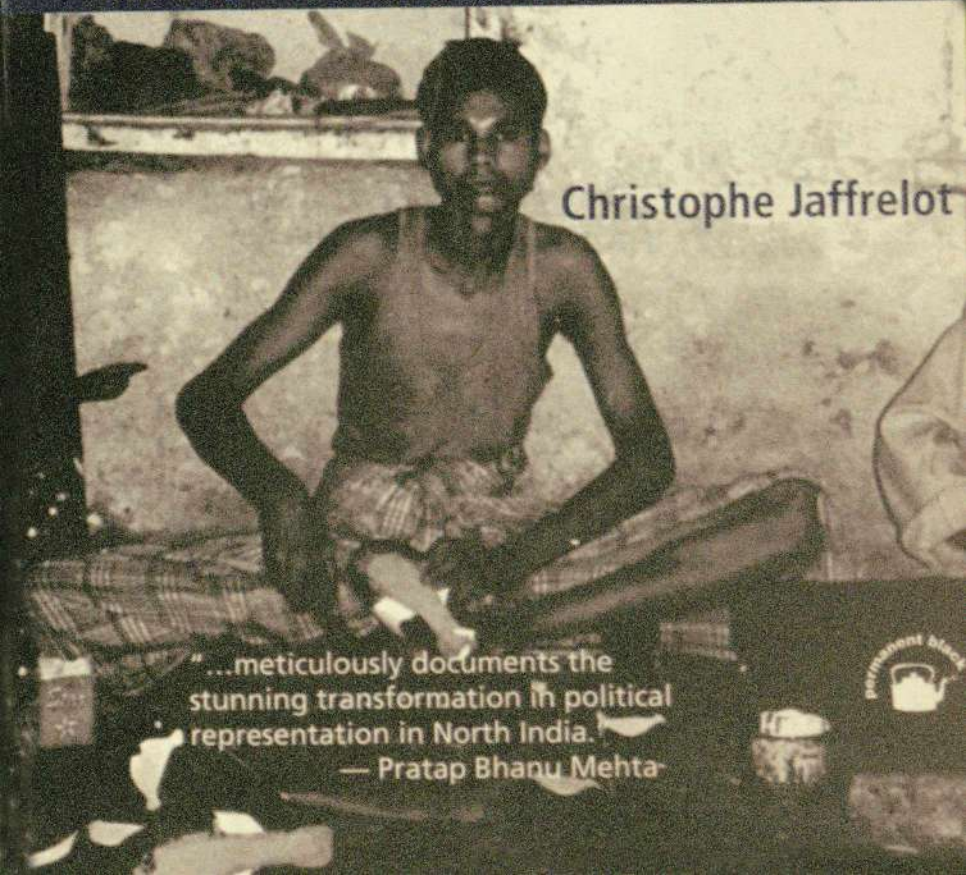
India's Silent Revolution

THE RISE OF THE LOW CASTES IN NORTH INDIAN POLITICS



Christophe Jaffrelot

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CHRISTOPHE JAFFRELOT

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The Rise of the Low Castes in North Indian Politics

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It was in the early 1990s, when the 'Mandal affair' was at its peak, that I began working on the 'revolution' that North India is experiencing. It seemed to me that the kind of social change which was unfolding was a proper revolution because there was a transfer of power in the making from the upper castes to the lower castes in the bureaucracy and the political sphere in North India. One may argue that this revolution was not silent at all, given the vigorous anti-Mandal mobilisation and the lower castes' counter-mobilisation of 1990. But the phase of violent confrontation was short and circumscribed. The upper castes quickly adjusted themselves to the new balance of power and looked for other avenues of social mobility, out of the state, while the lower castes relied on the constitutional process – the reservations and the democratic *modus operandum*, in which their massive numbers were bound to benefit them. Since then, while the overall process remains largely unaccomplished, they are gradually, and more or less surreptitiously, taking over in North India. In that respect, North India is going the way South India – and, to a lesser extent, West India – have already gone.

This book took longer to write than I thought, for two reasons. First, it is largely based on data concerning the caste background of North Indian political personnel, the collection and verification of which have been time-consuming. It has been especially hard to identify the caste of the Members of Parliament or Legislative Assemblies who were elected in the 1950s, 1960s or 1970s, some of whom are no longer with us. But I needed this data to establish long-term trends and I made a point of cross-checking the information I was given. In Madhya Pradesh I had a head start, given the work involved in preparing my first book on the Hindu nationalist movement in Central India. For the other states I started from scratch. I spent hours with old-timers from every political party, in dusty offices in Bhopal, Jaipur, Agra, Lucknow . . . painstakingly combing through lists of hundreds of names. My thanks go first to these political veterans who often became as excited as I was by the

delineation of their party's social profile – they were often surprised by the results!

India's Silent Revolution has also taken longer than the 'five-year plan' I had in mind originally, because I decided to write it directly in English. For French scholars working on India (or other countries), the choice of the most relevant language for scientific communication has become difficult. Their books, especially when they are based on hard and/or detailed fieldwork data, are mainly for their colleagues and advanced students. Now, this public could read them in English, and to write such books in English enables other colleagues and students abroad to have access to their content – something no book in French can really achieve, given the decline of our language in the international scientific community and the small number of books 'English-speaking' publishers translate. However, I would not have embarked on such an enterprise had not Michael Dwyer assured me that C. Hurst & Co. would take care of the editing. My text, like *The Hindu Nationalist Movement* published by the same firm in 1996, has immensely benefited from the painstaking rewriting orchestrated by Michael Dwyer.

I am also grateful to the many colleagues and students who, over the years have commented upon the views expressed in this book, most of the time in a very encouraging and constructive manner. Among them, I would like to thank those who have either invited me to present these views or discussed them in one respect or another: Arjun Appadurai, Amrita Basu, Rajeev Bhargava, Kanchan Chandra, Gyan and Jayati Chaturvedi, Ian Duncan, Barbara Harris, Mushir and Zoya Hasan, Rob Jenkins, Anand Kumar, David Ludden, Owen Lynch, Gurpreet Mahajan, James Manor, Sujata Patel, V.B. Singh, Anne Vaugier-Chatterjee, Yogendra Yadav, Ashutosh Varshney, Steven Wilkinson, Andrew Wyatt, Eleanor Zelliot, Jasmine Zérinini-Brotel, and, of course, Bruce Graham, who read an early version of the manuscript with his inimitable care. Yet, this book owes more to Tara, through whom I discovered the happiness of being two for fieldwork.

In spite of all this support, the book has shortcomings, and they are entirely mine.

Paris, March 2002 CHRISTOPHE JAFFRELOT

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THE SOCIALISTS AS DEFENDERS OF THE LOWER CASTES, JAT POLITICIANS AS ADVOCATES OF THE PEASANTS

The North Indian politicians who promoted the cause of the low castes were few in number till the late 1960s. The Congress party was dominated at the centre by progressive leaders who did not regard caste as a relevant category for state-sponsored social change and relied on conservative notables at the local level. The communists were in no position to give much hope to the low castes of the Hindi belt either; their influence remained confined to Kerala and West Bengal, where they certainly introduced substantial land reforms and education programmes.[1] In the North, their support peaked at 4.5% of the valid votes in UP in 1967 and 10.7% in Bihar in 1971. But the growing marginalisation of the two communist parties in North India was largely determined anyway by the scant attention they paid to the lower castes *qua* castes. True to their analysis of social struggle in terms of class conflict, they concentrated on organising the working class and economic change, namely the nationalisation of the means of production. Caste was ignored on the grounds that it was bound to be submerged by class. Dealing with 'this resistance to

[1] On West Bengal, see A. Kohli, *The State and Poverty in India: The politics of reform*, Cambridge University Press, 1987, chap. 3.

dealing with caste', Omvedt underlines that 'the communists universally adopted the Gandhian term "harijan" without much concern for whether it would appeal to the people concerned.'[2]

For Menon, Kerala Brahmins such as E.M.S Namboodiripad found in Marxism an ideology that allowed them to rehabilitate the Brahmins against the Dravidian anti-Brahmin ideology. Indeed, Namboodiripad referred to the caste system, monitored by the Brahmins, as a scientific division of labour and a necessary stage in the transition towards a modern mode of production.[3]

West Bengal, the other communist stronghold, where the Communist Party of India (Marxist) first came to power in 1967 and which they have been governed since 1977 was one of the few states which had neither established lists of Other Backward Classes nor introduced quotas for them in the administration till the 1990s. The West Bengal government appointed a committee to investigate the matter in 1980 but its report recommended that 'Poverty and low levels of living standards rather than caste should [. . .] be the most important criteria for identifying backwardness' and therefore that programmes should be designed 'for the economic development and educational advancement of the groups who are below the poverty line. . .'.[4] Jyoti Basu, the then West Bengal Chief Minister, while appearing before the Mandal Commission, pointed out that 'caste was a legacy of the feudal system and viewing the social scene from the casteist angle was no longer relevant for West Bengal'.[5]

The implementation of the Mandal Commission Report in 1990 was received sceptically by CPI(M) top leaders, Bhogendra Jha and Somnath Chatterjee. But these two Brahmins were criticised by the party's eleven OBC MPs.[6] As far as the CPI was concerned, it became

[2] Omvedt, *Dalit Visions*, op. cit., pp. 40–1. The CPI included its opposition to discrimination based on caste in its 'Programme of the Democratic Revolution' only in 1948.

[3] D.M. Menon, 'Being a Brahmin the Marxist Way: E.M.S. Namboodiripad and the Past of Kerala' in Daud Ali (ed.), *Invoking the Past: The Uses of History in South Asia*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. 55–87.

[4] *Report of the [Second] Backward Classes Commission*, op. cit., p. 11.

[5] Ibid., p. 46.

[6] K.C. Yadav, *India's Unequal Citizens*, op. cit., p. 92. Yadav suggests that this stand was due to the over-representation of the upper castes among the communist office bearers. He substantiates his claim by showing that in Bihar a large number of the CPI and CPI(M) leaders were Bhumihars (ibid., pp. 120–1).

aware of the necessity to take caste seriously in to account in 1992, in the post-Mandal context partly under the impetus of Inderjit Gupta. This belated realisation may well have come too late to help the communists to recover in North India.[7] The Socialists, in fact, were the first to consider the lower castes as a pertinent social and political entity.

The Socialists and the Low Castes

The Socialists began to focus on the peasants' condition at a time when the Congress leadership was still rather urban-oriented. The programme that circulated before the founding conference of the Congress Socialist Party (CSP), held in Patna in May 1934, advocated the 'organisation of the peasants in Kisan Sanghs [peasant associations]'. It promised to work for 'the elimination of landlordism and the redistribution of land to the peasants'.[8] Socialists like Narendra Deva dared actively to depart from the Gandhian doctrine of 'trusteeship' by pitching tenant against landlord and thus preaching class struggle at the village level.[9] Narendra Deva, who was born in Sitapur (United Provinces) in a Khatri family, who had 'some Zamindari interests',[10] was probably the first Socialist ideologue of India. He presided over the inaugural Congress Socialist Conference in 1934 when he justified the creation of the CSP in sociological terms: the Congressmen's 'social basis being very narrow they really feel stronger by entertaining the belief that they are acting in interests of society as a whole'[11] but the Congress, according to Deva, badly needed to promote 'an alliance between the lower middle class and

[7] The appointment of Raja, a Dalit, as Secretary of the National Council of the CPI, however, suggests that the party has realised the need for promoting low caste people in the party apparatus (interview with D. Raja in Paris, 28 March 2000).

[8] 'Draft Proposals for the Formation of a Congress Socialist Party', in S. Mohan, H.D. Sharma, V.P. Singh and Sunilam (eds), *Evolution of Socialist Policy in India*, New Delhi: Janata Dal, 1997, p. 56 and p. 59.

[9] Acharya Narendra Dev, 'The Peasant in Indian Revolution', in ibid., pp. 96–112.

[10] H.D. Sharma (ed.), *Selected Works of Acharya Narendra Deva*, vol. 1, 1928–40, New Delhi: Radiant, 1998, p. xxxvi.

[11] A. Narendra Deva, 'Presidential Address at Patna Congress Socialist Conference', in ibid., p. 11.

the masses'.[12] This was the objective he assigned to the CSP.[13] For its leaders, the masses in question were primarily to be found in the village. They played an active part in the establishment of the All India Kisan Sabha, founded in 1936 in Lucknow. Narendra Deva was its president in 1939 and in his presidential address he justified its establishment as he had done with that of the CSP: as many Congress local committees 'are controlled by Zamindar elements [. . .], it is exactly in such places that the existence of the Kisan Sabhas will be mostly needed to carry on their day-to-day struggle':[14] 'The Kisan organisation is therefore necessary to exert revolutionary pressure on the Congress to adopt more and more the demands of the peasants'.[15]

The use of the word 'peasant' in Narendra Deva's speeches and writings is rather ambiguous for he was aware that the 'peasantry is not a homogenous class'.[16] In 1939 he said that 'the interests of the village poor can best be served in the present stage by mobilising the peasantry as a whole and not by splitting it into its various sections . . .'.[17] But this was a tactical device stemming from the weakness of the rural masses *vis-à-vis* urban society: to divide the peasants would have still made things worse. Narendra Deva did not want to indulge in what he called 'peasantism', a synonym for what I term 'kisan politics' (see below). This 'ism' looks at all questions 'from the narrow and sectional viewpoint of the peasant class [. . .]. It believes in rural democracy, which means a democracy of peasant proprietors [. . .]. It has the outlook of the middle peasant who has been influenced by modern ideas and is based on petty

[12] Ibid., p. 12.

[13] Narendra Deva was very lucid about the social profile of the Congress. In 1939, he wrote: 'In certain places the Congress organisation is controlled by professional men, merchants and moneylenders of the city and as their interest collide with those of the rural population, they cannot be expected to safeguard the interests of the peasantry. The result is that there are acute antagonisms between the town and the country and the Congress has very little hold on rural areas.' ('Presidential address at All India Kisan Conference', in ibid., pp. 168–9)

[14] Ibid., p. 162.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid., p. 165.

[17] Ibid., p. 165.

bourgeois economy. In its crude form it would mean a kind of narrow agrarianism and an insatiable desire to boost the peasants in all possible places'.[18]

Narendra Deva's programme was very different since it drew on Marxist theories and the Soviet experiment: 'Our objective will be to re-educate the main mass of the peasantry in the spirit of socialism and to bring the bulk of the peasantry into line with socialist reconstruction through the medium of co-operative societies [. . .]. And this co-operative commonwealth must have a democratic base, in the shape of free peasants'.[19]

This programme – very similar to the measures Nehru would try to implement twenty years later through the Nagpur resolution – also implied land distribution and the abolition of all middlemen, such as the *zamindars*, between the tiller and the state. While Narendra Deva, true to his Marxist leanings, thought in terms of class interests,[20] he did not totally ignore caste. In his Presidential Address at the All India Kisan Conference of 1939 he emphasised that the 'agricultural labourer suffers from double bondage. The peculiar caste system of India has degraded him in the social scale. The social reform movement, which seeks to abolish untouchability, is therefore to be welcomed. It will raise his social status and will serve to make him conscious of human dignity. But unless the material and moral condition of his life is immediately improved social reform movement, however beneficent it may be, will not go a long way to make him a valuable self-respecting member of society'.[21]

This reference to caste – the only one, almost, in Deva's selected works covering the years till 1948 – suggests first, that untouchability is the only issue at stake – there's no mention of the need to abolish caste as such; secondly, it assumes that social reform should dispense of this curse; and thirdly, that the pre-condition for the annihilation of Untouchability is material and moral progress – the Marxist,

[18] Ibid., p. 169.

[19] Ibid., pp. 178–9.

[20] For Surendra Mohan, a veteran socialist who joined the CSP in 1946 in Uttar Pradesh, 'They were guided totally by the concept of class. They were marxist and even those who were not did not take caste questions into consideration' (interview with S. Mohan, New Delhi, 4 Nov. 1995).

[21] A. Narendra Deva, 'Presidential Address at All India Kisan Conference', op. cit., p. 167.

materialist analysis continues to prevail, at least to a certain extent.[22] The first official indictment of caste by the CSP came in 1947 in its policy statement at the annual party conference:

> In India, apart from economic inequalities, there are social inequalities, particularly among one of the communities, namely the Hindus. The system of castes is anti-social, undemocratic and tyrannous, inasmuch as it divides men into high and low, touchable and untouchable, curtails human liberties and interfere with economic activities.[23]

After Independence the Socialists gradually highlighted the importance of caste when it appeared that land reform might not solve all the problems of rural India and that 'in the framework of a democratic system certain sections of the society had to be mobilised'.[24] The CSP, which became a party on its own, the Socialist Party, after severing its links with Congress in 1948, made an election pact with Ambedkar's Scheduled Castes Federation in 1952. It was even prepared to enter into a political federation with this party. The proposal

[22] It does not mean that Narendra Deva was not a strong proponent of equality. In fact, he was a militant egalitarian and this inclination probably accounts for his interest in Buddhism – he was an avid reader of studies on the Buddha and planned to write a book 'on Buddhist philosophy' in 1943 while in jail (H.D. Sharma (ed.), *Selected Works of Acharya Narendra Deva*, vol. 2, 1941–8, New Delhi: Radiant, 1998, p. 35). But this sense of equality tended to bypass caste. The need to abolish caste is mentioned for the first time in Narendra Deva's *Selected Works* in 1945, in an address to students (ibid., p. 80). In the Presidential address he delivered at the seventh Annual Conference of the Socialist Party that was held in Patna in 1949, he did not mention the word caste even though the address was entitled 'The Caste System and Democracy'. He emphasised that India 'should make every effort towards the social, economic and cultural advancement of the backward classes'. (Narendra Deva, *Towards Socialist Society. Collection of Writings and Speeches*, Delhi: Apala Publishing Cooperative Society, 1990 (1997), p. 117)

However, he stuck to an economicist perspective ('it is necessary to lay special stress on the equality of opportunities with a view to achieving economic progress') (ibid., p. 116). In fact, Narendra Deva remained imbued with a Marxist-like class analysis and was fascinated by 'the example of Soviet Russia'. He said, for instance: '. . . if we want to unite the people and invoke their co-operation in preparing the foundations of a new life, we shall have to follow the Russian example' (ibid., p. 116).

[23] 'Policy Statement of Socialist Party' in Sharma (ed.), *Selected Works of Acharya Narendra Deva*, vol. 2, op. cit., p. 287.

[24] Interview with Surender Mohan, New Delhi, 4 Nov. 1995.

came to nought because Ambedkar regarded the Kisan Mazdoor Praja Party (KMPP) of Kripalani, with which the SP was simultaneously preparing a merger, as reactionary.[25]

The 'rising star'[26] of the Indian socialist movement, Rammanohar Lohia, a Banya by caste was probably the first, to really incorporate caste in the movement's ideology.[27] He had been one of the founders of the CSP and in 1954 became general secretary of the Praja Socialist Party, which resulted from the merger of the SP and the KMPP of Acharya Kripalani. Disagreeing with most PSP leaders, who were inclined to collaborate with Congress, Lohia launched his own Socialist Party in 1956. A laborious reunification process led to the foundation of the Samyukta Socialist Party in 1964, before a new split took place in 1965, giving birth to a new PSP. Lohia remained at the helm of the SSP till his death in 1967, by which time it had become the largest socialist force in India.[28]

The PSP – old or new – displayed little interest compared to the Lohiaites in uplifting the lower castes. A survey conducted in 1967–8 showed that its leaders and MPs belonged to the upper caste urban intelligentsia: 75% of its forty top leaders were from the upper castes (including 50% of Brahmins) whereas the low castes accounted for only 12.5%. Half of them were professionals – as against 12.5% who were engaged in agriculture,[29] a fact reflected in the party's opposi-

[25] Ibid.

[26] The expression is from Nehru, whose relations with Lohia soured quickly after independence (G. Mishra and B.K. Pandey, *Rammanohar Lohia – The Man and His Ism*, New Delhi: Eastern Books, 1992, p. 12).

[27] K.R. Jadhav, 'Dr. Lohia on reservation policy' in B.A.V. Sharma and K.M. Reddy (eds), *Reservation policy in India*, New Delhi: Life and Life Publishers, 1982, pp. 38–9. He was not the only socialist leader to pay great attention to caste issues, of course. S.M. Joshi, for instance, considered that 'In this country, social inequality born out of the Varnashram and the caste system with its ghastly appendage of untouchability was a greater challenge than economic inequality and exploitations.' (S.M. Joshi, 'The Way to Socialist Alternative' in Mohan, Sharma, Singh and Sunilam (eds), *Evolution of Socialist Policy in India*, op. cit., p. 265)

[28] P.R. Brass, 'Leadership Conflict and the Disintegration of the Indian Socialist Movement: Personal Ambition, Power and Policy' in P.R. Brass, *Caste, Faction and Party in Indian Politics*, vol. 1, New Delhi: Chanakya, 1984, pp. 155–88.

