

## The Rise Of the Other Backward Classes in the Hindi Belt

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THE RISE OF THE OTHER BACKWARD CLASSES (OBCs) is certainly one of the main developments in the Hindi-belt politics over the last ten years. The OBCs are castes in the Indian social system that are situated above the Untouchables but below the forward castes (the "twice born," Brahmins, Kshatriyas [warriors] and Vaishyas [merchants]) and the intermediate castes (mostly peasant proprietors and even dominant castes). They form the bulk of the Shudras-the fourth category (*varna*) of the classical Hindu social arrangement. The OBCs, whose professional activity is often as field-workers or artisans, represent about half of the Indian population, but they have occupied a subaltern position so far. Their rise for the first time seriously questions upper-caste domination of the public sphere.

The over-representation of these elite groups in the political sphere has always been more pronounced in the Hindi-speaking states than anywhere else. In the South, and even in the West, the upper castes lost ground early, largely because they were smaller in number---in Tamil Nadu Brahmins account for only 3 percent of the population whereas they constitute almost 10 percent in Uttar Pradesh (a state where the upper castes altogether represent one-fifth of society). But the upper castes remained politically dominant in the Hindi belt also because of the pattern of land ownership that enabled them, especially the Rajputs, to consolidate their grasp over the countryside as *zamindars*, *jagirdars*, or *taludars* under the British and to retain some of their influence in spite of the efforts toward land reform after 1947.

In fact, these notables were the backbone of the Congress Party's network, and for decades the social deficit of democracy in North India resulted from the clientelistic politics of this party. The Congress co-opted vote-bank 'owners,' who were often upper-caste landlords, and Untouchable leaders, whose rallying around the ruling party deprived their group of some important spokesmen. There were even fewer lower-caste leaders within the Congress Party, the lower castes being closer to the opposition parties, especially the Socialists, or the "independents" (Brass 1980); they remained marginalized also for this reason. Until the early 1970s, the upper-caste Members of Parliament (MPs) represented more than 50 percent of the North Indian MPs as against less than 5 percent for intermediate castes and, at the maximum, 10 percent for the Other Backward Classes.

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Historically, in North India two kinds of approaches have prevailed among those who attempted to dislodge the upper-caste, urban establishment from its positions of power. The first one concentrated on their mobilization as peasants (kisans). It was initiated by members of cultivating castes such as Chhotu Ram (a Jat) in Punjab between the 1920s and the 1940s (Gopal 1977), and Swami Sahajanand (a Bhumihaar) who became a leading figure of the Bihar Kisan Sabha in the 1930s.<sup>1</sup> The second one relied more on caste identities and was primarily articulated by socialist leaders such as Rammanohar Lohia, who regarded caste as the main obstacle towards an egalitarian society. While the 'kisan school' endeavored to gather together all those engaged in cultivating work on the basis of socioeconomic demands, the caste-oriented Socialists attempted to form an alliance of the non-elite groups mainly on the basis of affirmative action techniques: they asked for caste-based quotas, especially in the administration. The social groups represented by these two approaches had much in common but did not coincide. The proponents of "*kisan* politics" came primarily from the rank of peasant-proprietors who tried to mobilize "the peasants" - as if that were a social category without internal differentiation - to promote their own interest and maintain lower castes under their influence. The caste-based approach was rather conceived for defending the latter.

Over the last decades, these two strategies have contributed to the rise of first the middle-caste peasants and then the OBCs in North Indian politics. The first significant changes occurred in the 1960s when they entered the Bihar and Uttar Pradesh legislative assemblies in massive numbers under the auspices of the socialist parties and Charan Singh. Kisan politics asserted itself in the 1970s and 1980s, thanks to Charan Singh and his lieutenants. But in the late 1980s and 1990s, the anti-establishment agenda was taken over, on the political scene, by heirs of the socialist movement within the Janata Dal, whose quota politics culminated in the implementation of the recommendations of the Mandal Commission report. As a result, the kisan front broke down along caste lines, the peasant proprietors from the intermediate castes distancing themselves from the OBCs. But do the latter have more coherence and can they resist the new upper-caste dominated, BJP-led ruling coalition?

### Quota Politics and *Kisan* Politics

Few men and political parties in North India have tried to promote the cause of the lower castes since Independence. The Congress Party was dominated, at the Center, by progressive leaders à la Nehru who did not regard caste as a relevant category for state-sponsored social change, and it relied anyway on a network of conservative notables. None of them was truly interested in acknowledging the needs of the Other Backward Classes even though this expression was originally used by Nehru in his first speech, on his Objectives Resolution, on December 13, 1946, before the Constituent Assembly. He announced that special measures were to be taken in favor of "minorities, backward and tribal areas and depressed and other backward classes" (Constituent Assembly Debates 1989, 1:59) but did not elaborate further and, interestingly, senior congressmen such as K. M. Munshi resisted any effort to clarify who these OBCs were (1:697). Article 340 of the Indian Constitution voted on January 26, 1950, merely stated:

The President [of the Republic] can by decree nominate a Commission formed by persons he considers to be competent to investigate, within the Indian territory, on the condition of classes suffering of backwardness as well in social as in educational terms, and on the problems they meet, the way of proposing measures which could be taken by the Central or a State Government in order to eliminate difficulties and improve their condition.

(*Government of India n.d.*, 178)

<sup>1</sup> See his book *Khet Mazdoor* in Hauser 1994.

The first Backward Classes Commission was appointed on January 29, 1953 under the chairmanship of a former disciple of Gandhi, Kaka Kalelkar (*Government of India* 1955). Its report relied heavily on the concept of caste for defining the Other Backward Classes. Caste was not the only criterion but it was a key element and the Commission, therefore, established a list of 2,399 castes, representing about 32 percent of the Indian population, as forming the bulk of the "socially and educationally backward classes" that needed affirmative action programs.

The report was rejected by Nehru's government. G. B. Pant, the Home Minister, objected that "With the establishment of our society on the socialist pattern ..., social and other distinctions will disappear as we advance towards that goal" (*Memorandum*, {n.d.}, 2.) Secondly, he disapproved of the use of caste as the most prominent criterion for identifying the backward classes. He considered that "the recognition of the specified castes as backward may serve to maintain and even perpetuate the existing distinctions on the basis of caste" (*ibid.*). The report was tabled before the Parliament accompanied by a Memorandum by Pant on September 3, 1956, but was not even discussed (*Government of India* 1980, 2). In May 1961, the Nehru government eventually decided that there was no need for an all-India list of the OBCs---and that, consequently, there would be no reservation policy at the Center. Even though they were responsible for Article 340 of the Constitution, Congressmen were obviously reluctant to cater to the needs of the lower castes, either because of sheer conservatism or socialist ideas.

So far as the Communists were concerned, they were very reluctant to take caste into account, holding the view that this social category was bound to be submerged by that of class. For a long time the Socialists were the only ones to consider the lower castes as a pertinent social and political entity.

### The Socialists and Affirmative Action for the Lower Castes

The first to recognize the importance of the lower castes was probably Rammanohar Lohia. Although he was from a merchant caste and had been influenced by Marxism, Lohia decided to fight for the cause of the lower castes. To those who favored an analysis in terms of class, he objected that "caste is the most overwhelming factor in Indian life" (Lohia 1979, 79):

Many socialists honestly but wrongly think that it is sufficient to strive for economic equality and caste inequality will vanish of itself as a consequence. They fail to comprehend economic inequality and caste inequality as twin demons, which have both to be killed.

(20)

Lohia therefore became one of the staunchest supporters of positive discrimination---what he called "unequal opportunities" not only in favor of the Scheduled Castes but also of the backward castes:

When everybody has an equal opportunity, castes with the five thousand years old traditions of liberal education would be on top. Only the exceptionally gifted from the lower-castes would be able to break through this tradition. [...] To make this battle a somewhat equal encounter, unequal opportunities would have to be extended, to those who have so far been suppressed.

