, Part I, Report, p. 116.
53. G.B. General (Education), File no. 1E-8, January 1917, Progs. nos. 14-17.
54. *Modern Review*, January 1920, p.28 Dutta Srinath, 'Recommendation of the Joint Parliamentary Committee in the Report to the Parliament with regard to the Representation of the Depressed Classes (in Bengal)''.
55. Brailsford H.N., *Subject India*, Bombay, 1946, p.115.
56. *Report on Indian Constitutional Reforms*, Calcutta, 1918, p.99, para 155.
57. Evidence of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar before the Southborough Franchise Committee. Quoted in *BPSA.*, p. 110.
58. Bandyopadhyay S., *op.cit.*, p.52.
59. De Barun, 'Introduction : A Mirror Cracked from Side to side Colonialism, Class, Caste and Communalism' in Bandyopadhyay S and Das S.(ed.), *Caste and Communal Politics in South Asia*, Calcutta, 1993, p.2.
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60. Omvedt G., *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution*, New Delhi, 1994, p. 269.
61. Bandyopadhyay S and Das S.(ed.), *op.cit.*, p.3.

"Most schemes of political improvement  
are very laughable things".

- Boswell's Life of Johnson.

In August 1917 an announcement with a promise of 'responsible government' was made by the Secretary of State and the Viceroy. The declaration stimulated the ambition of every section of Indian population. While the Indian National Congress felt it necessary to get ready for obtaining large shares of powers from the British hands, the response of the depressed people was not quite prompt. This was because the Depressed Classes being economically and educationally very backward could not develop a high level of political consciousness. But this does not mean that there was a total lack of preparedness among them. On the contrary, without any programme for participation in the scramble for power the depressed people had long since started to mobilize horizontally through many of their caste associations for attaining higher caste status and most importantly for redress of their plight by expanding the opportunities for education among their fellow caste men. The caste associations, it is true, often vied with each other, but they had also taught them how to organise and with this experience they could also jostle for power with the high caste elites. The Home Rule League which had practically captured the Congress platform tried to pacify them by adopting a resolution in condemnation of untouchability. But the Depressed Classes remained unquieted and without slightest intention of making any settlement with the Congress they opposed the Reform Scheme which they feared would lead to the ascendancy of the high caste dominated Congress. The

non-Brahmans though not perhaps depressed people themselves also followed suit. However, no section of Indian population could find their demands met in the Reform Act of 1919. Home Rule or self-government was clearly out of the question. Communal electorates could not be expanded beyond the sphere already delimited in 1909. Reservation in a plural constituency was said to be against the principle of democracy. Only non-official representation through nomination was conceded to, and there again the number was restricted to only seven at the first instance. The Depressed Classes, therefore, stood disillusioned.