[29] L.P. Fickett, 'The Praja Socialist Party of India – 1952–1972 : A final assessment', *Asian Survey*, Sept. 1973, 13(9), p. 831.

tion to Lohia's proposal of reserving 60% of administrative jobs for the low castes.[30]

In contrast, Lohia, who first championed the peasant's cause, gradually emphasised the abolition of caste. In his early career, he focussed, like Narendra Deva, on the economic issues of rural India. He was elected President of the Hind Kisan Panchayat in 1950 and prepared a 13-point programme which included 'parity between agricultural and industrial prices, a ceiling on personal income to be fixed at Rs 1,000 and no agriculturist household to have less than 12.5 acres and more than 30 acres of cultivable land'.[31] He took part in several demonstrations against the shortcomings of the land reform – including the high compensation given to former *zamindars* – and the eviction of tenants. Yet he began taking an interest in caste issues in 1952 in a series of lectures to a socialist study circle.[32]

For Lohia the caste system was responsible for the recurrent invasions India endured in its long history because it 'renders nine-tenths of the population into onlookers, in fact listless and nearly completely disinterested spectators of grim national tragedies'.[33] Fighting caste was therefore not only necessary for the emancipation of the subaltern groups but also and foremost because it weakened India in such a way as the 'dvija [twice born] have also suffered grievously from this atrophy of the people'.[34] However, social justice was his primary motivations: to those who favoured an analysis in terms of class he objected that 'caste is the most overwhelming factor in Indian life'.[35]

> 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.[36]

Lohia considered that political action needed to be supplemented

[30] Ibid., pp. 828–9.

[31] Mishra and Pandey, *Rammanohar Lohia*, op. cit., p. 41.

[32] Ibid., p. 151.

[33] R. Lohia, 'Towards the destruction of castes and classes' (1958), in R. Lohia, *The Caste System*, Hyderabad: Rammanohar Lohia Samata Vidyalaya, 1979 (1964), p. 81.

[34] Ibid., p. 102.

[35] Ibid., p. 79.

[36] R. Lohia, 'Class organisations: instruments to abolish caste' (1953), in ibid., p. 20.

by the reform of caste, and he fought one of its cornerstones, endogamy, advocating not only marriage between *jatis* but also between *varnas*, between the 'twice borns' and the Shudras.[37] He even went so far to advocate marriage to someone from another caste as a precondition for entry into the administration. Such measures were suggested by one of the resolutions of the All India End Caste Conference organised under his auspices at Patna in 1961[38] and became an article of faith of the Samyukta Socialist Party.[39]

Lohia partly drew his inspiration from Ambedkar. While Jagjivan Ram's duplicity left him cold – 'although he is known to flatter and kow-tow to the caste Hindus when he deals with them, he is reported to sing to the bitter tunes of hatred in exclusively Harijan meetings'[40] –, he was fascinated by Ambedkar. After the latter's death, in 1956, he wrote to Madhu Limaye, one of his lieutenants, as follows:

> It had always been my ambition to draw him [Ambedkar] into our fold, not only organisationally but also in full ideological sense, and that moment seemed to be approaching [. . .] Dr. Ambekar was to me, a great man in Indian politics, and apart from Gandhiji, as great as the greatest of caste Hindus. This fact had always given me solace and confidence that the caste system of Hinduism could one day be destroyed.[41]

But Lohia was no 'Ambedkarite'. What militated against him lending the former his support were his Marxist leanings, his admiration for Gandhi and the fact that he was less interested in the conditions of the Untouchables than in the backward classes – which he often called 'the shudras' –, perhaps because the former already had their political party, unlike the latter. In 1957, after the division of the All India Backward Classes Federation, one of the fractions trans-

[37] R. Lohia, 'The two segregations of caste and sex' (1953) in ibid., p. 4.

[38] R. Lohia, 'End caste conference resolutions' in ibid., p. 139. This conference also pleaded for the Indian people to abandon caste taboos regarding eating practices and other communal activities.

[39] One of the items of the programme adopted at the first conference of the SSP in 1966 read: 'Inter-Varna marriage should be deemed a qualification for Government employment. Inter-dining among Government servants twice a year should be made compulsory.' ('The Socialist Programme' in Mohan, Sharma, Singh and Sunilam (eds), *Evolution of Socialist Policy in India*, op. cit., pp. 260–1)

[40] Letter to Madhu Limaye, 1 July 1957, in ibid., p. 37.

[41] Ibid., p. 36.

formed itself into a political party but later merged with the Socialist Party, as mentioned in chapter 7. This fusion was based on ideological affinities as evident from the letters between R.L. Chandapuri, the leader of the secessionists, and Lohia. In one of these Lohia explained his support for the system of grants for low caste students and that a quota should be set aside for them in the administration – from where the higher castes had to be dislodged.[42] Lohia had, by then, become one of the staunchest supporters of positive discrimination – what he called 'unequal opportunities' –, not only in favour 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.[43]

For Lohia such policies touched upon the core issue of India, whereas the Marxists' views about revolution or Nehru's policy of nationalisation amounted to 'vested interest socialism' because none of these things would change India:

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

[42] 'I think that the *dvijas*, in special conditions, should not get government services.' (Letter from Lohia to R.L. Chandapuri, dated 4 Sept. 1957, in ibid., p. 43)

[43] R. Lohia, 'Towards the Destruction of Castes and Classes' (1958) in ibid., p. 96.

to adjust, routine efficiency is undisputed. Five thousands years have gone into the building of this undisputed merit.[44]

Lohia did not entertain any romantic idea of the Indian lower orders – 'the Shudra too has his shortcomings. He has an even narrower sectarian outlook'[45] – but he thought they definitely deserved special treatment and should be 'pushed to positions of power and leadership'.[46] He was against affirmative action in the education system[47] but emphasised the need for administrative and electoral quotas. Once again he was following Ambedkar's strategy of empowerment that the non-Brahmin movement had already implemented in the South. In 1959, the third national conference of the Socialist Party expressed the wish that at least 60% of administrative posts be reserved for Other Backward Classes.[48] This recommendation was reiterated at the fifth annual session of the party, in April 1961, a few months before the third general elections.[49] Subsequently, the programmes or election manifestos of Lohia's successive parties promoted the notion of 'preferential opportunities', as in the programme adopted by the first Conference of the 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, adibasis [tribals] 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.[50]

[44] Ibid., pp. 96–7.

[45] R. Lohia, 'Class organisations: Instruments to abolish caste' (1953), in ibid., p. 13.

[46] Ibid., p. 13.

[47] 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.' ('Towards the Destruction of Castes and Classes', 1958, p. 104)

[48] Ibid., p. 135.

[49] Ibid., p. 142.

[50] 'The Socialist Programme', in Mohan, Sharma, Singh and Sunilam (eds), *Evolution of Socialist Policy in India*, op. cit., pp. 258–9.

This document again recommended a quota of 60% for the backward sections of society – comprising then the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, the OBCs and women – but extended it to 'all spheres', not only the administration, but also, apparently, the education system and the elected assemblies. These reservations were intended to give a share of power to the low castes; it was an empowerment scheme. Indeed, the SSP programme diagnosed that the weakness of the 'people's movement' resulted from its divisions but also from 'the preponderance of upper caste leadership in [the] major political parties'.[51] To show the way, the SSP nominated a large number of candidates from non-elite groups and the socialists had more OBC MLAs elected than any other political party in the states where they achieved their best results, namely Uttar Pradesh and Bihar.

Bihar as a Socialist Laboratory for 'Quota Politics'

Bihar had been the cradle and the birthplace of socialism in India since the foundation of the CSP in Patna, the state capital. In the 1950s and 1960s the socialist parties together polled between 20 and 25% of the valid votes, except in 1962 (see Table 8.1).

The 1967 election was a milestone not only because Congress lost power for the first time but also because this event was largely due to the growing assertiveness of low caste leaders, a process to which the ruling party had inadvertently contributed. Before the elections, the outgoing Chief Minister, K.B. Sahay, a Kayasth, depended on Bhumihar and Rajput factions who demanded much in return. To free him from their tutelage, Sahay had to rely more and more on OBC leaders. He organised a cabinet reshuffle which reduced the share of upper caste ministers from 50 to 40% and increased that of the backwards from 10 to 20%.[52] The latter were mainly upper backward. For instance, Sahay appointed a Yadav, Ram Lakhan Singh Yadav, and a Kurmi, Deo Saran Singh, as ministers. However, before the 1967 elections, Ram Lakhan Singh Yadav asked Sahay that 60% of Congress nominations be given to the OBCs, the figure recommended by Lohia. The higher caste leadership of the party rejected his demand but the episode tended to crystallise a lower caste front against the higher castes.

[51] Ibid., p. 260.

[52] S.N. Chaudhary, *Power-Dependence Relations: Struggle for Hegemony in Rural Bihar*, Delhi: Har-Anand, 1999, p. 218

Table 8.1. ELECTION RESULTS OF SOCIALIST PARTIES DURING THE FIRST FOUR GENERAL ELECTIONS
(*% of valid votes*)

	1952 SP	*1952 KMPP*	*1957 PSP*	*1962 PSP*	*1962 SP*	*1967 PSP*	*1967 SSP*
All India	10.6	5.8	10.4	6.8	2.7	3.1	4.9
Bihar	21.3	3.4	21.6	12.7	6.1	7.4	17.8
Uttar Pradesh	12.9	4.9	15.3	10.4	8.6	3.7	10.3

Source: D. Butler, A. Lahiri and P. Roy, *India decides*, New Delhi: Living Media, 1989, pp. 84-85.

Table 8.2. CASTES AND COMMUNITIES OF THE MLAs OF THE THREE MAIN PARTIES OF BIHAR, 1967
(*absolute values and %*)

	Congress	*SSP*	*Jana Sangh*
Upper castes	55 (42.97)	31 (46.26)	6 (25)
Intermediate and lower caste	28 (21.87)	27 (40.29)	8 (33.3)
Scheduled Castes	23 (17.97)	7 (10.44)	5 (20.8)
Scheduled Tribes	14 (10.93)	1 (1.49)	5 (20.8)
Muslims	8 (6.25)	1 (1.49)	
Total	*128 (100)*	*67 (100)*	*24 (100)*

Source: R. Mitra, *Caste Polarisation and Politics*, Patna: Syndicate Publications, 1992, p. 120.

On the socialist side, Karpoori Thakur played a leading part in the assertion of the OBCs and his activities explained the rise of the SSP at the expense of the Congress. A long-time socialist who had taken part in the Quit India Movement as a CSP member, Thakur belonged to a low caste classified among the 'Most Backward Classes' of Bihar, the Nais (barbers). He had been joint secretary of the Bihar Kisan Committee in 1948–52 and of the Bihar Socialist Party. He had been returned without any interruption as an MLA since 1952 and was one of Lohia's lieutenant in the SSP. In 1967 he popularised the following slogan: 'Socialists ne bandhi gangh/ Pichara pave saumee sath' (now Socialists are determined to get 60% reservations for the backwards).[53]

The decline of Congress during the 1967 assembly elections, from

[53] Ibid., p. 221.

41.35% to 33% of the valid votes, partly due to the fact that it could no longer retain the OBC support, prevented it from winning a majority of seats in Bihar,[54] whereas the SSP jumped from 6% to 18% of the valid votes and from 7 to 68 seats. The opposition parties, the communists, the Jana Sangh and the socialists formed a coalition called Samyukta Vidhayak Dal (SVD – the united parliamentary group), of which the SSP was the largest component. A former high caste (Kayasth) congressman, Mahamaya Prasad Sinha,[55] became Chief Minister, but the deputy Chief Minister was no other than Karpoori Thakur. In five months the SVD government, took some significant measures such as abolishing land revenue and prohibiting the use of Hindi in public.[56] The Socialist strategy of promoting and mobilising of the low castes largely explains the success of the SSP and the election of a large number of low castes MLAs in the late 1960s (see Table 8.3).

While the rise of the OBCs at the expense of the upper castes is not that dramatic, it is not insignificant either, especially if one looks at the declining share of Brahmins (from 17% to 12% of the MLAs returned in non-reserved constituencies) and the growing proportion of Yadavs, whose rise put them just behind the Rajputs (18.05% as against 23.15% in 1969).[57] Backward caste leaders could now exert much more leverage in obtaining new concessions, as evident from the growing share of ministerial portfolios they obtained in the late 1960s and early 1970s (see table 4.7).

Chandapuri, the President of the All India Backward Classes Federation, was approached by the Congress and agreed to back the party provided one of the backward castes was named at the head of the government,[58] and it was B.P. Mandal who agreed to take up the post.

[54] The mid-term elections of 1969 produced very similar results to those of 1967, including in terms of the MLAs' caste-wise distribution (among the SSP MLAs, the share of the intermediary and low castes members remained unchanged but that of the higher castes rose to 33.9%).

[55] Sinha had defected from the Congress in December 1966 to form the Jan Kranti Dal because he was sure that the Congress would be defeated.

[56] Among the Socialists, Lohia had been especially hostile to the use of English because it gave the élite groups a monopoly of the language of politics and administration and added one more hurdle for low caste upward mobility.

[57] Blair, 'Rising kulaks and backward classes in Bihar', op. cit., p. 68.

[58] Frankel, 'Caste, land and dominance in Bihar', op. cit., p. 90.

Table 8.3. CASTE AND COMMUNITY OF THE MLAs RETURNED IN NON-RESERVED CONSTITUENCIES IN BIHAR ASSEMBLY, 1962–9 (%)

	1962	*1967*	*1969*
Upper castes	*59*	*55.1*	*53.9*
Brahmin	17.2	13.2	12.3
Rajput	23.8	22.2	23.5
Bhumihar	12.6	14.8	14.8
Kayasth	5.4	4.9	3.3
OBC	*28.8*	*31.6*	*32.1*
Banya	3.3	5.3	6.2
Yadav	11.7	15.2	18.5
Kurmi	7.1	5.3	3.3
Koeri	6.7	5.8	4.1
MBC	*1.7*	*2.9*	*2.5*
Muslim	*8.8*	*7.4*	*7.8*
Bengali	*1.7*	*2.9*	*3.7*
Total	100	100	100
	N=242	N=243	N=242

Source: Blair, 'Rising Kulaks and Backward Classes in Bihar', op. cit., p. 67.

Bindeshwari Prasad Mandal, a Yadav who presided over the second Backward Classes Commission in 1978, had been elected an MLA on a Congress ticket in 1952 and 1962. He defected from the Congress in 1965 because the SSP offered him better opportunities; indeed, he obtained the ministerial portfolio of health in the SVD government in 1967 in spite of the fact that he had been elected in the Lok Sabha and not to the state assembly.[59] Lohia asked Madhu Limaye to persuade him to relinquish the post of minister but he refused and left the SSP to form the Shoshit Dal, or 'party of the oppressed', with 40 low caste dissident MLAs, including a number from the SSP. Madhu Limaye lamented that 'as soon as power came, SSP men broke up into caste groups. They equated the [Lohia's] policy with casteism! [. . .] Castemen belonging to other parties were felt to be closer than one's own Party comrades belonging to other castes'.[60] While one may indeed regret that once again Congress had managed

[59] Parliament of India, *Sixth Lok Sabha Who's Who*, op. cit., p. 341.

[60] M. Limaye, *Birth of Non-Congressism*, Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corporation, 1988, p. 155.

to divide in order to rule by co-opting opponents from the lower castes, such developments, which were the logical outcome of the Socialist policy, had some positive aspects: castes were transforming themselves into interest groups and forming socio-political coalitions like the non-Brahmins of South India. It meant that the low castes could not be integrated in vertical linkages as easily as during the heyday of the Congress system. Thus transformed, the low castes certainly lent themselves to manipulation by political entrepreneurs like B.P. Mandal, but the Mandal government episode brought out a positive development: the politicisation of caste and the growing solidarity between lower caste MLAs from different parties had become so pronounced that to topple the SVD government the Congress had no choice but to support one of the Shoshit Dal leaders – this is how B.P. Mandal became the first OBC Chief Minister of Bihar, in February 1968. He remained in office only a few months because the ruling coalition was very heterogeneous but he was to be followed by other non-elite leaders: of the nine Chief Ministers who governed the state from March 1967 to December 1971, only two were from the high castes.

However, Scheduled Castes leaders soon became interested in playing the game of the upper castes. When the Bihar Congress decided to support Mandal, sixteen upper caste congressmen led by the ex-Chief Minister Binodanand Jha (a Brahmin), left the party to form the Loktantrik Congress Dal. He toppled the Mandal ministry by allying with Scheduled Castes MLAs such as Bhola Paswan Shastri whom he promoted as the future Chief Minister. A counter-strategy to the rise of the low castes was taking shape through the activation of the traditional clientelistic links that the Congress upper-caste politicians maintained with their Scheduled Caste allies. The Scheduled Castes bore grievances towards the SVD regime since not one of them had been appointed to M.P. Sinha's cabinet. Shastri was Chief Minister for less than 100 days and then President's rule was imposed. The February 1969 elections left no party with a clear-cut majority and President's rule was imposed again in July.

After the February 1970 election, when the Congress(R) was still in a minority but in a better position to regain power, it appointed, as mentioned above, a Yadav, Daroga Prasad Rai, as Chief Minister. Rai reduced the share of the upper castes in his cabinet to an all-time low 33%, as much as that of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled

Tribes, whereas the OBCs remained at 20%. Rai took the socialist discourse of Indira Gandhi literally. Denouncing the domination of the higher castes, he appointed an OBC as Chief Secretary and set up a Backward Classes Commission, the Mungeri Lal commission which was entrusted with reporting on the lag which the OBCs had incurred in socio-economic terms and education. The Brahmins within the ruling party, under L.N. Mishra's leadership, immediately expressed their objections. Mrs Gandhi shared their concern and Rai was obliged to resign. He had governed for barely ten months but his successor was Karpoori Thakur, who was supported by a large coalition of parties opposed to Congress. Thakur however could not hold on to power for more than six months.

The rise of the low castes came to a halt after the 1972 elections with the Congress(R)'s return to power, as noted above. Congress once again resorted to its strategy of co-opting the leaders of weaker groups that the higher castes had no reason to fear. This unequal coalition brought to the fore the vertical, clientelistic arrangement of the 'Congress system'. But it was not a restoration, and the socialist strategy of low caste mobilisation had now crystallised in such a way that it was bound to be reactivated more effectively one day.

The growing assertiveness of the lower castes in Bihar in the 1960s was largely a by-product of the socialist strategy. I have analysed it in terms of quota politics because a major feature of the programme of Lohia and his followers was spelled out in terms of reservations: the SSP not only reserved a large share of its electoral tickets to the lower castes, but the party also demanded quotas for these castes in the administration. Both developments fostered the low castes' mobilisation and sense of solidarity. This strategy thus contributed directly and indirectly to the democratisation of the social background of Bihar's politicians.

Quota politics was thus over-determined by the state's positive discrimination policies. The socialists had not invented anything: the procedure of what Lohia called 'unequal opportunities' was already there. The socialists simply mobilised the lower castes in order to have these policies implemented and extended. The Socialist quota politics benefited from the groundwork of the AIBCF, especially after Chandapuri's faction joined hands with Lohia. As in the South at the time of the Justice party, quota politics and the state's reservation policy had become two sides of the same coin, which

contributed to the empowerment of the lower castes through the administrative and educational reservation policies and through the introduction of quota politics into party politics. However, another path to empowerment, parallel to quota politics, developped in the 1960s, namely *kisan* politics, an ideology of social transformation which mobilised the rural poor by emphasising their common interests and separate identity as peasants.

Kisan politics and the mobilisation of the Jat farmers

Kisan politics made its impact in Uttar Pradesh under the aegis of a Jat leader, Charan Singh, at the same time as the Socialists were – albeit briefly – rising to power in Bihar in the late 1960s. Jat farmers had long been the crucible of *kisan* politics because they embodied the independent-minded peasant proprietor, not only in UP but also in neighbouring Punjab, its real birthplace.

Changes in Jat identity in the nineteenth century. The Jats are especially numerous in the Punjab plain where they 'commonly are several times as numerous as the second most popular castes'.[61] But they are also the dominant caste in West Uttar Pradesh and in some parts of Rajasthan. This is probably one of the reasons why they have always found the Brahmins' superiority difficult to accept, which partly explains why many of them followed the reformist movement of the Sadhs.[62] This creed, which showed no respect for the Brahmins (and even did without them for all ritual matters), was the sectarian remedy for caste oppression open to the Jats.[63]

In the late nineteenth century, the Arya Samaj's success among the Jats was probably accounted for by its affinities with the Sadh's credo. They especially appreciated Dayananda's hostility to Brahmins. The first Jats to join the Arya Samaj were those of Hissar district where Lala Lajpat Rai practised law and also those of Rohtak in the 1880s and 1890s. One of the first-Jat 'converts' to the Arya Samaj was a medical practitioner, Ramji Lal Hooda who was attracted to the movement in 1883 by Lajpat Rai's father, Radha Krishan, who was

[61] J. Schwartzberg, 'The Distribution of selected castes', *Geographical Review*, 15 (1965), p. 488.

[62] N. Datta, *Forming an Identity: A Social History of the Jats*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 7.