(1979, 96)

According to him, the Marxist views about revolution or Nehru's policy of nationalizing private properties amount to "vested-interest socialism" because none of these things would change Indian society:

Workers with the brain are a fixed caste in Indian society; together with the soldier caste, they are the high-caste. Even after the completed economic and political revolution, they would continue to supply the managers of the state and industry. The mass of the people would be kept in a state of perpetual physical and mental lowliness, at least comparatively. But the position of the high-caste would then be justified on grounds of ability and in economic terms as it is now on grounds of birth

or talent. That is why the intelligentsia of India which is overwhelmingly the high-caste, abhors all talk of a mental and social revolution of a radical change in respect of language or caste or the bases of thought. It talks generally and in principle against caste. In fact, it can be most vociferous in its theoretical condemnation of caste, so long as it can be allowed to be equally vociferous in raising the banner of merit and equal opportunity. What it loses in respect of caste by birth, it gains in respect of caste by merit. Its merit concerning speech, grammar, manners, capacity to adjust, routine efficiency is undisputed. Five thousands years have gone into the building of this undisputed merit.

(1979, 96-97)

Lohia did not entertain any romantic idea of the Indian plebe - "the Shudra too has his shortcomings. He has an even narrower sectarian outlook" (1979, 13)-but in spite of this for Lohia, the Shudra deserved special treatment, especially in one direction: he should be "pushed to positions of power and leadership" (13). He did not regard affirmative action in the education system as desirable<sup>2</sup> but emphasized the need for quotas in the administration and for the election candidates. Obviously, reservations were intended to give a share of power to the lower castes; it was an empowerment scheme. In 1959, the third national conference of the Socialist Party expressed the wish that at least 60 percent of the posts in the administration be reserved for Other Backward Classes (135). This recommendation was reiterated at the fifth annual session of the party, in April 1961, a few months before the third general elections (142). Subsequently, the program or election manifestos of Lohia's party promoted the notion of "preferential opportunities," which was justified by the special nature of caste society, as in the program adopted by the first Conference of the Samyukta Socialist Party (SSP) held in April 1966:

It should be remembered that equality and equal opportunity are not synonymous. In a society characterised by a hierarchical structure based on birth, the principle of equal opportunity cannot produce an equal society. The established, conventional notions about merit and ability must result in denial of opportunities in actual practice for backward castes, harijans [Scheduled Castes), adibasis [Scheduled Tribes] etc. The principle of preferential opportunities alone will ensure that the backward sections will catch up with the advanced ones in a reasonable period of time.

(Mohan et al. 1997, 258-59)

This document again recommended a quota of 60 percent for the backward sections of society-comprising then the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, OBCs, and women---but extended it to "all spheres," not only the administration, but also the education system and the assemblies. The weakness of the "people's movement," according to the document, resulted from its divisions, and also from "the preponderance of upper-caste leadership in [the] major political parties" (Mohan et al. 1997, 260). To show the way, the SSP nominated a large number of candidates from non-elite groups, and the socialists had a larger number of OBC Members of Legislative Assemblies (MLAs) elected than other political parties in the states where they achieved their best scores, in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. In the latter state, in the 1967 elections, the SSP had almost 40 percent of its MLAs coming from the lower castes (as against 22 percent on the Congress side) (Mitra 1992, 120).

<sup>2</sup> He tried to justify this stand in 1958 by saying: "Let the backward castes ask for two or three shifts in schools and colleges, if necessary, but let them never ask for the exclusion of any child of India from the portals of an educational institution" (1979, 104)

Obviously, Lohia's strategy bore its most significant electoral fruits in Bihar, the birthplace and cradle of socialism in India since the foundation of the Congress Socialist Party in the state capital in 1934. In 1967, Lohia's party, the Samyukta Socialist Party (SSP), the Communists, and the Jana Sangh formed a majority coalition called the Samyukta Vidhayak Dal (SVD, the united parliamentarian group). However, the socialist leaders were, in a way, victims of their own strategy of promotion and mobilization of the lower castes. While this policy largely explained their success and the election of a large number of lower-caste MLAs, especially Yadavs whose number had increased so much as to be just behind the Rajputs (14.8 percent as against 24.1 percent) (Blair 1980, 68), this group did not show much commitment to the SSP. Soon after the elections, Bindeshwari Prasad Mandal, a Yadav who was to preside over the second Backward Classes Commission in 1979, defected and formed the Shoshit Dal, "the party of the oppressed" with forty lower-caste MLA dissidents from different sides, including the SSP. Madhu Limaye, one of Lohia's lieutenants, lamented that "as soon as power came, SSP men broke up into caste groups. They equated ... [Lohia's] policy with casteism! . . . Ministers developed affinities on caste lines. Castemen belonging to other parties were felt to be closer than one's own Party comrades belonging to other castes" (Limaye 1988, 155-56).

In fact, these developments had some positive aspects. Castes, eventually, got transformed into interest groups, which meant that lower-caste people could not be integrated in vertical linkages as easily as during the heyday of the Congress Party domination. The lower castes may have lent themselves to manipulations by political entrepreneurs like B. P. Mandal, but greater caste consciousness also implied a stronger rejection of vertical arrangements and a growing solidarity between lower-caste MLAs from different parties. These phenomena had become so pronounced that to topple the SVD government the Congress had no other choice but to support one of the Shoshit Dal leaders; thus in February 1968 B. P. Mandal became the first OBC Chief Minister of Bihar. He was to be followed by other non-elite leaders. Out of the nine Chief Ministers who governed the state from March 1967 to December 1971, only two belonged to the higher castes.

### Charan Singh and the Mobilization of the Farmers

Besides the socialist approach recognizing caste as a lever of social domination and the corollary caste-based mobilization and affirmative action, North India saw in the late 1960s the shaping of an alternative strategy by Charan Singh which aimed at empowering the peasantry. The fact that "the Chaudhuri," a title held by Jat leaders, became influential in the late 1960s is largely explained by the relative economic growth which, at that time, benefited the middle-class farmers of North India. This growth resulted from two cumulative phenomena. First, the land reform, even though it had remained incomplete, enabled many tenants to become peasant-proprietors. Secondly, the Green Revolution served the interests of those among these landowners who had some investment capacity. This "revolution" stemmed from the introduction of high-yielding seeds between 1965 and 1966, but also from the development of irrigation and the use of chemical fertilizers.

Charan Singh always identified himself with the interests of the peasants. In 1939, before the executive committee of the Congress parliamentary group in the Uttar Pradesh assembly, where he had been elected for the first time in 1937, he proposed a 50 percent quota in public administration in favor of the sons of farmers. He framed his project in terms of a latent "urban India versus rural India" conflict:

In our country the classes whose scions dominate the public services are either those which have been 'raised to unexampled prominence and importance' by the Britisher, e.g. the money-lender, the big zamindar or taluqdar, the arhatia or the trader, or those which have been, so to say, actually called into being by him--the

vakil [advocate], the doctor, the contractor. These classes have, in subordinate cooperation with the foreigner, exploited the masses in all kinds of manner during these last two hundred years. The views and interests of these classes, on the whole, are, therefore, manifestly opposed to those of the masses. The social philosophy of a member of the non-agricultural, urban classes is entirely different from that of a person belonging to the agricultural rural classes.

(Singh 1986, 203)

The All-India Jat Mahasabha supported his proposal, but Charan Singh did not value caste affiliations very much. He tried, rather, to subsume caste identities into a feeling of class or at least into one of a peasant movement. This approach was partly dictated by his own caste background, since the Jats occupy an intermediary position: though technically they have to be classified as Shudras, their dominant caste status is often the root-cause of conflicts with lower castes. In addition, their number is comparatively small in Uttar Pradesh (1.2 percent of the population). Therefore Charan Singh had good reasons for forging a kisan interest group that the Jats would be leading, and for promoting an identity opposing the peasants to the town-dwellers in order to subsume caste divisions into a new group feeling. Even though OBC leaders rallied around the Chaudhuri, his scheme was not designed for emancipating their group but for promoting the interests of those who owned some land and could sell their surplus crops. In fact, it was likely to reinforce the Jats' hegemony over the lower castes.

As Revenue Minister in charge of land reform in Uttar Pradesh after Independence, Charan Singh promoted the interests of what he called the middle peasantry by abolishing the zamindari system.<sup>3</sup> The bulk of this class was to come from the intermediary castes, including his own, the Jats. This approach largely explains the selective character of Uttar Pradesh land reform and his later conflict with Nehru. In 1959 he vigorously opposed the project of agricultural co-operatives announced by the Prime Minister in the Nagpur session of the Congress. He immediately published a book called *Joint Farming X-Rayed: The Problem and Its Solution*, in which he proposed a strategy of global development radically opposed to that of Nehru.<sup>4</sup> Questioning the need for a rapid, state-sponsored industrialization as advocated by Nehru, Charan Singh proposed to give priority to agriculture and to promote it by developing small farmer holdings, the only way to generate the surpluses that were needed for industrial investment.<sup>5</sup> For him, agricultural cooperatives would annul the productivity gains resulting from the elimination of the zamindar-like intermediaries because they would jeopardize the independence of the farmers:

The thought that land has become his [the peasant's] and his children's in perpetuity, lightens and cheers his labour and expands his horizon. The feeling that he is his own master, subject to no outside control, and has free, exclusive and untrammelled use of his land drives him to greater and greater effort. [. . .] Likewise any system of large-scale farming in which his holdings are pooled must affect the farmer, but in the reverse direction. No longer will he be his own master; he will become one of the many; his interest will be subordinated to the group interest.

(Singh 1959, v-vi)

<sup>3</sup> This system, which had been established by the British, combined property rights and fiscal aspects: the *zamindars*, like the *taluqdars* and the *jagirdars*, were both landowners and tax agents since they collected the land revenue.

<sup>4</sup> Charan Singh wrote this book while he was out of the Uttar Pradesh government. He had resigned in April 1959 because of several disagreements with Sampurnanand, the Chief Minister. (Johnson 1975, 145).

<sup>5</sup> Charan Singh spells out this point rather late in the book but it is his basic argument: "Industrialization cannot precede but will follow agricultural prosperity. Surpluses of food production above farmers' consumption must be available before non-agricultural resources can be developed" (Singh 1959, 251).

Obviously, economic rationality is not the only reason for rejecting agricultural cooperatives. Charan Singh admits that "Ultimately it is not a question of economic efficiency or of form of organisation, but whether individualism or collectivism should prevail" (1959, 107). Indeed, he argues, "The peasant is an incorrigible individualist; for his avocation, season in and season out, can be carried on with a pair of bullocks in the solitude of Nature without the necessity of having to give orders to, or, take orders from anybody" (104). Charan Singh spells out a very romantic view of the kisan, even a mystique of the peasant, as the man in communion with Nature (a word that he writes with a capital n) and the only one able to sustain its "nutritional cycle" (266).

On landless agricultural labor, Charan Singh's views are worth noting, too. Referring, en passant, to the laborers' condition, he notes that "If wages have at all to be paid, in view of the fact that a large supply of idle labour is almost always available, the wages paid need only be subsistence wages" (1959, 168). Indifferent to the condition of the landless laborers, Charan Singh was against too low a ceiling in the land reform program which could have benefited them because it would multiply the noneconomic exploitations and weaken the peasant-proprietor pattern.

In spite of this selective defense of the rural folk, Charan Singh systematically attempted to project himself as the spokesman for village India. He presented the village community as forming a harmonious whole and claimed that it "was always a stronger moral unit than a factory. The sense of the community was a vital thing among the peasantry, providing a natural foundation for collaboration or co-operative action" (Singh 1959, 270). He completely ignored the deep social contradictions and class antagonisms between landowners, tenants, sharecroppers, and laborers. While Charan Singh is of course the representative of peasant-proprietors, his whole strategy consists in forging a kisan identity in which all the people working in the fields may be able to recognize themselves. He insisted on the dichotomy between the cities and the countryside in this very perspective.

There has always been lack of equilibrium, rather a sort of antagonism between cities and the countryside. This is particularly so in our land where the gulf of inequality between the capitalist class and the working class pales into insignificance before that which exists between the peasant farmer in our village and the middle-class town dweller. India is really two worlds-rural and urban. The relationship between the countryside and the cities is, therefore, a vital problem to us.

(Singh 1984, 212)

Charan Singh's kisan politics was successful to a certain extent, since he was able to gradually evolve a coalition of cultivating castes from different social ranks. This coalition came to be known as AJGAR, an acronym where A stood for Ahir (or Yadav), J for Jat, G for Gujar and R for Rajput. While there was no representative of the (often landless laborers) untouchable castes in this grouping, it covered a wide range of status from OBC to intermediate and upper castes. For instance, Mulayam Singh Yadav was among the followers Charan Singh attracted in the 1960s. Yadav was elected MLA for the first time in 1967 on a ticket of the Bharatiya Kranti Dal, Charan Singh's party. Interestingly, he was introduced to the Chaudhuri by another OBC, Jairam Verma (Lal and Nair 1998, 32), who was a Kurmi, a sign that Charan Singh attracted cultivating castes even beyond the AJGAR coalition.

## The Janata Party at the Confluence of Quota and *Kisan* Politics

The fact that both strategies, quota politics and *kisan* politics, persisted during the "JP movement" and the subsequent Janata phase is evident from the discourse then promoted by Madhu Limaye and Charan Singh, who became Deputy Prime Minister and Home Minister in 1977. The former, as convener of the JP Movement Programme Committee in 1975, drafted a document where one could read the following statements:

Caste hierarchy based on birth is the biggest obstacle in the path of achieving social equality. In an unequal society, the doctrine of judicial equality and equal opportunity cannot by itself remove caste disabilities. The doctrine of preferential opportunity, therefore, had to be invoked in order to enable the backward sections to come up to the level of the upper-castes. Reservation in the services that we have today had not enabled us to overcome the disabilities from which our suppressed communities suffer [ . . . ] This must change, and these people and other backward classes should be enabled to secure, through preferential opportunities and reservation, the substance of power.

(Limaye 1997, 314)

Madhu Limaye emphasized the empowerment dimension of affirmative action schemes the same way as his mentor, Lohia, did. Charan Singh regarded the "three decades of Congress rule in post-Independence India as essentially elitist and urban oriented" and argued that the Janata Party had to maintain "its live links with the villages, with agriculture, with cottage and village industries, and generally with the uplift of our Kisans" (Singh 1997, 325, 327). Two major components of the Janata, the former Congress (O) of Prime Minister Morarji Desai and the Hindu nationalist Jana Sangh "were unwilling to concede primacy" to Charan Singh (Varshney 1995, 104). Dismissed by Desai on the ground of indiscipline, he organized a huge peasant rally of about one million people in December 1978 and then rejoined the Government as Senior Deputy Prime Minister in charge of Finance. His "kulak budget," to use the pressmen's words in 1979, reduced several indirect taxes on mechanical tillers, diesel for electric water pumps, and chemical fertilizers, by 50 percent for some of them; it "lowered interest rates for rural loans; increased subsidy of minor irrigation; and earmarked funds for rural electrification and grain-storage facilities" (105). The Janata did not last long enough to implement all these measures, but Charan Singh had raised the peasants' issues in such a way that they arrived center-stage; so much so that they were taken up by farmers' movements in most of the states (T. Brass 1995), amongst which the Bharatiya Kisan Union of Tikait and the Shetkari Sangathana of Sharad Joshi in Maharashtra were especially noticeable for their attempt at projecting their apolitical character.