[63] Ibid., pp. 38–9.

his Persian teacher.[64] Lajpat Rai describes him as the first spokesman of the Arya Samaj among the Jats: 'Ramji Lal's house was a centre for the Jats of the entire division [. . .] By his ability and his skill as a physician and surgeon and his hospitality, Dr. Ramji Lal spread his religion amongst thousands of Jats. . .'[65] Indeed, Hooda played a major role in organising Jat Sabhas (and the Jat Mahasabha) and in spreading, via this channel, the Arya Samajist ideology among his caste fellows. In 1921 he became President of the Arya Samaj in Hissar and then contributed to the development of Shuddhi Sabhas. These associations were intended – to use his own terms – to 'bring back those persons who were converted long ago, to the Vedic fold'.[66] In 1923 he became President of the Shuddhi Sabha covering the districts of Hissar and Rohtak which reconverted a Jat who had embraced Islam. But, in fact, these Shuddhi Sabhas 'purified' many Jats – and lower castes – even when they were Hindus in order to transform them into 'twice borns'.[67]

Even though the Arya Samaj claimed that Shuddhi promoted equality, this ritual drew its inspiration and its procedure from the Brahminical tradition and adhered to the logic of Sanskritisation.[68] The 'Jats were told not to consume alcohol or meat, minimise their

[64] In his diary he says 'I owe every good things in my life since 1881 to him' (M.M. Juneja and K. Singh Mor (eds), *The Diaries of Dr Ramji Lal Hooda*, Hissar: Modern Book Co., 1989, p. 47).

[65] Cited in M.M. Juneja and K. Singh Mor, 'Introduction', in ibid., p. 14.

[66] Ibid., p. 244.

[67] These activities had developed by the turn of the century under the aegis of Ram Bhaj Datt, the president of the Shuddhi Sabha who described the ritual of shuddhi in the following terms: 'The ceremony is everywhere the same. In all cases the person to be reclaimed has to keep Brat (fast) before the ceremony [which culminates with the passing of the sacred thread in the case of low caste converts] [. . .] The very act of their being raised in social status makes them feel a curious sense of responsibility. They feel that they should live and behave better and that they should act as Dvijas [twice borns]. It has thus, in the majority of cases, a very wholesome effect on their moral, social, religious and spiritual being. As to treatment, the Arya Samaj treat the elevated on terms of equality.' (Cited in *Punjab Census Report, 1911*, p. 150)

[68] For more details, see C. Jaffrelot, 'Militant Hinduism and the Conversion Issue (1885–1990): From Shuddhi to Dharm Parivartan. The Politicization of an "Invention of Tradition" ' in J. Assayag (ed.), *The Resources of History. Tradition and Narration in South Asia*, Paris: Ecole Française d'Extrême Orient, 1999, pp. 127–52.

expenditure on wedding and ceremonial displays, and refrain from singing cheap songs and watching lewd pictures during the fairs'.[69] The Arya Samaj exerted over the Jats such a strong Sanskritisation effect that men like Hooja opted for a vegetarian diet.[70] Its preachers argued during long ritual debates that they were twice born Kshatriyas opposing them to orthodox Hindus (*shastarth*).[72] The All India Jat Mahasabha, 'an offshoot of the Arya Samaj, formed in Muzaffarnagar in 1905',[73] developed the same discourse under the auspices of Jat princes. Like the ruling family of Rewari, the Maharajahs of Bharatpur and Dholpur – both of them Jats – stressed the Kshatriya identity of their caste.[74] The Maharajah of Dholpur, while he was president of the Jat Mahasabha in 1917–18, supported the development of the Arya Samaj in his state.[75] The brother of the Maharajah of Bharatpur, Ragunath Singh, who relaunched the Jat Mahasabha in 1925, was known as a 'protestant reformer' because of his strong arya samajist leanings.[76]

Besides its opposition to the Brahmins and its sense of Sanskritisation, the Arya Samaj had affinities with the most specific characteristic of the Jats, their sense of industry. From its early days the Arya Samaj, with its strong emphasis on the notion of self help, displayed a spirit of enterprise – partly because many Arya Samajists came from the merchant castes, partly because of their nationalist concern for self sufficiency. They were the first, in the 1880s, to set up indigenous enterprises, the precursors of the Swadeshi movement. Exasperated by the imposition in 1893 of an 'excise tax' on Indian cotton, Mul Raj, the founder-president of the Lahore Arya Samaj, set up associations selling only *deshi* (made in India) clothes.[77] The following year

[69] Datta, *Forming an Identity*, op. cit., p. 71.

[70] Juneja and Singh Mor (eds), *The Diaries of Dr Ramji Lal Hooda*, op. cit., p. 159.

[71] Datta, *Forming an identity*, op. cit., p. 74.

[72] Ibid., p. 79.

[73] Ibid., p. 76. See also N. Datta, 'Arya Samaj and the Making of Jat Identity', *Studies in History*, 13(1), 1997, p. 107.

[74] Datta, *Forming an Identity*, op. cit., p. 161 and p. 165.

[75] Juneja and Singh Mor (eds), *The Diaries of Dr Ramji Lal Hooda*, op. cit., p. 198.

[76] Interview with his grandson, Raghuraj Singh, Bharatpur, 16 August 2000.

[77] Lajpat Rai, *Autobiographical Writings*, Joshi (ed.), Delhi: Jullundur University, 1965, p. 96.

he initiated the first bank with purely Indian capital, the Punjab National Bank[78] and then the Bharat Insurance Company.

This sense of enterprise was well in tune with the industrious ethos of the Jats. In his *Tribes and Castes of the North West Provinces and Oudh*, Crooke writes:

> The Jat takes a high rank amongst the cultivating races of the provinces. He is simply a slave to his farm [. . .]. He never dreams of taking any service except in the army, he is thrifty to the verge of meanness and industrious beyond comparison.[79]

Such orientalist stereotypes were in accordance with local proverbs. Blunt cites one in Hindi: '*Jat mara tab janiye jab terahwin guzar jae*' (Never be sure that a Jat is dead till the days of mourning for him are over);[80] whereas Schwartzberg mentions another in English: 'The Jat's baby has a plough-handle to play with'.[81] As Byres emphasises, 'the Jats are the archetypal working peasantry of northern India',[82] women even work in the fields, which is the exception in this type of intermediate caste. The ideal Jat owns his land and cultivates it with the nuclear family.[83]

The agrarian system of the Jats predisposed them to such a production-oriented lifestyle. This system was known as '*bhaichara*' because, customs (*chara*) were observed by a community (*bhaia*) for the management and distribution of land'.[84] But far from implying

[78] P. Tandon, *Banking Century: A Short History of Banking in India and the pioneer: Punjab National Bank*, New Delhi: Penguin, 1989, p. 152.

[79] Cited in Blunt, *The Caste System in Northern India*, op. cit., pp. 265–6.

[80] Ibid., p. 266.

[81] Cited in J. Schwartzberg, 'The Distribution of selected castes', *Geographical Review*, 15 (1965), p. 488.

[82] Byres, 'Charan Singh (1902–87): An Assessment', *JPS*, 15 (2), Jan. 1988, p. 142.

[83] A British handbook of the 1940s presenting the peasant castes described the Jats as follows: 'With traditions deeply rooted in agriculture they are a sturdy and independent race, loyal alike to their land and to its service in arms. Wherever a Jat community is found, there one can look with certainty for a high standard of cultivation, a long-standing tradition of hospitality, an independent outlook, directness of speech and loyalty to one's salt'. (Khan Sahabzada, 'The Jat Cultivator' in W. Burns (ed.), *Sons of the Soil*, Delhi: Government of India, 1944 [1941], p. 43)

[84] Jagpal Singh, *Capitalism and Dependence. Agrarian Politics in Western Uttar Pradesh, 1951–1991*, Delhi: Manohar, 1992, p. 10.

any collectivist *modus operandi*, or any hierarchical arrangement, this system had truly individualist connotations. As M.C. Pradhan points out:

> In the *bhaichara* system, land was equally divided among the lineages (*thoks*) of the founding ancestors or original conquerors. This system of land tenure was a Jat idea because Jats did not acknowledge the rights of their chiefs to the sole proprietorship of land conquered and colonised by them.[85]

In fact, *bhaichara* communities, after occupying a certain area, divided it between villages (from a minimum of 8 to 84) and all village affairs were managed by *khaps* (clan councils). Clan headship was hereditary and the chief was called the Chaudhari.[86] Jagpal Singh pertinently emphasises that 'land was not owned communally in the *bhaichara* villages. Under this system the peasant-proprietors had individual and hereditary rights on the land'.[87] And he adds: 'Production was carried out by the family members of peasant-proprietors, though sometimes Jats cultivated land as tenants in one plot and proprietors in another. They are called peasant-proprietors by virtue of their proprietorship over land and the family's participation in the production process.'[88] This system stood in stark contrast with the other agrarian arrangements of North India – *zamindari*, *taluqdari*, *jagirdari* or *malguzari* – where tillers did not own the land, which was controlled by landlords who also acted as intermediaries between the peasants and the state and therefore levied taxes. Obviously, the *bhaichara* system offered a suitable context for the development of the Jats' individualist industriousness. Thus the Jat Arya Samajists shaped their own emancipatory identity from their relatively subordinate status by combining the Sanskritised teaching of the *updeshaks* and this strong working ethic. Chhotu Ram is one such case in point.

Chhotu Ram, the Architect of Kisan Politics. Chhotu Ram was born in 1881, the son of an illiterate small Jat peasant proprietor in a village in Rohtak district, where he was to enter public life under the patronage of Ramji Lal Hooda. Remarkably intelligent, he studied

[85] M.C. Pradhan, *The Political System of Jats in North India*, Oxford University Press, 1966, p. 34.
[86] Ibid., pp. 1–6.
[87] Singh, *Capitalism and Dependence*, op. cit., p. 11.
[88] Ibid., pp. 11–12.

in Delhi at St Stephen's High School and then at St Stephen's College. After gaining his BA in 1905 he became assistant private secretary of Raja Rampal Singh of Kalakankar in Pratapgarh district (United Provinces), who had already supported Madan Mohan Malaviya's newspaper, *Hindustan*, in which Chhotu Ram was given an opportunity to write. But he resumed his studies, passed his LLB and set up his practice in Agra and then in his home district, Rohtak, in 1912.

Chhotu Ram was therefore one of the first Jat peasants to become part of the intelligentsia. In fact, he became an organic intellectual in the Gramscian sense since he constantly lobbied on behalf of those from his own background.[89] As early as 1907, he wrote in *The Imperial Fortnightly* an article entitled 'The improvement of India village life' which established the mainstays of the ideology of the *kisan*. He deplored that Indian villages were so backward and considered that 'no progressive society can afford to allow such a large and important section to remain stationary'.[90] Chhotu Ram wanted the individual to deploy his sense of entrepreneurship. This was to be one of the basic principles of the *kisan* ideology, that is of the peasant proprietor. Such an entrepreneurial individualism was supported by his Arya Samajist allegiance.[91]

[89] In fact Chhotu Ram was the first politician to articulate in analytical terms the opposition between rural and urban India. This attitude initially resulted from the cultural shock of his studies in Delhi: 'My seven years of study at Delhi brought me into close contact with students from the highly cultured sections of Delhi society. My relations with them were always entirely cordial, but, in friendly banter, these urban comrades always styled their school and college fellows from the countryside as rustics, clowns and pumpkins. Jats came in for particularly heavy share of these epithets.' (Cited in M. Gopal, *Sir Chhotu Ram – A Political Biography*, Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corporation, 1977, p. 16)

As he was to later reveal, in 1942, Chhotu Ram then felt 'that inchoate desire which in later years grew into a powerful passion for uplifting my class, educationally, socially, economically and politically' (ibid.)

[90] Chhotu Ram 'The improvement of Indian Village Life' in K.C. Yadav (ed.), *The Crisis in India*, Kurukshetra, Haryana Historical Society, 1996, p. 72. Among the factors which hindered the modernisation process, Chhotu Ram mentioned the joint-family and the 'old patriarchal system' whose main consequences was that 'the individual does not put forth his best efforts. Also, the advanced members of the family cannot introduce reforms without disturbing the peace of the house. This is a great hindrance in the way of social reform'.

[91] Chhotu Ram entered 'Vedic' in the column against religion specified in

However, Chhotu Ram emphasised the threats the merchant castes and urban-dwellers – groups that held dominant positions within the Arya Samaj – at large posed to the *kisans*. Ramji Lal Hooda had already distanced himself from the upper caste milieu from which most leaders of the Arya Samaj came. He wrote, for instance, in his diary that Banyas 'are always the friends of gain and have no appreciation of friendship or past obligations'.[92] Chhotu Ram joined Congress in 1917 but left it soon after because it was controlled by urban Arya Samajists and more especially Banyas. With Mian Fazl-i-Husain, a Muslim leader who was equally eager to organise the peasants in Punjab, he formed the National Unionist Party in the early 1920s. In 1923, the party's election manifesto focussed on the needs of 'the backward classes' –, which did not benefit from a 'just and fair' representation in the public services of the province and were exploited by 'the economically dominant classes'.[93] This term – the backward classes – was used as a synonym for the peasants as indicated by the party's promise to 'preserve intact the Punjab Land Alienation Act as a measure of protection to backward classes'.[94]

After the 1923 electoral success of the NUP, Fazl-i-Husain became Chief Minister of Punjab and Chhotu Ram Minister of Agriculture in 1924. He was thus largely responsible for amending the Land Revenue Act so as to fix the term of a normal settlement at a minimum of forty years and the state's share at a maximum of 25% of net assets in passing the Regulation of Accounts Bill. This pro-

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the admission form of the intermediate examination to show that he fully adhered to Dayananda's doctrine (ibid., p. 14).

[92] Juneja and Singh Mor (eds), *The Diaries of Dr Ramji Lal Hooda*, op. cit., pp. 226–7. Hooda was also positively inclined towards the uplift of the lower castes. One entry of his diary reads: 'A meeting of the lower caste [*sic*] was held at Devi Bhawan, and all the Municipal wells were opened for all Hindus including "Achhoots". There is some opposition in certain quarters, but the opponents will realise their mistake after some days' (ibid., p. 282).

[93] Cited in M. Gopal, *Sir Chhotu Ram*, op. cit., p. 59.

[94] Cited in ibid. Chhotu Ram wanted to protect peasants from traders who brought agricultural products at low prices and acted as greedy moneylenders. As a result, the peasant's indebtedness reached unbearable levels and they eventually had to sell their land. This phenomenon was such a cause of concern for the British that they passed in 1900 the *Land Alienation Act*, which made very difficult the transfer of land from agricultural to 'non–agricultural tribes'. However, the Act had many loopholes and Chhotu Ram felt moved to organise the peasants.

tected debtors against the malpractices of moneylenders and made the Punjab Land Alienation Act work in favour of the "agricultural tribes". The NUP government also reduced water rates so that cultivators got better conditions for irrigation. Last but not least, the Punjab Agricultural Produce Marketing Act reformed the marketing committees of the *mandis* (agricultural market places), with peasants representing two-thirds of their members and traders one-third. Gokul Chand Narang, an Arya Samajist leader who owned several sugar mills protested that 'Through this legislation, penny worth peasants would sit alongside millionaire *mahajans* [banyas] in the committee'. Chhotu Ram replied: 'The Jat deserves no less respect than the Arora mahajan [Aroras are *Banyas* from Punjab]. [. . .] The time is not far off when the hard working peasant would leave the worshippers of money far behind'.[95]

This reply reveals how Chhotu Ram's thinking moved from the notion of 'Jats' to that of 'Peasants', suggesting that an equation could be established between both in his mind. The Jat was intended to be the rallying point of all the castes tilling the land. Chhotu Ram propagated the idea of *biradari* (peasant brotherhood) among the Ahirs, Jats, Gujars and Rajputs – hence the acronym AJGAR (cobra).[96] As Datta points out, Chhotu Ram 'used two entwined languages: one was of Jat cultural assertion and the other was that of a homogeneous rural community embodying elements of peasant culture'.[97]

Chhotu Ram is especially remarkable because he introduced in Indian politics a clear distinction between rural and urban India, what was to be known at a later stage as the famous 'Bharat versus India' slogan. In the mid-1930s he wrote in the *Jat Gazette*:

> O you rich people reside in towns, whilst the poor *zamindar* owns only a plough.[. . .] You (townsmen) enjoy rich food, the *bechara zamindar* [the hapless zamindar][98] gains his share of cheap brown sugar and coarse rice, and that too by mortgaging some of his utensils with the shopkeeper.[99]

[95] Cited in ibid., p. 108.

[96] Datta, *Forming an Identity*, op. cit., p. 108.

[97] Ibid., p. 112.

[98] He pointed out that 'In some provinces *zamindars* are different from peasants. But in the Punjab the two are synonymous. Here the agriculturist who has proprietary rights in land is the one who actually ploughs it.' (Cited in Datta, *Forming an Identity*, op. cit., p. 97)

[99] Cited in ibid., p. 104.

On the other hand, Chhotu Ram exhorted the peasants to 'shed their fatalistic outlook, acquire a vision and gain self-confidence and self-respect':[100] 'I want to see the Punjab peasant prosperous and united [. . .] awakened and standing on his feet, in action and organisation'.[101]

With Chhotu Ram, the Jats thus invented a new idiom of politics, *kisan politics*, which emphasised socio-economic cleavages. Such an agenda was bound to offer this caste – and other peasant castes – an alternative identity on the way to social emancipation. Logically enough, another Jat, Charan Singh, articulated this ideology after independence.

Charan Singh and Kisan Politics. Charan Singh's discourse was replete with references to his lowly origins[102] and spelled out an egalitarian agenda: 'For creating an egalitarian society the reins of power of the country should lie in the hands of the 80% of the population, uneducated and poor, which lives in the villages'.[103] Yet he represented more than anything else the class of peasant proprietors which he had begun to shape with the land reform he had initiated in Uttar Pradesh after Independence.

Our assessment of Charan Singh's land reform in chapter 2 suggested that he identified himself with the interests of peasants-proprietors from an early date. As far back as 1939 he successively introduced in the Legislative Assembly of the United Provinces a Debt Redemption Bill, which brought great relief to indebted cultivators, an Agriculture Produce Market Bill that was intended to protect cultivators against the rapacity of traders and a Land Utilisation Bill which should have transferred the proprietary interest in agricultural holdings to the tenants who deposited ten times the annual rent to the government as compensation to the landlord.[104] Like Chhotu Ram, Charan Singh was eager to protect the peasants from merchants, moneylenders and the urban population as a whole. In

[100] Ibid., p. 106.

[101] Cited in ibid.

[102] Sometimes with autobiographical references such as 'My own childhood has been spent amongst the peasants who bare bodied toiled and laboured in the fields.' (Cited in G. Ravat (ed.), *Chaudhary Charan Singh: Sukti aur Vichar*, New Delhi, Kisan Trust, 1985, chap. 6 [n.p.])

[103] Ibid.

[104] Goyal (ed.), *Profile of Chaudhary Charan Singh*, op. cit., pp. 6–7.

1939 he manifested a sharp awareness of the latent conflicts between rural and urban India:

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 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.[105]

For Charan Singh, Nehru epitomised this elitist, urban-oriented attitude in Indian society:

This supreme city dweller administrator had no knowledge whatsoever about life conditions of the millions of helpless Indians who live in the villages of India. He, who had only knowledge of the western principles of economy learnt in the Oxbridge university education system, was given the charge of administering the growth of the country. He got carried away towards these ready-made theories and concepts, which promised comparatively higher national production. He had imagined that by a public ownership of the industries the country could get a high level of production.[106]

According to Charan Singh priority had to be given not to industry but to agriculture. To implement a rural-oriented economic policy, the administration had to be staffed by the sons of farmers because only an official who understood and thought like a peasant could effectively solve his problems.[107] Charan Singh's view of affirmative action is therefore very different from that of Lohia or Ambedkar: for him it is a way of making an agriculture based on peasant-proprietors more efficient; for them it was a way of empowering the lower

[105] C. Singh, 'Why 50 per cent of government jobs should be reserved for sons of agriculturists' in Charan Singh, *Land Reforms*, op. cit., p. 203.

[106] G. Ravat (ed.), *Chaudhary Charan Singh: sukti aur vichar*, op. cit., chap. 8 [n.p].

[107] Ibid. He even said: 'If in the public services the number of those coming from peasant and rural sectors can be increased, not only the entire state administration will function as per desired expectations but its efficiency will considerably increase.' (Ibid.)

castes. In 1939, Charan Singh even proposed a 50% quota in public administration in favour of the sons of the farmers. The All India Jat Mahasabha supported Charan Singh's proposal although he was less wedded to caste affiliations as such.