The Janata government was too heterogeneous a coalition to have a consistent affirmative action policy. The Jana Sangh, representative primarily of the urban and upper caste middle class, was reluctant to move in the direction of affirmative action. The differences showed clearly at the subnational level, when Karpoori Thakur, the socialist Chief Minister of Bihar, and Ram Naresh Yadav, his socialist counterpart in Uttar Pradesh, tried to introduce quotas in the state administration. Yet Desai yielded to OBC pressures and appointed the second Backward Classes Commission, whose principal terms of reference were "to determine the criteria for defining the socially and educationally backward classes" and "to examine the desirability or otherwise of making provision for the reservations of appointments or posts in favour of such backward classes of citizens which are not adequately represented in public services (*Government of India* 1980 1: vii). The Commission, whose chairman was B. P. Mandal, concluded from its survey that the OBCs were coterminous with low castes, representing 52 percent of the population, and that their backwardness justified a quota of 27 percent of the posts being reserved for them in the bureaucracy and the public sector. The Mandal Commission report was submitted in late 1980, more than a year after the fall of the Janata government. Indira Gandhi and then Rajiv Gandhi



were not interested in implementing measures that might affect the upper-caste supporters of the Congress or, at least, damage its image of a "catch-all party." The report was finally made public by the Janata Dal when it took power from the Congress in 1989.

### The Janata Dal and the Empowerment of the Lower Castes

The Janata Dal, which was officially founded on 11 October 1988, amalgamated the legacies of Lohia and Charan Singh, as evident from the identity of the parties it incorporated. On the one hand, the Lok Dal (A) of Ajit Singh, son of Charan Singh, and the Lok Dal (B) of Devi Lal, another Jat leader from Haryana, merged in the Janata Dal. On the other hand, many socialist old-timers from the Janata Party, such as Madhu Dandavate (who was to become Finance Minister in V. P. Singh's government), George Fernandes (who was to hold the portfolio of Railways), and Surendra Mohan (a member of the Janata Dal Executive Committee who shaped its election manifesto), took an active part in it. This amalgamation had inner problems, as the controversy over the naming of the party quickly demonstrated. Until the last minute the party was to be called Samajwadi Janata Dal (Socialist People's Party), but Devi Lal strongly objected to the term socialist and it had to be removed (Mustafa 1995, 110).

Yet the party's discourse on social justice remained heavily loaded with socialist references, and its affirmative action program drew most of its inspiration from Lohia's *modus operandi*. The party's president, V. P. Singh, was a late convert to this brand of socialism. Descending from a Rajput lineage which had been the ruling family of a small princely state near Allahabad, the "Raja of Manda", as he came to be called rather ironically, had shown some early interest in the Sarvodaya movement, but had then been co-opted by the Congress Party to become, as MLA and then MP, one more "notable" in the vote-bank pyramid. He was expelled from the Congress in July 1987 because of his accusation that Congress Party leaders were corrupt. The party he founded then with other Congress dissidents, the Jan Morcha, was small, but it played a pivotal role in the foundation of the Janata Dal and became the rallying point of other opposition parties with which it formed the National Front. The day after he was sworn in as Prime Minister, on 3 December 1989, in his First Address to the Nation, Rammanohar Lohia and Jaya Prakash Narayan were the only names he mentioned as his guides (V. P. Singh 1997, 357). This shift from Congress to a mixed brand of Socialist politics reflected V. P. Singh's old commitment to Sarvodaya but also his dependence upon socialist leaders.

The Janata Dal indeed tended to adopt the socialist program for social justice: it concentrated its attention less on class than on ascriptive groups and turned towards affirmative action as the main remedy. The program adopted by the party during its inaugural session promised that "Keeping in view special needs of the socially and educationally backward classes, the party [if voted to power] shall implement forthwith the recommendations of the Mandal Commission" (V. P. Singh 1997, 343).

The party was prepared to show the way and promised to allot 60 percent of the tickets in the general elections to "the weaker sections of society." Before that, V. P. Singh had promised to apply this 60 percent reservation to the party apparatus. The 60 percent quota was an old socialist idea that Lohia had propagated in the 1960s. It could not be implemented allegedly because of the opposition of Devi Lal (Mustafa 1995, 115). Once again, the socialist approach was opposed by a Jat who tried to appear as the heir of Charan Singh.

The JD, indeed, represented the aspirations of the proponents of kisan politics as well. Devi Lal, the then Chief Minister of Haryana, had won the 1987 state election largely because he had promised to waive the cooperative loans up to Rs 20,000 (Varshney 1995, 141). The 1989 election manifesto of the National Front promised to do the same with "Loans upto Rs 10,000 of small, marginal and landless cultivators and artisans" (143). Most of the items regrouped under the headline "Rural Economy" were in favor of the peasant-proprietors:

Not less than 50 percent of the investible resources will be deployed for the development of rural economy. Farmers will be assured of guaranteed remunerative prices for their produce, a countrywide network of godowns and warehouses, remission of debts, provision of cheap credit, removal of unreasonable restrictions on movement of agricultural produce, crop insurance, security in land holding and strict implementation of land reforms and improved access to water resources.

(26)

The only promise which directly concerned the agricultural laborers was the one about the land reform, which was not implemented. On the other hand, Devi Lal, who became Deputy Prime Minister with the Agriculture portfolio, and Sharad Joshi, one of his advisors, with a cabinet rank, waived "all agricultural loans under central jurisdiction up to Rs 10,000" (Varshney 1995, 143).

Yet, *kisan* politics was not as resolutely pursued by the V. P. Singh government as the "quota politics," probably for two reasons. From a pragmatic point of view, V. P. Singh was more eager to cater to the needs of the lower castes than to those of the middle peasants. The latter constituency was already won over by Ajit Singh and Devi Lal. V. P. Singh was more interested in broadening his base among the OBCs. From a more ideological point of view, like most of the old socialist leaders, V. P. Singh believed less in economic and financial support than in the reform of the power structure within society, for which affirmative action appeared to be the most relevant method. The 1989 National Front election manifesto underlined that "Implementation of reservation policy will be made effective in government, public and private sector industrial undertakings, banking institutions, etc., by resorting to special recruitment drives so as to fulfill their quotas within the shortest possible time" (*National Front Manifesto* 1989, 26) and that "The recommendations of the Mandal Commission will be implemented expeditiously" (27). While the government did not dare to extend the reservation system to the private sector, it did implement the Mandal report recommendations.

V. P. Singh announced this decision in a one-and-a-half page suo moto statement in both Houses of Parliament on 7 August 1990. He justified it in his Independence Day Address on 15 August by the need to give "a share to the poor in running the Government" (Mohan et al. 1997, 360):

We believe that no section can be uplifted merely by money. They can develop only if they have a share in power and we are prepared to provide this share. In this year of justice, in memory of Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar the Government has recently taken a decision to give reservation to the backward classes in the jobs in Government and public sector. It is being debated as to how many persons would get benefit out of it. In a sense, taking into account the population of this country, the Government jobs account for only one percent [of the total] and out of this one percent if one fourth is given to anyone, it cannot be a course for his economic betterment though it may have some effect. But our outlook is clear. Bureaucracy is an important organ of the power structure. It has a decisive role in decision-making. We want to give an effective share in the power structure and running of the country to the depressed, downtrodden and backward people.

(361)

As it was for most socialists before him, the caste system was also a target for V. P. Singh, and he analyzed the caste system based on power relations. This approach could not please the proponents of *kisan* politics. Devi Lal had been appointed by V. P. Singh as chairman of a committee for the implementation of the Mandal report recommendations, but, according to the Prime Minister, he "did not take much interest" (cited in Mustafa 1995, 171). He had strong reservations concerning the report because the Jats had not been included among the OBCs (interview with Ajay Singh, Jat minister in V. P. Singh's cabinet, New Delhi, 28 October 1997). Devi Lal tried to have the Jat's inclusion accepted by the government, but in vain.<sup>6</sup> Finally, V. P. Singh decided to ask Minister of Social Welfare Ram Vilas Paswan, a Dalit leader, to do the job.

The Prime Minister announced the implementation of the Mandal Commission report recommendations only a few days after Devi Lal resigned from his government. Though there were other issues also leading to the rupture, the views and interests of V. P. Singh and Devi Lal could not coincide. Indeed, the social potential of V. P. Singh's reforms was perceived as posing a threat to Jat interests insofar as it could promote the assertiveness of tenants and agricultural laborers from the lower castes.