Instead he wanted to subsume caste into a new peasant identity. This approach was undoubtedly dictated by his own social background since his caste, the Jats, occupied an intermediary position and were not numerically dominant. Though, technically, they have to be classified as Shudras, the Jats form a dominant caste and are therefore locked in conflicts with lower castes working for them as labourers or acting as their tenants. Second, in Uttar Pradesh the Jats represent only 1.2% of the population: so Charan Singh obviously, had good reasons to forge a '*kisan*' identity emphasising the opposition between peasants and town-dwellers in order to transcend caste divisions and promote peasant solidarity. In Charan Singh's discourse, '*kisan*' tended to be synonymous with 'villager', whereas, in reality, as Thorner points out in one of his studies published in the 1950s, precisely when Charan Singh was implementing his reform, *kisans* were situated between the 'maliks' – landlords and rich landowners – and the 'mazdoors' – poor tenants, sharecroppers and landless labourers. They are small landowners and substantial tenants who work the fields and have property interests but not on the same footing as the '*maliks*'.[108]

As revenue minister in charge of land reform in Uttar Pradesh after Independence, Charan Singh's strategy had been to promote the interests of the middle class peasantry by abolishing the *zamindari* system. His approach largely explains the moderate and selective character of the Uttar Pradesh land reform and later his conflict with Nehru. In 1959, in the Nagpur session of the Congress, he vigorously opposed the projected introduction of agricultural co-operatives announced by the Prime Minister. He even published a book, *Joint farming x-rayed: The problem and its solution*, where he proposed a strategy of global development radically opposed to that of Nehru.[109]

[108] D. Thorner, *The Agrarian Prospect in India*, Delhi University Press, 1956.

[109] Charan Singh wrote this book while he was out of office. He had resigned in April 1959 because of several disagreements with Sampurnanand, the Chief Minister, and was replaced as Revenue Minister by Hukum Singh. (M. Johnson, 'Relation Between Land Settlement and Party Politics in Uttar Pradesh', Ph.D. thesis, University of Sussex, 1975, p. 145)

In some ways *Joint farming x-rayed* is the first manifesto of *kisan* politics in post-independence India. Questioning the need for a rapid, state-sponsored industrialisation as advocated by Nehru, Charan Singh proposed to give priority to agriculture and to promote it by developing small farmer holdings, the only way according to him to generate the surpluses that were needed for industrial investment.[110] For him, agricultural co-operatives would have annihilated the productivity gains resulting from the elimination of the *zamindar*–like intermediaries because this would have jeopardised the independence of the farmers:

> The thought that land has become his [the peasant's] and his children's in perpetuity, lightens and cheer his labours 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.[111]

Obviously, economic rationality is not the only reason for rejecting agricultural co-operatives. 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'.[112] Indeed he defends then *kisans*' way of life, not only their material vested interests. According to him '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'.[113] Charan Singh spells out a very romantic view, even a mystique of the *kisan*,

[110] Charan Singh spells out this argument rather late in the book but it is his starting point: 'Industrialisation cannot precede but will follow agricultural prosperity. Surpluses of food production above farmers' consumption must be available before non-agricultural resources can be developed.' (Charan Singh, *Joint Farming X-rayed – The problem and its solution*, Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1959, p. 251)

[111] Ibid., pp. v–vi.

[112] Ibid., p. 107. He subsequently emphasised that 'Collective farming is against human character'. (Cited in Ravat (ed.), *Chaudhury Charan Singh: sukti aur vichar*, op. cit., n.p.

[113] Singh, *Joint Farming X-rayed*, op. cit., p. 104.

as the man in communion with Nature (a word that he writes with a capital n) and the only one able to sustain its harmony.

> There is a nutritional cycle in Nature, without maintenance of whereof Mother Earth will refuse to yield any crops at all. Nature has so ordained that whatever the earth produces is the nutrition of all living things including man, but whatever part of this nutrition is left unutilised and, therefore, rejected by the body of man, beast, bird, or insect, is the nutrition of Mother Earth which had, in the process of producing nutrition for the animal world, got exhausted and become hungry. If this night-soil and farm-yard waste are composted (along with dead vegetation) that is, properly treated, and returned to the earth, the nutritional cycle becomes complete, and our fields will never disappoint us and will continue giving us an ever-enduring supply of food.[114]

Naturally, 'a small farmer can best help complete' the cycle in nature.[115] First because being a *kisan* implies the use of draught animals which will produce the manure earth needs. Charan Singh argues, rather dramatically, that 'with tractors taking the place of bullocks [. . .], India will soon end up with a desert' because the peasants 'will have to apply chemical fertilisers instead of dung or compost, which is the best form of organic matter for fertilising the soil and best means of soil conservation'.[116] In addition to his living in harmony with nature, the *kisan* displays virtues which Charan Singh does not hesitate to present grandiloquently:

[114] Ibid., p. 266.

[115] Ibid., p. 50.

[116] Ibid., p. 268. The first argument presented against the use of machine was of course basically economic since it concerned the fight against unemployment: 'India has a huge population and a limited cultivable land surface, and mechanisation would throw out of work thousands of men' (ibid., p. 79). This argument is also offered in favour of non-capital intensive small-scale industry. Here Charan Singh claims to be in the footsteps of Gandhi (ibid., p. 213). Indeed, his eulogy of decentralised, village-based economy reminds us of the Mahatma. However, his developmental project differs from Gandhi's on one fundamental issue. Whereas the Mahatma recommended the pooling of all goods and highlighting their collective value, Charan Singh champions the right to property because he belongs to a class of farmers which he helped to promote and which he himself rightly calls 'peasant-proprietors'. In a latter edition of *Joint Farming X-rayed*, where the subtitle has become part of the title, Charan Singh elaborates on this point. He attributes the economic lag of India to the dominant mentality, the Brahmanical value system, which depreciates work and

Agriculture is a profession where the peasant has to fight nature and thus has to learn daily the lessons of perseverance. As a consequence there grows in him solidity and a capacity to bear hardships. In this way, such a personality is born which cannot grow in any other profession.[117]

Charan Singh defends the way of life and the interests of the peasant-proprietors but not those of other social groups, especially the landless peasants. He regards the Jat household as his model and considers, therefore, that 'The existence of landless agricultural labour [. . .] is not essential to peasant farming'.[118] Referring, *en passant*, to the labourers' 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'.[119] Charan Singh was against any land reform that applied too low a ceiling and gave land to everybody because it would multiply holdings that would be 'uneconomic' and hence weaken the peasant-proprietor pattern. For him '[t]here should be a provision in law that the allocated land is not further subdivided but the allocated position will be given to a single heir'.[120] He thought that the average ceiling should be fixed at about 30 acres because, in his view, this is the optimum area of land that one man can manage.[121] By setting the level at which a holding was deemed to be non-viable at 30 acres Charan Singh betrayed his preference for one group of peasants over another. This was tantamount to shelter from land redistribution a whole

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turns man into a fatalist. Only those people who have followed the teaching of reform movements such as the Arya Samaj have developed their enterprising spirit. He is one of them and claims to follow the founder of this movement. (C. Singh, *India's Poverty and its Solution*, New York: Asia Publishing House, 1964, p. 319, n.7)

[117] Ravat (ed.), *Chaudhury Charan Singh: sukti aur vichar*, op. cit., chap. 8 [n.p].

[118] Singh, *Joint Farming X-rayed*, op. cit., p. 88.

[119] Ibid., p. 168.

[120] Ravat (ed.), *Chaudhury Charan Singh: sukti aur vichar*, op. cit., chap. 8.

[121] Singh, *Joint Farming X-rayed*, op. cit., p. 90. In 1955, Charan Singh had sent a long letter to the chief editor of *The National Herald* explaining that there were no more than 35,000 farms whose holding represented more than 30 acres and that the surpluses which could be obtained from this source would not exceed 750,000 acres, a very small proportion of the 40 million cultivable acres in the state. (Singh, *Land Reforms*, op. cit., p. 162)

class of middle class farmers who had sometimes grown rich. Not only that, but according to Charan Singh any surplus land obtained by putting a ceiling on large holdings should be redistributed 'to sub-basic holders rather than landless people'. For Charan Singh, the latter 'have to be drawn to industries, trade, transport and other non-agricultural avocations'.[122] In fact '[i]f the landless labourers do not go to other industries then the country will not progress. . .'.[123] Twenty years after the publication of *Joint Farming X-rayed*, Charan Singh was asked what was his programme for the landless peasants, he admitted that he did not regard them as peasants and that there was no land left for them.[124] Concerned about the implications of Charan Singh's politics, Partha Chatterjee warned that if his 'appeal succeeds in finding a stable home in peasant consciousness, it will be impossible at any future time to politically unite owner-peasants, large or small, with the landless'.[125]

In spite of this selective defence of the rural masses, Charan Singh systematically attempted to project himself as the spokesman for village India, against the city-based, parasitic elite, presenting the village community as a harmonious whole. He claimed that a village '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'.[126] Like Gandhi – from whom he explicitly drew inspiration[127] – he completely ignored the deep social contradictions and class antagonisms between landowners, tenants, sharecroppers and labourers and dwelt instead on consensual processes of conflict resolution. He thus claimed that 'Differences or disputes amongst the villagers were settled

[122] Ibid., p. 137.

[123] Ravat (ed.), *Chaudhury Charan Singh: sukti aur vichar*, op. cit., ch. 8 [n.p].

[124] Ho Kwon Ping, 'The rise of the aging sun', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 103 (2), 12 Jan. 1979, p. 81.

[125] Chatterjee, 'Charan Singh's Politics', *A Possible India – Essays in Political Criticism*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 72.

[126] Singh, *Joint Farming X-Rayed*, op. cit., p. 270.

[127] For instance he shared Gandhi's reluctance towards the machine: '. . . we must follow the path advocated by Mahatma Gandhi [. . .] According to this path, we must stop the production of consumer goods by machines and in its place the existing cottage industries be made operational.' (Ravat (ed.), *Chaudhury Charan Singh: sukti aur vichar*, op. cit., ch. 8 [n.p])

mostly by discussion on a basis of equity guided by the village elders, the priest or the teachers, again, as a tradition and out of the self-same sense of being one community'.[128]

Charan Singh paid little heed to caste.[129] When he did, he drew his inspiration from Dayananda. He once said: 'Arya Samaj is my mother and Maharishi Dayanand is my Guru'.[130] He took up the Arya Samajist theory that belonging to a caste was originally not hereditary but determined by merit and individual competence.[131] From that he deduced an ironic view of society which has strong Gandhian overtones:

> The method of combining functional skill with new castes was an ingenious way of establishing social harmony by giving the newcomer an assured economic position within Hinduism, and this continued to hold the field as long as the economic basis of the Hindu social order remained stable. The system served as a social insurance for the weak and the unsuccessful. Instead of being thrown in a maelstrom, every member of the society knew his place and has a source of living, which was secure from encroachments or grasping proclivities of his neighbour.[132]

While such a discourse echoes Gandhi's view as much as it does those of the Arya Samaj, in contrast with the Mahatma he was less inclined to rehabilitate the traditional social system, preferring instead, simply to abolish the caste system. As early as 1939, he proposed a resolution to the Congress Legislature Party according to which 'no enquiries should be made into the caste of a Hindu candidate who seeks admission into an educational institution or any of the public services'.[133] Ten years later he submitted a note to the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, G.B. Pant asking the government not to help finan-

[128] Singh, *Joint Farming X-Rayed*, op. cit., p. 272.

[129] In *Joint Farming X-Rayed* he referred to it only once to deplore that 'dignity of labour, without which no wealth can be produced, is foreign to the conception of caste founded on birth' (ibid., p. 259).

[130] Cited in Ravat, *Chaudhury Charan Singh*, op. cit., ch. 6.

[131] 'Swami [Dayananda] set the criteria for excellence and knowledge at the place of birth' (ibid.).

[132] Singh, *India's Poverty*, op. cit., p. 329.

[133] An observer, *Who is a Casteist?*, New Delhi: Kisan Trust, 1984, p. 21. Similarly, he proposed in 1951 that 'no Congressman shall either be a member or participate in the proceedings of an organisation whose membership is

cially the educational institutions named after a particular caste.[134] He did so again, in 1953, in a note where he suggested that 'only those persons shall be allowed to enter the legislature and gazetted services of the State or the Union who, if they marry or have married after a certain date, have done so outside their caste, or, if they are bachelors, propose to do so.'[135] Charan Singh was prepared to amend the Constitution to see this reform implemented. In 1954 he wrote to Nehru along these lines, justifying his fight against caste by evoking its divisive impact and his own personal story: 'Men like me know from experience what it means to be born in castes other than those which are regarded or regard themselves as privileged.'[136] But he never projected himself as a spokesman for the low castes.

Charan Singh was torn between two considerations so far as positive discrimination in favour of the lower castes was concerned. This ambivalence was especially evident from his conflict with C.B. Gupta in the early 1960s. Soon after he took over as Chief Minister, Gupta questioned the relaxation in the age criteria for the recruitment of backward caste candidates for the police, a measure that G.B. Pant's government had granted. He wanted Charan Singh – who was Home Minister – to rescind the concession. Singh replied that the backward classes represented 53% of the population of Uttar Pradesh, whereas there were only 35 gazetted officers from those out of 3,250 in 1946–7, and 25 out of 5,250 in 1954–5. He also emphasised that there were only twenty-two OBC MLAs among the Congress Legislature Party, as against thirty-three among the opposition MLAs.[137] Finally he reminded Gupta that the southern states had reserved posts for the backward classes in their bureaucracy and that the Kalelkar Commission had recommended likewise. But he concluded his note by saying that while he was not inclined to question the

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confined to a particular caste or castes or indulge in spreading hatred against other castes.' (Cited in An Observer, *Who is a Casteist?*, op. cit., p. 27)

[134] Ibid., p. 22.

[135] Ibid., p. 24. He reiterated this proposal in the 1964 edition of *Joint-Farming X-rayed* (Singh, *India's Poverty*, op. cit., pp. 353–4).

[136] Cited in An Observer, *Who is a Casteist?*, op. cit., p. 31. Nehru replied that such a low or constitutional amendment would 'offend the basic principle of individual freedom' (ibid. p. 32).

[137] Indeed, the low castes were comparatively more numerous in the social-

relaxation in the entry conditions for OBC candidates, he in no way favoured reservation of posts for them in the services or seats in the legislatures.[138] Charan Singh did not want to develop positive discrimination but rather to see caste abolished. He did not highlight caste cleavages but championed the interests of the peasants against those of the town.

To sum up: Charan Singh represented peasant-proprietors and his entire strategy consisted in forging a *kisan* identity in which all agricultural workers would recognise their common interests and mobilise behind him. So in building as broad a coalition as possible, he emphasised the dichotomy between urban and rural India.

> 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.[139]

This discourse excludes any kind of solidarity between workers and peasants and ignores the internal divisions of rural society, either in terms of economic disparities or social conflicts, which govern village life. Nor did he seek to mobilise followers on a caste basis.[140]

Charan Singh's *kisan* politics enabled him gradually to build a coalition encompassing the cultivating castes ranging from OBCs to intermediate castes. This coalition, in fact, was the old AJGAR grouping that Chhotu Ram had already developed in Punjab, minus the Rajputs.[141] While, unsurprisingly, there was no representative of

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ist groups of the Uttar Pradesh legislative assembly in 1962: 31% for the SSP as against 23% for the PSP (against 14% for the Jana Sangh and 8% for the Congress). (A. Burger, *Opposition in a Dominant Party System*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1969, p. 55)

[138] An Observer, *Who is a Casteist?*, op. cit., p. 59.

[139] Singh, *India's Poverty and its Solution*, op. cit., p. 212.

[140] He did not hide his antipathy for Brahmins and the parasitic, anti-work culture they embody but nor did he try to cash in on anti-Brahmin feelings or caste cleavages.(Byres, 'Charan Singh', op. cit., pp. 143–4).

[141] For Kalelkar, the AJGAR coalition included the Rajputs, the final 'R' standing for them, but it was no longer true with Charan Singh's *kisan* politics (*Report of the [first] backward classes commission*, op. cit., p. XXII).

the (often landless) Untouchable castes in this grouping, it included a wide range of castes, from the OBCs to intermediate and upper castes. Mulayam Singh Yadav was among the Yadav followers whom Charan Singh attracted in the 1960s – he was first elected as an MLA in 1967. Interestingly, he was introduced to the Chaudhuri by another OBC, Jairam Verma,[142] who was not even a Yadav but a Kurmi, a sign that Charan's Singh appeal to the cultivating castes extended beyond the AJGAR coalition.[143] *Kisan* politics had gradually found (and shaped) its constituency. But the Congress party ignored this emerging group and its principal spokesman.

Charan Singh's marginalisation within the Uttar Pradesh Congress

The case of the Jats shows clearly that contrary to what Weiner observed in areas other than the Northern Hindi-speaking states, in Uttar Pradesh the Congress hardly bothered to accommodate the interests of this emerging group of peasant proprietors or to co-opt some of its members. In fact the party harboured within its ranks one of its main leaders, in the person of Charan Singh, but again and again he was prevented from implementing the measures which would have benefited the rising peasantry.

One of his rivals within Congress, the Rajput leader, Thakur Hukam Singh, opposed the large scale land consolidation policies which Charan Singh enacted as Revenue Minister, a policy that served above all the interests of middle farmers whose productivity was

[142] Lal and Nair, *Caste vs Caste – Turbulence in Indian Politics*, Delhi, Ajanta, 1998, p. 32.

[143] Jai Ram Verma was one of the first OBC leaders of the Congress. He was a member of the Uttar Pradesh Government in 1957–60, and in 1962–7. Then he followed Charan Singh out of Congress and became one of his ministers in his 1970 government. He was the first Kurmi to be given such responsibilities within Congress. In fact, he drew the dividends from his early involvement in the freedom movement – which was then an avenue for upward socio-political mobility: he took part in anti-British activities in 1936 when he was 30, and then in the individual *satyagraha* (1941) and the Quit India Movement (1942). He was jailed repeatedly till 1945 for his militancy – and rewarded by a Congress ticket in 1946 (when he was elected to the UP Assembly) and by a seat at the AICC in 1950. (*Who's Who in Legislative Assembly 1962–67*, Lucknow: U.P. Legislative Secretariat, 1963, p. 82)

hampered by the scattered nature of their holdings.[144] The party's leaders in the state eventually acceded to Thakur Hukam Singh's wishes and replaced him as Revenue Minister in 1959 and held the post until 1967.

Another bone of contention between Charan Singh and the other Congress leaders concerned relations between the farmers and the urban merchants who bought their produce. As early as 1938, Charan Singh had proposed a bill to protect farmers from illegal trading practices. However, the Act was passed only in 1964 because of the stubborn resistance of several congressmen, including C.B. Gupta, a Banya close to the merchants' lobby who was Chief Minister of UP in 1960–3.

Another conflict that set Charan Singh against the UP Congress leadership concerned the taxation of villagers. Farmers were taxed very lightly. In addition the *bhumidhars* and *sirdars* had obtained an assurance in 1947 that there would be no increase in their taxes for forty years. In 1962 C.B. Gupta drafted a bill implying a 50% tax increase, which the farmers had to pay. Charan Singh reacted with a long note where he listed all the taxes which were already levied on the farmers. He also underlined the differential between the price of agricultural products and that of manufactured goods, which generated an imbalance in the terms of exchange between urban and rural dwellers.[145] The bill was abandoned but this controversy reflected a deep division.

In the 1964 edition of *Joint Farming X-Rayed* Charan Singh expressed his bitterness in a sad ironical tone:

> It cannot be seriously disputed that, had those in whose hands lies the power to make policies in India, their roots laid in the soil of their own country and their fingers on the pulse of their peasantry, we would have progressed much faster, at least, in the sphere of agriculture. But views and sentiments of the peasants are seldom shared by those at the top today. Political leadership of the country vests almost entirely in the hands of those who come from the town and, therefore, have an urban outlook. They may have an intellectual sympathy for the rural folk, but have no personal knowledge and psychological appreciation of their needs, problems and handicaps. Not only this: our leaders and the intelligentsia are nurtured on text-books written in conditions entirely different from our country or which are mostly inspired by the

[144] Johnson, *Relation between land settlement and party politics*, op. cit., pp. 57 and 103.

[145] Ibid., pp. 151–88.

ideology of Marx who had made no special study of the rural problems. That is mainly why Mahatma Gandhi's powerful advocacy in favour of a truly Indian approach to India's problems notwithstanding, we are under the spell of economic, political and social ideas and doctrines that we may have received ready-made from foreign oracles – western oracles till yesterday and eastern today.[146]

More importantly, Charan Singh had political ambitions, and he resented the way upper caste Congressmen threatened his attempt to become Chief Minister of UP. C.B. Gupta was preferred to him even though he had twice lost an election to the Assembly during the current term, 1957–62, and was not even a MLA. Thereafter, in 1963, the post was offered to Sucheta Kripalani, who was not even from Uttar Pradesh.

The Congress displayed shortsightedness in marginalising Charan Singh because in the 1960s the social basis of his *kisan* politics had mushroomed. First, the land reform, even though it had been limited, had enabled some tenants to become peasant-proprietors. In India at large, from 1953–4 to 1971–2, the share of landowners possessing more than 10 acres decreased from 13.5% to 10.3% of rural households and finally represented 53.2% of the cultivated area in 1972, as against 66.5% in 1953–4. At the same time the share of those owning 2.5 to 10 acres increased in proportion to rural households (85.5% in 1954–5 and 89.6% en 1970–2) and finally represented 46.7% of the total cultivated area, as against 36.4% in 1954–5 (for more details, see table 1.1, p. 44).

In Uttar Pradesh, the share of landowners owning more than ten acres decreased from 7.6% to 5.3% of rural households between 1953–4 and 1971–2. This upper category owned 'only' 29% of the cultivated areas in 1971–2, as against 38% in 1953–4. In the same period, the smallest households increased in number since those possessing less than 2.5 acres represented 15.6% of the total in 1971–2, as against 12.1% in 1953–4. The intermediary group of those operating between 2.5 and 10 acres met a different fate. Their share of the total of rural households fell from 35.8% to 33.1%, but the ground area they represented rose from 49.9% to 55.3% of the total. This development would not have been significant had these middle peasants not benefited from the second, most important event of the 1960s, the Green Revolution.

[146] Singh, *India's Poverty and its Solution*, op. cit., p. 411.

Table 8.4. DISTRIBUTION AND SIZE OF OPERATIONAL HOLDINGS LAND IN UTTAR PRADESH, 1953–72

Size of class operational holdings (acres)	*1953-4 Households %*	*Area operated %*	*1960-1 Households %*	*Area operated %*	*1971-2 Households %*	*Area operated %*
0–1	35.6	2.2	37.2	2.4	39.5	2.8
1–2.5	21	9.9	21.2	10.4	22.2	12.8
2.5–5	20.4	20.4	20.1	20.6	20.5	25.4
5–10	15.4	29.5	14.4	28.1	12.6	29.9
10–25	6.5	26.5	6.1	25	4.8	23.4
25 +	1.1	11.5	1.2	13.5	0.5	5.6

Source: A. Kohli, *The State and Poverty in India*, op. cit., p. 213.

The Green Revolution enabled the small and middle peasants who had some investment capacity to commercialise their surpluses. This 'revolution' stemmed from the introduction of high yielding seeds in 1965–6, but also from the development of irrigation and the use of chemical fertilisers, especially in Punjab and West Uttar Pradesh. In Uttar Pradesh at large between 1960–1 and 1982–3, wheat production increased fourfold and progressed from 27% to 58% of the food products. Using these figures Zoya Hasan points out that the peasants who benefited most from this growth were those who possessed at least ten acres and could, therefore invest in new seeds, fertilisers and irrigation. In the early 1970s, 27.65% of these farms of more than 10 acres, were managed by middle caste farmers and 52.07% by upper castes. The former represented 31.33% of rural households in the state and accounted for 23.58% of the cultivated land whereas the latter represented 15.63% of the rural households but 40.7% of cultivated land.[147] It is among the middle caste peasants that one finds a large number of those whom the Rudolphs have called the 'bullock cart capitalists'.[148]

The Jats of western Uttar Pradesh and Haryana grew wealthy, notably thanks to the increase in sugar cane production resulting from extensive irrigation programmes in the framework of the Green Revolution.[149] The assertion of these middle farmers, among whom the Jats were over-represented largely explains the growing success of Charan Singh's *kisan* politics in the 1960s.

After the 1967 elections, which the Congress won by a small margin, C.B. Gupta was again preferred to Charan Singh for Chief Minister. The latter refused to join the government allegedly because Gupta did not agree to sack two ministers who did not enjoy a good

[147] Hasan, 'Patterns of resilience and change', op. cit., p. 169. These figures must be referred to with care because big landlords can appear in the middle peasant category simply because they have divided their land among relatives, friends or subordinates (*benami*).

[148] Rudolph and Rudolph, *In Pursuit of Lakshmi*, op. cit., p. 336.

[149] D.N. Dhanagare, 'The green revolution and social inequalities in rural India', *Bulletin for Concerned Asian Scholars*, 2 (20), April 1988, pp. 2–13. For a more monographic assessment of the social impact of rural modernisation in west Uttar Pradesh, see K. Siddiqui, 'New Technology and Process of Differentiation: Two Sugarcane Cultivating Villages in Uttar Pradesh', *EPW*, 25 Dec. 1999, pp. A139–A152.

reputation.[150] According to another interpretation it was because Gupta refused to appoint thirteen of Charan Singh's followers – that is one third of the government – as cabinet ministers and ministers of state.[151]

Charan Singh left the Congress with sixteen of his mostly non upper caste supporters: nine of these MLAs were Yadavs and Kurmis, four were Brahmins and Rajputs and two were from the Scheduled Castes. This muting enabled Charan Singh to topple C.B. Gupta's government and to replace him as Chief Minister with the help of opposition parties, with which he formed a coalition called the Samyukta Vidhayak Dal, as in Bihar. For the first time in Uttar Pradesh it was not a 'twice born' who occupied the highest post in the state. In addition 43% of ministers and state secretaries came from the intermediary, lower and Untouchables castes. Its composition was in stark contrast to C.B. Gupta's government (Table 8.5).

The coalition supporting Charan Singh included communists, socialists, RPI members and Jana Sanghis. Within this grouping the bones of contention were many.[152] The most important dispute concerned Charan Singh's opposition to the demand of the communists and the socialists concerning the abolition of land revenue on farms of less than 6 acres[153] because, according to him, it was desirable that the farmer pay it to feel fully committed to land ownership. This argument was in tune with his entrepreneurial logic, which had been used earlier in the land reform of Uttar Pradesh. The SSP and the CPI then withdrew their support from the government, which finally fell in February 1968.[154]

The failure of the SVD government showed that a major handicap

[150] Goyal (ed.), *Profile of Chaudhury Charan Singh*, op. cit., p. 41.

[151] Johnson, *Relation between land settlement and party politics*, op. cit., p. 188.

[152] For instance, Charan Singh was criticised by the Jana Sangh for cutting the margins of intermediaries and traders, who formed a major component of the right wing Hindu electorate. The Jana Sangh also protested against the requisitioning of the 500,000 tonnes of grain – finally reduced to 200,000 – in order to alleviate the victims of food shortage because it penalised the big landlords (ibid., p. 198).

[153] Anirudh Panda, *Dhartiputra Chaudhuri Charan Singh*, Ghaziabad: Ritu Prakashak, 1986, p. 104.

[154] For more details, see Paul Brass, 'Coalition politics in North India', *American Political Science Review*, 57 (4), Dec. 1968, pp. 1174–91.

Table 8.5. CASTE AND COMMUNITY GOVERNMENTS OF C.B. GUPTA AND CHARAN SINGH, 1967

	C.B. Gupta's government	*Charan Singh's government*
Upper castes	*9*	*12*
Brahmin	2	3
Rajput	1	5
Banya	5	1
Bhumihar	1	1
Other		2
Intermediate castes		*1*
Jat		1
Other backward classes		*7*
Yadav		3
Gujar		1
Kurmi		1
Lodhi		1
Jaiswal		1
Scheduled Castes	*1*	*4*
Muslim	*1*	*3*
Christian		*1*
Total	*11*	*28*

Source: *Sarvadhik Pichhra Varg Ayog Report* (Report of Most Backward Classes Commission), (Hindi), Lucknow: Uttar Pradesh ki Sarkar, 1977, p. 95.

of the lower caste leaders lay in their dependence on the other opposition parties which did not share the same interests. In this regard the SVD's short-lived experiences began a series of alternating governments which ended in failure. However, the change of government in Uttar Pradesh reflected the impact of the socio-economic rise of the middle-caste peasants on the political sphere, even though the effects of the Green Revolution were more pronounced in West Uttar Pradesh than in other areas.

The comparison of Charan Singh's *modus operandi* in UP and the situation in Bihar suggest that two means of mobilising and empowering the non-elite groups have been used more or less successfully in the 1960s. The strategy of the socialists – who were in the forefront in Bihar – relied more on caste identities and positive discrimination whereas Charan Singh resorted instead to a *kisan* politics that was intended to subsume caste divisions to engineer peasant

solidarity against the urban elite. Both trends converged in the 1970s through the emergence of new political parties.

From the BKD to the BLD: the emergence of a new political force. In contrast to the many people who left the Congress and rejoined it after it came back to power, Charan Singh did nothing of the sort and even remained deaf to the calls of Indira Gandhi.[155] Two days before becoming Chief Minister in April 1967, he created his own party, the Jana Congress, which soon merged with the Bharatiya Kranti Dal (BKD – The Indian party of revolution). The BKD, founded on the initiative of Congress dissidents like Humayun Kabir, had initially been intended to be a national party.[156] Its inaugural convention took place in Indore (Madhya Pradesh) in autumn 1967, but the largest delegations came from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal. Some of the representatives coming from the latter state – beginning with Kabir – left the party when they failed to impose a conciliatory line towards the Congress, and the remaining Bengalis were expelled in 1969 because they were seeking alliance with the communists.[157] In April 1969, Charan Singh became president of the BKD, after which it appeared to develop as a regional party. This trend was confirmed during the 1968–9 elections when the BKD won 21.3% of votes in Uttar Pradesh as against 1.5% in Haryana, 2.1% in Bihar and 1.7% in Punjab. In Uttar Pradesh, the party's primary source of support were the Jats from the West, that is, from the same caste and region as Charan Singh. In the Aligarh district Duncan has established a clear correlation between Jat domination and the BKD vote, which was positive in almost all the constituencies.[158] Elsewhere Charan Singh attracted support from lower peasant castes. Satpal Malik, one of his supporters, points out:

Charan Singh was popular amongst the farmers because he fought against Nehru, against cooperative farming and again, within Congress, he fought against vested interests [. . .]. Anywhere, the Congress committees were

[155] Brass, 'Chaudhuri Charan Singh – An Indian political life', *EPW*, 25 Sept. 1993, p. 2088.

[156] Fickett Jr., 'The politics of regionalism in India', *Pacific Affairs*, XLIV (2), summer 1971, pp. 201–3.

[157] Johnson, *Relation between land settlement and party politics*, op. cit., p. 250.

[158] Duncan, *Levels*, op. cit., pp. 156 and 175.

headed by Guptas [Banyas]. So the farmers knew that we were fighting for them. In eastern and central UP, the Kurmis and Yadavs get rights on the land because of the Zamindari abolition done by Charan Singh. He was their hero.[159]

Charan Singh however was concerned to make his party represent all the farmers. Once free from the responsibility of Chief Ministership he set about restructuring it by replacing members of the *ad hoc* local committees with representatives of the smaller peasantry from the lower castes.[160] These efforts made little impact since, in 1970, 56.7% of the presidents and general secretaries of the BKD district branches were still from the upper castes (18.9% Brahmins and 22.2% Rajputs) against 33.3% from the intermediary and the lower castes (8.9% Jats, 16.6% Yadavs, and 7.8% Kurmis).[161] It was clear that, in order to strengthen the party Charan Singh had to co-opt established leaders and notables, and he could only find them among the higher castes. However, he succeeded in giving party tickets to a large number of non-upper caste candidates in the mid-term elections of 1969 – caused by the absence of majority in the legislative assembly – the BKD fielded 115 candidates from backward and intermediary castes, as against only twenty-three on the Congress side.[162] This strategy certainly helped the BKD to become the second largest party in the state assembly, with 98 seats against 211 for the Congress. This electoral breakthrough of the BKD – and then of its successor, the BLD, which won 106 seats in 1974 – explains the rise of the OBCs among the UP MLAs in the late 1960s and early 1970s from 13% in 1962 to 29% in 1967, 27% in 1969 and 28% in 1974. In parallel with this trend the percentage of the upper castes declined and remained around 40% in 1967–74 – as against 53% in 1962.[163]

In 1969, the electoral success of the BKD was due not only to the fielding of OBC candidates but also to its capacity to rally a number of outgoing MLAs who had not been given a fresh ticket by Congress and who felt sufficiently bitter about it to cross over to the opposition. Of the 402 candidates of the BKD, 79 were former MLAs (of which 44 were outgoing). The party therefore benefited from

[159] Interview with Satpal Malik, New Delhi, 25 Oct. 1998.

[160] Duncan, *Levels*, op. cit., p. 258ff.

[161] Ibid., p. 262.

[162] Hasan, 'Patterns of resilience and change in Uttar Pradesh', op. cit., p. 182.

[163] Hasan, *Quest for Power*, op. cit., p. 251.

the influence of these political leaders and their own 'electoral machinery'.[164] In spite of this performance, Charan Singh was not in a position to form the government and C.B. Gupta became Chief Minister once again. But the Congress party split soon after. C.B. Gupta joined the Congress (O) and Charan Singh's BKD allied with Indira Gandhi's Congress (R), which enabled him to form a coalition government. The social composition of both governments showed that C.B. Gupta and Charan Singh were representing two contrasting constituencies (Table 8.6).

Interestingly, in Charan Singh's government, which lasted only eight months, out of ten Brahmin Ministers, nine were from the Congress (R), and out of eight OBCs five came from the BKD. The BKD/Congress alliance worked rather well in Uttar Pradesh but it

Table 8.6. CASTES AND COMMUNITY IN THE GOVERNMENTS OF C.B. GUPTA AND CHARAN SINGH, 1970

	C.B. Gupta's government	*Charan Singh's government*
Upper castes	*32*	*20*
Brahmin	15	10
Rajput	8	6
Banya	3	1
Kayasth	2	
Bhumihar	1	1
Khatri	1	1
Other	2	1
Intermediate castes		*2*
Jat		2
OBC	*3*	*8*
Yadav	2	5
Kurmi		1
Lodhi	1	1
Mallah		1
Scheduled Castes	*5*	*9*
Muslim	*4*	*6*
Sikh	*1*	
Total	*45*	*45*

Source: As for Table 8.6, pp. 96–7.

[164] Johnson, *Relation between land settlement and party politics*, op. cit., p. 299.

met difficulties at the Centre over the issue of the abolition of the princes' privy purses. Charan Singh opposed this measure on the pretext that it was a breach of a promise given by Sardar Patel to the Princes.[165] Though short-lived, this second experiment with power helped the BKD to establish its image as a *kisan* party. In 1974 it won more seats than in 1969 – 106 as against 98. The party was attracting more farmers, including well-off ones, notables who offered their vote banks to the BKD. Rashid Masood is a case in point. He joined the party in the mid-1970s to become General Secretary of the district branch of Saharanpur. He was the son of a *zamindar* who farmed 300 acres and who had been elected an MLA as an independent in Nakur (Saharanpur district) in 1967 and 1969. After contesting in 1974 as an independent, Masood joined the BKD because this party represented the farmers:

'Basically, I am a *khaksha*, a *kisan* and our interests lied with Chaudhary Charan Singh. Why should I have gone to Congress – a party of monopolists? Not *banyas*, who were with Jana Sangh, but industrialists [. . .]. When you pronounce the name of Chaudhury Charan Singh, immediately everyone would know it pertains to something rural. That was our basic ideology. In India, the *kisan* was the most neglected creature. He produced for others and was never properly paid. That movement started with the Unionist party in Punjab, with Chhotu Ram. He started the fight for big *zamindars* but basically they fought for *zamindars*. And for the first time in Indian history, someone raised his voice for the people who were *supposed to be* with land [. . .]. A *kisan* is who is tilling the land, but under the definition of the Lok Dal [Charan Singh's party after 1974], all those who either till the land or owe their livelihood to land *or tiller*, that is the artisans who are making tools for tillers and those who are living, even landless labour, from cultivation.'[166]

Rashid Masood, who was to be an MP four times and General Secretary of the Lok Dal in 1980, gave in this interview a significant definition of Charan Singh's *kisan* politics. Basically he was a *zamindar* himself, a notable whose family enjoyed enough influence to win elections but he found it useful to subsume the division of rural India under the label of '*kisan*'. The BKD offered landlords like him an ideological platform which enabled them to forge an anti-urban and

[165] Panda, *Dhartiputra Chaudhri Charan Singh*, op. cit., p. 113.

[166] Interview with Rashid Masood, New Delhi, 28 Oct. 1998 (emphasis added).

anti-businessmen coalition in which they could play a pivotal role: they projected themselves as *kisans* and even as rural people, and through this they could instrumentalise this encompassing category to promote their own, elitist interests. This case provides us with a good illustration of Paul Brass's findings.

Brass analysed the mechanism underlying the rise of the BKD on the basis of detailed calculations. He hypothesised that, since the 1950s middle caste peasants increasingly resented Congress rule. On the one hand the policies of the governments of Delhi and Lucknow annoyed them because they suffered from the structural weakness of agricultural prices; on the other hand 'control over agricultural patronage in the districts was maintained by Congress supporters among the local landed elites, who naturally favoured themselves and their closest allies in distributing inputs and credits'.[167] Till the late 1960s, the middle class peasantry expressed its hostility towards Congress largely by supporting independent candidates (like Masood's father) who received an average of 20% of the vote in election after election until 1967. They then shifted to the BKD. Indeed, the Congress vote fell by only 10% in 1969 and 1974.[168] Similarly, the Jana Sangh declined only marginally from 21.7% to 18% between 1967 and 1969. Thus the BKD did not grow at the expense of other parties. The smaller socialist parties comparatively suffered more (the PSP fell from 4% to 1.7% and the SSP from 10% to 8% between 1967 to 1969). Apart from independent candidates, the socialist parties had indeed been the only ones to receive a proportionately higher vote from the low castes.[169]

The election results in Meerut district for the UP legislative assembly provides a good illustration of this process. While Congress declined by 10% between 1967 and 1969 and the Jana Sangh by only 4%, the BKD succeeded in gaining 36% of the valid votes, largely because of the declining influence of the independents (who had already dropped from 24% to 5% in 1967) and the Socialists, who declined from 16% to 6% between 1967 and 1969.[170] Jagpal Singh

[167] Brass, 'The politicisation of the peasantry in a North Indian State – Part 2', *JPS*, 8 (1), Oct. 1980, p. 31.

[168] Brass, 'The politicisation of the peasantry in a North India State – Part 1', *JPS*, 7 (4), July 1980, p. 410.

[169] Brass, 'Uttar Pradesh' in Weiner (ed.), *State politics in India*, Princeton University Press, 1968, p. 86.

[170] Singh, *Capitalism and Dependence*, op. cit., p. 130.

also shows that in Meerut district, the Lok Dal – Charan Singh's party in the early 1980s – was supported by middle and rich peasants, most of them Jats.[171] However, 'just before 1969 elections he [had] accepted the need for ceiling on landholdings and redistribution of land and it was included in the election manifests of BKD'.[172] Such a move, which was certainly intended to broaden the base of the party, helped Charan Singh to mend fences with the Socialists – their social support bases partly overlap and were partly complementary.

In the late 1960s, the electoral success of the Socialists in Bihar and Charan Singh in Uttar Pradesh reflected the growing mobilisation of the middle peasantry from the intermediate and low castes, emerging groups that the Congress ignored at its own peril. The Socialists and Charan Singh represented two different political traditions. The former's strategy for social emancipation, which was first articulated by Lohia, put a strong emphasis on caste. Like Ambedkar, Lohia regarded caste as the basic unit of Indian society and amended his Marxist views accordingly. His aim was to encourage the coalescence of the lower castes in order to destroy the upper castes' domination. Paradoxically, he tried to promote equality by manipulating caste categories. Charan Singh, on the other hand, focused on *kisan* identity. He tried to promote a new rural solidarity in order to subsume caste and class divisions. This *modus operandi* reflected his own quest for power since the crystallisation of a cleavage between urban and rural India would enable him to mobilise a majority of Indian society behind him.

These two strategies gained momentum in the 1960s and 1970s in North India but they were not novel. In fact, Socialist quota politics used the reservation policy categories implemented by the state. Lohia was in the footsteps of the Justice Party, except that he did not imbue the lower castes with any ethnic identity and nor did he use the notion of Non-Brahmins that the British had introduced but rather that of 'Backward Classes' that had been institutionalised by the 1950 Constitution and popularised by the Kalelkar Commission. In fact, the Socialist success of the late 1960s in North India occurred in the wake of the mobilisation that the AIBCF had orchestrated to implement the Kalelkar Commission Report. Charan

[171] Ibid., pp. 132–5.
[172] Ibid., p. 127.

Singh's tactics were also rooted in Jat political culture. The industriousness of this caste prepared the ground for such developments as early as the 1920s when Chhotu Ram created *kisan* politics in Punjab. Either in Punjab or in Uttar Pradesh, this political culture had affinities with the Jat ethos of the peasant-proprietor.