Devi Lal's resignation signaled the breakdown of Charan Singh's coalition. For partisans of "quota politics," such a breakdown was for the better because kisan politics, in their view, merely served the economic interest of the peasant-proprietors and maintained the social status quo in the countryside. The old socialist and Ambedkarite approach based on an anti-caste discourse and affirmative action was considered more promising.

### Caste Polarization around Mandal

The main achievement of V. P. Singh was to make a broad range of castes coalesce under the OBC label. In fact, he made it a relevant category for the lower castes, as per the quotas recommended by the Mandal Commission report. Many of those who were earlier known as "Shudras" internalized this administrative definition of their identity in the early 1990s. The OBC category also crystallized for a while because the upper castes militantly resisted such reservations in the administration. The cleavage between upper castes and lower castes was suddenly reinforced by a collective, open hostility on the part of the former and by the unleashing of violence.

Soon after V. P. Singh announced the implementation of the Mandal Commission report recommendations, upper-caste students formed organizations such as the Arakshan Virodhi Sangharsh Samiti and the Mandal Ayog Virodhi Sangharsh Samiti in Uttar Pradesh. Students who were from the upper castes but from the lower middle class protested against a new quota that would deprive them of some posts in the administration. They wanted to "abolish all reservations including reservations for the Scheduled Castes" (Hasan 1998, 155), a demand that brought the Dalit and OBC leaders closer. At the same time, the students "feared that their hopes of government patronage would be thwarted by a coalition of lower-castes" (155), which they were largely shaping themselves by provoking a new cleavage between forward castes (including Jats)<sup>7</sup> and lower castes.

Immediately, leaders from the Janata Dal organized a counter mobilization. Sharad Yadav, one of the Ministers of V. P. Singh, launched the movement in Delhi. "We will," he said, "show them within 15 days how many people are behind us if they don't come back to their sense. . . ." (cited in *The Hindustan Times*, 3 September 1990). V. P. Singh went to Patna for an anti-upper-caste rally. Thus, the early 1990s were marked by an exacerbation of the cleavage between upper castes and lower castes, an atmosphere which explains *at that time* the emotional value of the OBC as a social category.

Their new unity helped the OBC to organize themselves as an interest group outside the vertical, clientelistic Congress-like patterns. The aim was to benefit from its main asset, its massive numbers (52 percent of the Indian population), at the time of elections. Indeed, the share of the OBC MPs increased in the Hindi belt because lower-caste people became more aware of their common interests and decided no longer to vote for upper-caste candidates. In South and West India such a silent revolution had already started before independence and bore fruits soon after.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with P. S. Krishnan, New Delhi, 4 April 1998. P. S. Krishnan was Secretary to the Ministry of Social Welfare who prepared the implementation of the Mandal report recommendations for R. V. Paswan.

<sup>7</sup> The Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU) was explicitly against caste-based quotas and favored, like the BJP, an economic criterion for job reservations.

Table 1. Caste and community of the MPs elected to the Lok Sabha in the Hindi belt in 1952-98 (in percent)

Castes & communities	1952	1957	1962	1967	1971	1977	1980	1984	1989	1991	1996	1998
<b>Upper-castes</b>	64	58.6	54.9	55.5	53.9	48.2	40.88	46.9	38.2	37.11	35.3	34.67
Brahmin	30.54	21.9	19.25	22.48	28.31	16.37	18.22	19.91	12.44	16.29	15.49	12.44
Rajput	8.87	13.33	15.49	13.76	13.7	13.27	11.56	15.49	15.11	14.03	14.03	13.33
Bhumihar	3.45	2.38	3.76	3.21	2.28	3.1	3.11	2.65	2.22	1.81	1.77	1.78
Banya/Jain	10.34	9.52	7.51	8.26	5.48	8.4	4.89	5.31	3.11	1.81	1.77	3.56
Kayasth	8.37	8.57	4.69	2.75	2.28	3.1	0.89	1.33	2.22	1.81	1.33	1.78
Other	2.46	2.87	4.23	5.05	1.83	3.98	2.21	2.21	3.1	1.36	0.89	1.78
<b>Intermediate Castes</b>	1	1.43	1.88	2.75	4.11	6.64	5.33	5.31	8.00	5.43	7.53	8.00
Jat	1	1.43	1.88	2.75	4.11	5.75	4.89	4.87	6.67	5.43	6.64	7.11
Maratha						0.89	0.44	0.44	0.89		0.89	0.89
Other									0.44			
<b>OBC</b>	4.45	5.24	7.98	9.64	10.1	13.3	13.74	11.1	20.87	22.6	24.8	23.56
Yadav	1	1.9	4.69	4.59	6.39	6.19	5.33	6.19	9.33	7.69	8.41	6.67
Kurmi	1.48	2.86	2.35	1.83	2.28	3.98	4.44	1.77	7.11	9.95	7.08	7.56
Lodhi							0.44	0.44	1.78	1.36	1.77	1.78
Koeri							0.44	0.44	0.44	0.91	0.44	1.33
Gujjar							0.44	0.89	0.44	0.91	0.44	0.89
Mali							0.89	0.44	0.44	0.45	0.89	
Panwar	0.49	0.48		0.46	0.46				0.44	0.91	0.44	
Jaiswal											0.89	
Other	1.48		0.94	2.76	0.92	3.09	1.76	1.32	0.89	0.45	4.41	5.32
<b>SC</b>	15.76	18.1	19.72	18.35	18.26	17.7	17.78	17.26	17.78	18.1	18.14	18.22
<b>ST</b>	5.42	6.9	7.04	7.8	7.31	7.08	7.56	7.52	7.56	8.14	7.52	7.56
<b>Muslim</b>	5.42	4.76	4.23	3.67	4.57	5.75	11.56	9.73	5.78	4.52	3.54	5.33
<b>Other minorities</b>	1.48	0.96	0.94	0.46	0.46	0.44	0.89	0.44	0.44	0.9	0.89	0.89
Sadhu		0.47	0.46	0.46			0.44			0.9		
<b>Unidentified</b>	2.96	4.76	2.82	1.38	1.3	0.89	0.89	2.21	0.89	1.36	2.21	0.89
<b>Total</b>	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

N = 203 N = 210 N = 213 N = 218 N = 219 N = 226 N = 225 N = 225 N = 226 N = 221 N = 226 N = 225

Source: fieldwork.

By contrast, in the states of the Hindi belt-Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Delhi, and Chandigarh-politics was still almost monopolized by the upper castes until the 1980s, as suggested by the caste background of the MPs returned to the Lok Sabha (the lower house of Parliament).

As Table 1 shows, the share of intermediate-caste and OBC MPs really started to increase in 1977, thanks to the Janata Party's victory, when the proportion of the upper-caste MPs fell below 50 percent for the first time. But the decline of the upper castes benefited more the upper layer of the peasantry, especially the Jats, and the return of the Congress Party in the 1980s brought back a large number of upper-caste MPs, especially in 1984. The percentage of OBC MPs increased again after the Congress lost power in 1989, doubling from 11.1 percent in 1984 to 20.9 percent in 1989, when the share of upper-caste MPs fell below 40 percent for the first time, largely because the Janata Dal, the winner of the ninth general elections, had given tickets to a considerable number of OBC candidates. Interestingly enough, the proportion of the OBC MPs continued to grow in 1991, in spite of the Congress party's comeback in 1996, when the BJP became the largest party in the Lok Sabha and in 1998 when the coalition it was leading was able to form the government. This evolution was continuously pursued at the expense of the upper castes. Most political parties, it would appear, had started giving a larger number of tickets to OBC candidates.

However, the rise of the OBCs has been rather uneven in the states of the Hindi belt. In Rajasthan the share of OBCs among the MPs has remained stable at 12 percent between 1984 and 1998, whereas over the same period it has increased from 11 percent to 20.8 percent in Uttar Pradesh and from 7.5 percent to 20.5 percent in Madhya Pradesh. In Bihar, the share of OBC MPs rose from 17 percent to 43 percent between 1984 and 1996. The figures concerning the Vidhan Sabhas confirm these trends. In Uttar Pradesh, the share of upper-caste MLAs decreased from 58 percent in 1962 to 37.7 percent in 1996, whereas the proportion of OBCs grew from 9 percent to 30 percent in 1993-before declining to 24 percent in 1996 due to the BJP's success (Jaffrelot and Zerini-Brotel 1999, 80). In Madhya Pradesh, the share of upper-caste MLAs decreased from 52 percent in 1957 to 33 percent in 1998, while the proportion of OBCs rose from 7 to 21 percent (*ibid.*). In Bihar, the share of the upper castes in the state assembly decreased from 42 percent in 1967 to 33 percent in 1990, while that of the OBCs rose from 26 percent to 35 percent in the same period.<sup>8</sup>

The OBCs' rise to power, in conjunction with the increasing electoral participation of the lower castes, has been called a "second democratic upsurge" by Yogendra Yadav, who further considers that "The expression 'OBC' has ... traveled a long way from a rather careless bureaucratic nomenclature in the document of the Constitution to a vibrant and subjectively experienced political community" (Yadav 1996, 96, 102). While the "Mandalisation" of Indian politics has certainly contributed to the democratization of a traditionally conservative democracy, the capacity of OBCs to sustain the kind of unity that is needed in forming a "political community" is very doubtful.

### Are the OBCs a Community?

In 1996, one member of the Uttar Pradesh Backward Classes Commission observed that "Political change is now leading to social change. The OBC which was a constitutional category has now become a social category" (cited in Hasan 1998, 164). This comment, which reflects a widely held view, is questionable. While lower-caste solidarity increased during the Mandal affair, when caste polarization was at an extreme, such solidarity has been declining since the mid-1990s.

<sup>8</sup>I am most grateful to Anand Kumar (CSSS/JNU) for providing me with these data.

### Grassroot Mobilization or Yadav Manipulation?

The rise of the OBCs is first of all the rise of the Yadavs and the Kurmis, as their share among the MPs testifies. Together, they represent about 15 percent of North Indian MPs in the 1990s, as much as the Brahmin or the Rajput MPs. Certainly, table 1 shows almost graphically that, while the Yadavs and Kurmis alone had representatives in the Lok Sabha until the 1970s, new castes joined the political arena in the 1980s (Lodhis, Koeris, Gujars, Malis) and 1990s (such as the Jaiswals, the Telis, and the Kacchis - I have classified the latter two castes among the 'others' in Table 1). However, the share of the Yadavs and the Kurmis has grown too, so much so that each one of these castes represents about one-third of the OBC MPs of North India since 1989.

Even though the Kurmis organized themselves as early as the Yadavs through caste associations,<sup>9</sup> the Yadavs have been at the forefront of the OBC mobilization since the very beginning. The leader of the All-India Backward Caste Federation in the 1960s and 1970s, Brahm Prakash Chaudhury, was a Yadav. B. P. Mandal himself was a Yadav, and Yadav leaders have consistently paid greater interest to his report. After the Janata Dal took over in 1989, they mobilized in favor of implementing the Mandal Commission Report. Sharad Yadav, the Minister for Textile and Food Processing in V. P. Singh's government, was among the most vocal. After the anti- Mandal agitation started, he was at the forefront of the counter-mobilization in Delhi and elsewhere in the country, until he launched his Mandal Rath Yatra in late 1992 and early 1993 in reaction to the Supreme Court's decision regarding the exclusion of the "creamy layer" of OBCs from the quotas. The Court used this expression to designate the elite among the OBCs who did not need any help from the State and, therefore, should not be entitled to any quotas. The Janata Dal, with Laloo Prasad Yadav as President and Sharad Yadav as leader of the legislative group in the Lok Sabha, then lobbied for excluding the well-off peasants from the "creamy layer." They were obviously defending the interests of their caste since many Yadavs had become relatively rich. Eventually, the pressure exerted by the Yadavs-and other OBC leaders-proved to be effective, and the "creamy layer" was defined in a rather loose way. It comprises only the OBC applicants from establishment families, or those whose fathers owned land beyond 85 percent of the acreage permitted by ceiling laws.

When the 27 percent reservation was eventually implemented at the Center after the Supreme Court decision of November 1992, the upper castes did not resist it any more. They resigned themselves to the rule of numbers. Moreover, the liberalization of the economy also began to make careers in the private sector, to which affirmative action laws did not apply, more attractive. Simultaneously, having won the battle over quotas, the lower castes did not feel an acute need for solidarity any more. The very notion of the OBCs started to lose its edge. The general OBC category was, in fact, often used by a Yadav elite to promote its interests. Such an elite manipulation was not uncommon in the past since the kisan identity promoted by Charan Singh was also perceived by many Jats as a means to mobilize a large social base and Lohia had deplored it already in the 1960s: "Ever and even again, the revolt of the down-graded castes has been misused to up-grade one or another caste . . ." (Lohia 1979, 90). Lohia had already seen the Yadavs as the main protagonists for such a strategy (103).

<sup>9</sup> On the Kurmis early entry into the public sphere, see Verma 1979 and on the Yadavs, Rao 1987.

## Yadav Politics in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh

The way Yadav leaders used the Janata Dal reservation policy for promoting their caste interests is evident from the strategies of Mulayam Singh Yadav and Laloo Prasad Yadav after they became Chief Ministers, in November 1989 and March 1990, respectively, of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. M. S. Yadav lost power in 1991 but governed the state again between 1993 and 1995. L. P. Yadav won both the 1990 and the 1995 state elections, and is still at the helm through his wife, Rabri Devi, who took over from him in 1997, when he was indicted for corruption in the infamous "fodder scam".

Even before V. P. Singh's reservation policy was announced, Mulayam Singh Yadav, the new Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister, had promulgated an ordinance providing the OBCs with a quota of 15 percent in the state administration (Hasan, 149). Though he came from the Lok Dal, Charan Singh's party, Mulayam Singh Yadav decided "to place a far greater emphasis on the collective identity of the backward classes than the Lok Dal had ever done" (Duncan 1997, 262). That was well in tune with what Lohia had taught him in his early career. In fact, Yadav was initiated into politics by Lohia when the latter came to his village for a "j'at todo" (break caste) meeting (Lal and Nair 1998, 32). He then took part in the canal rate agitation launched by Lohia in 1954.

The Samajwadi Party (Socialist Party) - which Mulayam Singh Yadav founded after severing his links with the Janata Dal in 1990 - contested the 1993 state election in association with the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), a Dalit-led party, and highlighted the cleavage between the upper castes and the lower castes. Its election manifesto promised a quota of 27 percent for the OBCs in the state administration, and it implemented the quota once Yadav became Chief Minister for the second time through the Uttar Pradesh Public Services (Reservation for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes) Act of 1994. This new measure, while it was under discussion, was strongly resented in Uttarakhand where the OBCs represent only 2 percent of the population. Yadav severely repressed this protest movement. His government at that point had only three "representatives" of the upper castes but as many as twenty members of the OBCs and Dalits (and two Muslims) (Duncan 1997). Upper-caste bureaucrats were transferred to nonessential posts. The number of Additional District Magistrates from the upper castes decreased from forty-three (out of sixty-three) to only thirteen in only six months. The Chief Secretary, a Brahmin, was replaced by a Kayasth. These decisions, which were publicized on purpose, were partly made under the pressure of the BSP. But they accorded well with M. S. Yadav's strategy.

Table 2. Distribution, according to Caste, of DMs and DDCs in Bihar in 1995

	District Magistrates	Deputy Divisional Commissioners
OBCs	26	30
Minorities	4	4
Forward Castes	20	16
Total	50	50

Source: *India Today*, 28 February, 1995, 100-7.