In this chapter, I have identified quota politics with Bihar and *kisan* politics with Uttar Pradesh because these states and these strategies were closely associated with their respective locales but Lohia was active in UP, his birthplace, and *kisan* politics was also present in Bihar, especially among the Bhumihars, a caste whose characteristics are reminiscent of the Jats of UP. In fact, Swami Sahajanand implemented this very same strategy almost as early as Chhotu Ram in Bihar.[173]

The contrast between quota politics and *kisan* politics does not

[173] See Walter Hauser, *Sahajanand on Agricultural Labour and the Rural Poor*, Delhi, Manohar, 1994. Born in Ghazipur District (eastern UP) in 1889, Swami Sahajanand took the vow of renunciation in 1907 but remained involved in the promotion of his caste's interests through the Bhumihar Brahman Mahasabha with which he was associated till the 1920s. Like the Jats, the Bhumihars are a dominant caste in several parts of East UP and Bihar where they own much land and till it too. And like the Jats, they were first involved in a Sanskritisation process, claiming Brahmin descent, a status the British recognised in the 1911 census. (E.A.H. Blunt, *The Caste System of Northern India*, op. cit., p. 227) Swami Sahajanand first pursued this Sanskritisation path but in a slightly different way since he claimed that in the old time 'agriculture was the Chief occupation of the Vaishyas [the merchant caste]'. (W. Hauser (ed.), *Sahajamand*, op. cit., p.13) However, Sahajanand gradually distanced himself from caste associations and paid more attention to the peasant as a socio-economic category, so much so he played a key role in the establishment of the *kisan sabhas* of Bihar in the 1930s:

> We have seen an effort for some time, both directly and indirectly, to confuse the movement of agricultural labourers with the caste movement of the socially most depressed members of the society [. . .] The one unfortunate consequence of this development has been that the basic problems of the agricultural labourers have been ignored and in their place only some broad questions have been raised. This had limited to a few particular castes what is a large and complex range of issues involving all *khet mazdoors*. (Ibid., p. 73)

As Walter Hauser points out in his introduction to his translation of Sahajanand's 1941 book, *Khet Mazdoor*, this expression, *khet mazdoor* and *kisan*

need to be exaggerated either. These two routes had parallel objectives: they aimed at dislodging the upper caste urban elite from the

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are used interchangeably by Sahajanand, and he employs 'the term *kisan* in a general sense in referring to both peasants and agricultural labourers'. (Ibid., p. 6) His definition of *kisan* is indeed encompassing:

> Generally, only those whose chief means of livelihood is agriculture should be called kisans, which means that those who are not primarily dependent on agriculture cannot make this claim [. . .]. But that person whose family's principal means of livelihood is labour, though generally not regarded as a *kisan*, should not be taken out of the category (*shreni*) of *kisan* so long as he subsists by working at least in the field of petty landholders (*chote mote khetihar*) and does not work on vast plantations or large farms. The sum and substance is that so long as there is any hope of acquiring even some small plot of land and subsisting by cultivating that land, he can be called *kisan*. (Ibid., pp. 54–5).

Even the agricultural labourers who have no land but hope to acquire some in the future are *kisans* according to this definition. Obviously, Sahajanand who represents the upper caste rural elite tries to design a social category that this elite could mobilise for promoting its own interests – under the garb of advocating the common interests of the *kisans*. He admitted that quite candidly when he wrote:

> The reason for considering them (the labourers) as *kisans* has to do with the issue of their 'organisation' and movement. We must think of them as *kisans* so that their movement rather than being organised as a labour movement be organised like that of the *kisans* and only to gather with the *kisans*. (Ibid., p. 62)

As a result, Sahajanand exhorts the farmers to 'treat the agricultural labourers on the basis of equality and brotherhood'. (Ibid., pp. 92–3) But this equality is spelled out in rather odd terms since he describes the labourers as 'literally the arms and legs of the *kisans*'. (Ibid., p. 93). Such a metaphor harks back to the organicist *imaginaire* sustaining the caste system. Indeed, Sahajanand's view of the peasantry is far from egalitarian and the solidarity between its components are bound to be limited. For instance, he is opposed to any land reform:

> When the *kisan* himself is dying and not only grasping every inch of his land, but also feverishly searching out for more land, then how can he lend his ears to the plea of conveying land to the *khet mazdoors*? (in ibid., p. 96)

For Sahajanand, the solution to the landlessness of the labourers lay in the increase of the land under cultivation and the modernisation of agriculture. This process will deprive half of the labourers from their job but they 'will find employment in new industries and workshops' because the 'full introduction

sites of power. Both were power-oriented. That was explicit in the case of quota politics since the empowerment of the lower castes was a recurring claim and in the case of *kisan* politics it was clear from Charan Singh's ambitions. This is the main reason why the Socialists and Charan Singh joined hands in the 1970s, preparing the ground for a larger coalition which culminated in the Janata Party.

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of scientific methods in agriculture means that there will need to be a large number of new factories to produce the necessary tools and equipment for engaging agriculture. (Ibid., p. 101)

Therefore, Sahajanand tries to enrol the labourers in the *kisan* movement – the Kisan Sabha at least – but he is not interested in taking up their claims (regarding land redistribution for instance). He only aims at having them supporting the demand of the peasant proprietors, who according to him have distinctively common interests, such as the development of irrigation. (Ibid., p. 96)

The peasant proprietor is Sahajanand's role model, hence his rather romantic view of the *kisan*. Sahajanand established a mystique of the peasant almost at the same time as Chhotu Ram in Punjab. He wrote, for instance: 'The *kisan* of course carries on his cultivation with his bullocks and other animals. He loves them very much unless and until he has fed the cattle he will not eat himself. He may go without food but his cattle can never go hungry.' (Ibid., p. 93) Sahajanand candidly admitted once that he had set up the Kisan Sabha 'to get the grievances of the Kisans redressed by mere agitation and propaganda and thus to eliminate all chances of clashes between the *Kisans* and *zamindars* which seemed imminent [. . .] and thus threatened to destroy all the all round unity so necessary to achieve freedom. Thus I began the organised Kisan Sabha as a staunch [class?] collaborator.' (Cited in L. Singh, 'The Bihar Kisan Sabha Movement – 1933–1939', *Social Scientist*, 20 (5–6), May–June 1992, p. 29)

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THE QUEST FOR POWER AND THE FIRST JANATA GOVERNMENT

Far from being mutually exclusive, quota politics and *kisan* politics have many ideological affinities and areas of overlap. They try to promote the interests of *roughly* the same groups, yet they regard them from two different viewpoints: as castes or as peasants. The adverb 'roughly' needs to be emphasised because quota politics is more concerned with the OBCs and – to a lesser extent – the Scheduled Castes, who are generally small peasants or labourers, whereas *kisan* politics focuses on intermediate castes (like the Jats) and OBCs who own land, as small or middle peasants but, sometimes, as well-off farmers too. The small and middle peasants from the OBCs represent the social intersection of these two constituencies. They formed an important and growing group in the 1970s and Charan Singh and the Socialists soon realised that it might well be the pivot of a larger coalition which could vote them to power.

The quest for power, here, refers to the personal ambition of leaders such as Charan Singh but also to the empowerment agenda of the lower castes. It was the root-cause of the merger of a section of the Socialists and the BKD and, to a lesser extent, of the formation of the Janata Party. By appointing the Mandal Commission, the Janata government showed that the proponents of *kisan* politics were also prepared to rally around quota politics.

The BLD: a joint venture

Several individual careers bear testimony of the porosity between *kisan* politics and quota politics. In addition to the case of Mulayam Singh Yadav, Satpal Malik exemplifies the first Socialists who became Charan Singh's supporters. Malik was the son of a Jat *zamindar* 'owning a big patch of land but cultivating it himself'.[1] He was

[1] Interview with Satpal Malik, 25 Oct. 1998, New Delhi. Malik's father was

inspired by Lohia while he was a student and later at Meerut College because 'Lohia was the centre for anti-establishment thinking in North India' and 'a bridge between Gandhi and Marx'.[2] Malik was president of the student union of Meerut College in 1965–9 and took part in many agitations, some of which landed him to jail. In 1969 he was offered a ticket for the Assembly elections by the district president of the BKD; he declined the offer because 'Charan Singh was not our ideal, as socialists. The socialists wanted land revenue to be abolished. Charan Singh opposed it.' In 1973 Charan Singh approached Malik directly because he thought they had much in common including an Arya Samajist background. Malik, who was to become a minister in V.P. Singh's government, turned out to be more responsive this time and joined the BKD.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s the socialists were in disarray. Lohia died in 1967 and his lieutenants fought each other. The faction of Madhu Limaye and George Fernandes – which was especially strong in Maharashtra – wanted to drop Lohia's policy of non-Congressism and merge with the PSP (which had already negotiated seat adjustments with Congress) whereas the faction led by Raj Narain was willing to pursue the 'non-congressism' line and opposed merger with the PSP. This faction was especially strong in Uttar Pradesh, Raj Narain's home state.[3] Raj Narain, a Bhumihar by caste, played a leading role in the *rapprochement* with Charan Singh. Associated with the CSP since its inception in 1934, he had left Congress in 1958 to join the PSP and became chairman of the Socialist Party in 1961. Having followed Lohia, he became general secretary of the SSP. The Indian *Who's Who* mentions that he was 'imprisoned 58 times for a period totalling about 15 years in connection with student's and socialist movements'[4] and that he 'invariably found himself at the centre of controversy and agitations'.[5] Raj Narain, indeed,

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a freedom fighter from Meerut district. His anti-British activities were such that he was disowned by his family and had to leave his village.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Brass, 'Leadership conflict and the disintegration of the Indian socialist movement', op. cit., p. 162.

[4] *Sixth Lok Sabha Who's Who – 1977*, New Delhi: Lok Sabha Secretariat, 1977, p. 479.

[5] G. Singh (ed.), *India's Who's Who Year Book 1977–78*, New Delhi: Alfa Publications, (n.d.), p. 27.

epitomises the propensity of Indian socialists to agitate and debate – including among themselves, and not necessarily on substantial issues. (The proliferation of factions in socialist politics is largely the result of this tendency.)

Raj Narain had few if any ideological affinities with Charan Singh – except that the Bhumihars of East UP (he was from Varanasi district) were almost in the same position as the Jats of West UP. But he regarded the BKD as a good ally against Congress in order to win power. Charan Singh did not appreciate the socialists' mentality. According to Malik, 'he was afraid that he had to follow their ways. He was not for demonstrations every day and this and that'.[6] But Charan Singh knew that the social base of the Socialists and of his own party overlapped and in any case he needed allies against the Congress party.

Under Raj Narain's and Charan Singh's influence, in 1974 the SSP and BKD merged to form the Bharatiya Lok Dal (BLD – Indian People, Party) with Charan Singh as President. Soon after, the Swatantra Party also merged with the BLD, even though this liberal party did not share any social or peasant-oriented concerns since it had emerged in the late 1950s as the mouthpiece of business and landlord interests against Nehru's economic policy.[7] Obviously, Charan Singh was eager to make his party grow by any means, to build a political force which could dislodge Congress and serve his personal ambitions.[8]

Even before the formation of the BLD, the BKD had adopted some aspects of quota politics. For instance, it had proposed that 20% of unskilled jobs in all factories both in the public and private sector should be reserved for Scheduled Castes.[9] It had also 'agreed to reservations of jobs for Backward Castes in 1971 much against Charan Singh's own inner urge'.[10] In 1974 the party's manifesto for the Uttar Pradesh elections contained a revealing paragraph on this question:

> While the socially and educationally backward classes, other than Scheduled Tribes and castes, both Hindu and Muslim, constituted more than half of

[6] Interview with Satpal Malik.

[7] H.L. Erdman, *The Swatantra Party and India Conservatism*, Cambridge University Press, 1967.

[8] 'Charan Singh, for power, could do anything', according to Satpal Malik.

[9] An observer, *Who is a casteist?*, op. cit., p. 54.

[10] Ibid., p. 62.

our people, they have little or no place in the political and administrative map of the country. [. . .] While, therefore, *BKD regards any kind of reservation as a vicious principle*, it has, at long last, come to the conclusion that there is no way out but that a share in Government jobs, say 25 percent, be reserved for young men coming from these classes, as recommended by the Backward Classes Commission . . .[11]

The alliance between the socialist agenda based on caste politics and reservations and the proponents of *kisan* politics was fostered by the JP movement. While many other forces – including the Hindu nationalists – took part in it, the socialists were well represented in this movement partly because its epicentre was in Bihar, their own stronghold.

Charan Singh, in stark contrast, 'was not very enthused with it. He said that it would lead us to anarchy. He was not very happy with all this disorder'.[12] According to Satpal Malik, 'he had told that, had Indira Gandhi made him Home Minister he would have dealt with this JP movement'.[13] He was, indeed, prepared to join Congress in 1975, had the Prime Minister 'changed some of her colleagues and policies'.[14] But nothing of the kind happened and the socialists were exerting more and more influence over the BLD – so much so that 'Charan Singh was afraid that the Socialists eventually dominate his party'[15] and the JP Movement at large. These socialists were still promoting quota politics. Madhu Limaye, as convenor of the JP Movement Programme Committee in 1975, drafted a document where one could read:

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 have 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

[11] Cited in ibid., p. 62.
[12] Interview with S. Malik.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid.

secure, through preferential opportunities and reservation, the substance of power.[16]

Limaye emphasised the empowerment dimension of affirmative action schemes the same way his mentor, Lohia, had done. There was little room left for *kisan* politics in this 'programme'. During the Emergency, however, Charan Singh re-established some of his influence. He cashed in on his own image as the main architect of unity among the Indian opposition which, since the formation of the BLD in 1974, he had striven hard to achieve by merging parties together – as much as he could under his chairmanship.

The creation on the Janata Party resulted from the merger of the BLD, the Jana Sangh, the Socialist Party, the Congress (O) and the Congress for Democracy – the product of a break-away faction of Congress led by Jagjivan Ram. Charan Singh could not dominate it – largely because other leaders like Morarji Desai, the Prime Minister, were wary of his personal ambitions – but the party further promoted the combination of quota politics and *kisan* politics already initiated by the BLD.

The Janata experiment

In 1977 the Janata Party election manifesto promised a 'policy of special treatment' and even a 'New Deal for weaker sections'. If voted to power it would 'reserve between 25% and 33% of all appointments to government service for the backward classes, as recommended by the Kalelkar Commission'.[17] However, most of the manifesto's promises were addressed to the *kisans*. One of the party's objectives was to narrow down the 'rural-urban disparities' by giving 'the farmer [. . .] remunerative prices'. The Janata Party did not speak about land reform but about 'agrarian reform', which should be covering 'tenurial relationships, ownerships and consolidation of holdings' and abolish landlordism.[18] Moreover, Charan Singh, as Union Home

[16] M. Limaye, 'Socio-economic Programme of JP Movement' in S. Mohan *et al.* (eds), *Evolution of Socialist Policy in India*, op. cit., p. 314.

[17] 'The 1977 Janata Party Election Manifesto', Appendix IV to J.A. Naik, *The Great Janata Revolution*, New Delhi: S. Chand, 1977, p. 157.

[18] Ibid., p. 149. On the top of this *kisan* discourse, the manifesto promised to launch a 'New village Movement' which was intended to 'bring new life, hope

Minister in Morarji Desai's government, regarded the 'three decades of Congress rule in post-Independence India as essentially elitist and urban oriented' and considered 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*'.[19]

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.[20] He was expelled from the government because of the way he had criticised the Cabinet's weakness *vis-à-vis* Indira Gandhi (who, according to him, should have been tried for atrocities committed during the Emergency) and, more importantly, because of his attempt at destabilising Desai – whose post he coveted (he had accused his son, Kanti Desai, of corruption, for instance). Charan Singh organised a huge '*kisan* rally' attended by 5 million farmers in Delhi in December 1978 and he was re-inducted in the government as Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance soon after.[21] His 'kulak budget', of 1979 to use the media's catch phrase, reduced indirect taxes on mechanical tillers, diesel for electric water pumps and chemical fertilisers by 50% in some cases; it lowered interest rates for rural loans; increased subsidies for small-scale irrigation; and earmarked funds for rural electrification and grain-storage facilities.[22] Charan Singh also succeeded in transferring indirect taxes on chemical fertilisers from producers to manufacturers and in raising sugarcane prices.[23] The Janata experiment was too short-lived to implement all these measures but Charan Singh had unquestionally become the rallying point of the *kisans*. During the Janata era, he raised the peasants' concerns in such a way that they became central to political debate – so much so that

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and dignity to rural India seen as viable communities of functional rural clusters. . .' (ibid., p. 155)

[19] Charan Singh, 'The Emergence of Janata Party – A Watershed in Post-Independence Politics' in S. Mohan *et al.* (eds), *Evolution of Socialist Policy*, op. cit., p. 325 and p. 327.

[20] A. Varshney, *Democracy, Development, and the Countryside – Urban, Rural Struggles in India*, Cambridge University Press, 1995, p. 104. Most of this paragraph draws from this book.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Ibid., p. 105.

[23] P. Brass, 'Congress, the Lok Dal, and the Middle-Peasant Castes', op. cit., pp. 14–15.

they were taken up by farmers' movements in most states,[24] among which the Bharatiya Kisan Union of Tikait (a Jat who had been close to Charan Singh – the moving spirit behind the BKU) and the Shetkari Sangathana of Sharad Joshi in Maharashtra were noteworthy.

While Charan Singh tried to promote the *kisans*' interests, he was less active in so far as the reservation policy was concerned. As Deputy Prime Minister he suggested to the government that 25% of administrative posts should be reserved for OBCs[25] but he did not push the issue further, perhaps because it aroused too many objections within the Janata. Regarding reservations for the Scheduled Castes, he considered that they should be withdrawn so far as promotions were concerned because they had led 'to heart-burning and great inefficiency in services'.[26] And he added 'Nor should there be any reservation in education, particularly of Medicine and Engineering'.

However, 1977 was a milestone in the quest for power of the lower castes and the *kisan*, as evident from the social profile of MPs who had been returned in the Hindi belt, all of whom – except three – were from the Janata Party, stark evidence indeed that the Congress party had been routed.

The comparison between the 1977 figures and those of the previous elections – including 1971, when the Congress had been so successful – suggests interesting conclusions. Even though the change is not dramatic, one can observe obvious contrasts: for the first time, upper caste MPs represent fewer than 50% of Hindi belt MPs. Correspondingly, he share of intermediate castes and OBCs increased from 14.2% to 20%; however the Janata Party remained much more elitist than its parliamentary group, as evident from the caste background of the members of its National Executive (see Tables 9.1 and 9.2).

The overwhelming dominance of the upper castes – and, among them of the Brahmins – in the Janata Party National Executive was mainly due to the social profile of the ex-Congress (O) and ex-Jana Sangh. Besides the resilience of the upper castes in the party apparatus, the rise of the OBCs was unevenly distributed state-wise, as evident from the social composition of the assemblies of Madhya Pradesh,

[24] For details see T. Brass (ed.), *New Farmers' Movements in India*, London: Frank Cass, 1995.

[25] Brass, 'Chaudhuri Charan Singh', op. cit., p. 2089.

[26] Cited in Hasan, 'Patterns of Resilience', op. cit., p. 191.

Table 9.1. CASTE AND COMMUNITY OF HINDI BELT MPs, 1971 AND 1977

	1971	*1977*
Upper castes	*53.9*	*48.2*
Brahmin	28.31	16.37
Rajput	13.7	13.27
Bhumihar	2.28	3.1
Banya/Jain	5.48	8.4
Kayasth	2.28	3.1
Other	1.83	3.98
Intermediate castes	*4.11*	*6.64*
Jat	4.11	5.75
Maratha		0.89
OBC	*10.1*	*13.3*
Yadav	6.39	6.19
Kurmi	2.28	3.98
Panwar	0.46	
Other	0.92	3.09
Scheduled Castes	*18.26*	*17.7*
Scheduled Tribes	*7.31*	*7.08*
Muslim	*4.57*	*5.75*
Other minorities	*0.46*	*0.44*
Sadhu	*0.46*	
Unidentified		*0.89*
Total	*100*	*100*
	N=219	*N=226*

Source: Fieldwork.

Rajasthan and Bihar. In Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, two states where the ex-Jana Sangh, an upper-caste-dominated party, was the largest component of the Janata, the OBCs represented respectively 15% and 7% of the MLAs, whereas the upper castes formed 44% to 49% of the assembly. Upper caste domination was even more evident in the state governments since the upper castes represented 62–69% of the ministers. In UP their percentage was even higher, but the share of the OBC reached 17.4%. By contrast, in Bihar, the percentage of upper caste MLAs fell to 35.3% and that of OBCs rose to 27.7%. More important, the low castes represented 38% of the government, 9 percentage points more than the upper castes.

Table 9.2. CASTE AND COMMUNITY
JANATA PARTY NATIONAL EXECUTIVE

	1978
Upper castes	*72.09*
Brahmin	39.53
Rajput	4.65
Banya/Jain	13.95
Kayasth	6.98
Sindhi	2.33
Other	4.65
Intermediate castes	*4.66*
Jat	2.33
Patidar	2.33
OBC	*9.32*
Ezhava	2.33
Kurmi	2.33
Nair	2.33
Yadav	2.33
Scheduled Castes	*4.65*
Muslim	*4.65*
Unidentified	*4.65*
Total	*100*
	N=43

Source: Fieldwork

These figures largely explain why the first attempts at re-launching the reservation policy took place in Bihar. The Janata Party had won the state elections throughout the Hindi belt in June 1977 and since the ex-BLD was stronger in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Haryana, whereas the ex-Jana Sangh was well entrenched in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Himachal Pradesh, the former obtained the Chief Ministership of the first three states and the latter that of the last three states.[27]

In Bihar, the Janata Party was dominated by S.N. Sinha, a Congress (O) Rajput leader, and Karpoori Thakur, who, after the SVD episode, had been Chairman of the SSP and Deputy Chief Minister in 1970–2. The former was supported by Rajput MLAs, who

[27] P. Brass, 'Congress, the Lok Dal, and the middle-peasant castes : An analysis of the 1977 and 1980 Parliamentary elections in Uttar Pradesh', *Pacific Affairs*, 54, 1 (spring 1981), p. 14.

Table 9.3. CASTE AND COMMUNITY OF THE MLAs RETURNED IN BIHAR, RAJASTHAN AND MADHYA PRADESH, 1977

	Bihar	*Rajasthan*	*MP*
Upper castes	*37.2*	*43.9*	*46.6*
Brahmin	5.8	12.5	21.3
Rajput	16.6	13	10.6
Bhumihar	11.4	–	–
Banya/Jain	–	15.8	10
Kayasth	3.4	1.1	3.1
Khattri	–	0.5	1.3
Other	–	1	0.3
Intermediate castes	–	*14.5*	*0.9*
Maratha	–	–	0.9
Jat	–	14.5	–
OBC	*29.6*	*7*	*14.3*
Banya	2.5	–	–
Jat	–	–	0.3
Yadav	15.7	1.5	1.6
Kurmi	3.7	–	3.1
Koeri	4.9	–	–
Lodhi	–	–	0.6
Teli	–	–	1.6
Panwar	–	–	2.2
Gujar	–	4	–
Other	2.8	1.5	4.9
Scheduled Castes	*13.8*	*17*	*13.4*
Scheduled Tribes	*8.6*	*7*	*20.4*
Muslim	*7.7*	*5*	*0.9*
Sikh	–	*2*	*0.3*
Unidentified/Other	*2.1*	*3*	*3.1*
Total	*100*	*100*	*100*
	N=324	*N=200*	*N=320*

Sources: For Bihar, adapted from H.W. Blair, 'Rising Kulaks and Backward Classes in Bihar', op. cit., p. 67; for Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, fieldwork.

represented about 21% of the MLAs, and the latter by the low castes, who had been elected in large numbers since their share in the Vidhan Sabha had jumped from 29.5 to 38.5% of the total between 1975

Table 9.4. CASTES AND COMMUNITIES IN THE GOVERNMENTS OF BIHAR, RAJASTHAN, UTTAR PRADESH AND MADHYA PRADESH, 1977

	Bihar	*Rajasthan*	*UP*	*MP*
Upper castes	*29*	*62.6*		*68.8*
Brahmin	*n.a.*	31.3		37.5
Rajput	*n.a.*	12.5		15.6
Banya/Jain	*n.a.*	18.8		9.4
Kayasth	*n.a.*			6.3
Intermediate castes	*n.a.*	*12.5*		
Jats	*n.a.*	12.5		
OBC	*38*		*17.4*	*6.2*
Yadav	*n.a.*		13.1	3.1
Teli	*n.a.*		–	3.1
Lodhi	*n.a.*		4.3	
Lower Backward	*4*			
SC (and ST for Bihar)	*17*	*18.8*	*8.7*	*9.4*
Scheduled Tribes	*n.a.*			*9.4*
Muslim (and Bengali for Bihar)	*13*	*6.3*	*4.3*	*6.25*
Total	*100*	*100*	*100*	*100*
	N=n.a.	*N=16*	*N=23*	*N=32*

Sources: As for Table 9.3. For UP, C.L. Sathi, *Pichhre vargon ka arakshan*, Lucknow: Bahujan Kalyan Publishers, 1982, p. 118.

and 1977. Among them, the Yadavs were the most successful with 20% of the MLAs (as against 11% in 1975).[28] Even though he belonged to the Most Backward Castes, Thakur was recognised as their representative by the Yadavs and even though he was a former socialist, Charan Singh chose him as his nominee. Thakur's government, for the first time in the state, had more OBC (42%) than upper caste (29%)[29] ministers but among the latter the Lower Backwards were very few compared to the Yadavs who got the lion's share. After laborious debates within the Janata Party, where the upper castes showed much reluctance towards any ambitious reservation scheme, in November 1978 Thakur announced the following quotas, which relied on the classification in OBCs and MBCs of the Mungeri Lal Commission, in the state administration:

[28] H. Blair, 'Rising Kulaks and Backward Classes in Bihar', op. cit., p. 69.
[29] Ibid.

	%
Other backward classes	8
Most backward classes	12
Scheduled Castes	14
Scheduled Tribes	10
Women	3
Economically backward	3

As noticed by R.K. Hebsur in the second Backward Classes Commission Report, 'Thakur was only pursuing the Lohia line of further mobilising the backward classes',[30] even if he amended this approach by following the Mungeri Lal Commission and distinguished MBCs from OBCs. According to Blair, the new reservation policy concerned only 1,800 jobs per annum (since the administration recruited 9,000 new employees each year) and was therefore a 'symbolic' measure.[31] However, Frankel underlines that the new quotas would have affected the Kayasths who represented 40% of the upper layer of the state administration.[32] And symbols are nonetheless important: even if it did not damage the upper castes' interests to a great extent, Thakur's scheme called the social order into question. This is probably the main reason why upper caste students demonstrated violently against the new reservation policy, burning buses and attacking trains – even to the extent of having one derailed. Government property and buildings were devastated. The agitation was supported, behind the scenes, by the former Jana Sangh which disapproved of the policy's impact on its upper caste electoral basis and of the fact that it divided along caste lines Hindu society, the constituency it was anxious to represent. The ex-Jana Sangh therefore withdrew its support to Thakur on 19 April 1979 and provoked the fall of the Bihar government with the help of a group of Scheduled Castes MLAs close to Jagjivan Ram, the then Deputy Prime Minister.

The *rapprochement* between the ex-Jana Sangh and Scheduled Castes MLAs was partly due to tactical calculations since the former

[30] R.K. Hebsur, 'Reactions to the Reservations for Other Backward Classes' in *Report of the Backward Classes Commission – Second Part*, New Delhi: Government of India, 1980, p. 157. However, the socialists themselves had become divided over the reservation issue with Ramanand Tiwari leading the upper castes' opposition to positive discrimination.

[31] Blair, 'Rising Kulaks and Backward Classes in Bihar', op. cit., p. 66.

[32] Frankel, 'Caste, Land and Dominance in Bihar', op. cit., p. 110.

was prepared to support Jagjivan Ram's claim to the Prime Ministership in order to replace Desai. But this alliance also reflected the persistence of the pattern defined by Brass as a 'coalition of extremes'. The rise of the OBCs, that was epitomised by Thakur's reservation policy, worried the upper castes as much as the Scheduled Castes. In the village, the latter were often landless agricultural labourers working for Yadav or Kurmi farmers and therefore they had antagonistic class interests. In 1982, 96.7% of the Scheduled Castes had either no land or a miniscule holding.[33] The distribution of housing plots to these people and the establishment of minimum wages during the Emergency had made relations between labourers and farmers – whether from the OBCs or from upper castes – more tense. Conflicts arose, for instance, about wages.

In 1979, the toppling of Karpoori Thakur enabled a Scheduled Caste leader, Ram Sunder Das, to take over as Chief Minister but the upper caste members were in a majority in his government, 50% as against 20% of OBCs (and no MBCs).[34] In July 1979, this government amended Thakur's reservation policy in such a way as any recruitment of SC/ST, OBC and MBC candidate on a 'merit' basis would be deducted from the quotas. For instance, if 2% of MBC people joined the Bihar administration by passing the competitive examination for posts, which were not covered by the quota, this quota would be reduced in the same proportions. The same rule was to be applied for the other quotas.

A similar scenario unfolded in Uttar Pradesh where the large Janata Party victory enabled Charan Singh to appoint one of his lieutenants, Ram Naresh Yadav, as Chief Minister. Like Takur, Yadav was also a socialist. In his own words, he 'came in contact with Acharya Narendra Deva, the eminent socialist leader and thinker of the country during University life and dedicated himself to the cause of socialism'.[35] Like many socialists he became close to Charan Singh in the 1960s and 1970s and as Chief Minister implemented *kisan*-friendly policies by increasing the procurement price of wheat to

[33] In Uttar Pradesh, in 1981, 56.52% of the landless holdings were Scheduled Castes (Hasan, 'Patterns of resilience and change in Uttar Pradesh', op. cit., p. 169).

[34] Blair, op. cit., p. 9.

[35] G. Singh (ed.), *India's Who's Who and Year Book, 1977–78*, New Delhi: Alfa Publication, 1978, p. 29.

Rs 115[36] and supporting high prices for sugar cane, which had been affected by poor rains.[37] On the other hand, he paid great attention to the reservation policy. He did not implement the recommendations of the UP Backward Commission whose report, submitted in June 1977, provided for a 29.5% total reservation for OBCs and MBCs, because such a large quota – in addition to the 20% for the Scheduled Castes – would have been rejected by the upper castes, even within the Janata Party. Upper caste ministers still represented on overwhelming majority of the UP government (see table 9.4). In his Government Order of 20 August, 1977, Yadav provided for the following scheme of reservations for state services and for industrial training institutes:

	%	
Other backward classes	15	in Class I, II and III
	10	in Class IV
Scheduled Castes	18	
Scheduled Tribes	2	
Physically handicapped	2	
Dependants of freedom fighters	5	
Ex-military officers	8	

The new reservation policy met with strong protests throughout Uttar Pradesh. In some areas civil servants themselves took part in the agitation, which was marred by violence in the eastern districts.[38] As in Bihar, 'the Jana Sangh group articulated the disapproval of upper castes over the potential challenge to their primacy'[39] and withdrew its support in favour of Banarsi Das, of the Congress(O). Banarsi Das froze all the reservation schemes announced by Ram Naresh Yadav. Quotas were not complemented at a national level either.[40]

[36] K. Lieten, 'The Janata as a Continuity of the System', *Social Scientist*, Dec. 1980–Jan. 1981.

[37] *EPW*, 2 Dec. 1979.

[38] R.K. Hebsur, 'Reactions to the Reservations for Other Backward Classes' in *Report of the Backward Classes Commission – Second Part*, New Delhi: Government of India, 1980, p. 161, and Hasan, *The Quest for Power*, op. cit., p. 146.

[39] Ibid

[40] After he became Prime Minister, Charan Singh proposed to reserve 25% of central government jobs for the OBCs, a measure that had to be dropped after the President objected that the caretaker government had committed itself

The alliance strategy of the Socialists and Charan Singh bore fruit since it culminated in the formation of the Janata government, in which both groups played a pivotal role. The bad news, however, was that they could not gain power alone – they needed allies – and that the Janata government was too heterogeneous to implement a consistent policy regarding positive discrimination or the promotion of rural interests. Its socialist and BLD components tried to push through a programme of quota politics and *kisan* politics but the Congress(O) of Morarji Desai and the Jana Sangh were not prepared to let an over-ambitious Charan Singh occupy centre stage or allow these new reservations to reduce the proportion of the upper castes in the bureaucracy. The Hindu nationalist party, which was strongly associated with the urban, upper caste middle class resisted any pro-peasant and pro-OBC policies and feared that such moves would strengthen the BLD in North India, its own stronghold.

The tensions between the BLD and the Socialists on the one hand and the Congress(O) and the Jana Sangh on the other led to the schism of June 1979 when Charan Singh founded the Janata Party (S)[41] receiving Indira Gandhi's support to become Prime Minister. It was the first time that a non-upper caste and a rural leader occupied the post and in his speech on Independence Day, on 15 August 1979, he accordingly focused on rural issues,[42] even if he tried to correct the anti-city portrait that the media were assiduously painting of him at that time. The appointment of Charan Singh generated a great deal of excitement among the *kisans* and the OBCs. The OBC leader Ram Lakhan Yadav, commenting upon this event, considered that 'a great enlightenment came to the Backward classes' and that it 'combined all Backward Classes together'.[43] This enthusiasm was short-lived

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not to indulge in decisions 'which might amount to electoral initiatives'. (Galanter, *Competing Equalities*, op. cit., p. 187)

[41] 'S' for secular because he reproached the Janata regime for promoting Hindu communalism by accepting Jana Sangh leaders who pay allegiance to the RSS. On this 'dual membership' issue, see, Jaffrelot, *The Hindu nationalist movement and Indian politics*, op. cit., ch. 8.

[42] He said, for instance that he regarded it as a priority 'to establish cottage industries in the villages'. ('Charan's Singh's Speech on Independence Day', reproduced in R.K. Hooda, *Man of the Masses – Chaudhary Charan Singh, First Peasant Prime Minister of India*, New Delhi: Chaudhary Hari Ram and Sons, 1979, p. 77)

[43] Cited in Chaudhury, op. cit., p. 217.

since the Congress withdrew its support even before the vote of confidence and the Lok Sabha had to be dissolved, the 1980 elections bringing Indira Gandhi back to power. In states like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar the Congress largely owed its success to the reconstitution of the old coalition regrouping upper castes (mainly Brahmins), Scheduled Castes and Muslims. The OBCs were sidelined once again. In Uttar Pradesh, the Congress party nominated 120 Brahmins as against 26 OBCs for the elections to the Legislative Assembly.[44] Soon after returning to power in UP, the Congress removed in 1981 the age extension in favour of the OBCs applying for recruitment in the police. (The Janata Party government had increased by 5 years the age-limit for the OBCs). In Bihar, the Congress(I) highlighted its policy in favour of the landless labourers in 1975–7 to attract Scheduled Castes voters during its election campaign.[45] However, the return of the Congress did not mean that ideas instilled and the social dynamics of the Janata period would not one day re-emerge.

The Janata governments of Bihar and UP had failed to implement their reservation policies but their very attempt showed that quota politics was gaining momentum in North India. This trend was also well illustrated by the appointment (and then the report) of the second Backward Classes Commission. The North was becoming more conscious of the reservation issue. Charan Singh himself almost switched to this strategy, a move which represented one more step in the direction of the Socialists.

The Mandal Commission: the reservation issue revisited at the Centre

On 20 December 1978 the Prime Minister Morarji Desai announced the government's decision to appoint the second Backward Classes Commission, whose terms of references were close to those of the earlier one: it had to determine the criteria defining the OBCs and to recommend the measures, such as reservations in the administration, which could contribute to their social emancipation.[46] Twenty years after the appointment of the Kalelkar commission, the Centre re-launched quota politics. Desai might have done so reluctantly and

[44] An Observer, *Who is a casteist?*, op. cit., p. 42.

[45] Frankel, 'Castes, Land and Dominance in Bihar', op. cit., p. 115.

[46] *Report of the [second] Backward Classes Commission – First Part*, op. cit., p. vii.

with some after thoughts,[47] but the report of this Commission was to make a major impact. In contrast to the Kalelkar Commission, this body had no upper caste members but only OBCs,[48] of whom three out of five were MPs or ex-MPs. The Chairman of the Commission, Bin-dhyeshwari Prasad Mandal, as we know, was a Yadav who had been elected MP in Bihar in 1967 on a SSP ticket and who had been briefly its Chief Minister in 1968. He was an important figure in the Janata Party – in 1980 he had been a member of the party's Central Election Commission. Unsurprisingly, the 'Mandal Commission' advocated the Socialist policy of positive discrimination. Its report read:

> To treat unequals as equals is to perpetuate inequality. When we allow weak and strong to compete on an equal footing, we are loading the dice in favour of the strong and holding only a mock competition in which the weaker partner is destined to failure right from the start.[49]

In India, the Mandal report argued, the caste system was the root-cause of structural inequality and therefore notions of merit could not apply in the same way as they did in an individualistic society: it 'is an amalgam of native endowments and environmental privileges'.[50] The Mandal Commission had therefore no inhibition in recognising caste as the main factor in the backwardness of the OBCs: 'Caste is also a class of citizens and if the caste as a whole is socially and educationally backward, reservation can be made in favour of such a caste on the ground that it is a socially and educationally backward class of citizens within the meaning of Article 15(4)'.[51] Yet, the Commission did not regard caste as the sole criterion for the definition of the OBCs. In fact, it evolved an index based on eleven indicators subdivided into three categories – social, educational and economic. Three of the indicators were concerned with caste: whether the group was regarded as backward by others, whether it depended

[47] For Lal and Nair, Desai appointed the second Backward Classes Commission as 'the usual answer of most governments in India to silence strident demands without acceding to them' Lal and Nair, *Caste vs Caste*, op. cit., p. 90.

[48] One of them, Dina Bandhu Sahu had to resign on the ground of ill-health, but he was replaced by a Scheduled Castes former MP, L.R. Naik.

[49] Ibid., p. 21.

[50] Ibid., p. 23.

[51] Ibid., p. 62.

on manual labour and whether or not its members married at a young age. The three educational indicators tried to measure the proportion of children attending school and obtaining their matriculation. The four economic indicators concerned the family's assets, whether at least one quarter of the group had a *kuccha* (proper) house, whether they had easy access to water and whether they had taken out loans.[52] Ultimately social indicators were given heavier weighting than other criteria and thus the OBCs were defined as caste-groups. This is evident from Table 9.5 where the Commission ventured to present an overview of Indian society under the title 'Distribution of Indian Population by Caste and Religious Groups'.

The table was criticised by scholars because it drew on several sources (the 1931 census for the forward castes and the 1971 census for the SC/STs and the religious groups) and arrived at a figure of 52% for the OBCs through a roundabout route.[53] Yet it did for the first time provide a statistical straight-point which could be used for affirmative action and was not reliant only on caste criteria – economically disadvantaged Brahmin and Rajput sub-castes had been previously classified as OBCs for instance.[54]

After identifying the OBCs, the Mandal Commission recommended that 27% of posts in the administration and public sector should be reserved for them, a conclusion that reflected an Ambedkarite and Socialist-style approach to compensatory discrimination since the objective was to give the OBCs access to power, not jobs:

> It is not at all our contention that by offering a few thousands jobs to OBC candidates we shall be able to make 52% of the Indian population as forward.

[52] Ibid., p. 52.

[53] P. Radhakrishnan wrote for instance that the Mandal Commission's 'estimate of the OBC population is a hotpotch, arrived at by subtracting from 100 the population percentages for SCs, STs and non-Hindus (22.56 and 16.16 respectively) as per the 1971 Census, and the percentage for "forward Hindus" ' (17.58) as extrapolated from the incomplete 1931 Census, and adding to this derived sum (43.7) about half of the population percentage for non-Hindus (8.4)'. He also criticised the fact that for 'its "socio-educational survey", supposedly its most comprehensive inquiry, the Commission selected only two villages and one urban block from each district' (P. Radhakrishnan, 'Mandal Commission Report: A Sociological Critique' in Srinivas (ed.), *Caste – Its Twentieth Century Avatar*, op. cit., p. 207).

[54] For a list of these Brahmin and Rajput sub-castes see Prasad, *Reservational Justice*, op. cit., pp. 68–9.

Table 9.5. DISTRIBUTION OF INDIAN SOCIETY BY CASTE AND COMMUNITY ACCORDING TO MANDAL COMMISSION

	% of total population
Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes	*22.56*
Scheduled Castes	15.05
Scheduled Tribes	7.51
Non-Hindu communities, religious groups	*16.16*
Muslims	11.19
Christians	2.16
Sikhs	1.67
Buddhists	0.67
Jains	0.47
Forward Hindu castes and communities	*17.58*
Brahmins (including Bhumihars)	5.52
Rajputs	3.9
Marathas	2.21
Jats	1
Vaishyas/Banyas	1.88
Kayasthas	1.07
Others	2
Remaining Hindu caste/groups to be treated as OBCs	*43.70**
(Religious groups which may also be treated as OBCs)	*(8.40)*
Total	*100*

*Derived figure.

Source: *Report of the Backward Classes Commission – First Part*, op. cit., p. 56.

But we must recognise that an essential part of the battle against social backwardness is to be fought in the minds of the backward people. In India Government service has always been looked upon as a symbol of prestige and power. By increasing the representation of OBCs in government services, we *give them an immediate feeling of participation in the governance of this country.* When a backward class candidate becomes a Collector or a Superintendent of Police, the material benefits accruing from his position are limited to the members of his family only. But the psychological spin off of this phenomenon is tremendous; the entire community of that backward class candidate feels socially elevated. Even when no tangible benefits flow to the community at large, the feeling that now it has its 'own man' *in the 'corridors of power'* acts as morale booster.[55]

[55] *Report of the [second] Backward Classes Commission – First Part*, op. cit., p. 57. Emphasis added.

The report modestly presents access to, and the exercise of, power from a psychological point of view but its ambitions were greater than that: it goes on to say that 'reservation will certainly erode the hold of the higher castes on the services',[56] and this was one of its objectives, albeit one balanced by the attention paid to education. In contrast to Lohia's reluctance to introduce reservation in schools and universities, the Mandal Commission Report recommended that 27% of 'seats should be reserved for OBC students in all scientific, technical and professional institutions run by the Central as well as State Governments'.[57] The Commission resigned itself to maximum quotas of 27% in order to remain within the limits of the 'law laid down in a number of Supreme Court judgements'[58] after the Balaji case.

When the North lags behind: reservation policies outside the Hindi Belt in the 1980s

The Mandal Commission prepared its report at a time when the states of South and West India were forging ahead with new reservations schemes. In the South, these developments were related to the rise to power of regional parties which often represented the lower castes, the DMK being a prime case in point. The All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) – a party born from a split of the DMK and which had gained influence over it – and the Telugu Desam Party emulated its strategy in the 1970s–1980s.