A similar scenario unfolded in Bihar. Already during the 1990 election campaign, the JD assured voters that it was the only party prepared to reserve posts for the OBCs in the State administration and at the Center. Once voted to power, it increased the quota for the OBCs up to 27 percent. In August 1993 the Patna University and the Bihar University Amendment Bill was passed, according to which 50 percent of the seats would be reserved for the OBCs in the universities' senate and syndicate (Chaudhary 1999, 193). In 1993, a member of the Indian Administration Service (IAS) from the Scheduled Castes replaced a Brahmin as Chief Secretary and an OBC took over the charge as Director General of Police from another Brahmin. A large number of OBC bureaucrats were transferred from the sidelines to the main department, and the number of the District Magistrate (DM) and Deputy Divisional Commissioners (DDC) positions -

two strategic positions - belonging to the OBCs increased. The number of OBC DMs and DDCs exceeded those from the upper-castes (see table 2).

In 1993 the Bihar Vidhan Sabha passed the Panchayati Raj Bill according to which "the Panchayats with majority of the people belonging to backward classes will be reserved for them only and in these Panchayats upper-castes will be debarred from even contesting elections" (Chaudhary 1999, 226). This bill was unanimously passed by both houses of the state legislature.

The Yadavs benefited more than any other lower-caste groups from the policies followed in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, the two states in which they form the largest component of the OBCs with respectively 8.7 and 11 percent of the state population (according to the 1931 census). In Bihar, the largest caste (after the Chamars) they had one-fifth of the MLAs in 1990 and more than one-fourth of the MPs in 1996. In Uttar Pradesh, where they form the third largest caste after the Brahmins and the Chamars with 8.7 percent of the population (according to the 1931 census), they represented more than one-fourth of the MLAs in 1993 (as much as the Rajputs and more than the Brahmins).<sup>10</sup> The governments of Mulayam Singh Yadav and Laloo Prasad Yadav were more and more identified with the Yadavs, so much so that it became obvious that the notion of the OBCs had been used by this caste to its own advantage right from the beginning.

Of course, the Yadavs were likely to be among the first beneficiaries of the quotas because they are more numerous and relatively more educated than the other OBCs. But they were also favored by the governments of Mulayam Singh and Laloo Prasad Yadav. In Uttar Pradesh, out of 900 teachers appointed by M. S. Yadav's second government, 720 were Yadavs. In the police forces, out of 3,151 newly selected candidates, 1,223 were Yadavs (Indian Today, 15 October 1999, 37). Such a policy alienated the BSP, the SP's ally, but also the Kurmis, the second largest OBC caste of the state, which was well represented in the BSP. Sone Lal Patel, the Secretary General of the party, who presided over the Uttar Pradesh branch of the All-India Kurmi Mahasabha, organized a Kurmi Rajnitik Chetna Maha Rally in Lucknow to protest against the Yadavisation of the State one year after the formation of Mulayam Singh Yadav's government (India Today, 15 December 1994).

The SP does have Kurmi leaders, but it has not been able to project itself as a party representing the second largest OBC caste of Uttar Pradesh. In 1993, more than one-third of its MLAs were Yadavs (as against 8 percent Kurmis) and in 1996, almost one-fourth (as against less than 3 percent Kurmis) were Yadavs (J. Zerini-Brotel database). In 1996, a preassembly election opinion poll by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies showed the extent to which the OBCs were politically divided in Uttar Pradesh. While 75 percent of the Yadavs remained strongly behind the SP, the Lodhis supported the BJP of Kalyan Singh, a Lodhi himself, and the Kurmis divided their votes chiefly between the BJP (37 percent) and the BSP (27 percent).<sup>11</sup> A *summa divisio* took shape within the OBCs, with the Lower OBCs (or Most Backward Castes) expressing a strong preference for the BJP and a more limited inclination in favor of the SP (25 percent) and the BSP (19 percent).

<sup>10</sup> I am most grateful to Jasmine Zerini-Brotel for these figures.

<sup>11</sup> India Today, 31 August 1996, 53; A. Mishra, "Uttar Pradesh-Politics in flux," Economic and Political Weekly, 1 June 1996, 1300, and "Uttar Pradesh-Kurmis and Koeris: Emerging 'Third' Factor," op. cit., 4 January 1997, 22-23.



The BSP has thus become a strong contender for the vote of a substantial section of the OBC. In contrast with its Dalit image, in Uttar Pradesh and in Madhya Pradesh the party has gained some following among the OBCs, and especially the Most Backward Castes (MBCs) (Jaffrelot 1998a). The poll showed that, while only 4 percent of the Yadavs were prepared to vote for the BSP, 27 percent of the Kurmis and 19 percent of the "lower backward" supported this party in Uttar Pradesh. Indeed, BSP's leader, Kanshi Ram, regarded the MBCs as his main target in 1996: "There are 78 Most Backward Castes in Uttar Pradesh. 26 percent of the UP population are from the MBCs and the maximum tickets I have given to the MBCs" (interview with Kanshi Ram, New Delhi, 12 November 1996). This strategy is well illustrated by the social profile of the BSP candidates in the 1996 Assembly elections: 30 percent of the candidates were OBCs (more than half of them MBCs), whereas 29 percent were Scheduled Castes, 16 percent from the upper castes, and 16 percent Muslims.<sup>12</sup>

The political division of the OBCs is also most obvious in Bihar where, again, the main cleavage is between Kurmis and Yadavs. In this state, too, the Kurmis resented the bias of Laloo Prasad Yadav in favor of his caste fellows. For instance, Yadavs were appointed as heads of important boards such as the Bihar Public Service Commission, the Bihar Secondary Education Service Commission, the Bihar State Electricity Board, and the Bihar Industrial Development Corporation. Kurmi leaders felt sidelined, and one of the most prominent of them, Nitish Kumar, left the Janata Dal in 1994 and sponsored the creation of the Samata Dal along with George Fernandes. This party made an alliance with the BJP in the mid-1990s and cashed in on the Kurmi vote in all subsequent elections.

Obviously, the very notion of the OBCs as 'a political community' needs to be qualified because of the rivalry between major castes such as the Yadavs, the Kurmis, and the Lodhis. Castes classified as OBCs might have coalesced in the early 1990s because of the Mandal affair, but this cementing force declined subsequently. The internal divisions, however, do not mean that the rise of the lower castes can be taken lightly. They may not form a social-or even a political-category, and the jatis classified as OBCs may be divided themselves in their political choices, but the members of these castes have acquired a new political consciousness that leads them to vote more than before for candidates from their own milieu. This has forced political parties to pay more attention to the OBCs in selecting their candidates, instead of relying on rather old clientelistic and paternalist vertical linkages. The growing importance of the lower castes in the public sphere shows that they have gained a new influence. Even though he regretted the 'casteist' attitude of B. P. Mandal in 1967-68, Madhu Limaye drew similar conclusions from this episode:

If the [socialist] caste policy had not been there, the factional abuse would have taken some other form. But this does not prove that the general policy was wrong. Throughout the zig zag and tortuous course of this policy, the rising consciousness among the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and OBCs had been a fact of life. It was still not what Lohia called a 'resurrection of India - the destruction of caste'. Still it was a step forward of sorts towards equality.

(Limaye 1998, 163-64)

### The BJP's Reluctant Mandalization

While Limaye's comment above may sound relevant even for today, one must finally consider the implications of the rise of Hindu nationalism for OBC politics. There is a kind of dialectic between both phenomena. Many upper-caste people and non-OBC Shudras, like the Jats, became supporters of the BJP and took part in the Ayodhya movement because that was the only party that initially showed some reluctance towards caste-based reservations, while trying to subsume the lower castes versus upper castes cleavage by resorting to ethnoreligious propaganda.

<sup>12</sup> These data have been compiled on the basis of lists published in Bahujan Sangathak, 11 November 1996.

The Hindu nationalist movement has always been known for its upper-caste, even brahminical character. The Hindutva ideology relies on an organic view of society where castes are seen as the harmonious limbs of the same body (Jaffrelot 1996, ch. 1). Since its creation in 1925, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) has concentrated on attracting to its local branches (the shakhas) Hindus who valued this ethos, either because they belong to the upper castes or because they want to emulate them. The technique of "conversion" of lower-caste people to Hindutva relies on the same logic as what M. N. Srinivas called "sanskritisation" (Srinivas 1995, 7).