In 1978 the government of M.G. Ramachandran, the president of the AIADMK, decided to implement one of the recommendations of the Sattanathan Commission that had gone unheeded, namely to exclude from quotas OBCs whose income exceeded 9,000 rupees a year. This measure provoked vehement protests among the OBCs and it was apparently one of the reasons for the electoral setback of the AIADMK in 1980.[59] M.G. Ramachandran immediately revoked the decision and even raised the OBC quota from 31% to 50%. Upper castes members went to the Supreme Court which, in its judgement of 15, October 1982 asked the government to appoint a

[56] Ibid.
[57] Ibid., p. 59.
[58] Ibid., p. 58.
[59] Yadav, *India's Unequal Citizens*, op. cit., p. 134.

Commission. It recommended a quota of 32% for the OBCs so that total quotas whould not exceed 50% but M.G. Ramachandran preferred to bury the report.[60]

Andhra politics was even more clearly dominated by leaders advocating the cause of the low castes in the 1980s after the rise to power of the Telegu Desam Party, a regionalist organisation whose electoral basis largely consisted of OBCs. In 1983, shortly after its success in the state elections, Rama Rao, its founder-president and then Chief Minister, increased the OBC quota from 25% to 44% in the state administration. The High Court declared the decision invalid because the total quotas now exceeded 50%. Rama Rao withdrew his project, which triggered off violent street demonstrations from the OBCs,[61] evidence of their newly found self-assurance.

The OBCs had not only gained new assertiveness but had also been empowered to a certain extent. In 1982, they made up 28.6% of Andhra civil servants and were well represented in the entire administration, except among the IAS elite, the last stronghold of the Brahmins.[62] Ultimately they were to benefit substantially from reservations because of the political determination of the main parties but also because of a shift in attitude of the courts, an issue to which we return below.

In Gujarat, shortly after its return to power in 1980, the Congress appointed a second 'Backward Classes Commission' in order further to cultivate its low caste support. This Commission, in its report of 1983, recommended that caste be abandoned as a criterion for defining quotas and that the existing quota should be increased from 10% to 28%. Solanki kept the findings secret until January 1985 –

[60] Ibid., p. 135. The increase of the quotas granted to the OBCs in Tamil Nadu had already restricted the number of places available to Brahmins, who had either to opt for the private sector, or to migrate to the North or to go abroad (mostly to England or the United States) to forge a career in medicine or in engineering. After the introduction of quotas in the 1920s already, many Brahmins left for Bombay. (R.K. Hebsur, 'Reaction to the reservations for Other Backward Classes', Bombay, Tata Institute of Social Sciences 1980, in *Report of the Backward Classes Commission*, second part, vols III–VII, New Delhi: Government of India, 1980, pp. 147–50)

[61] P. Brass, *The New Cambridge History of India – The politics of India since independence*, Cambridge University Press, 1990, p. 212.

[62] G. Ram Reddy, 'The politics of accommodation – Class, caste and dominance in Andhra Pradesh', op. cit., pp. 300–2.

two months before the state elections – and then supported the increase in quotas up to 28% but without abandoning the caste criterion. He even appointed a new Commission in order to identify more 'backward castes'.[63] These decisions partly explain the excellent showing of the Congress (I) in the March 1985 state elections, after which Solanki formed a government in which fourteen ministers out of twenty were 'Kshatriyas'. This triggered off violent reactions from the upper castes. Their opposition to quotas had already been manifested in 1981 when riots had broken out – in particular in Ahmedabad – to protest against quotas granted since 1975 to Scheduled Castes in 'Medical Colleges'.[64] In fact, these quotas had remained unfulfilled: in 1979–80, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes students numbered only 507 out of 4,500 (instead of the nominated 945, according to the 10% quota) and in 1984, only 34% of seats reserved for the OBCs were effectively occupied.[65] The violent response of the upper caste seemed even less justified in 1985 when, once again, students were in the forefront of the protest. They formed the All Gujarat Education Reforms Committee and began attacking symbols of the state (bus stations, post-offices, schools . . .), forcing the cancellation of examinations. The High Court imposed a stay order on the implementation of the measures but violence continued unabated and on 5 July the deliberate derailment of a train, which injured more than 200 people, led Solanki to resign. His successor, Amarsingh Chaudhari cancelled the increase in the quotas and in June 1987 appointed a new Commission presided over by R.C. Mankad. Thus the 1985 riots (and their impact) revealed the limits of the reservation policy in Gujarat: in contrast with the South, positive discrimination measures were facing mounting opposition from the upper castes fearful of reduced opportunities and of a challenge to their pre-eminent status.

[63] U. Baxi, 'Reflections on the reservations crisis in Gujarat' in V. Das (ed.), *Mirrors of Violence: Communities, Riots and Survivors in South Asia*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990, pp. 215–39.

[64] P. K. Bose, 'Social mobility and caste violence – A study of the Gujarat riots', *EPW*, (16) 18 April 1981, pp. 713–16

[65] I. P. Desai, 'Anti-reservation agitation and structure of Gujarat Society', *EPW*, May 1981, p. 821, and U. Baxi, 'Reflections on the reservations crisis', op. cit., p. 217.

The Lok Dal fighting for Mandal

It is in this context that the Mandal Commission Report was first discussed in the 1980s. Charan Singh had launched a new political party, the Lok Dal, soon before the 1980 elections, one of whose 'aims and objects' was to establish 'a socialist society, consistent with maintenance of individual freedom',[66] a good summary of the party's attempt to combine Lohia's legacy and *kisan* politics. Indeed, while Charan Singh was its president, its vice-president, Raj Narain, and its general secretary, Madhu Limaye, were both from socialist backgrounds, like many secretaries (such as Rabi Ray)[67] and members of the National Committee (such as Karpoori Thakur and George Fernandes).[68] Its National Executive Committee, in addition to Jat leaders (Satpal Malik and Devi Lal) comprised many OBC, mainly Yadavs, such as Hukum Deo Narain Yadav, Chandrajeet Yadav, Brahma Prakash Chaudhary and Sharad Yadav. Table 9.6 reveals that the Yadavs were the second largest group, after the Jats, in the Lok Dal National Executive in the 1980s. The Brahmins remained in large numbers, mainly because there were many Brahmins among the Socialists but they were no more numerous than the Yadavs in the mid- and late 1980s. In fact, the overall proportion of upper caste members of the Lok Dal National Executive declined from about one third to about 27% over the 1980s.

The 1980 election manifesto of the Lok Dal also combined the Socialist legacy and *kisan* politics. On the one hand it advocated farmer's interests: it pleaded for 'the replacement of farm tenancy by peasant-proprietorship' – which summarised what should be 'land reform' – and promised that, if the Lok Dal was voted to power, the state would 'intervene in the market to protect the farmer and ensure that he is not compelled to make distress sales' – not a word about landless labourers or those not engaged in commercial production.[69] On the other hand, the manifesto devoted a paragraph to the eradication of caste and went back to the old idea 'to give preference in

[66] See 'The Lok Dal' in A.M. Zaidi, *ARIPP-1979*, New Delhi: S.Chand, 1980, p. 385.

[67] Interview with Rabi Ray, New Delhi, 24 Oct. 1998.

[68] However, many Socialists had stayed in the Janata Party.

[69] Lok Dal, 'Election Manifesto – 1980 mid-term poll' in ibid., pp. 396–7.

Table 9.6. CASTE AND COMMUNITY IN THE NATIONAL EXECUTIVE OF LOK DAL

	1980	*1981*	*1984*	*1987*
Upper castes	*33.34*	*29.62*	*29.28*	*27.08*
Brahmin	11.11	14.81	12.20	10.42
Rajput	8.33	7.41	9.76	4.17
Banya/Jain	2.78	3.70	4.88	4.17
Bhumihar	2.78			
Kayasth	5.56	3.70	2.44	2.08
Khatri	2.78			2.08
Nayar				2.08
Tyagi				2.08
Intermediate castes	*16.67*	*22.21*	*17.08*	*18.75*
Jat	11.11	14.81	12.20	18.75
Reddy	2.78	3.70		
Vokkaliga	2.78	3.70	2.44	
Other			2.44	
OBC	*25*	*18.52*	*19.51*	*16.67*
Gujar				2.08
Kurmi	11.11	7.41	2.44	4.17
Nai	2.78	3.70		
Yadav	11.11	7.41	17.07	10.42
Scheduled Castes	*5.56*	*3.70*	*2.44*	*6.25*
Christian	*5.56*	*7.41*	*4.88*	*4.17*
Muslim	*11.11*	*11.11*	*12.20*	*16.67*
Unidentified	*2.78*	*7.41*	*14.63*	*10.42*
Total	*100*	*100*	*100*	*100*
	N=36	*N=27*	*N=41*	*N=48*

Source: Fieldwork.

recruitment to gazetted services to those young men who have married outside their own caste'.[70]

The same dual strategy was evident from the Lok Dal's attitude to reservations. The party was eager to expand positive discrimination not only to OBCs but also to 'kisan communities',[71] yet its MPs were at the forefront of the fight to implement the Mandal Commission Report.

[70] Ibid., p. 407.

[71] 'Lok Dal and Reservation, Statement, April 1981', cited in Hasan, 'Pattern of resilience and change', op. cit., p. 187, n.76.

The Report was submitted to Indira Gandhi's government in December 1980 but it was put before the Lok Sabha only on 30 April 1982, when there was barely a quorum in the House, a clear indication of the ruling party's priority. The most vehement speakers were Lok Dal MPs such as Chandrajit Yadav who emphasised what to him was its main finding: the fact that 'the other backward classes constituted 52% of our population'.[72] OBC leaders were obviously realising that their 'community' was a majority and could form an unbeatable constituency. Ram Vilas Paswan was also very combative in the debate even though he was not an OBC but a Dusadh (the member of a Scheduled Caste of pig herders). Paswan had a socialist background – he had been secretary of the Bihar SSP – and joined the Lok Dal in 1974, to become the secretary of the party Bihar unit.[73] When he appeared before the Mandal Commission he suggested that 'the existing percentage of reservation for OBCs should be increased and greater educational facilities provided to them' but he also added that 'in case the family income of a candidate exceeded Rs. 10,000 per year, [an OBC applicant] should not be given the benefit of reservations'.[74] In the 1982 Mandal debate he adopted an Ambedkar-like position in denouncing caste hierarchy as inherent in Hinduism, invoking the Law of Manu to this end.[75] The senior Congress representative then in the House, the Defence Minister, R. Venkataraman objected that the essence of Hinduism was found not in Manu but in the Gita whose hero, Krishna 'was a Yadava',[76] an attempt at flattering the Sanskritization tendencies of the Yadavs. Venkataraman went on to claim that the Mandal Commission Report, which had identified 3,743 castes, contradicted the findings of the Kalelkar Commission, which 'identified somewhere 2,000 and odds' such

[72] Lok Sabha Secretariat, *Lok Sabha Debates*, New Delhi, vol. 31, Aug. 11, 1982, col. 359. Chandrajit Yadav also used this opportunity to recall that the 'Yadav community has also made a great sacrifice for the country' in the 1962 war and that it was unfair to them not to create a Yadav regiment (ibid., cols 518–19).

[73] Paswan had been first elected in the Bihar Assembly at the young age of 23 in 1969 and to the Lok Sabha in 1977 in Hajipur (*Who's Who in Lok Sabha – 1977*, op. cit., p. 422).

[74] *Report of the [second] Backward Classes Commission*, op. cit., p. 45.

[75] Lok Sabha Secretariat, *Lok Sabha Debates*, New Delhi, vol. 31, 11 August 1982.

[76] Ibid., col. 562.

castes. According to him, neither could it be reconciled with the lists established by the states.[77] More importantly, he expressed the view that the reservation policy 'should be extended to include economically backward people'[78] and concluded that 'this is only a point of view; this is not the decision of the Government'. This decision was never implemented since the Congress was not interested in developing affirmative action. On 15 January 1982, Indira Gandhi had announced a new 20-point programme which emphasised health care, welfare programmes for women and greater provision of education.[79] A few days after the Lok Sabha debate, the Home Minister, Giani Zail Singh, gravely declared that 'the recommendations made by the Commission raise important and complex issues which have wide and deep implications for the country as a whole' but that 'the Central Government have forwarded the Report of the Commission to the various State Governments for obtaining their views'.[80] That was the only action taken by the Congress.

The tabling of the Mandal Commission Report before the Lok Sabha – which had been set for mid-February and then postponed – marked the partial conversion of Charan Singh to the notion of quota-politics:

> The founding fathers of our Constitution have clearly provided that the socially and educationally backward castes in our society be given reservation in services so that they would be able to come on a par with other forward castes. But the ruling Congress party during its thirty-one years rule instead of implementing the provisions of the constitution in relation to the backward castes has perpetuated the age-old domination of the so-called high castes over the backward castes. The recommendation of Kaka Kalelkar commission regarding the backward classes, which was submitted to the government in 1955 have not been implemented till date. It is as if here was a deep-seated conspiracy hatched by the upper castes and capitalists to thwart the rightful urges and aspirations of the backward castes, Harijans and Girijans [Tribals] to have their rightful place in the Indian society. It is

[77] Ibid., col. 558.

[78] Ibid., col. 560.

[79] 'AICC Circulars', in Zaidi, *Annual Register of Indian Political Parties – 1982*, op. cit., p. 570.

[80] *Memorandum explaining action taken on the report of the second backward classes commission*, New Delhi: Government of India, Ministry of Home Affairs, 1982, pp. 5–6.

heartening to note that these depressed sections of the Indian community have now risen from their age-long slumber and are now prepared to fight for their rights. They are bound to be victorious, as they constitute the majority of the Indian society.

It was for the first time during the post-independence period that a political party, viz. the Janata Party in its election manifesto for Lok Sabha elections in 1977 pledged itself to implement the recommendations of Kaka Kalelkar Commission Report and the Janata Party's pledge was actualised in Bihar under the stewardship of Karpoori Thakur who was the Chief Minister at the time. The Janata Party appointed the Mandal Commission as per the provisions of the Constitution to review the situation and make appropriate recommendations for the welfare of the backward castes. The Cong. (I) Government at the centre has been in possession of the said report for the last one year but has not yet published it despite its repeated assurances in the Parliament to put [it] on the table of the House. It seems the recommendations of the Mandal Commission would meet the same fate as the previous Kaka Kalelkar Commission Report unless the backward castes start a massive people's movement to compel the Government to implement them. Hence I make this fervent appeal to all the backward castes, Harijans and Girijans to join a massive rally on 18 February 1982 at Noon which is also the opening day of the Budget session of Parliament at the Boat Club near Parliament House in New Delhi. Let this rally be the precursor of a long-drawn-out battle of all the have-nots against the monopolists to assert their rightful place in the Indian society'.[81]

On 18 February 1982 Charan Singh held a meeting outside the Lok Sabha to exert pressure on the MPs to adopt the report's recommendations. However the Lok Dal was in no position to fight for the report's implementation. First, the staunchest candidates of reservations, the socialists, were not very strong in the party. But Charan Singh did not take all the Socialists with him when he left the Janata Party, which was still led by Chandra Shekhar. Surendra Mohan and Ramakrishna Hedge remained its general Secretaries and Ashok Mehta, N.G. Gore and Ramand Tiwari members of its National Executive. They acted as a lobby in favour of the OBCs and thus the party's 1980-election manifesto emphasised that it 'will see that the recommendations of the [Mandal] Commission are expeditiously processed and acted upon when they are received'.[82]

[81] Cited in R. Ray, Preface to 'An Observer', op. cit., pp. 5–6.

[82] Janata Party, 'Election Manifesto 1980 Mid-Term Poll' in Zaidi, *The Annual Register of Indian Political Parties* (hereafter *ARIPP*), New Delhi:

In addition to the division of the Socialists between the Janata Party and Charan Singh's party, the latter was also to split. In 1982, Devi Lal, a Jat leader from Haryana and Biju Patnaik – the strongman of Orissa – Karpoori Thakur, George Fernandes, Sharad Yadav, H.N. Bahuguna and Ram Vilas Paswan were expelled for 'anti-party activities'.[83] According to Rashid Masood, the chief whip of the Parliamentary group, they had to be expelled because 'they opposed Charan Singh. There was nothing ideological. It was purely personal, factional'.[84] The expellees formed the LD (K) (for Karpoori) and Charan Singh the LD (C) (for Charan). Devi Lal, Sharad Yadav and Bahuguna rejoined Charan Singh before the 1984 elections but his Lok Dal won only two seats, this fragile unity being shattered after his death on 29 March 1987. The acting president – who was supposed to help an ageing President, Charan Singh, was H.N. Bahuguna. Ajit Singh, his son, was one of the general secretaries, and the heir apparent. When Charan Singh died, they both claimed his legacy and a new split ensued, with Bahuguna founding the LD (B) and Ajit Singh the LD (A).

Thirdly, Lok Dal leaders were not uniformly interested in seeing the implementation of the Mandal Commission Report. According to Rashid Masood, during the Janata phase Charan Singh and his lieutenants supported the appointment of the Backward Classes commission because they 'thought then that all the *kisans* would benefit from it, including jats'.[85] However, Jats were not classified as OBCs by the Mandal Commission and therefore supporters of Charan Singh from this caste lost interest in the issue. Charan Singh himself later softened the party's lower caste image – he preferred to return to his former discourse that rejected caste *en bloc*:

> Our party is of poor people whether those poor may belong to village or to city or whether of high castes or backward castes or Scheduled Castes. Our party is of farmers and artisans, to whatever religion or sect they may belong

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S. Chand, 1980, p. 301. In 1983, other Socialists joined the Janata Party and became its office-hearers in the JP, such as Madhu Dandavate and Yamuna Prasad Shastri. They were joined in 1986 by George Fernandes and Mrinal Gore.

[83] See the long argument by the Lok Dal National Executive, which met on 25 August 1982 in, Zaidi, *The Annual Register of Indian Political Parties – 1982*, New Delhi: S. Chand, 1982, pp. 673–9.

[84] Interview with Rashid Masood.

[85] Ibid.

to, whether they are proprietors of their land or are mere landless labourers [. . .] We are against caste system and regard casteism as the greatest enemy of our society, country and democracy. Casteism leads to all round degradation, that is for persons practising casteism, character, ability and capacity have no appeal.[86]

In fact, the 1987 split of the LD resulted also from the desire of Yadav leaders – such as Mulayam Singh Yadav – to emancipate themselves from Jat tutelage. Interestingly, only 5 of the 18 Uttar Pradesh Lok Dal MLAs continued to support, Ajit Singh but not one Jat left him.[87]

To sum up, while quota politics and *kisan* politics crystallised in the 1960s as two distinctive methods of promoting social transformation, they had many similarities and their social constituencies overlapped to such an extent that the proponents of the former, the Socialists, and of the latter, Charan Singh and his group, began to make common cause in the 1970s. This *rapprochement* was intended to catapult their coalition to power. It was partly successful since the Janata Party enabled the Socialists and Charan Singh's followers to sit in government at the Centre for the first time. But the other components of this party – the ex-Congress(O) and the ex-Jana Sangh – were associated with social groups – mainly the upper caste middle class –that the Socialists and Charan Singh were eager to dislodge from their privileged position. Thus reservations was one of the factors that precipitated the collapse of the Janata coalition.

An important outcome of the Janata government however was the appointment of the Mandal Commission, which had fewer inhibitions than previous, similar commissions regarding the use of caste as a relevant criterion for identifying the Other Backward Classes. Its approach was bound to relaunch quota politics. The Lok Dal – which gathered together proponents of quota politics and *kisan* politics once again under the aegis of Charan Singh – epitomised the growing synthesis of these two currents. Gradually, quota politics was taking over. Charan Singh himself supported this development for some

[86] 'Presidential address by Ch. Charan Singh. Lok Dal National council', in A.M. Zaidi (ed.), *ARIPP*, New Delhi: Indian Institute of Applied Political Research, 1985, p. 501.

[87] M. Jain, 'Backward Castes and Social Change in U.P. and Bihar', in Srinivas (ed.), *Caste – Its Twentieth Century Avatar*, op. cit., p. 147.

time in the 1980s, even though *kisan* politics was still his favourite option. Tension beween the two camps remained prevalent within the Janata Dal but the strategy of this party led ultimately to the rise of quota politics.

'This is a very fine and useful work, summarizing, synthesizing, and analysing a vast amount of material to demonstrate the extent to which the transformations of caste politics have indeed led to fundamental as well as systemic changes in [the Indian] political system.'

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India's Silent Revolution

Since the 1960s a new assertiveness has characterized India's formerly silent majority, the lower castes that comprise more than two-thirds of the country's population. Today, India's most populous state, Uttar Pradesh, is controlled by lower-caste politicians, as is Bihar, and lower-caste representation in national politics is growing inexorably. Jaffrelot argues that this trend constitutes a genuine 'democratization' of India, and that the social and economic effects of this 'silent revolution' are bound to multiply in the years to come.

For anyone interested in Indian politics, post-Independence history, and the contemporary political scenario, this is an indispensable book.

Christophe Jaffrelot is director of the Centre d'Etudes et Recherches Internationales (CERI), part of the Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques in Paris. He is the author of *The Hindu Nationalist Movement and Indian Politics*, which the *New York Review of Books* hailed as 'a scholarly tour de force'.

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