However, the upper-caste character of Hindu nationalism has gradually become a liability for the BJP because of the growing political consciousness of the lower castes. The 1993 election results, when the BJP lost both Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh partly because of the OBC and Dalit voters, led the party leaders to promote a larger number of lower-caste people in the party apparatus. K. N. Govindacharya, one of the BJP General Secretaries, was the main advocate of this policy, which he called "social engineering." Murli Manohar Joshi, a former president of the BJP, opposed this move and even implicitly questioned the notion of "social engineering" in general by asking "what social justice has been brought in the name of social engineering? Rural poverty has increased and most of the rural poor continue to be Dalits" (interview in *Sunday*, 26 January 1997, 13).

As the 1996 election approached, the party evolved a compromise between these conflicting views. The party's manifesto put a stress on social harmony<sup>13</sup> but also admitted that the existing quotas in favor of the Scheduled Castes and the OBCs could not be questioned "till they are socially and educational [sic] integrated with the rest of society." This compromise reflected the debate within the BJP between the advocates of "social engineering" and those who wanted to abstain from acknowledging caste conflicts.

Up to the late 1990s, the BJP opted for what I have called "indirect mandalisation" (Jaffrelot 1998b), that is, the making of alliances with parties representing lower castes (such as the Samata Party in Bihar or even the BSP in Uttar Pradesh). However, its leaders seem now prepared to resign themselves to a more direct brand of mandalization, inducting a growing number of lower-caste cadres in the party executive committees and the nomination of more OBC candidates at the time of elections. While the share of OBCs among the BJP MPs returned in the Hindi belt - the party's stronghold - is lower than among the Congress and Janata Dal's MPs, it increased from 16 percent in 1989 to 20 percent in 1998, while the proportion of its upper-caste MPs dropped from 52.3 percent in 1991 to 43.4 percent in 1998 (Jaffrelot 2000). The state units of the BJP show the way. In Uttar Pradesh, even though the share of the OBCs among the BJP MLAs marginally increased from 18 percent to 22 percent from 1991 to 1996, the share of the OBCs in the governments of Kalyan Singh - himself a Lodhi - jumped from 22 percent in 1991 to almost 32 percent in 1999 (Jaffrelot, Zerini, and Chaturvedi forthcoming).

True, OBC candidates from the BJP are not projected as Backward Caste leaders, which is largely due to the Hindu nationalist ideology: the RSS and its offshoots insist on the need to put the emphasis on the Hindu sense of belonging to an organic community, the "Hindu nation," rather than to particular castes. According to Uma Bharti, a prominent OBC leader of the BJP, the acceptance of such an outlook has given lower-caste leaders of the BJP a "Brahmin's mentality." She even complains that the "BJP OBC candidates have an upper-caste mentality. They do not show their caste" (interview with Uma Bharti, New Delhi, 12 February 1994).

<sup>13</sup> The manifesto said: "The task is nothing short of rekindling the lamp of our eternal 'Dharma,' that *Sanatan* thought which our sages bequeathed to mankind - a social system based on compassion, cooperation, justice, freedom, equality and tolerance" (Bharatiya Janata Party, *For a strong and prosperous India - Election manifesto* 1996, New Delhi, 1996, p. 5).

However, the BJP has been led to co-opt an ever-increasing number of OBC and Scheduled Castes leaders from other parties, including the Samajwadi Party and the BSP, in order to cope with the need for "mandalising" itself and in view of the rise of lower-caste parties. Many of its cadres and election candidates do not have any RSS background today. On the contrary, they import "subversive" references: for example, a BJP Scheduled Caste MLA from Agra West originally from the BSP adopts Ambedkar's discourse (interview with Ram Babu Harit, Agra, 3 November 1998), and an OBC MLA from Bhopal, even though trained in the RSS shakhas, displays the photograph of Lohia in his office and forcefully articulates egalitarian arguments (interview with Babulal Gaur, Bhopal, 23 October 1998). This dilution of the sanskritisation ethos may well accentuate the "mandalisation" of the BJP in the near future.

### Conclusion

Traditionally, political mobilization against the urban, upper-caste establishment has followed two routes in North India. One route—that of quota politics—came from Lohia, who attributed most of social inequality to caste and favored affirmative action programs. The other route—that of kisan politics—came from Charan Singh, who promoted peasants' solidarity against urban India. The former strategy eventually prevailed over the latter in the political arena when it was adopted by the Janata Dal. It proved to be doubly effective since, first, it emancipated the OBCs from the hegemonic strategy of the proponents of kisan politics—mainly the Jats whose interests did not fully coincide with that of the OBCs and, secondly, it contributed to getting an OBC vote bank crystallized after the implementation of the recommendations of the Mandal Commission report, the most important decision ever made in the framework of the "quota politics." For the first time, lower-caste people have started to vote en masse for leaders belonging to their own milieu. It means that the political class is changing with the replacement of an upper-caste oligarchy by rather plebian newcomers. This silent revolution has probably opened the second age of Indian democracy as Yogendra Yadav convincingly argued.

But the OBC phenomenon is also something of a myth because the Other Backward Classes do not represent a cohesive social category. There was unity when the battle lines were drawn over the Mandal Commission's recommendations, when the castes classified as OBCs had to mobilize to overcome the resistance from the upper castes. But this solidarity declined when the battle was won—partly because the upper castes gave up, all the more easily as the 1991 liberal turn opened for them better opportunities in the private sector than in the bureaucracy—and it soon appeared that the OBCs were stratified, the less backward of these caste groups, the Yadavs especially, instrumentalizing this category to promote their own interests. The policies of Mulayam Singh Yadav and Laloo Prasad Yadav, as well as the fragmentation of the so-called OBC vote, bear testimony of the cleavages between the castes classified as OBCs.

The rise of the OBCs has met another adversary in Hindu nationalism, which remains upper-caste dominated and whose OBC politicians have little affinities with the value system of lower-caste movements. The Hindu nationalist movement, however, is experiencing a tension between sanskritisation and "social engineering," a strategy which is leading the BJP to co-opt a larger number of OBC leaders without any RSS background among its election candidates; at the same time, those who have one, like Kalyan Singh or Babulal Gaur, are asserting themselves and tend to project themselves as lower-caste leaders.

Obviously, the rise of the lower castes in North Indian politics, though substantial, will have a more transformative effect if two conditions can be fulfilled in the future: (1) if OBC leaders of the BJP take over the party apparatus on behalf of more egalitarian values, and (2) if the Most Backward Castes (MBCs) unite and gain their share of power against the dominant OBCs. The former move is very likely to be resisted by the RSS and, were it to happen, likely also to undermine the ideological cohesion of the Sangh parivar. The latter possibility is one of the challenges before the lower-caste parties.

They will have to overcome many more difficulties than their southern counterparts which have been pursuing this strategy for decades. In Tamil Nadu, for instance, the Dravida Kazhagam and its successors, the DMK and then the AIADMK, could rely on the Dravidian identity as a cementing force, since the Brahmins, who were smaller in number than in the North anyway, were seen as the Aryan invaders. By fighting them, the lower castes were promoting a regional identity transcending caste cleavages. Such an ideological basis is missing in the North, where the notion that the lower castes are descendants of the original inhabitants of India can never prevail in the same way. In the Hindi belt, lower-caste discourse has always been influenced by the categories of sanskritisation. For instance, the Ahirs (who call themselves "Yadavs") and the Kachhis (who have adopted the name of another Rajput dynasty, the Kushwahas) claim a Kshatriya ancestry. Instead of developing horizontal solidarities, they are engaged in competition based on the criterion of status. Deprived of a common identity, the OBCs may join hands because of their growing awareness of common interests regarding the reservation policy, but this route is bound to be longer than the one used by the Dravidian parties.

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